

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

by
BARBARA PAPPAS



Chapter Five

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CHAPTER FIVE

Christian Morality

BACKGROUND: To this point, Paul has been speaking rather gently about the divisions in the Church. Now he becomes more indignant, speaking vehemently against the immorality that he has heard is taking place among them.

5:1. *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife!* One of the Christians and his stepmother have been involved in an illicit relationship (see Lev 18:8, Deut 22:30 & 27:20). The woman must not have been a Christian, or Paul would have admonished her also. Corinth was notorious for its sexual freedom, but this particular sin shocked even the pagans.

5:2. *And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from you.* This situation was apparently being condoned because the Corinthians were mistakenly convinced that as Christians they were free from the moral code of the Old Testament (the Mosaic Law) given by God, through Moses, to His people (see Books of Exodus, Leviticus & Numbers). This “Law” had been given to the people of Israel for many reasons:

a. as types, symbols and prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, Who would rescue mankind from the effects of sin (Lev 16:20-22, 1 Jn 2:2), and of the events of His life, i.e. the Passover Lamb (Ex 12) prefigured His Crucifixion (1 Cor 5:7)).

b. to teach them to be holy (set apart from others), in the world, not of it; good and just, showing love through obedience.

c. to protect them in some way. For example the Jews were not allowed to eat pork in the days when cooking and storage methods were inadequate. Thus God’s law safeguarded their physical as well as their spiritual well being.

d. to define sin (Rom 3;19-20; 5:13), allowing them to realize that they could never earn salvation through their own efforts, so needed a Savior.

e. because of the hardness of their hearts (Ezek 20:22-26).

At first God deemed it sufficient to inscribe the natural law, or the Decalogue, upon the hearts of men; but afterwards He found it necessary to bridle, with the yoke of the Mosaic Law, the desires of the Jews, who were abusing their liberty; and even to add some special commands, because of the hardness of their hearts.

They therefore had a law, a course of discipline, and a prophecy of future things. For God at first warned them by means of natural precepts, which from the beginning He had implanted in mankind, that is, by means of the Decalogue (which, if anyone does not observe, he has no salvation), did then demand nothing more of them. As Moses says in Deuteronomy, *These are all the words which the Lord spoke to the whole assembly of the sons of Israel on the mount, and He added no more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone, and gave them to me* (Deut 5:22), so that they who are willing to follow Him might keep these commandments. But when they turned themselves to make a calf, and had gone back in their minds to Egypt, desiring to be slaves instead

of free men, they were placed for the future in a state of servitude suited to their wish—(a slavery) which did not indeed cut them off from God but subjected them to the yoke of bondage; as Ezekiel the prophet, when stating the reasons for the giving of such a law, declares: *And their eyes were after the desire of their heart; and I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments in which they shall not live* (Ezek 20:24).
IRENAEUS¹

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). How does Orthopraxia (Orthodox Practice) reflect items “b” and “c” above?

The Mosaic Law (the Written Covenant between God and man) contained 613 rules (as well as the Ten Commandments), each of which had to be followed precisely. To break one was to be guilty of breaking them all (Jas 2: 10). This was the bondage of the Law from which Jesus saved His people.

Under the new and final Blood Covenant through Jesus Christ, those who acknowledge Him as their Savior are no longer under the Law as far as having to *be* perfect to earn salvation—Jesus did that for us (Rom 3:16-21). Death came to the world as a consequence of sin. Christ lived a perfect life, so did not deserve death, yet He willingly accepted its ravages for our sake (Jn 10:17-18). Then He rose from the dead to show us there is life beyond the grave. Those who are a part of the Body of Christ (the Church) through Baptism and who try to live a Christ-like life to remain so will naturally be with Him eternally, in this life and the next.

While Christians no longer have to follow the laws of the old covenant perfectly in order to earn salvation (an impossibility), we are still required to try to follow its moral order (basically the Ten Commandments as summarized by Jesus in Mark 12:29-31). As Jesus said, He came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17), a truth that Paul continually emphasizes (Rom 3:31). Accepting this discipline demonstrates faith and at the same time, it molds us in His (holy) image.

The mistaken notion that Jesus did everything for us, so all we have to do is say we believe then continue to live in any manner we choose is a heresy which, as this Chapter shows, arose very early in the Church. The Book of James was written to refute this heresy, the danger of which is obvious. Many in every segment of Christianity have been led astray by it.

5:3-5. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged, as though I were present, concerning him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Since the Corinthians have not taken the proper action with regard to the sin taking place, Paul tells them what they must do: gather in a meeting of the entire Church at Corinth and cast out of their midst, excommunicate, the offending member *in the name of* and *with the power of*... *Jesus Christ*. To be a part of the Church is to be a part of the Body of Christ, with Him as the Head. To be cast out of the Church is to become a member of the society ruled over by Satan, the prince of this world (Jn 12:31 & 14:30), who boasts of having all the Kingdoms of the earth at his disposal (Mt 4:8-9). The Corinthians are to take this action in the hope that the severity of it will shock the offender and bring him to repentance.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Why is excommunication not practiced in the Church today as a means of trying to correct sinful conduct and bring an offender to repentance?

