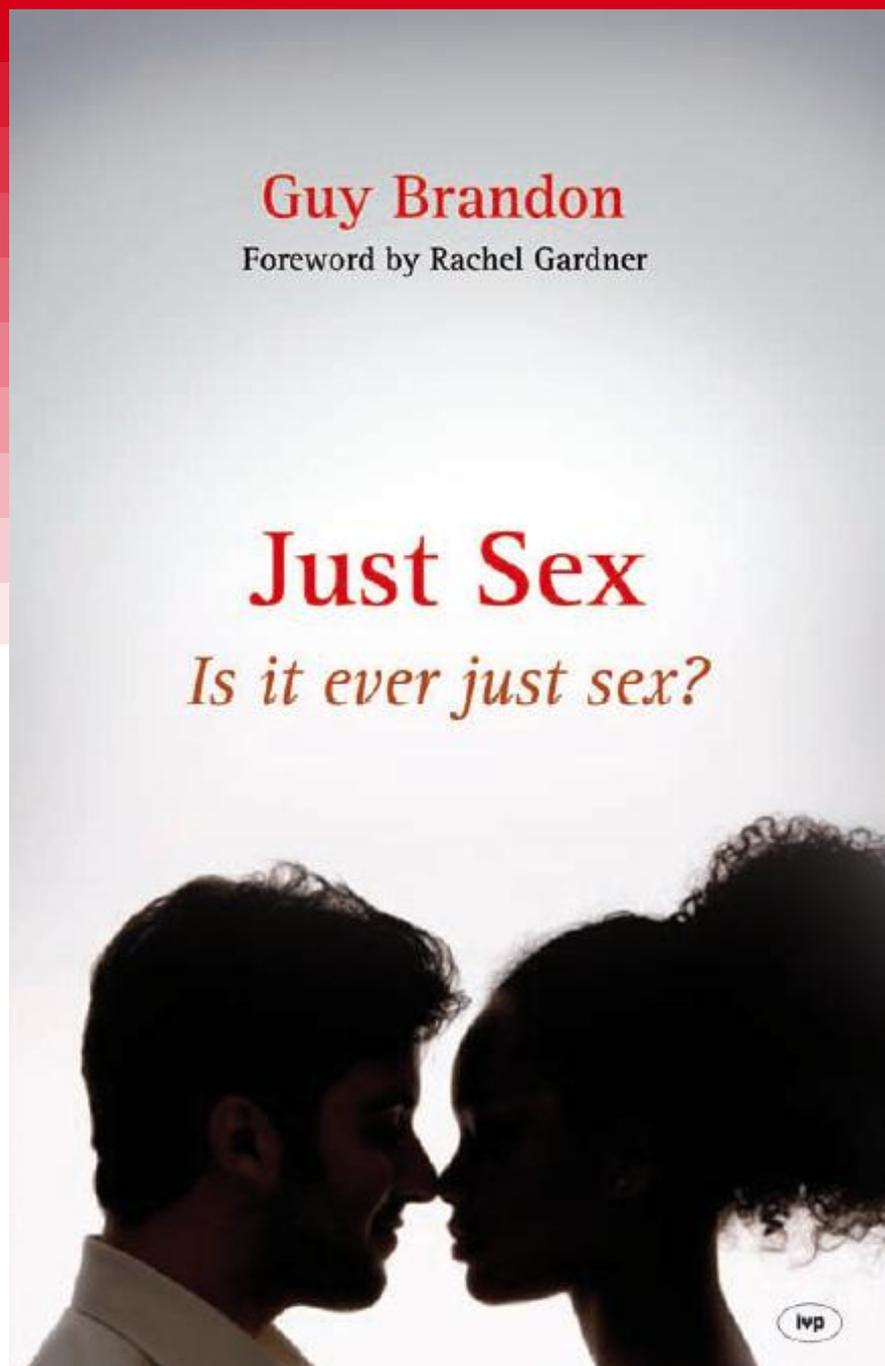


1 Corinthians 5-7

Three Bible Studies: Sexual Ethics

Leaders Notes



JUBILEE
CENTRE

A BIBLICAL VISION FOR SOCIETY

1 Corinthians 5-7

Three Bible Studies: Sexual Ethics

*Designed to supplement
'Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?'
by Guy Brandon (IVP, 2009)*

Rose Lynas & Guy Brandon

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Preface

Since 1983 the Jubilee Centre has conducted research into a biblical vision for society and how that vision might inform our response to a wide range of contemporary concerns. This has taken us into Sunday trading, credit and debt, international peace-building, criminal justice, care for the elderly, asylum and immigration, the environment, and numerous other fields. Our goal has always been the big picture – a rival to the ‘isms’ of our age. In 2005 we drew together the conclusions of our work to date in *Jubilee Manifesto: A framework, agenda and strategy for Christian social reform*, edited by Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft (IVP).

Our contention is that our well-being, both individually and collectively, is essentially a relational issue. Relationships is the big idea. Not ‘relationships’ as they are often talked about, restricted to little more than merely sexual relationships, but the complete spectrum of personal, social, economic, and political relationships that constitute our identities and contribute to our well-being.

Faced with a barrage of messages from a sexually permissive environment and lacking a clear rationale for biblical teaching, many Christians are unsure of what they think about sex – uncertain whether an ancient text has anything to say to our Brave New World and, if it does, unconvinced of whether they really want to pay it any attention. Even Church leaders are divided over key issues like sex before marriage, divorce and homosexuality.

