Radically Different, Radically Engaged
1 Cor 5

There are some passages in the Bible that can leave you thinking, 'yuk!' And today's passage is one of them, because at first glance it seems it's about a man sleeping with his step-mum. Which it is. But it's about much more than that. It's about the kind of community Christians are called to be in a pagan world.

A Religion with Demands

In his book, *Destroyer of the gods*, Larry Hurtado argues that in the first century, Christianity was unique. It was the only religion that placed behavioural demands on its members. Now, Judaism did as well, but Judaism wasn't evangelistic like Christianity, Hurtado argues. Christianity was the only religion that deliberately appealed across barriers of race and ethnicity *and* called people to a radically different lifestyle from those around them.

And in a chapter called, *A New Way to Live*, Hurtado says, that alongside protecting the lives of the newborn, and rejecting the culture of violence for entertainment, like the gladiator shows, and its refusal to worship pagan gods, it was Christianity's attitude to sex that made it like nothing else the ancient world had ever seen. As someone else has said, in the first century, pagans gave their money to practically no-one, but their bodies to practically everyone. Whereas, the Christians came along and gave their money to practically everyone and their bodies to practically no-one.

You see, in Roman culture sex was no big deal - at least if you were a man. You did it with your spouse, but also with prostitutes and with your slaves. Demosthenes said, 'Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children.' In other words, you can have sex with whoever you like, just pick the right tool for the right job.

So if sex was so free, why would anyone embrace a new religion that said sex was reserved for marriage?

Because that pagan view of sex diminishes it. Just like any product, flood the market with it and you can't help but devalue it. And in the pagan world sex was everything, but that inevitably meant it became nothing.

Think how our current culture does the same. You might think, 'there's no way our Western cultures undervalue sex! It's everywhere! Including advertising.' But that's the point. Sex isn't just something that sells, it's become something to be consumed. And so, far from *over*-valuing sex, our secular culture doesn't value it enough, because it's reduced it to something you do, something you trade in the market-place of relationships.

But the price has got to be right, hasn't it? And the product good enough, if you're going to buy. Whether in a secular culture like Lausanne, or a pagan one like Corinth, the person has to be attractive enough, the sex has to be good enough, *and* the cost has to be low enough. But if the cost goes up and the person I'm having sex with begins to make commitment demands on me, or if the quality of the sex goes down, or the attractiveness of the person falls, then I can quit.

So, in such a culture sex can become like any consumer good, except rather than filling your shopping basket, it's about whose filling your bed. And the problem is, that doesn't just diminish sex, over time it begins to diminish you. You find yourself either being used and then discarded, like

any other consumer good, or you find yourself using and discarding others. Both of which take their emotional toll.

And yet, in just such a culture Christianity exploded, including its sexual ethic, so much so that within 300 years it had overturned the culture. Why?

Because, among many reasons, the Bible restores sex to its right, incredible, value. You see, by saying sex is reserved for life-long covenant marriage between a man and a woman, sex is taken off the shelves and out of the shopping basket. It's taken off the market. And that wasn't just appealing then, it's appealing now.

Listen to what Caitlin Flanagan, the American social critic wrote in the New York Times at the height of the MeToo movement. She was arguing that to combat sexual aggression and abuse of power by men, getting *spoken* consent before sex just isn't enough. We need more, she said: 'Take it a step further. What if [before we slept with anyone] we asked for a *lifetime* commitment, a binding legal document *and* the presence of witnesses at the vow taking? Could work.'

Now she meant that tongue in cheek, but what's she saying? She's saying: how do you stop sex being something that's used? Something *demanded* by powerful people and *traded* by those who need them? Answer: life-long, exclusive, faithful, marriage.

Now, the danger is you think that the Bible confines sex to marriage like a convict to his prison cell. But the way the Bible sees sex and marriage, the walls of marriage aren't the walls of a prison but the walls of a playground where things can get really wild, because you know you're safe and loved.

You see, if legalistic religion suppresses sex, and if pagan, secular cultures trivialise it, Christianity celebrates it, inside of marriage. And what the Bible has to say about sex makes the religious person blush, but the licentious secular person irate. It's why in the words of the old Prayer Book, as the bride and groom placed a ring on each other's finger they said 'With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee *worship*.' Now, you might get nervous about the word *worship,* which the later editors did and changed it to 'honour'. But the original was on to something. Because when you give yourself to someone sexually, you are giving yourself at the deepest possible level.

And that is why Paul was horrified by what's going on in Corinth: v1, 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.' And Paul's right, sex with your step-mother was one step too far even for pagans. Cicero, the statesman, who was prudish about sex, *and* Catulus the poet who wasn't, both said such a relationship was disgusting and totally out of bounds.

