

**“A COUPLE OF SURPRISES!”**

*1 Corinthians 5:1-13*

If you were here a couple of weeks back when I was preaching, or at the Church Meeting last month, you'll be aware that we're going to be having a look at some of the big issues which currently confront us as Christians living in a culture which appears, on the face of it, to be moving further and further away from what we would take to be biblical norms. The catalyst for our dealing with this is the discussion about same-sex marriage and what we should do about it. We'll come to that specific issue in a few weeks' time, but it has to be said that many of the issues which we seem to find difficult to cope with or to talk about come back to the subject of sexual behaviour. Now that's not because we're all followers of Freud, who seemed to think that all human behaviour is influenced by our sexual drive – apologies to any psychologists here this morning for that gross over-simplification! – but because of the current proliferation in our culture of sexualised language, imagery and attitudes. Wherever you look – television, music, cinema, advertising, publishing, the Internet – the objectification of the human body (usually the female body) and the libertarian idea that you can do what you want so long as it doesn't really hurt anyone else have led to a sensory overload that can become almost oppressive. And this commodification of it all – sex as part of what we buy and sell – leads to broken relationships, empty lives, gender-based violence, skewed child development, slavery, trafficking, organised crime, problems of self-image and so on.

How are we to cope with, to respond to this relentless tide of what many would call self-expression or liberation and others would call filth and depravity? As Christians, what should we be doing and, more importantly as we have been thinking recently, what should our underlying attitude be to all this? Well, as followers of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, our fundamental resource must be the Bible, God's word, where we encounter the teaching of Jesus, and we seek the help of his Holy Spirit to interpret it and apply it to our own situation. What does the Bible have to say about all this – taking into account the fact that it was written long before publishing really got going, before photography and cinema and the Internet came along, before many of the theories of sociology and psychology that we take for granted today had been formulated? What are the principles we should be using to help form our attitudes?

Well, this morning we are going to take a look at Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth and see if we can find some help there. It's particularly appropriate as the little church in Corinth was trying to establish its identity in a culture that was deeply affected by sex. Just as we might feel today, they were surrounded by such stuff and wondering quite how to live out their faith in a context that was very much at odds with what the teaching of Jesus seemed to be advocating. Our situation is nothing new!

Corinth was a very busy seaport and stood at the crossroads of a number of trade routes. Such places always seem to have a reputation for illicit sex – people away from home, looking for a bit of excitement where they’re not known and can’t be identified. But the city was dominated by a huge Temple to the goddess Aphrodite. It was an impressive structure which stood on a hill at the edge of the town – you can still see its ruins today. And if you’ve ever had anything to do with the classics or ancient history, you’ll know that Aphrodite was the goddess of love – which, then as now, was usually another word for sex. The Temple was decorated with all kinds of images appropriate to that and the city itself full of references to it. But also, the Temple was serviced by 1,000 prostitutes, which meant it was good for business, too. In that culture, as in ours, the bottom line in most discussions was about the money it brought into the local economy and the number of jobs it provided. So Corinth was well-known all over the world of Paul’s time as a place to go for sex. In fact, there was a phrase that was current in Greek at the time – “to have a bit of a Corinth with someone”, the meaning of which you can probably imagine. It was very similar to stuff we find in contemporary western culture, not unlike the backstreets of Amsterdam or Soho. One New Testament scholar in America suggested that you could quite easily rename this letter, *The Epistle to the Californians!*

And Paul was desperate for these new Christian converts in the Corinthian church to disassociate themselves from all this stuff. They were to keep well away from sexual immorality, as he tells them in the passage we’ve just read. The word which is translated as “*sexual immorality*” here is “*porneia*”. It’s based on an older Greek word which meant “to sell” and soon came to mean selling for sex – prostitution – and then, especially as Paul uses it here and elsewhere, to mean any kind of extra-marital sexual relations. You have probably already spotted that “*porneia*” is at the root of our word “*pornography*”, which basically means depicting sex in words or pictures and has been shortened back to “*porn*” – about which more on another occasion.

Paul’s use of the word is part way along that linguistic development and he uses it to mean sexual immorality, which is how it’s translated here. There is no doubt that he considers it to be wrong. And that fits in with the whole tenor of the Bible’s teaching on it as it is expressed in the Old Testament as well as in the teaching of Jesus. Remember what Jesus says in *The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27)*: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Jesus is taking us beyond the actual physical act – committing adultery – to the attitudes that lurk beneath – lust and illicit desire. Clearly, as those who claim to follow Jesus, we should be steadfastly against the undercurrent of lust which propels so much of our contemporary culture and we should seek to distance ourselves from any involvement in or connivance with it. So far, so good for most of us, I imagine. But this passage has some surprises in it, which is why we’re looking at it this morning before we go on to think about some of

the specific issues with which we have to grapple at the moment. It's vitally important that we get this right before we go stomping all over the stuff that's going on around us.