One reason for the confusion is that people find themselves walking a narrow line between, on the one hand, affirming traditional standards of sexual conduct and, on the other, showing grace and forgiveness to those who have chosen alternative forms of behaviour. It is understandable and right that we should seek to comfort an individual who has been hurt by their own actions and those of another in a sexual relationship. Equally, in an age that extols diversity and multiculturalism, few people want to risk being accused of intolerance or prejudice. However, such desires and fears can obscure the need to uphold the biblical standards that can prevent so much pain – particularly when the reasons for these standards are poorly understood.

The first letter to the Corinthians was written to believers who shared our modern confusion. The three chapters covered by this set of three studies grapple with deeply personal issues of sexuality. In it, we discover a message of hope, that in Christ we can live a rich and fulfilling relational life that satisfies the needs both of us as individuals and of those around us. Explore with us as we seek to understand not just ‘what is permissible’, but what is fair and best for us and wider society and, ultimately, what brings glory to God.

Dr John Hayward
Executive Director
Jubilee Centre
www.jubilee-centre.org

Leader's Notes Introduction

Reading 1 Corinthians 5-7 in context

It may seem an obvious point, but we don't get to 1 Corinthians 5-7 without first passing through chapters 1-4. Ideally, we would also discuss the chapters immediately following 5-7, but to keep these notes brief we will focus on chapter 15, in which Paul sets out his theological framework for the entire letter. As we go, it is useful to bear some steps in mind for understanding how this applies to us:

Step 1: What did the text mean to the original audience?

Step 2: How is the original audience similar to us and in what ways does it differ from us?

Step 3: What lessons can we learn from this text?

Step 4: How can we apply these lessons to our everyday lives?

Background: Corinth

Corinth was a wealthy port city, located on a narrow strip of land connecting the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece to the rest of the country. Its location allowed Corinth to control north-south trade, as well as being a critical land link between east and west. The ancient city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. Some 100 years later Julius Caesar re-founded it as a Roman colony, and from 29 BC it served as the capital of the senatorial province of Achaia (an ancient province of Greece). It attracted a wide diversity of people from across the empire, including retired soldiers (many freed slaves), Jews and Greeks, and many religions including mystery cults from Asia and Egypt. Roman law, culture and religion dominated, but Greek influences were apparent in language, philosophy, religion and culture.

The "old" city was synonymous with sexual immorality and prostitution, and the reputation of the "new" city was not much improved. It is within this historical context that 1 Corinthians is set.

The Church

The church at Corinth was established by Paul, probably around AD 50, and was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Jews brought their own religious background, whereas the Gentiles brought different pagan ideas and practices to the church. There was also a mixture of rich and poor, slave and free, and the diversity made for strife as differing perspectives, expectations and needs clashed.

The Letter

Paul's letter to the Corinthians includes some personal information for individuals, but was mostly intended for the whole church, to be read aloud as a substitute for his actual presence. The letter is not a comprehensive, carefully structured work of theology, as Romans is; it was written to address specific circumstances at a particular time, in response to communications to him (from Chloe's house, 1 Corinthians 1:11). Reading it is a bit like listening to just one side of a conversation so we have to be careful about taking general principles from it without knowing why he wrote what he did, and without checking they fit with his other letters and the rest of the Bible.

Despite the specific circumstances, the broader issues faced by the Corinthian community are common to all Christian communities - how to live as free and holy children of the Kingdom within the very real and destructive structures and influences of the World.

1 Corinthians 1-4

In chapters 1-4 Paul sets about establishing his authority, which some are questioning. This is critical, otherwise his message will not be heard.

We don't get too far into 1 Corinthians before realising that the Corinthian community were struggling to maintain their identity as Kingdom people amidst the complex, sophisticated and multicultural world of Corinth. 1:2 boldly declares that they have been set aside, made holy, but the rest of the letter stresses that this freedom in Christ is for a special purpose, which is to be worked out in everyday living. As a community they were confused, petty, spiritually ambitious and elitist, fascinated with the spectacular, judgmental of each other without the necessary regard for their own morality. They were not lacking in enthusiasm, but it was very misdirected. Paul spends little time in preliminaries before addressing the heart of the issue - he confirms in chapters 1-4 that the Holy Spirit is indeed active among and through the Corinthian believers, but this must lead to behavioural transformation. They have all they need to serve Christ and one another, but, as we shall see, this equipping is being used more for 'puffing up' than 'building up'.

Beginning in 1:4-8 Paul stresses the "not yet" aspect of the Kingdom, and by inference the "not yetness" of the Corinthians' spiritual perfection (this theme appears throughout the letter). There is much transformation yet to happen. God's salvation story has a past, present and a future - neither it, nor the Corinthians have reached completion yet. The Corinthians believed what theologians call "over-realised eschatology." They believed that they already lived in the fully realised Kingdom of God, so had little need for transformation. They believed that they were already rich and reigning in the Kingdom (see 4:8). At the end of time, according to this theory, all that would change is that they would lose their bodies. They stressed the present power of the resurrection, denying any future completion.