Now, the word Paul uses for 'sexual immorality' is *porneia,* which referred to any and every sexual behaviour outside of marriage. And Christians stood out from the pagan world for saying, we don't live like this, *porneia,* sexual immorality, is something we don't do.

So why hasn't the church at Corinth got that memo? Why, Paul wants to know, are they tolerating something that scandalised even pagans?

A Pride that Makes you Powerless

Look at v2, ‘And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?’ And the word Paul uses for ‘arrogant’ is the same word he used in chapter 4: they’re *puffed up*. Their egos are overinflated. They’re proud.

And their pride has left them unwilling or unable to tell this man he’s wrong. Think how that could happen.

Firstly, pride can make us cowardly, can’t it? We tend to think that pride makes you macho, willing to ‘get-in-your-face’. But if you’re proud, what others think of you means too much to you. So you’re not going to do anything that might put that at risk. And some commentators suggest that this man has got away with this because he’s wealthy - which is why Paul twice adds greed alongside sexual immorality in v10-11 — that he’s a patron to others in the church, that their positions depend on him. Because if status and how others see you matters too much to you, you’re going to have a hard time challenging the person who controls your access to status, or can damage your career progress or your social connections.

But secondly, pride leaves you thinking you’re above the law, that you can get away with it, that the rules don’t apply to you. And you lose your sense of sin. You stop grieving over your sin: ‘Ought you not rather to mourn?’, Paul asks them. Not if you don’t see sin as sin any more; *or* you think that God’s just there to make you happy, and he wouldn’t want you *not* to have what makes you happy; *or* if you just see sin as what has to be done to get ahead.

You see, when someone thinks that accountability is for others, disaster is not far away, is it? It's why Proverbs says, ‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty [puffed up] spirit before a fall’ (16:18).

But thirdly, pride blinds us to how influenced by our culture we are. You see, when you stop seeing sin as sin, your ethics start slipping. But as they slip they inevitably become more and more like those of the culture around you. And if that’s Corinth, you become more and more like Corinth, where sex is everything and sex is nothing. But because you’re now your own law-maker, there’s nothing to stop you slipping past even your surrounding culture, and you out-Corinth Corinth and end-up sleeping with your step-mum.

So Paul is clear, they need to stop valuing things like status and position like their pagan neighbours do, and instead return to the gospel.

But to do that they’re going to have to take specific, concrete steps in the life of the church.

A Community that’s Different (but engaged)

This man’s behaviour threatens their identity as a Christian community, so Paul is clear: they can’t be indifferent to it. In fact, four times he tells them that, as a whole church, they must put him out of the church. Verse 2, ‘Let him who has done this be removed from among you.’ Verse 5, ‘you are to deliver this man to Satan’ - he’s living like someone in the world, so put him back in the world, the domain of satan. Verse 7, ‘cleanse out the old leaven’. And v13, “Purge the evil person from among you”.

Now, you might think, ‘isn’t this a bit harsh? Excommunicating someone just because they fall into sin? And if the culture of this church was one of pride and judging and comparing yourself to others

so you can feel good about yourself, won't this just feed into that?' And a secular person might say, 'exactly! This is precisely what's wrong with religion - self-righteousness. Judging others so you can feel good and look good.'

But self-righteousness and the shunning of others isn't just a problem for religion, is it? Just a few months back, Läderach chocolate, a family firm, were on the receiving end of a campaign against them, because their CEO, who's a Christian, supports a traditional view of marriage and it resulted in the loss of their contract with Swissair. So a secular person might complain about the Bible saying 'don't even eat with a sexually immoral person' but the next moment refuse to eat the chocolate of someone who thinks the Bible's right. And the reason behind that kind of shunning is just as much about self-righteousness as can happen in the religious scene.

And yet, secular or religious, if you want to grow you've got to be willing to embrace criticism, haven't you. As Winston Churchill said, ideas that offend, or criticism that seems unpleasant "fulfil the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to the development of an unhealthy state of things."

So, look at the reasons Paul gives for doing this: v5, 'You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *so that* his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.'

So when a local church says to one of its members, 'look, your behaviour is inconsistent with being a Christian, and unless you let us help you turn this around, we're going to have to put you outside the church, because it seems you *are* outside the church' they're doing it to wake the person up to the seriousness - the eternal seriousness - of their condition. We're doing it, Paul says, 'for the destruction of the flesh', to defeat sin in your life, so you'll see your need to repent and be saved.