When Jesus chose the Apostles to act *in His Name*, He was continuing the Jewish tradition of sending,

when necessary, someone to act in one's stead. The person fulfilling this role was called a "shaliach." Any action taken by the shaliach when acting in this capacity, if taken according to the instructions of the principal, was binding on the one by whom he was sent. Thus, when Abraham sent his servant to choose a wife for his son Isaac, the servant's choice was honored (Gen 24). This is the authority Jesus gave the Apostles (Jn 20:21), which Paul is citing in this chapter, and which Orthodox Christian ordained clergy have possessed ever since, through Apostolic succession (Acts 20:28), by means of the Holy Spirit.²

Jesus gave the Apostles authority to bind and to loose sins on earth, with such decisions accepted in Heaven (Jn 20:23). This action of excommunication from the Church that Paul is advising would also extend to Heaven, as would any resultant repentance and reinstatement to the Church through the Apostles or their successors. Always though, any such actions taken are valid only to the extent that they follow the truths Christ passed on to the Apostles, and final judgment belongs to God.

for the destruction of the flesh implies that Satan would be allowed to inflict some physical difficulty upon the offender to bring him to his senses. Suffering is a blessing if, through it, a person is awakened to the need to examine his spiritual life. Thus, even if he loses his life, he may regain his soul.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). How would suffering a physical ailment bring a sinner to his senses?

5:6. *Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?* Paul continues his analogy (vs 5:2) regarding boasting and the swelling of dough containing leaven ("filled with hot air"?). He charges that their self-righteousness in the midst of gross disobedience has caused immorality to be condoned among the people. Beyond the spiritual danger to those involved, Paul warns that if this activity is allowed, others may assume that such conduct is acceptable for Christians and may indulge in further immorality. Just as a little yeast in a much larger amount of flour affects the whole mixture, sin among a group of Christians affects the whole community.

...the devil does his part, and never ceases to whisper in the heart of those he holds fast in bonds. I know that to fornicators, to adulterers who are not content with their own wives, he says that the sins of the flesh are not grievous. Against such whispering we must hold before our minds the Incarnation of Christ. It is through the enticements of the flesh that the enemy deceives the Christian; making light of what is grave sin, mild what is fierce, sweet what is bitter.

AUGUSTINE³

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). How does the sexual climate in ancient Corinth compare with the state of the world today, when many who call themselves Christians think premarital sex is not only acceptable but even expected?

5:7. *Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.* *Leaven* refers to sinfulness. The Corinthians had been spiritually cleansed through Baptism, but the unquestioned sin in their midst posed a spiritual danger to all of them. By association with it they could slip back to what they had been.

Under the Old Testament, to give His people a way of escape from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, God told them to sacrifice young perfect male lambs and to spread the blood of those lambs around the doors of their homes (read Ex 12:3-7). On the appointed night, death came upon the first-born in every home not so marked (12:23). The resulting trauma and chaos in the unmarked homes of the Egyptians gave the

Hebrew people the opportunity to escape. This event came to be called the Jewish *Passover* because the destroyer “passed over” every marked home, sparing those inside from death.

This was a pre-figuration of Christ’s sacrifice for us under the New Testament. He is called the new Passover, the Lamb of God, the last living sacrifice, because He died to save us (to atone for our sins). Those marked with His blood (through receiving Holy Communion as part of living in a Christ-like manner) will be rescued from death, having only to pass through it to eternal life with God in His Kingdom.

The mystery of the lamb which God ordered you to sacrifice as the Passover was truly a type of Christ, with whose Blood the believers, in proportion to the strength of their faith, anoint their homes, that is, themselves....Moreover, that lamb which you were ordered to roast whole was a symbol of Christ’s Passion on the Cross. Indeed, the lamb, while being roasted, resembles the figure of the cross, for one spit transfixes it horizontally from the lower parts up to the head, and another pierces it across the back, and holds up its forelegs. JUSTIN⁴

5:8. Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. The Jews of the Old Testament were told to keep the Feast of the Passover every year forever (Ex 12:14 & 13:3-10). Christ was crucified on the eve of the Feast of Passover (Jn 19:14)⁵ because He was to be the new Passover. His sacrifice superseded the Exodus sacrifice.

In the following fashion I can show that God’s precept concerning the paschal lamb was only temporary. God does not allow the paschal lamb to be sacrificed in any other place than where His name is invoked (that is, in the Temple at Jerusalem), for He knew that there would come a time, after Christ’s Passion, when the place in Jerusalem [where ...the paschal lamb was sacrificed] would be no more...and then all sacrifices would be stopped. JUSTIN⁶

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). What event in history caused the Temple at Jerusalem to “be no more”?