Paul's final words of his thanksgiving passage (1:4-9) reset the proper perspective - Jesus is the faithful one; it is because of His work alone that the Corinthians enjoy fellowship with Him. Paul mentions Jesus' name eight times in the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians, underscoring his main message that Jesus is to be central in every individual and collective Corinthian life; the world and history are to be understood from this Christ-centred perspective. Everything, including what it means to be and become fully human, is to be understood in the light of Jesus and His ongoing work. The Corinthian church defined themselves by their differences rather than what they held in common. Time and again, directly and indirectly, Paul will refute this, reminding them of their common bonds and life together in Christ Jesus.

This perspective sets the scene for what comes next. In 1:10 Paul begins to address one of the main issues of the Corinthian church - disunity. His message is clear: Jesus is the only true leader of the church. All the rest, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, leaders and non-leaders alike, are baptised into this one crucified Jesus. It is all about Jesus; the person who baptises is irrelevant.

This leads into a discussion on the clash between human wisdom and the "wisdom" of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Corinth prided itself as an intellectual city. A group of Greek philosophers known as the Sophists were particularly influential, and their followers would contest which leader was the greatest. It is clear that the lines between the world and the church were blurred at best. Paul insists that the only appropriate boasting is in the Lord and His startling example. The foolish, the weak, the powerless, the despised, the discounted (those with no status) have been chosen to shame the wise, the strong, the powerful, the elite, the counted (those with status). In Corinth those who mattered were the rich elite, the politically astute and powerful, the clever rhetoricians. But God came down and became the rubbish of the world, lived among the rubbish of the world, died with and as the world's rubbish, so that the rubbish would not go to waste, indeed so that the rubbish would become

the treasure of the Kingdom of God. This is entirely other than the way of the Corinthian church. They are living an upside-down gospel. Paul himself has endeavoured to embody the way of this crucified, offensive Christ (2:1-5) to them.

In 2:6-16 Paul stresses that all the mysteries of the universe converge in the scandal of the crucified Christ, which can only be glimpsed by faith, as revealed by the Holy Spirit - no self-respecting Sophist would believe such nonsense. The wisdom of the Kingdom is from another time; it breaks into the world's time but the world cannot understand it. It reveals the foolishness of the world's wisdom. In the foolishness of the cross, the world's wisdom, and all its supposed power, was defeated. Everyday, followers of Christ's "foolish-wisdom" are called to live the reality of its "now" and "not yet" reality. As Paul will go on to show - this is not elitist or escapist knowledge, but this mature spiritual wisdom has critical implications for everyday living, for everyone.

It is very likely that the Corinthians listening to this letter would have supposed that when Paul refers to this spiritual wisdom in these verses that they more than adequately qualify being so spiritually mature... but Paul has a shock in store for them. Rather, their recent behaviour – for example, disunity – has betrayed their distinct spiritual immaturity. In fact, Paul has had to simplify his message for them so that they will understand it (3:1-4). All their supposed wisdom and spiritual maturity is an illusion. The crux of the matter is that their disunity utterly undermines the fellowship with Christ that underpins their identity. The church is to be shaped by the One who was a scandal to the Jews and a fool to the Greeks, the one whose body (to use another of Paul's images) is the church. If the church is not united, how can the body function?

Paul desires the Corinthians to see that the world's wisdom and their so-called prophets are nothing compared to the resources they have at their disposal in Christ (3:21-23). They need to begin to live that awesome reality rather than deceiving themselves with cheap alternatives (3:18-20). Again he wants to stress that while each leader has played their part in the planting and watering or building, it is God who enables growth and it is Christ who is the foundation. All are servants of God, from whom they must take their reference for living. The only one to be lifted up above all others, and indeed all else is the crucified Christ. *How* this building up is carried out is critical. God's church is holy, demanding Kingdom-quality service; bad service can deconstruct this holy temple so it is a serious matter indeed. The quality and character of the work will finally be revealed.

In chapter 4 Paul urges them to see that their "puffed up" attitude is not the way of Christ. He notes the hardships of apostleship so as to show what this Kingdom wisdom effects in the world as it clashes with the prevailing wisdom. The Corinthians' illusory wisdom, riches, power is contrary to the way embodied by Christ humiliated, attacked, tortured, belittled, criticised, taunted, misunderstood, misappropriated...crucified. The litmus test that discerns between the "puffed up" and "Kingdom builders" is how you live.

1 Corinthians 15

We have considered the immediate context of chapters 5-7 by looking at chapters 1-4. We also need to briefly consider chapter 15, a theological treatise that has informed, shaped, and been the foundation for the entire letter. If we had time, all the chapters should be included in our discussion.

1 Corinthians 15 focuses on the resurrection, that of Jesus as the first fruits of the world's future hope, and the future resurrection of the His followers in the finally realised Kingdom of God. Chapter 15 is the longest and most detailed discussion of one subject that we have from Paul. Throughout the letter Paul endeavours to explain to the Corinthians what their true identity is. They belong to the crucified and risen Christ, the climax and culmination of a long salvation story. The correct placing of each individual story (including that of the

Corinthian church) within this grand, overarching plan will help the Corinthians to understand who they are, which will in turn help them to see why such issues as sexual immorality are so problematic.

In short, the resurrection is the foundation of the Christian community. Every aspect of life must be understood by it. This one event altered the course of history, and everyone who orders their life by it is changed forever. It is thus imperative that the Corinthians get this, and reject their current bad theology.