## 1. **THIS IS NOT ABOUT CULTURE: IT'S ABOUT THE CHURCH** (vv1,9,11)

Paul makes it very clear indeed that this isn't about distancing oneself from the world, trying to keep ourselves clean by having nothing to do with the culture in which we find ourselves. He says in v9 that that's pretty well impossible unless you want to live as a hermit. It's impractical for us to try and live only with Christians – and I know there are some who will only employ a plumber or go to a dentist or whatever if they're a Christian. This isn't about isolating ourselves from a sinful world and hoping it will all go away. When Paul is talking about sexual immorality here, he is talking about what's going on in the church!

The trigger for all this is a case of incest that is happening in the congregation there in Corinth. Someone is having sex with his stepmother and that's not on. It's not on even for the pagans, Paul points out. There's a well-documented comment in a letter by the great orator Cicero which expresses shock and horror at a similar situation which he has encountered – and Cicero was no prude. But in the church there even seems to be some support for this man. F F Bruce writes about this that, “*A significant body of opinion in the Church thought that this was rather a fine assertion of Christian liberty, of emancipation from Jewish law and Gentile convention alike.*” “Look, we're Christians now – under grace. We can do what we like because we're no longer bound by all those rules and regulations and we can get forgiven as easily as anything.” (Paul has a lot more to say about that attitude in his letters to Corinth.) The church was as implicated in all this sexual stuff as anyone else. Think back to that quotation from *The Sermon on the Mount*: who was Jesus speaking to? To the disciples, to those who were at the heart of his group of followers.

The temptations are still there. Today's statistics bear it out. There's as much going on in the Church as there is outside, so don't start pointing the finger just yet. Marriage breakdown, divorce, extra-marital cohabitation, gender-based violence – they're all just as common in the Church as in society at large. In fact, a fellow student of mine when I was doing my Master's was writing his dissertation on gender-based violence amongst church leaders because – in his denomination, at least – it was actually *more* prevalent than in society at large! A recent survey in *Christianity* magazine found that 55% of men and 20% of women in churches (mainly evangelical churches at that) regularly access pornography on the Internet.

This is not an expression of freedom in Christ. This is bondage to the spirit of this age, to the spirit of the world, which saps spiritual energy and can fill you with guilt and shame. Paul is writing to the church, to Christians, to those who claim to be disciples of Jesus – just like us. It's happening here, among us –

statistically that is certainly the case. So, like those Corinthians, we need to begin looking very carefully at our own attitudes and behaviour. It's true that we are influenced by what's happening in the world around us – that is almost impossible to avoid – but we do need to do all we can to ensure that we are not colluding with it, that we are not blind to its effect on us, and on our worship and witness.

## 2. THIS IS NOT ONLY ABOUT SEXUAL SIN: IT'S ABOUT ALL SIN (v11)

For all kinds of reasons we seem to get hung up about what we might call sexual sin. In the minds of many people – many Christians – it looms larger than any other sins. But Paul includes that “*porneia*” here in a list which includes several other sins. And that list in v11 forms the basis of Paul's guidelines for disassociation and, indeed, expulsion from the church. I'm sure many of us would be the first to put our hands up to vote for someone guilty of great sexual sin to be sanctioned by the church, but what about some of these other things.

**Greed.** That's the second thing on the list here. How do we feel about getting rid of the greedy people here? We're not talking about the ones who eat all the biscuits after the service. This is about those who always want more of everything – the covetous, the avaricious. It's always closely linked to idolatry, as it is here. In *Colossians 3:5* Paul warns us against “*greed which is idolatry*”. And that's because wanting more can so easily become a consuming passion, to the extent that we take our eyes off God. It's all bound up with this pretty well universal idea that you've got to keep getting richer, you've got to keep acquiring more. It's probably the most pernicious attitude of our current culture and it infects us all. Paul includes here “*swindlers*”, which has a bit of an idea of violence about it in Greek, but it's really about those who will go to any length to get what they want – profiteers, tax avoiders, borrowers, gamblers even. Martin Luther threatened to excommunicate a man from his church because he had bought a house for 30 guilden and wanted to sell it for 400, when it was worth maybe only 150. That, said Luther, was greed in the sense that Paul uses it here and was grounds for expulsion from the congregation. And there's plenty of that spirit in Lichfield, in this church.

**Slander.** Surely not, you may say – not in church. Get real! The Greek word here is “*loidoros*” which refers to someone who rails against others, who reviles or insults or disparages others. It's basically those who give voice to their anger, their jealousy, their prejudices in regard to other people. Again, in a culture where there is so much of this on the television, in the newspapers, on the Internet – Internet trolls are an extreme example, but plenty come pretty close on Facebook and Twitter – it's really easy to get sucked in. I'll hold my hand up to this – as many of you know, and have told me – and I'm sorry. It's

wrong. It's sinful. It can be serious enough for expulsion from the church, says Paul. It has no place in the church.

