

Faith Formation in Vegas

A Prep Guide for Session Three

by Dr. Allen Hilton

I started our first session with the claim that First Corinthians puts us closer to the ground in the lives of an early Christian community than any early Christian document. In our third session, as we reach chapters 5 –6, we will validate that claim, as Paul takes us into the bedroom with one member, into the petty squabbles between others, and into the brothels with still others. But this is no gossip fest or frustrated harangue. Paul is not simply airing this community's dirty laundry to shame them. Instead, he is developing here a moral theology of community that I believe the 21st-century church desperately needs.

Paul targets two large issues for the Corinthians: their arrogance and their misunderstanding of their relationship with the world around them.

With each of Paul's three behavioral examples in our section, Paul addresses Corinthian arrogance. We learned in chapter 4 that Paul sees this group as unduly self-satisfied, as if they've already arrived (4.6 –8). Now, in chapters 5 –6, he demonstrates that their picture of themselves is utterly belied by their egregious sexual sin (ch. 5), their inability to judge even small matters of dispute among themselves (6.1-8), and their willingness to misuse their bodies with prostitutes (6.12-20).

Each of these three specifics also raises the issue of group boundaries. The incestuous couple behaves even more immorally than the notorious Corinthian Gentile norms, those who sue fellow Jesus people take internal issues across the line to outsiders, and the frequenters of prostitutes violate the community's commitment to be, individually and collectively, the body of Christ.

There's a lot here! Let's read!

Formation in a Moral Community

Paul has called himself a farmer, a master builder, and a father. Later he'll be a healthcare worker (1 Thessalonians 2). In this last role, he turns next to diagnose the Corinthian illness: they are arrogant. And this letter's very next words challenge their

high estimate of themselves. It appears that Chloe's people have reported to Paul more than the divisions he mentions in 1.11. It's likely that Paul's first sentence in chapter 5 relates another part of that group's intelligence briefing.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, namely, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. (5.1-2 - New American Standard Bible)

In the situation Paul addresses, it seems one of the Corinthian Christians is having an affair with his stepmother. It borders on incest – Paul says not even the naturally immoral pagans (non - Jews) would call this ok – and Paul offers it as Exhibit A of the Corinthians' arrogance.

What is Paul's point?

The first thing to notice here is that Paul does not primarily address the man and woman whose actions he features. Instead, Paul's pronouns are plural and second person, addressed to the community that has abdicated its duty to foster a specific Christian moral culture. He talks *about* the couple, but he talks *to* the rest of the community.

Second, Paul also authoritatively advocates a specific communal response. In 4.16, he charged the Corinthians to "be imitators of me". Here, he provides his example from a distance.

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I [am] with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to turn such a person over to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. (5.3-5)

To our inclusive and grace -trained 21st-century eyes, Paul's sentence of excommunication may seem exceedingly harsh – almost medieval. In our own time, it smacks of Amish shunning or social media cancel culture. It certainly

What may surprise you is that it walks right in step with a similar response by Jesus in Matthew 18. In that familiar passage, Jesus commands that the one who refuses to listen to a brother or sister's claim of harm and refuses to seek reconciliation "shou ld

be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.” (Matthew 18.17) In this context, Jesus charges the community to “bind and loose” – a mysterious phrase that seems, in context, to imply heavenly authority and responsibility to excommunicate people who persist in behaviors that especially violate community culture.

So why does Paul (and why does Jesus!) advocate ecclesiastical exile? What purpose is served by “turn[ing] such persons over to Satan” or prescribing their “gentile or tax collector” status? For Paul and for Jesus, excommunication seems to have two main ends:

1. Paul hopes that this harsh consequence will eventually lead to the offender’s spiritual salvation (5.5), and Jesus customarily sought to transform the lives of Gentiles and tax collectors. Neither consigns the offender to damnation. Both hope for a future reincorporation.
2. Both Paul and Jesus hope to preserve the moral culture of the group. Paul draws a stark line between the norms of faithful living and the moral atrocity of incest and portrays the latter as a sort of infection – “old leaven” in a new lump of dough (or “one bad apple will spoil the whole barrel”) For Jesus, the practices of community discipline are crucial – right alongside the forgiveness that never leaves Christian practice. (Matthew 18.21-35)

When I read 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18, my mind goes to occasions in churches I’ve attended or served, in which a member has become belligerent or abusive toward other members in meetings, or showered the clergy with poison e-mails, or otherwise persisted in destructive behavior within the body of Christ. I’ve always pictured step one as an arm-around-the-shoulder confrontation by another member saying, “Friend, that’s not how we treat one another around here.” And then, if the behavior continues, a visit from another or others. I have never seen a member excommunicated (the third step) or put out of the congregation. I wonder if this tolerance is a misunderstanding of grace and an underestimation of Paul’s and Jesus’s seriousness about the sanctity of community.