Paul begins in 15:2 by stressing the progressive and conditional nature of salvation. There is no room here for "puffed up" believers; right (wise) behaviour in these "in-between times" provides the critical evidence that faith is real. It reveals priorities, and the foundation upon which a life is being built. What is done now has eternal significance.

Paul's understanding of resurrection was not "life after death," but, as Tom Wright has put it, "life after life after death," that is, those who have died, along with those who are still alive, will, at the end of time, receive "new" bodies. These bodies would exhibit continuity with the "old" body. This teaching was refuted by some Jewish groups (e.g. the powerful, literalist, and elitist Sadducees, see Acts 23:8), and was distinct from the pagan belief in a shadowy, less-than-life, existence after death. Denial of the resurrection was the dominant world-view in Corinth, and had been carried into the church. Again, the wisdom of the gospel clashes with the "wisdom" of the world. Crucial for the Corinthians is the understanding that the body has a central place in God's future plans. It matters what we do with our own, and how we treat other peoples' bodies. There is no place in Christ's Kingdom for disembodied spirits, only for those who practice the ways of the Kingdom, "building up" one another, assisting in God's grand project to re-order His world.

Paul further expands his resurrection thesis by postulating what difference it would make if Jesus had not been raised. What does His resurrection achieve? First he notes that through His resurrection, Christ is vindicated as the world's true Messiah and King. If He had not been raised then He would have been just another tragic figure of history.

Second, if Jesus was raised from the dead then death is defeated. From Genesis 3 death resulted in the pain of broken relationships, caused by sin. The most critical of these broken relationships is that between creation and Creator, and hence death, the result of sin, is understood as separation from God. But if death is defeated then so too is sin. What difference does the resurrection make? If Jesus was not raised from the dead then creation would remain enslaved to sin and its consequences. What a hopeless situation! Faith is worth nothing if Jesus was not raised. However, if Jesus has been raised then the possibilities for this world are truly wonderful, beyond our wildest imagination, beginning with, and made possible by, a restored relationship with the Creator.

God's plan, brought forward through Jesus was puzzling if not shocking to the ancient Jew. Rather than all of God's people (and by that they meant the Jews) being raised at the end of time, and being vindicated before their unjust enemies, one person is raised in the middle of time. This same person announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth, a Kingdom open to all who believed in Jesus, a Kingdom that would, with its citizens, be made complete in the fullness of time. This Kingdom turns the world right-side-up with the world resisting at every turn. Anything that destroys relationships has no place in this Kingdom.

Paul desperately wants his addressees to understand that they are to live the reality of the Kingdom now, being daily transformed.

Further reading

Brandon, *Just Sex: is it ever just sex?*

Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction To The New Testament.*

Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word.*

Fee, *New Testament Exegesis.*

Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians.*

Garland, *1 Corinthians*

Johnson, *The Writings Of The New Testament.*

Wright, N.T, *The New Testament and The People of God.*

Wright, Tom *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians.*

First Study: 1 Corinthians 5

A Little Yeast

Welcome to the first of three studies in our mini series. Please read the introductory notes to give you the context for what follows, if you haven't already.

Prayer

1 Corinthians and chapter 5 in particular deal with difficult and often personal themes. We are all sexual beings and many struggle in this area. Pray for wisdom and sensitivity.

Read the text aloud.

Don't worry that you will not remember it, but trust that this living word will engage with you through the help of the Holy Spirit. Listen for repeated themes, take note of words that leap out at you, be expectant and patient. Try a different translation to hear it from a different perspective.

Introduction

Paul set up the church at Corinth but, after he left, problems developed about the setting and maintenance of appropriate community boundaries between the church and the world. Many in the church thought they could continue their former pagan associations and practices. Influenced by pagan ideas, they thought a person's spirit was what really mattered and so a person could do what they liked with their body.

1. The Corinthian's culture claimed that what they did with their bodies in terms of sex was irrelevant. What are our culture's sexual standards/beliefs?

The pagan philosophy that Paul describes here ('what I do with my body is irrelevant') provides the same justification as our culture's idea that 'consenting adults don't harm anyone.' However, it is not just the reasons for the sin that are important, but the effect it has. In both cases, the harm to the rest of the community or society is overlooked. In the Corinthians' case, the problems that this 'freedom' caused in the church was ignored. Our culture also generally sees sex only in terms of the couple directly involved, not the wider consequences.

Paul's basic message is that the church must demonstrate Kingdom integrity in everyday issues. Clear boundaries must be set not to separate out entirely from the world (Paul wants them to live quality lives in the world), but to be true to the gospel. They have indeed been set free, but this freedom is not freedom from, but rather freedom *for*...obedience to the way of Christ. Such freedom only exists within appropriate limits.

2. Paul warns about associating with immoral people – but what conditions on this does he state? (vv. 3, 9-11)

Did you spot the distinction? They are not to associate with immoral people within the church, but that does not mean separating themselves entirely from the world.

Every culture, no matter how liberal, has its limits. Even the sexually promiscuous Corinth had limits. Paul's anger is apparent in the strong language that he uses - the church is tolerating what the pagan world does not even tolerate! A man is living with his stepmother (presumably, because she is not referred to as mother), a relationship specifically prohibited in the Old Testament (see Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30, 27:20).