**Drunkards.** In a sense this speaks for itself. This is about those who are no longer able to control their words and actions due to the influence of alcohol. They are unable to focus on anything, let alone on Jesus. But I doubt whether very many of us today would look upon this as being as serious as sexual immorality, would we? Yet here it is – in the same list.

So don't huff and puff about sexual sin. Before we can, with any integrity, start to criticise the world around us, we need to put our own house in order. Think about your own attitudes and the way they are being shaped by the world around – about whether, as we saw a couple of weeks ago – you are being squeezed into the world's mould. Are you greedy? Do you find yourself being rude or unnecessarily critical of others? Is there anything to distinguish the way you think and behave from the people around you? But here's the final surprise from Paul.

### 3. **THIS IS NOT ABOUT JUDGING THE WORLD: IT'S ABOUT SORTING OURSELVES OUT (v12)**

Even Paul here does not take it upon himself to judge the world. That, he says, is God's prerogative. We can easily find ourselves spending an awful lot of time banging on about the world around us. They're an easy target because they're so blooming naughty! It's right, of course, that we make ourselves aware of the pitfalls of following what's happening in the wider culture, but isn't it often simply an excuse for ignoring our own sin? Speaking out against the immorality – sexual or otherwise – of our society means we don't have to examine our own greed or gossip or over-indulgence. Don't point the finger until you're at least making an attempt to deal with your own sin.

So what are we saying? Should we just forget about what's going on around us and concentrate on our own situation? That's, if you like, going to the other extreme. We do need to be aware of the things that are happening around us, to have a proper perspective on the evils that can be evident in our culture. If we don't, we end up allowing them to infect us further, and we also need to be able to help our children and young people find the tools to deal with it all. We cannot just let it all pass by.

We need to keep praying – and there are plenty of resources that can help you in that: Care, Evangelical Alliance, Christian Concern, *Christianity* and similar organisations and magazines: not to mention your daily newspaper. We also need to ensure that we share the good news of Jesus when we have

opportunity. Many people have no idea of the alternatives to the lifestyle they are currently following: help them to see Jesus.

And where you can, use your influence. Many of you here are in positions where you can overtly or by subversion ensure that the values taught and exemplified by Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, are expressed – as school governors or teachers, as managers and executives, as members of political parties, as trustees, as all kinds of things.

But above all – and this comes back to all that we've been saying about getting our own house in order – live lives of transparent goodness and integrity. Live out in your own life the values of the Kingdom of God. Look at what Jesus says, again in *The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16)*: “*In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*” Or at what Peter writes in his First Letter: “*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us*” (1 Peter 2:12) or: “*Keep a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander*” (1 Peter 3:16). Once we've really got ourselves sorted out, we can start to sort out the world!

Now there's lots more that could be said in relation to this passage about church discipline – look at vv2,13 – and the role of accountability and good fellowship (v11) in our dealings with one another: this is how Eugene Peterson translates vv11-13: “*But I am saying that you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when a friend who claims to be a Christian is promiscuous or crooked, is flip with God or rude to friends, gets drunk or becomes greedy and predatory. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behaviour. I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do, but don't we have some responsibility for those within our community of believers? God decides on the outsiders, but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and, if necessary, clean house.*” That's all for some other occasion, perhaps. This morning, think carefully about yourself and your own response to this, and try to discern what you need to do. If it would help to pray with someone about that, or if you want to talk to someone, please have a word with me or with one of the elders. Let's get serious about living as God wants us to.

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There is no doubt that he considers it to be wrong. And that fits in with the whole tenor of the Bible's teaching on it as it is expressed in the Old Testament as well as in the teaching of Jesus (e.g. *Matthew 5:27*). Clearly, as those who claim to follow Jesus, we should be steadfastly against the undercurrent of lust which propels so much of our contemporary culture and we should seek to distance ourselves from any involvement in or connivance with it. But this passage has some surprises in it and it's vitally important that we get this right before we go stomping all over the stuff that's going on around us.

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We do need to **be aware** of the things that are happening around us so that we do not allow them to infect us further, and to help our children and young people find the tools to deal with it all.

We need to **keep praying**.

We also need to ensure that we **share the good news** of Jesus when we have opportunity.

Where you can, **use your influence**.

But above all, **live lives of transparent goodness and integrity**. Live out in your own life the values of the Kingdom of God. Look at *Matthew 5:16*; *1 Peter 2:12*; *1 Peter 3:16*.

**Questions for discussion**

1. Why do you think we get so hung up about sexual sin?

2. In what ways has our society become sexualised over the past few decades? Why has that happened?
3. Why do you think greed is so closely linked with idolatry?
4. Why is the Church not immune from the temptations of the world around us?
5. Is there anything in this passage/study that particularly stands out for you? Why?