I mean, has there ever been a time when you've needed a wake-up call like this? Maybe not as severe, but someone or something to bring you up short, and tell you, things can't go on like this. When I was a student, I was stuck in sin and a mess of my own making. And one Sunday I was stood in church, feeling miserable, when the lady behind me tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'I think the Lord has given me this verse for you'. It was John 14:15, where Jesus says, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' And it was the jolt I needed. In that moment I knew God knew what I was doing, and that I needed to end it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was part of the anti-Nazi resistance in World War 2 said, "Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin." So, v4, Paul says, 'when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus', you are to love this man enough to warn him and in a way that wakes him up, by putting him out of the church.

That's the first motive, to save the man. But the second is to protect the church. Verse 6, 'Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?' Now, when you bake bread, you have this bowl of dough. How much yeast do you need to make it rise? In comparison, a tiny amount. And Paul is saying, sin's the same, it spreads. Tolerate this man and it sends a message to the rest of the church that sin's tolerated: 'If he can get away with *that*, then I can get away with *this*, which is nowhere near as bad.'

So this isn't just about saving this man, it's about saving others.

So Paul says, v7, ‘Cleanse out the old leaven.' And at Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, every Jewish family would sweep the floors and empty every cupboard and search the house to make sure not a speck of old leaven was left in the house that could compromise all that Passover meant: that the people of Israel were rescued by God to be his new, holy, set apart people in the world. And Paul is saying, have that kind of attitude to this kind of sin in your community, because you’re called to be different.

And that’s the third reason this church, and any church, is to take action against whatever compromises its identity as God’s people. Look at v9-10, ‘I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.’

So Paul envisages a church that’s engaged with the world. That in all the darkness of the world it shines, it offers God’s life and light. But such a church will have nothing to offer if it’s no different than the world. So to stay engaged with the world the church *has* to be distinct from the world.

And that means no compromise and no ghettos.

You see, typically, churches make one of two errors. Liberal churches have no problem engaging with the world, because really they’re no different from the world, but as a result, have nothing distinct to offer the world. Whereas highly-conservative churches are very different from the world, but to preserve that they withdraw from the world. But the New Testament has something very different in mind: local churches that are radically different from the world, but radically engaged with the world.

And Paul makes it clear that ‘radically different’ is not just about sex. Verse 11, ‘But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler - not even to eat with such a one.’ You see, in this culture to share a meal with someone was a sign of friendship. And Paul is saying that as Christians we cannot befriend sexual immorality, but neither can we covetousness, and the endless pursuit of more, or cheating people financially, or abusing substances, or hating others, or worshipping idols. That there are somethings that are inconsistent with being a Christian. And for the sake of each other, and the church, and the world, we cannot blur the witness of being God’s people in the world. Rescued *out of* the world to offer salvation *to* the world.

But what can motivate you to do that? How can a church, or any of us, maintain a distinct Christian lifestyle, while staying engaged with the world, and do it out of love for others and not self-righteousness?

A Church Shaped by the Cross

Look at v7: ‘Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, *as you really are unleavened*. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.’

So they aren’t to do this to try and become holy but because they’re already holy; because Christ has died for them and they’re already different. They simply need to live *in to* who they already are.

You see, legalistic, self-righteous religion says, you need to make yourself pure, you need to make yourself different if God's going to accept and love you. But the gospel says, because of Jesus, because of God's grace, God already accepts and loves you, regardless of how messed up sexually or financially you are.

And that will radically affect the choices you make. You see, if Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread remembered how God rescued his people from slavery, to make them his people, Paul is saying, Jesus has done that for you. He was the pure, spotless Passover lamb who gave his life to rescue you from the slavery of sin, from the slavery of looking to sex or money for your identity; from being dragged down by your self-righteous hatred of others. And by his grace, he's made you his own. Now, live in to that, become who you are in him.

You see, we will only love someone trapped in sin, and be willing to do the hard thing and confront them - out of love not self-righteousness - when we know we've been loved and that Jesus had to do the infinitely harder thing to save us when we were trapped in sin. It's only knowing you have been loved when you didn't deserve it that means you can love another when they don't deserve it.

And Paul says, constantly reminding yourself of that. Verse 8, 'Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.' The Feast of Unleavened bread lasted 7 days. Seven days of remembering God rescued us from slavery. And Paul's saying, continually celebrate it. Keep reminding yourself and rejoicing in the fact that by grace, Jesus has set you free from the slavery of sin, and you'll live in sincerity and truth. You'll live an authentic life, you can drop the mask and do the work of removing the leaven of sin from your own life without falling into despair but being thankful for all that Christ has done for you, a sinner who doesn't deserve it. You can confront in love, without sinking into self-righteousness. And you can engage the world, without being conformed to it.