3. How does the church react to the offence in this chapter? (vv. 2, 6)

The church, proud that it has passed beyond the pettiness of 'good and evil,' believing as it did that they were already spiritually complete, did not bat an eyelid at this outrageous situation. What did it matter what they did with their bodies, they thought.

Then, as now, incest was abhorrent to the wider culture. Such a relationship blurs family lines and structures. The extended family was the backbone of ancient society. It was to be fiercely protected. To subvert the family, and worst of all to be proud of your actions shows how badly the Corinthians had misunderstood the Gospel. The Gospel to them was about the spirit only and so they thought they could do what they liked with their bodies! They were also blind to how their behaviour affected relationships around them.

4. What does Paul say should happen to the evil doer and how does his response make you feel?

Paul does not hold back, demanding that this man be handed over to Satan, the prince of the world. This does not mean that he is removed from God's grace; God will correctly adjudge on the Day of the Lord.

The issue in chapter 5 is consistent with the rest of the letter - the church is 'puffed up,' proudly behaving like pagan philosophers rather than Christ followers. Indeed the more spiritual one was, the more free from (material) constraint one was. The incestuous man must be spiritual indeed!

The point being considered in 1 Corinthians 5-7 is where the boundary should be drawn, how we can know, and what the appropriate discipline is.

Paul is clear - discipline is essential to maintain the tension between freedom and responsibility. Unacceptable behaviour must be identified; there must be a measure of control exercised to protect the identity and unity of the community around the gospel. It is also to be hoped that the wrongdoer's exclusion prompts him to repent and be accepted back into that community.

The mixed (Jewish and Gentile) congregants at Corinth would have thought of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread (bread without yeast), remembering the Exodus. Today observant Jews go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no yeast remains in the house. (See Exodus 12:8, 12:17ff).

This Passover theme is critical to Paul's message. Jesus' life and work culminated in His dying as the Passover lamb to free the world from the slavery of sin (our Egypt) and to begin

our Exodus journey to the Promised Land. We therefore live in the time of the Passover - there is to be no yeast. Christ followers are to live differently in this new 'time' in which the Kingdom is both 'now' and 'not yet,' to live holy lives marked by sincerity (purity) and truthfulness (with Christ at the centre) (5:9).

Jesus uses the idea of 'yeast' in the same way. 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough' (Matthew 13:33).

5. Paul's comments about yeast suggest that this one person's sin has 'spread through the dough', i.e. the whole church. How has this one man's sexual sin affected others? More broadly, how do our 'freedoms' impact other people?

Paul doesn't distinguish between the sin and the sinner - what we do with our bodies is important, and what we do in private has consequences (for good and bad) for the rest of the community. (For more on how 'private' sexual behaviour affects others, see our book Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?)

If evil isn't excluded it will affect the whole community. In this case, their failure to discipline him sends the message that this behaviour is acceptable for others, too. The church must ensure that the members of its community are living according to Kingdom standards and if not take the necessary disciplinary steps for the good of everyone, to ensure that the community is built up and not destroyed.

6. What are the similarities/differences between Corinth and where you live?

You probably had a lot to say about values, cultures, philosophies, religion and pluralist nature of culture.

7. What are the differences/similarities between the Corinthian church and your own?

(One issue worth discussing is church discipline - does it happen and, if so, how, when, who does it and why?)

Hopefully there were some differences, but the high view of the spirit and the low view of the body lives on, for example in the low view of 'secular' work in many churches.

8. Churches and Christians as individuals often take on values from our wider culture (such as the idea of 'consenting adults in private'), as the Corinthians did. Is this idolatry? Why?

For a more detailed look at how sex and idolatry go together, see Just Sex? chapter 5 and the appendix.

We are now trying to identify theological or application principles from the text that surpass the specific situation and culture of the text. They should be both instructive for the original audience and for us today. These principles must correspond to the teaching of the Bible as a whole. This is a very important step, but requires care!

9. What practical applications can we draw in the way the church views and addresses sin – whether sexual or otherwise?

Here are some suggestions:

- *Do not judge those outside the church*
- *Do not ignore sin inside the church*
- *Private actions have wider public consequences*
- *The Christian community is to live according to a different standard to that of the world. To keep this gospel standard, boundaries must be maintained.*
- *It is necessary to exclude someone who is blurring these boundaries so as to prompt their repentance and to protect the church community.*
- *Different churches, denominations and traditions handle church discipline in different ways. Some other verses to look at which address this issue from which guidance can be drawn include Matthew 18:15-18, Titus 3:10 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-8*

As noted earlier, it is not the specific issues per se that are of interest here but how Paul addresses them. Therefore, as we move to the final step the challenge is, what are the issues that you and your community need to address, and what disciplinary steps need to be taken to expel the 'yeast'.

Remember that, while these studies are drawing out issues of sexual ethics, we should not and cannot, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians, make these the scapegoat issues. Rather, such sins are a consequence or a symptom of a much wider set of problems that often lie in our own behavioural blind spots.

Take some time to pray through the challenges raised by this study.

Second Study: 1 Corinthians 6

One Flesh

Welcome back to the second of our three studies. If you are new, this will make a lot more sense if you read the introductory notes.

What struck you most in last week's study?

In chapter 5, Paul addresses disturbing behaviour that has been reported to him. He criticises the community for tolerating incestuous behaviour that even the pagan world would shun. He commands them to remove this wicked person from their midst, before this evil 'leaven' (yeast) works its way through the community, destroying it from the inside. He extends his definition of a wicked person to include, amongst others, the sexually immoral, drunkards and the greedy. He urges the Corinthians to disassociate themselves from all such wicked persons.

