

PREFACE

My guess is that every one of us could attest to the spiritual reality that a little bit of sin left alone in a life will not on its own quietly fade away, but will instead deepen and spread through. I have always appreciated the remedy for this offered by Charles Swindoll: we must be diligent to “keep short accounts” with God. That is (as Barney Fife would put it) nip it in the bud—address and confess sin in our life immediately, before it has a chance to settle in as a way of life. Before it becomes “normal.”

So far in this fifth chapter of Paul’s letter he has been doing everything he can by long-distance to nip this sin in the bud in Corinth. He has made it clear to the church that instead of ignoring—or, some might conclude, even bragging about—the scandalous behavior of one in their midst, it is their responsibility to discipline this man, and put him out of the church.

Verses 1 to 5 prescribe the discipline; vv6-8 give the reason for it.

Sidebar: The passage before us today seems to be another indicator that there was indeed a sizable Jewish contingent in the Corinthian church. For this passage, vv6-8, is rich with Jewish imagery that would mean far less to Gentiles.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.**LEAVEN**

Once again, so that we might understand Paul’s imagery we must first translate from the contemporary to the ancient. The word “leaven” (*zyme*) is not synonymous with “yeast” (as the NIV would suggest). Yeast as we know it—today, a store-bought product added to bread dough to encourage rising through fermentation—was virtually unknown in the first century.

The leaven of which Paul speaks is more akin to the starter that bakers use for such things as sourdough bread. That is, it begins as a small portion of dough held back from a new batch of (unleavened) bread dough and allowed to ferment—i.e., spoil. That fermented starter is then added to the next batch of dough, which quickly ferments the entire batch, causing the bread to rise. Prior to baking *this* batch, a small portion is again held back as starter for the next batch. And so on.

Not surprisingly, this process contained a possible health risk. What began as fairly benign corruption could spiral out of control as, week after week, corruption was added to corruption. It is for this reason that some scholars are of the opinion that behind the religious celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was also a health provision.

Read Exodus 12:15.

By annually purging their dwellings of all leaven, and eating only unleavened bread for seven days, they would dramatically reduce the risk of old leaven reaching an unhealthy level of corruption, or contaminating other foods. Then, after the seven-day feast was concluded, from the unleavened bread they had been eating they would hold back a new starter for leavening. We see this imagery behind Paul's second metaphorical use of leaven in v7 of our passage:

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.

v6

Your boasting is not good.

The word translated “boasting” (*kauchema*) in this context is synonymous with “arrogant” (*physioo*) in v2. I don't believe Paul is saying that they were literally boasting in (glorying in, KJVs), bragging about the man's incestuous relationship, but, as in v2, they were so “puffed up,” so self-assured in their own vaunted spirituality, that they saw his behavior as either a trivial offense, or even of no consequence. And why is it “not good”? It was detrimental—perhaps even fatal, if left alone—to the entire church body.

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

Here is Paul's first metaphor: the simple fact that leaven permeates the entire lump of dough into which it is placed. By nature and design, it grows and spreads. Though larger than the leaven starter, the fresh dough does not overwhelm or squelch the action of the leaven; it is the other way around, with the smaller leaven “corrupting” the entire lump of dough.

This is probably a familiar Jewish proverb (which Paul had used verbatim in his letter to the Galatians); we might say, “A bad apple spoils the whole barrel.”

Jesus had also used this same metaphor to warn his disciples off the false teachings of the Jewish leaders and the corrupting influence of the world.

Read Mark 8:11-15.

Leaven was a familiar metaphor for the corrupting qualities of impurity and sin. Just as the ignoring—or worse, acceptance—of sin in our own life causes sin to increase, the winking at sin in the church causes sin and corruption to increase there.

It can be a profitable mental exercise to sit back and imagine how *not* exercising discipline in the church permits sin to spread—from one person, to a family, to the church family, to the children in Sunday School, and out to the community at large.

v7

Now, in v7, Paul uses a second metaphor with leaven—and once again (3:16-17) the apostle pleads with them to *be who they are*.

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.

Now he uses the leaven to represent the leftovers of the old life that must be thoroughly “clean[ed] out” (KJVs, purge out). For the Jews in the congregation this would have immediately taken them back to the familiar Jewish ritual associated with Passover; every crumb of leavened bread was removed in a ceremonial search of each dwelling on the morning when the Passover lambs were sacrificed (Garland).

To all, Jew and Gentile, the call is to get rid of the remnants of the old life and live as “a new lump”—*just as in fact they are*. Don’t miss the importance of that last phrase, “just as you are unleavened.”

David Garland: This second metaphor shows how Paul couples the imperative [do this] to the indicative [you are]: Remove the old leaven so that you can start over as unleavened bread, *because that is what you are*. The imperative to cleanse out the old leaven is predicated on the indicative: they *are* unleavened. In other words, Paul tells them to be what they are, to live like Christians. Who they are is revealed in what they do. What they do comes from who they are. Turning a blind eye to such odious sin committed by one of their number betrays a shamelessness that contradicts who they are as the people of God. Their identity as those who have been “washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (6:11), as unleavened bread, should inform their behavior. Their behavior will then inform the outsiders of their identity as God’s people. (emphasis added)

Paul fleshes out the imperative (“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump”) more fully in his letter to the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 4:17-24.

Paul is calling on the Corinthians to behave and live as he described them in the opening verses of this letter:

...the church of God which is at Corinth... those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. (1 Corinthians 1:2)

For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

Staying with the imagery of the Jewish Passover, Paul now gives the reason *why* the believers in Corinth are a “new lump” and “unleavened.” Just as the sacrifice of the lamb and the use of its blood during the first Passover led to the Jews being “unleavened,” our Lamb has been sacrificed, His blood shed once for all. On this basis (His shed blood) we are accounted as a new unleavened lump.

v8

Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul closes his thought by extending the metaphor even further, restating his previous admonition to “remove [the man] from [their] midst” and to behave as they truly are: a new unleavened lump. But now he does it in metaphorical terms, associating the Feast of Passover with all of the Christian life.

To put it succinctly, this last sentence is a call to holiness—for the believers in Corinth to live, individually, as the saints they are in Christ, and for them to zealously guard the integrity of their communion, the church. Even though it has been presented in a metaphorical, almost parable-like manner, this injunction could not be more important for us today.

- We are to guard the integrity of our personal walk with Christ, to live each day as what we truly are: saints redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.
- We are to guard the integrity of our corporate body, the church, to preserve it spotless and pure.

To close, let’s return to the Ephesians passage about husbands and wives, and read again about how they represent the picture of Christ and His church.

Read Ephesians 5:25-27.

Christ cleansed (past tense) the church, sanctifying her with His own blood. It is now our responsibility to *keep* her “holy and blameless” until she is presented to her Savior and Lord on the Day of His return.