The Corinthian Context

Paul’s reason for highlighting a sexual sin as the first order of business in this section – and returning to it at the end of this section spanning from 5.1 –6.19 becomes clearer if we know the city of Corinth a bit better.

The city was so well known for its sexual profligacy that Aristophanes, the great comic poet of Athens, coined the word KORINTHIAZESTHAI to mean “to fornicate.”

Philoterus wrote a play called “Korinthiastes” – The Whoremonger – and Plato’s “KORINTHIA KORE” meant “prostitute girl.” You get the picture. This church lives in Sin City.

What is the solution? Paul reframes their relativity. “Don’t play down to your city, play up to the Holy One.” To stop the cycle of relativity, Paul teaches them that their bodies are intended to be nothing less than the abode of God. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6.19)

Paul’s second point tells them why this high standard even matters. Some of the Corinthians think their bodies are meaningless stuff. “Food for the stomach, the body for food, and God will destroy both one and the other.” Physical matter doesn’t matter. That’s what some of the Corinthians think.

In response, Paul again reframes the issue for them. “You were bought with a price,” he says. God valued their life in this body so much that Jesus died for them. “Therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6.20)

Paul’s two points speak to us, too, because you and I face the same problem the Corinthians faced: we live in a society that sets the bar low for us – in sexual morality and across the spectrum of our ethics. Popular media coaxes us to lose clarity – to objectify other people’s bodies in a sex-crazed culture, to compromise our ideals because “everyone does it,” to begin believing that license is freedom.

Paul’s Solution #1: You and I need to remember that God calls us to holiness – not better-than-thou righteousness, but a true commitment to be capable hosts for God’s Spirit.

Paul’s Solution #2: We also need to remember that what we do with our bodies (and others’) matters enough to God for Jesus to put his own body on a Roman cross.

Paul’s words may seem like a call to Victorian prudishness. But it’s worth entertaining notion that, in our context as in ancient Corinth, It is a call to the proper Christian valuing of the bodies God gave us – not as ornaments, but as homes for God’s Spirit.

Paul is uncomfortably direct with the Corinthians. He tells them they are spiritual babies (1 Corinthians 3.1) and here he says that their boasting should rather be mourning. (1 Corinthians 5.1-2) In the 21st-century culture of the U.S., this directness

may seem harsh and even intrusive. Would you like your leaders to be as direct with your congregation as Paul is with the Corinthians?

Judge Julius

In a minor corner of the cable TV constituency and the reality TV genre, there exist people who love to watch legal spats in small claims court. A jurist called Judith Scheindlin made buckets of money and became a bit of a household name over a quarter century as Judge Judy, arbitrating cases and moralizing at the litigants. She outshone Judge Wopner before her and then handed the baton to [Judge Milian](#) and [Judge Mathis](#). It turns out, a certain segment of Americans love to watch real people take one another to court.

The second spotlight in this section falls on the ancient version of Judge Judy – call it Judge Julius – which features people from our little living -room full of Corinthian Christians seeking arbitration in the municipal court of Corinth to deciding torts between them. To put it mildly, the apostle Paul doesn't like the show.

Does any one of you, when he or she has a case against another, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?...I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you anyone wise who will be able to decide between his brother s and sisters, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather suffer the wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yo urselves do wrong and defraud. And this to your brothers and sisters! (6.1, 5-8)

In this matter, as with the incest in chapter 5, Paul challenges both this group's moral identity as a family and their failure to draw proper boundaries with the world around them.

Four things to notice here:

1. Paul contends that the “set apart ones” in Corinth, (1.2 -3) have all the spiritual resources they need to adjudicate their own conflicts.
2. Paul – who sounds here a lot like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount – chastises those who press the lawsuit (no laundry pun intended!), because proper Christian deference would “rather be wronged...be defrauded”.

3. The utter value of the people being sued is established in their identity as baptismal family. They are the suers' "brothers and sisters" in Christ. (Later, in 8.15, it will be "brothers and sisters for whom Christ died".)
4. Paul grounds his confidence in their competency in an eschatological role he pictures for them: they will "judge angels".

One crucial detail from the Roman legal context will help us to understand Paul's preoccupations in this section. While Roman law is properly celebrated through the ages as one of that culture's great contribution to the history of civilizations, the scales of justice were skewed by money. The wealthy and people of means had a huge advantage in the courts. Seneca the Elder, an older contemporary of Paul, tells the story of a rich man who taunts a poor man, "Why don't you accuse me? Why don't you take me to court?" to which the poor man replies, "Am I, a poor man, to accuse a rich man?" As in many courts of justice across cultures and throughout history, the ground before the judge's bench was not level.