Prayer

We continue to discuss difficult and often personal territory this week. Pray for sensitivity, and receptivity.

Read chapter 6 aloud.

Like chapter 5, chapter 6 is Paul's response to reports that have been brought to him.

1. What do we learn about judgment within the Church from this passage?

The consistent message from these cases is that the church community must not judge those on the outside, but must judge those on the inside – this is not permission to judge, but an order. The church, as we shall see in chapter 6, is very confused - not only does it fail to judge its members correctly but it goes 'outside' the church for judgment on 'inside' affairs. As in study one, the issue of boundaries is paramount.

2. Why are Christians not to bring lawsuits against each other? How might we apply this today, in our different context?

The church must show the world that it is different from it. One such step is to practice internal discipline not only because justice would be limited from Roman magistrates, but it avoids external criticism of the sort, 'they are just like us after all.' The civil magistrates were located in the centre of the marketplace - lawsuits exposed the Christian community to the watching and unbelieving world. Non-Christians are not to judge the church community.

The centre of their lives and actions must be Christ; this commonality must govern all other differences and indeed offences. The problem is not with the courts, Paul

himself appeals to the Roman legal system in Acts 16:37-39 & 25:10-12. His language is careful and deliberate. He contrasts the saints (6:2) with the ungodly (6:1).

If you are going to judge the world (Daniel 7:27) then you are capable of judging relatively trivial disputes. Paul backs up his point with biting sarcasm. Given that they have been proudly flaunting their wisdom he asks, 'Can it be possible that there is nobody among you who is wise enough to judge between these brothers.' Ouch! Paul returns to a major theme of his letter – their actual ignorance rather than their supposed wisdom has been exposed by their actions. He also stresses that whether this case is 'won' or 'lost', the more important point has already been lost (6:7).

3. Verses 9-10 follow straight on from the discussion around lawsuits, suggesting that the behaviours listed here are considered issues of justice. Why?

To the biblical writers, sex was a matter of justice – something we have lost sight of in recent decades. God's Law is concerned with establishing and maintaining right relationships of all kinds, including sexual ones. Not only that, but the marriage relationship is an image of God's own relationships within the Trinity, and of the relationship between Christ and the Church (see Genesis 1:26-27, Ephesians 5:25-32). Note also that homosexual sin is here, as elsewhere in the Bible, mentioned in the context of heterosexual sin and other subjects that we would not see the connection with.

4. What is Paul talking about in verses 12-20? How does his viewpoint differ from the Corinthians', and from our culture's own?

Paul addresses men who thought it was acceptable to visit prostitutes. They were so 'spiritual' they thought they could do what they liked with their bodies. Paul argues that we cannot make this distinction: sex, and what we do with our physical bodies, cannot be separated from our faith and every other area of life.

5. How does Paul respond to the Corinthian slogan - 'Everything is permissible for me'? (see also 1 Corinthians 10:23). (Is visiting prostitutes permissible?)

That God liberates those that follow Him is fundamental to His Kingdom message. However, this freedom is not simply freedom from any law, but freedom to live out the ways of the Kingdom. Liberation is inseparable from Kingdom responsibility. If the Corinthians are mastered by an act, how can they still proudly proclaim their freedom?

In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it. So the Law – in some form – still applies. Paul argues that we are subject to Grace, but that we should not sin against the Law as a result (read Romans 6:15-23).

6. What do you think the second slogan means ('Food for the stomach and the stomach for food') – and why doesn't the Corinthians' logic follow?

The Corinthians were using this slogan – 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food' – to justify their belief 'sex for the body and the body for sex.'

Bodies belong to the One who created them and He intends to raise them on the last day, as He demonstrated with Christ. Whatever form they will take there will be continuity between our present bodies and our future ones. Any notion of a disembodied plan for the future is decisively knocked on the head. Human beings are creatures with bodies, and what each of us does with our bodies affects all of us, spirit and body, not to mention the wider community. All of them, as interconnected wholes, are the Lord's, members of Him. Paul could not be clearer: bodies are of utmost importance.

The phrase 'the Lord for the body' in 6:13 may appear confusing, but this reinforces Paul's point. Christ gave His body for our bodies. He died to save our bodies. Therefore, if anyone is for the body, Christ is.

While it is true that human bodies are designed for sex, it does not follow that any sort of sexual practice is acceptable. Paul is careful not just to set out a rule about one such practice. He spends time in verses 12-15 to set out the framework within which all sexual practices can be properly judged, so that the Corinthians can make right decisions on their own.

7. Verses 16-17 encapsulate biblical teaching on sex ('one flesh'). Read Genesis 2:18-24 and Matthew 19:3-9. What themes and implications do you see here?

The theme of all of these passages is that sexual relationship was not supposed to be temporary, or 'disposable'. It could be broken, and sometimes was and is, but this was never the ideal. This is the application that Jesus and Paul pick up in different ways from the Genesis 2 verses.

Sex is not two bodies joining together in a superficial act, but two persons, body and spirit, becoming one flesh, the most intimate human-to-human connection, first celebrated in Genesis 2, before the consequences of the Fall affected all relationships in Genesis 3. For the biblical writers, sex had a far greater significance than the one we usually give it today.

