

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

On November 6, 2014, we received the following comment and inquiry:

“I'm researching the subject of disfellowshipping. How should I understand 1 Corinthians 5:5 which says "you must hand such a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord"?”

To the author, thank you for your email. This is an important verse and we are very happy to respond.

First, let's look at the scripture in context. Paul wrote:

“Actually sexual immorality is reported among you, and such immorality as is not even found among the nations—of a man living with his father's wife. And are you proud of it? Should you not rather mourn, so that the man who committed this deed should be taken away from your midst? Although absent in body, I am present in spirit, and I have already judged the man who has done this, as if I were actually with you. When you are gathered together in the name of our Lord Jesus, and knowing that I am with you in spirit along with the power of our Lord Jesus, you must hand such a man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” – *1 Corinthians 5:1-5 (Revised New World Translation)*

Paul had apparently heard of one particular situation involving a man in the congregation who was having sexual relations with either his mother or his step mother. Paul was outraged that no one in the congregation seemed to mind that such a man remained in their midst. In essence, Paul said he didn't have to have personal knowledge of all the facts, he knew this was wrong without even being there.

We can understand Paul's disgust. There are certain sins that can be mitigated or excused based on the circumstances and mental disposition of the sinner. Some sins are committed out of weakness or ignorance. But there are other sins that are more than just wrong. They are criminal and inexcusable, such as child abuse, domestic violence, and, in this case, incest. Sins such as these require a more firm response.

In this case, Paul said to 'hand the man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.' What did he mean? Looking at other translations of verse 5 are helpful. For example:

“You are to deliver this man over to Satan for physical discipline [to destroy carnal lusts which prompted him to incest], that [his] spirit may [yet] be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” (*The Amplified Bible*)

“And cast out this man from the fellowship of the church and into Satan’s hands, to punish him, in the hope that his soul will be saved when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.” (*The Living Bible*)

This carries the idea that certain sinners should be removed from the loving and protective association of the congregation. They should not be able to take advantage of congregational confidentiality, but should instead be allowed to suffer the punishment, indignation or discipline that the world at large would dole out for such conduct. The sinner needs to suffer the consequences in hopes that he or she might be shocked their senses.

We interpret this to mean that there are some sins that cannot and should not be handled by the congregation. There are some occasions when a sinner simply must be removed from the congregation to show that the behavior is not condoned. This could include sins that rise to the level of crimes against innocent persons, such as child abuse and domestic violence. Any person hearing about such conduct would know, without being privy to the underlying facts, that such behavior should not be tolerated in a Christian congregation. In these cases, such persons should be handed over to the governmental authorities for civil punishment so that the congregation is not aiding and abetting, or becoming a ‘sharer’ in the sin.

This is a drastic measure, but with regard to certain sins, this would be the proper response. And this is what we believe Paul was referring to.

“Elaia Luchnia”