Seeing this disparity, it is likely that any lawsuits being pressed among the Christians of Corinth were most likely instigated by the richer member. When Paul tries to stop this practice, he is siding with the poorer members of the Christian group. We'll soon see that this is part of a pattern in this letter. The rich could afford meat in their diets, while the poor could rarely enjoy it, and Paul ultimately challenges the rich. (8–10) And the gathering for a common meal and the Lord's Supper features some members, presumably those who have more leisure, showing up early and consuming the goods before the poorer members arrive. As Paul puts it, "one person remains hungry and another gets drunk." (11.21)

This is the pattern: with lawsuits, meat sacrificed to idols, and the central ritual of the Lord's Supper, Paul's position takes the side of the poor and contends against the rich.

An Ancient Vice List That Keeps Being Current

The issue of homosexuality and the Bible continues to divide churches, families, and neighborhoods. It is a sensitive issue on which views are passionately held. We will turn to this topic on Monday evening, because one focus passage within this conversation comes in Paul's vice list in 1 Corinthians 6.9 - 10.

Vice lists were a mainstay in ancient moral writings, in Judaism, Greco -Roman philosophy, and in the nascent Christian communities. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Greek philosopher, Aristotle listed no fewer than 20 vices:

Irascibility, Rashness, Shamelessness, Profligacy, Envy, Profit, Prodigality, Boastfulness, Flattery, Subservience, Spiritlessness, Cowardice, Diffidence, Insensitiveness, Loss, Meanness, Self-depreciation, Surliness, Stubbornness, Luxuriousness, Vanity, Smallness of spirit. Extravagance, Shabbiness, Rascality, Simpleness.

His list of virtues is shorter:

Gentleness, Courage, Modesty, Temperance, Righteous indignation, Liberality, Sincerity, Friendliness, Dignity, Hardiness, Greatness of spirit, Magnificence, Wisdom.

Sources from second temple Judaism (500 B.C.E. - 70 C.E.) also feature vice lists. 1 Enoch lists “sin...unrighteousness...blasphemy...violence in all kinds of deeds...apostasy...transgression...uncleanness”. (1 Enoch 91:5)

3 Baruch 4.17 lists, murder, adultery, fornication, perjury, theft, greediness, slander, envy, drunkenness, strife, jealousy, grumbling, gossip, idol worship, divination.

So these lists were common among moral teachers in Gentile and Jewish traditions. Paul shares two vice lists in chapters 5 and 6.

I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person, or a greedy person, or an idolater, or is verbally abusive, or habitually drunk, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a person. (5.11)

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor [g]homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor those habitually drunk, nor verbal abusers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. (6.9-10)

These lists as a whole get relatively little attention among preachers and teachers of Bible. But one element in Paul's second list (6.9) – the appearance of the Greek words MALAKOI and ARSENOKOITAI—continues to be a focal point in the ongoing Christian debate about homosexuality. In this brief space, I'll attempt to provide context for this very brief mention, to present options for translation and interpretation.

Homosexual behavior does not comprise a major topic in scripture – Jesus never mentions the issue directly – but it does appear several times when they are not the main point. But they have been a major topic that has divided churches and American culture for decades. One of the five passages that features in the debate comes in 1 Corinthians 6. In this section, we'll put this passage in its context – in Paul's argument, in the wider canon of scripture, and in the Greco-Roman context.

Below are the five famous passages that pronounce on homosexual behavior and/or desire, according to the English Standard Version translation:

Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

The two passages in Leviticus appear amidst a long string of other legal material. Chapter 18 is an extensive list of “you shall not,” passages, mostly about incest of every specific kind. Surrounding 18.22, the law forbids several practices that, despite widespread transgression, no Christians seem to be publicly protesting:

“You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 18.19)... If a man lies with a woman having her sickness and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people (Leviticus 20.18).”

“You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials (19.19).”

There is also an irony in our current U.S. political setting concerning the context of the two Levitical passages. Right now, strong voices from the Christian right are both shouting out against homosexuality because of Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 AND strongly oppose immigration against the clear commandment of Leviticus 19.33.

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. 3The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (19.33-34).

For progressives the inconsistency is reversed: during the immigration marches of 2016-17, I saw signs from the Left quoting Leviticus 19 and Leviticus 18 and 20 are nowhere to be found.

As we all hope to discern God's voice in the scriptures, it is vital to notice when and where we are making arbitrary choices and to be humble about that. Once during a denominational debate, I saw a placard that alerts us to this: "Selective literalism is idolatry."