8. What is Paul's advice on how to respond to sexual temptation?

This is a serious issue and Paul commands the Corinthians to flee from sexual immorality - after all, their union with Christ is at stake. Sex has lasting spiritual and physical consequences – as well as the damage to our relationship with God, sexual immorality involves sin against our own bodies and harm to other people as well.

9. Given the Corinthian's preoccupation with their spiritual side, what must they have made of Paul's comment in verses 18-20?

The Corinthians had no time for bodies, but Paul reminds them that they are a temple of the Holy Spirit - building up to chapter 15, which is all about bodily resurrection.

Sexual immorality is a sin against one's own body - sin does not just exist in some spiritual realm but affects the body. Sex is not just a superficial act. Again, this is about wisdom rather than just morality. Christ (and thus Paul) is in the business of restoring human beings, not of spoiling their fun. Our bodies are not our own – they have been bought with a price.

This language evokes the slave-market, emphasising that we have been bought out of slavery. So, why would we be so foolish to choose slavery over our freedom? A sexual sin is one against our bodies' true Lord and Master. Remember: our bodies have eternal significance.

10. In what ways is Paul's message still relevant to our permissive age?

11. What are some of the consequences of breaking the 'One Flesh' relationship, and the pastoral issues that 1 Corinthians 6 might raise in the church? How might we address these?

Human beings are whole persons; their spirit and body are one. Our bodies belong to the One who paid the price for their freedom. Therefore, what we do with our bodies matters. Christians should live out their future destiny in the present, conducting themselves in a just way, acceptable to such a high calling.

The Christian community must endeavour to behave beyond reproach, distinct from the behaviour of the watching world – i.e. not suing one another, or defrauding our or others' bodies. Not everything is beneficial to the building up of the individual or the community of faith.

Do not let anything master you. You have been liberated to serve in Christ's Kingdom. Do not choose to return to slavery.

Allow time for prayerful response.

Third Study: 1 Corinthians 7

Sex, Separation & Singleness

Welcome to the third and final study in our mini-series. (If you are new, this will make a lot more sense if you read the introductory notes.)

This is perhaps the most challenging chapter, not just because of the issues addressed, but because there is a lot of material to be covered!

What struck you most last week?

Prayer

Take a few minutes to pray. Chapter 7 is a challenging chapter. Pray for wisdom and energy as you discuss these issues together.

Read 1 Corinthians 7 aloud.

1. Why do you think that this chapter was written?

In chapter 7 Paul tries to clear up more of the Corinthians' misunderstandings, offering them wise counsel, based on theological reflection and pastoral experience. Having addressed those who have misunderstood the significance of the temporary sexual relationships they are engaging in (chapter 6), in this chapter he writes to those who are not in a sexual relationship, either by choice or circumstance, or are married.

The advice 'remain as you are' recurs several times throughout this chapter, as Paul addresses various circumstances. It is also important to note Paul's personal preference for singleness (celibacy), one that he himself and the Corinthians are well aware of.

Paul does not establish a hierarchy of celibacy then marriage, but rather puts them on equal footing as he argues elsewhere for no male-female, Jew-Greek, slave-free distinction. There are boundaries for either choice, but both are a choice. Neither is Paul reducing marriage to sex, but given the sexual immorality that is rife within the community he is careful about his language. Paul stresses that being married and being celibate are both gifted callings, in keeping with one's own disposition and capacity, and the context in which they are living.

The NIV reads, 'It is good for a man not to marry' (verse 1) but the Greek word used means 'to touch' – 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman'. Many commentators believe that this was a popular slogan quoted by the Corinthians that Paul is addressing; others think this is Paul's own opinion (hence some translations have quotation marks around this sentence and others don't). Whichever it is, Paul spends a lot of time in the rest of the chapter giving his complete opinion on this.

2. Does this chapter imply that sex is inherently bad? What is Paul's view?

In chapter 6 Paul dealt with one group of the Corinthian church for whom everything is permissible; now he deals with the anti-pleasure, 'no touching' group. In keeping with some popular philosophers of their time they were urging people to be celibate, and if married to abstain from sexual relations with their spouses. This 'not touching' was believed to be the path to higher spiritual enlightenment. See Colossians 2:20-23 for a similar 'catchphrase': 'Do not taste! Do not touch! Do not handle!'

Bad theology also played a part in their teaching - they believed that they already lived in the fully realised Kingdom of God so marriage was beneath them, even obsolete, along with all material things. The irony is that they reached the same conclusion as the pleasure wing – namely, that bodies don't matter.

3. What do you make of Paul's advice in verse 5?

The verb used in 7:5 is very striking - 'do not defraud/deprive one another.' This verb picks up the language of chapter 6. Not only does sexual malpractice defraud, but so does sexual abstinence within a marriage (except when mutually agreed for exceptional and short-term circumstances). Within marriage, sex is an equal right, privilege and duty of both partners. Don't overlook how surprising this 'equal rights' teaching must have been to the Corinthians. Paul encourages those who are married to have sex, otherwise the temptation to fulfil these needs might lead them elsewhere. In Corinth there were many outlets for the sexually frustrated, and Paul wants to ensure that Satan is given no opportunity to attack.

Paul's words here agree with teaching in the rest of the Bible, such as in Song of Songs and Genesis 2. Sex is not inherently bad; it is a blessing, but one that must be enjoyed in the right context.

