LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for March 14: When immorality comes to church

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The city of Corinth was wicked. Sexual immorality was pervasive. There were places where men could go and have sexual relations with a prostitute as an act of worship. Most of the other sexual deviances also were present in Corinth when the Apostle Paul wrote to the church there and warned them about immorality.

In this passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul is concerned about a particular instance in the church in Corinth where a man had taken for himself his father's wife. While such relationships may have been acceptable in Corinth, they were reprehensible to believers. The balance of these passages contains Paul's rejection of immorality and his instructions concerning living moral lives.

Does sin still shock us? (1 Corinthians 5:1-2)

Paul denounced the actions of the man described above, but there seems to be an equally disturbing corollary to the story. Paul was fearful the church was "proud" (v. 2) of what this man had done. The language conveys the idea the Corinthians saw themselves as accepting of this lifestyle, perhaps thinking they were progressive because of their tolerance. As Paul begins to scold the church, you can almost feel the rage in his words telling them they should, "have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this" (v. 2).

Analogies to the modern church must be made at this point. Today's church

finds itself in a culture very similar to the culture confronting the church in Corinth. Deviant lifestyles are common place and many of them are being displayed openly in churches. Some churches and church leaders knowingly allow church members to live openly immoral lives. Some will even take pride in their tolerance, sporting it as a badge of their progressive nature. It is as though the church is no longer shocked by sin.

Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ never must become so culturally desensitized that they no longer are shocked by the sins of the world. And the church never should allow open immorality to thrive in its midst.

How should we respond? (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

Certainly at Corinth and in other more recent times, the church practiced discipline toward members who openly lived in sin. Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to put out of their fellowship the man who had taken his father's wife (v. 2). It was not long ago when a fellowship of believers would "church" members who would not repent and be restored. Church is a place where moral absolutes must be accepted and celebrated which requires discipling those who will not live pure lives.

It should be noted Paul never encouraged or commanded the Christians at Corinth to disassociate with sinners. He even goes as far as to say the church would have to "leave this world" (v. 10) to be free from the presence of sin. Believers are expected to live among sinners in order to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Paul's encouragement isn't to come out of the world but to insure the world never gains a foothold in the church. Jesus told his disciples to be in the world but not of it. As early as the church at Corinth, believers were of the world but not in it.

What's wrong with sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:15-20)

Sexual immorality was inculcated into the Corinthian culture. Many

believed there was no harm in sexual immorality. Many today hold a similar opinion. Modern culture intimates certain sexual behaviors are not harmful to anyone. But culture is seldom a good judge for moral absolutes.

Paul begins to explain why sexual immorality is such a harmful practice. He makes three arguments; the human body was made for God's enjoyment and sexual immorality degrades God's purpose for sexual intimacy (6:13); joining in sexual intimacy outside the boundaries of a relationship with one's spouse is degrading to the body of the believer.(v. 15); and joining two bodies together in sexual intimacy makes two bodies one flesh (vv. 15-17).

Ultimately there must be a final authority on right and wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral. Often people look to their society and culture for such decisions. In these matters there is but one final judge and authority. God, the author and maker of human life, stands alone as the only one who is able to discern such matters. Morality is determined by the desires of God as explained in his word.

Is there any hope for a believer who is caught up in an immoral lifestyle? Paul, in a definitive and redemptive way encourages believers to, "Flee from sexual immorality" (v. 18). Knowing the difficulty of fleeing from evil desires, God has given every believer his Holy Spirit, "who is in you, whom you have received from God" (v. 19). With the help of God's Spirit, it is possible to flee sexual immorality.

God's word, like God himself, is timeless. It is relevant to every age and every culture. When Paul penned these words to the Corinthian church, God knew they would be needed in another time and another place. The modern church needs to hear again the wisdom of the ancient word and once again proclaim sexual purity as the desire of God and to do everything possible to insure immorality isn't tolerated within the body of Christ.