We remember Christ’s sacrifice (Crucifixion) and celebrate the festival (His Resurrection) at Pascha (Greek for Passover—called Easter in the West) every year in obedience to the Lord’s instruction to observe it forever.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the best remembrance or celebration of Pascha is to continually try to cleanse ourselves from sinfulness and to follow Christ according to the fullness of the truth. The new Passover is also celebrated every Sunday (the Lord’s Day), when we gather together in remembrance of the Resurrection of Christ, to receive His Body and Blood.

5:9-10. I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. Christians are expected to follow biblical standards of sexual morality because God’s word to His people never changes (Heb 13:7-8). For a sincere Christian to identify closely with a professed Christian who acts in ways that flout those standards would give the erroneous impression that those things no longer matter. It would be impossible, however, to avoid interaction with sexually immoral non-Christians because they are so prevalent in our world. Rather, we must try always, in their presence, to exemplify the Christian way of life. It has always been said that one good example is worth a thousand sermons.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (f). Christ sat with sinners to try to bring them into the fold (Mt 9:10-13). Can we have similar associations with that motive?

5:11. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. The word Christian means “Christ-like,” or “belonging to Christ.” A Christian does not have to *be* perfect like Christ but must always be *trying to become* like Him (Mt 5:48) and not be blatantly sinful. We cannot judge the person—that is God’s job—but we can judge activity that is not Christ-like and refuse to be a part of it, so as not to seem to condone it.

To encourage Christians to judge the actions of other Christians is very delicate ground, but we cannot just say: “live and let live” because this prevailing attitude has produced too many “name-only” Christians, a fact that non-Christians are quick to point out.

...when one who has sinned sees that all turn away from him, he will then come to see that his sin is something evil and reprehensible. But should he see that others do not consider his conduct to be unworthy, and accept him without complaint, and even encourage and abet him, then will the approval of others, abetting his own corrupt soul corrupt also the judgment of his conscience.

CHRYSOSTOM⁷

We must also take care to not become self-righteous and hypocritical, condemning the faults of others and excusing our own (Lk 6:41-42). Mahatma Gandhi once said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”⁸

5:12-13. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves that wicked person.” God will judge non-Christians. We as a Church (not as individuals) must determine what is proper conduct for Christians according to Scripture and the truths preserved by the Church, and must try to redirect each other with love when necessary in order to help one another stay on the road to the Kingdom.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). How does Orthopraxia reflect the precept that God’s people should be holy, in the world, not of it? One example is fasting, a spiritual discipline that helps us to learn to suppress worldly elements in our lives in order to elevate the spiritual. Fasting also teaches us to have the courage to be “different” than others around us, set apart for God (the definition of holiness). If we learn to fast regularly in a world where most do not, we may also develop what it takes to separate ourselves from the pack as we try to become Christ-like in morals, behavior, etc.

When we teach our children to fast, even under rather trying circumstances (as in school when no one around them is doing likewise) we are teaching them to have the courage to say “no” to the ways of the world when necessary. This discipline can be taught as a way to express love for and dedication to Christ and the way He asks us to live, with appropriate flexibility in consideration of physical and spiritual maturity and strength, and as a growing personal response to God through obedience.

Modern understanding of nutrition with regard to the reduction of red meat and harmful fats in our diet make it clear that the principles of fasting, if followed throughout the Church year, also promote physical

well being. Traditional Christian discipline is good for the body and for the soul.

(b). How would suffering a physical ailment bring a sinner to his senses? Suffering can teach valuable lessons, awaken a person from a spirit of apathy, bring about reflection (Ps 46:10), and/or test and strengthen faith (read the Old Testament story of Job and 1 Pet 1:6-9). A physical affliction can make one realize which things in this life have real value. When our health is threatened, we may pay more attention to our spiritual life—which endures forever. Also, God may sometimes allow the righteous to suffer so they may provide examples of faith under difficult circumstances, to the end that the faith of those looking on might be strengthened. (See this study for 2 Cor 12.)

(c). Why is excommunication not practiced in the Church today as a means of trying to correct sinful conduct and bring an offender to repentance? This chapter is not about excommunication, but about the fact that being a Christian incurs the responsibility to try to live a Christ-like lifestyle to demonstrate faith and to be a good example for others.

While still possible by Church Court, usually a synodical court, excommunication is almost never imposed today. It was probably necessary in the early Church because a firm foundation, built on the truths Christ taught, was still being laid down. The living Church had to be kept as pure as possible in practice to preserve these truths. When, with the passage of time, they were put into writings which were later compiled by the Church into what we now call the New Testament, and when the Fathers of the early Church clarified and interpreted the New Testament with their writings, according to the Holy Traditions that had been preserved intact by the living Church, these harsh practices could be relaxed. The Sacrament of Repentance (Confession) is the vehicle which the priest, who has the authority not only to bind and loose sins (Jn 20:22-23) but also to prescribe penance, can use today to try to bring about realization of sin, repentance, and reinstatement to the sacramental life of the Church.