4. Can you sense Paul's dilemma in chapter 7? He partly agrees, yet at the same time disagrees strongly with the Corinthian slogan of verse 1 - why is this?

In 7:6-7 Paul wishes that all men could be as he is - celibate - but concedes that celibacy is a gift, as is marriage. While he partly acknowledges the sentiment of the slogan, he emphatically refutes how it is being misused. After all, as far back as Genesis 2:18 it is stated that it is not good for a human being to be alone. Later in the chapter Paul will argue for singleness. His advice: to the married, those especially gifted for marriage - 'remain as you are;' to the celibate, those especially gifted for celibacy - 'remain as you are.'

Most translations of 7:8 refer to the 'unmarried and widows' but, as he addresses the 'never married' in 7:25ff it is most likely that in 7:8-16 he is focusing on the widowers and widows, and those who are single through separation.

5. What is Paul's advice to this group?

He wants to encourage this group that if they are managing to control themselves sexually then their current status is perfectly acceptable - 'remain as you are.' In the Corinthians' world, widows and divorced women experienced pressure, not to mention economic necessity, to remarry. Not so in the church. Their status has equal validity to those who are married.

6. What does Paul have to say here about divorce?

Divorce was not and is not part of God's desire for human beings (read Malachi 2:14-16 and Matthew 19:3-9). Divorce was allowed, for good reasons and as a last resort – typically when the covenant has been broken anyway – not a first stop.

Anyone who has experienced the pain of divorce can testify to its widespread devastation. God's laws are protective of human beings (and creation at large). In this short section Paul does not speak to why divorce happens, or offer relationship advice to distressed couples. For this the church has to gather together all the wisdom of this letter, and others, to better order their relationships to avoid this issue altogether. Paul's intention here is not a comprehensive doctrine on divorce but to refute the false notion that marriage should be rejected on ascetic grounds.

Paul uses the examples of circumcision and slavery as illustrations for his next point (7:17-24). (Note that the question of circumcision may not just be a theoretical discussion of adopting or dropping Jewish customs. There was a 'decircumcision operation' known in the ancient world.)

7. What point(s) is Paul making here, beyond 'remain as you are'?

Paul seeks to encourage the community not to conform to external pressures or societal 'norms.' Here Paul makes the same point as he does in Galatians 3:28 - in Christ's Church each person and each station has equal worth, they are one in Christ, and society's standards count for nothing in the church. Paul uses these examples to stress: if married, 'remain as you are;' if single, 'remain as you are.' In addition, Paul is certainly not legitimising slavery, rather he states - and don't miss how provocative this is within the ancient world, divided as it was into slaves and free - that in the Church a slave is of equal standing as a free person. In the Church such societal divisions have no place. The slave is free in Christ. These illustrations defy the assumption that celibacy (singleness) is a higher spiritual calling than marriage.

In 7:25-28 Paul stresses that he is not offering a command from the Lord, but wise, trustworthy counsel, in response to the present circumstances. His advice is that they remain as they are, given the 'present crisis.' His first reason for this advice is that he desires to save them from troubles.

'The present crisis' may mean a belief that Christ would soon return. But it could also refer to the situation of sexual immorality within the church which made for a bad environment for deciding life-long partnerships. Paul might have meant that they needed time to absorb his teaching before they started marrying again. Alternatively, he could have meant some form of persecution. Another possibility is the grain famine of the 40s and 50s predicted by Agabus in Acts 11:28.

8. In 7:25-38 Paul addresses those who have never been married. What message might we take from this today?

Obviously, Paul is not telling all Christians, at all times and settings, to avoid marrying and having families! However, there may be good reasons to postpone marriage, or not to look for a partner, either in the short or long-term, for personal reasons or due to situations beyond our control. Paul reminds the Corinthians that singleness, temporary or otherwise, presents opportunities for serving God that we may not have as married people.

9. What do you make of Paul's stated preference for singleness? Depending on who is in your group, what principles for pastoral care can we draw out from this chapter as a whole for singles, those who have divorced or remarried, and about the value that Paul places on sex?

Allow time for prayerful response.

About Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre seeks to demonstrate the continued relevance of biblical principles to the challenges facing society today. It believes the Bible presents a coherent social vision, based on right relationships, that provides an alternative to contemporary political ideologies.

The Jubilee Centre has applied this relational agenda to areas as diverse as the economy, criminal justice, care for the elderly, asylum and immigration, and the environment. Its publications include the ground-breaking 'Jubilee Manifesto' and the quarterly 'Cambridge Papers', an influential collection of peer-reviewed studies. The Jubilee Centre maintains an extensive blog and archive of its resources, most of which can be downloaded for free, on its website.

Its range of resources for the 'Fair Sex Movement' include the popular 'Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?' by Guy Brandon (IVP, 2009) and three public information bulletins, available on the Jubilee Centre's YouTube channel, together with an accompanying set of discussion questions.

Most Jubilee Centre resources can be freely downloaded from its website. If you have benefitted from these studies and would like to help the Jubilee Centre continue developing similar tools, please make a donation towards the charity's work. Find out more using the contact details below:

Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street
Cambridge
CB1 2NZ

Tel: 01223 566319

Email: info@jubilee-centre.org

Website: www.jubilee-centre.org

YouTube: www.youtube.com/jubileecentre