Romans 1.26-27

"For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers —none of these will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9-10)."

1 Timothy 1.9-11

"This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 1.9-11)."

Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19

A sixth passage mentions homosexual behavior, namely, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. There, all the men of Sodom surround the house in which Lot is staying and insist that the host release them so they can "have" the men inside. (Genesis 19:1-13)

Unlike the other five passages, which are in didactic contexts, the Sodom and Gomorrah passage is part of a narrative. Here are two opposing views on the “moral of the story” in Genesis 19:

"The Genesis passage is very clear, that the sin of Sodom that brought on the destruction of the city was indeed linked to homosexuality." (R. Albert Mohler, Southern Baptist Convention)

"Saying that the last recorded acts of the Sodomites -- the demands for same-gender sex -- are proof that they were destroyed for homosexuality is like saying that a condemned man cursing his guards on the way to his execution is being executed for cursing the guards. Sodom was judged worthy of destruction before the incident with Lot and the angels." (Inge Anderson)

1 Corinthians 6.9 - 10 and 1 Timothy 1.9 - 10

These two references come within vice lists in Paul. The other vices listed are:

- Fornicators
- idolaters,
- adulterers,
- thieves,
- the greedy,
- drunkards,
- revilers,
- robbers

While this list features character traits of which most Christians would disapprove, the rest of the list has not generally been used by Christians in the 21st century to qualify or disqualify prospective members or clergy. I have yet to hear of a clergyperson defrocked or (especially) a prospective member refused on account of her or his greed.

The translation of the Greek word is very important and has been, predictably, controversial. The words and various translations of them are arrayed below.

Translation of the Greek Words:

MALAKOI

male prostitutes,
male prostitutes
male prostitutes,
Transl.)
adulterers
the effeminate
male prostitutes
those who commit adultery
the effeminate

ARSENOKOITAI

sodomites (NRSV)
homosexual offenders (NIV)
those who practice homosexuality (New Living
men who practice homosexuality (ESV)
homosexuals (NASB)
homosexuals (International Standard Version)
homosexuals (God's Word Translation)
abusers of themselves with mankind (KJV)

One part of the contemporary debate that surrounds our passage is the question whether Paul means to picture heterosexual men and/or women seeking the sexual company of other men or women (a la Greek educational practices of taking lovers at the time of Socrates, which has a limited presence also in Rome) or whether he is picturing men and women of same-sex "orientation" or desire.

Two examples of biblical scholarship will have to suffice as our brief point/counterpoint:

In his popular book, *Romans for Everyone*, the English biblical scholar and churchman N.T. Wright grounds the Romans 1 passage in the story of "male and female" in the Genesis creation narrative. He sees the "male plus female" norm of that narrative as revelatory of God's character and will. He writes, "Paul's point...is, 'This is not what males and females were made for.'" (Vol 1, page 22) Wright's argument is sometimes called "gender complementarity," which is "the idea that men and women are different from one another in essential ways, and that Christian love depends on the pairing of just those differences." It is a conclusion about the biblical narrative on gender and is a prominent belief among Christians who maintain the traditional rejection of homosexual behavior and relationships as God-blessed arrangement.

On the other hand, in his book, *Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, James V. Brownson, a professor at Western Theological Seminary and member of the Reformed Church in America, claims that gender complementarity is not an assumption of the biblical narrative, and therefore does not confine valid Christian sexual ethics to heterosexuality. Instead, he reads Romans 1 in terms of the specific boundaries

A Summary of the Scriptural Debate

In one paragraph of his 2014 Christianity Today article reviewing Matthew Vines' book, *God and the Gay Christian*, Christopher Yuen summarizes very briefly the several arguments against seeing the six biblical passages as condemnations of 21st - century versions of monogamous same - sex relationships.

Six biblical passages directly address homosexuality, and Vines insists that none address same-sex orientation as we know it today. Thus,

in Genesis 19, the sin of Sodom is not related to loving, consensual same - sex relationships, but to the threat of gang rape.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not about committed same - sex relationships, but about the improper ordering of gender roles in a patriarchal society (men taking the receptive, sexual role; women taking the penetrative, sexual role).

Paul in Romans 1:26-27 is not referring to monogamous, gay relationships, but instead to lustful excess and the breaking of customary gender roles.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul does not condemn same - sex relationships as an expression of one's fixed and exclusive sexual orientation, but instead condemns the economic exploitation of others.

In his review, Mr. Yuen, a professor at the quite - conservative Moody Bible Institute, rejects each argument in favor of a more traditional reading, but his summary of progressive readings is compact and useful for our purposes.