(d). How does the sexual climate of ancient Corinth compare with the state of the world today, when many who call themselves Christians think premarital sex is not only acceptable but even expected? The devil has succeeded in deluding the masses to such an extent that many Christians in today's world—in every age category and from all walks of life—feel that while certain actions like stealing and murder are wrong, sexual activity between unmarried “consenting adults” is natural, pleasurable, and hurts no one. The New Testament and the writings of the early Church Fathers are very clear: any sexual relationship outside of marriage is immoral and not befitting a Christian (read 1 Thess 4:1-8, 1 Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, Heb 13:4, 1 Cor 7:2, 7-9). What sometimes causes confusion is a difference between the way the world defines the words adultery and fornication and biblical usage of these words. Even a worldly source⁹ recognizes the difference:

adultery: 1. defiling of marriage bed.

2. in scripture, all manner of lewdness or unchastity.

fornication: 1. act of voluntary sexual intercourse in single persons; if either party is married, it is adultery.

2. in Bible, any unlawful sexual intercourse, including adultery.

In other words, adultery and fornication are used interchangeably in Scripture to express any sexual activity outside of marriage. (As examples read Mt 5:27-28, which calls looking at a woman (other than

one's wife) lustfully adultery and applies to the unmarried as well as the married, and 1 Cor 5:9-11, which cautions that Christians are not to associate with sexually immoral people but mentions only fornicators and not adulterers specifically.)

What is adultery? What sort of necessity is there to bring us to this? Doubtless, it will be said, the tyranny of lust. But why, tell me, should this be? Is it not in everyone's power to have his own wife, and thus to put a stop to this tyranny? True, he will say, but a sort of passion for my neighbor's wife seizes hold on me. Here the question is no longer one of necessity. Passion is not a matter of necessity. No one loves of necessity, but of deliberate choice and free will. Indulgence of nature, indeed, is perhaps a matter of necessity, but to love one woman rather than another is no matter of necessity. Nor is the point with you natural desire, but vanity, wantonness, and unbounded licentiousness. For which is according to reason, that a man should have an espoused wife, and her the mother of his children, or one not acknowledged? Do you not know that it is intimacy that breeds attachment? This, therefore, is not the fault of nature. Blame not natural desire. Natural desire was bestowed with a view to marriage; it was given with a view to the procreation of children, not with a view to adultery and corruption. The laws, too, know how to make allowance for those sins which are of necessity—or rather nothing is sin when it arises from necessity but all sin rises from wantonness. God has not so framed man's nature that he should have any necessity to sin, since were this the case, there would be no such thing as punishment. We ourselves exact no account of things done of necessity and by constraint, much less would God, so full of mercy and loving-kindness..it is virtue which is according to nature, and vice which is against nature.

CHRYSOSTOM¹⁰

(e). What event in history caused the Temple at Jerusalem to “be no more”? Because He is omniscient, God foreknew that the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed (by the Roman Army in 70 A.D.) Orthodox Jews would like to rebuild the Temple to reinstate the sacrifices (which makes Muslims nervous, because one of their most treasured sites, the Dome of the Rock, sits on the land previously occupied by the Temple). Christians have no interest in having the Temple rebuilt because they know Christ was the last living sacrifice required by God according to the Law.

(f). Christ sat with sinners to try to bring them into the fold (Mt 9:10-13). Can we have similar associations with that motive? If our lifestyles are guided by Christian teachings, we are careful to reflect this in our conversations whenever possible, and we are able to answer questions with regard to God's word fully and correctly, we can be very powerful in outreach to those outside the Church. We must be very careful, however, not to let such associations endanger our spiritual condition. If there is any doubt as to whether we can withstand such temptation, we should flee from it. (Read 1 Thess 4:10-12). It is also important that such associations do not mislead others (see Chapter 8, Food For Thought (c).)

¹ Roberts and Donaldson, “Against Heresies,” Vol. I, p.479.

² Casimir Kucharek, “The Human Use of Divine Powers,” *Sacramental Mysteries: a Byzantine Approach*, p.69.

³ Toal, Vol. Two, p.225.

⁴ Falls, p.208.

⁵ George Mastrantonis, *a New Style Catechism on the Eastern Orthodox Faith, for Adults*, p.125.

⁶ Falls, p.208.

⁷ Toal, p.144.

⁸ Quotations Databank: <http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1905>.

⁹ Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, 2nd ed.

¹⁰ Schaff, “Homily II on Ephesians,” Vol. XIII, p.57.