

# Deep Dive

## 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

### Holiness, Witness, and Redemptive Discipline

#### Why this passage matters

1 Corinthians 5 is a “stress test” for a church’s moral imagination. Paul confronts not merely a personal failure but a **public, church-normalized practice** that is being defended under Christian identity. The central question is not, “Does sin matter?” but: **What does the gospel create the church to be, and how do we protect that identity without harming people?**

Michael Gorman helpfully frames the church’s calling in 1 Corinthians in terms of cruciform (cross-shaped) life together: where the cross shapes not only personal ethics but communal identity and public witness. In that light, the church’s arrogance in 1 Corinthians 5 is not merely bad PR; it’s a theological contradiction.

#### 1) Historical and social context

##### Corinth as a status-driven environment

Corinth was a Roman colony and a bustling port city. Public reputation, patronage, and social standing mattered. The church in Corinth included people across social strata (cf. 1 Cor 1:26-29), but the city’s status system still exerted pressure.

This helps explain why a church might tolerate scandal:

- **Elite protection:** If the man is wealthy or influential, confronting him risks losing resources, social capital, or stability.
- **Rhetorical culture:** Corinth prized persuasive speech and clever argumentation. A morally compromised person may have defended himself with “wisdom” that sounded sophisticated.
- **Misapplied freedom:** Some Corinthians likely interpreted Christian liberty as permission to relativize moral boundaries (a theme Paul tackles repeatedly).

David deSilva’s work on honor/shame dynamics (broadly in Greco-Roman settings) helps modern readers see how communities can become morally captive to what preserves honor, avoids embarrassment, or protects benefactors.

## 2) A guided translation and outline of the argument

### The argument flow

Paul's logic moves in a clear sequence:

1. **Public report of scandal** (v.1)
2. **Church's wrong posture: arrogance, not grief** (v.2)
3. **Apostolic judgment and corporate action** (vv.3-4)
4. **Severe remedy with salvific goal** (v.5)
5. **Theological rationale: leaven and Passover identity** (vv.6-8)
6. **Clarification: not withdrawal from "the world," but discipline inside the community** (vv.9-13)

## 3) Key Greek terms and what they do in the passage

### v.1 *porneia* (πορνεία)

*Porneia* is a broad term for sexual immorality: sexual behavior outside God's covenantal design. In Paul, it can function as a "bucket term" for behaviors that distort sexuality's purpose (faithful covenant love, integrity, non-exploitation, honoring God with the body).

Important: Paul's emphasis is not on lurid detail but on **the moral and communal implications** of a publicly defended practice. This matters pastorally: the passage is not a weapon against private strugglers; it's a warning against public normalization and theological justification.

### v.2, v.6 "puffed up" *pephysiōmenoi* (πεφυσιωμένοι)

The same "puffed up" arrogance appears earlier in the letter. This is not random; Paul is linking moral confusion to the same pride that fuels factions. In other words, sexual ethics here are not detached from ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). Pride distorts both unity and holiness.

### vv.3-5 "judge" *krinō* (κρίνω) and "deliver" *paradounai* (παραδοῦναι)

*Krinō* can mean judge/evaluate/decide. Paul claims a kind of apostolic discernment that is to be enacted **corporately** "when you are assembled" (v.4). This is not rogue leadership; it's communal action under Christ's lordship.

*Paradounai* ("hand over/deliver") is the verb used in v.5. It implies transfer, handing someone from one sphere to another.

## 4) The grammatical hinge: "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v.4)

This is one of the most important interpretive cruxes for the whole chapter.

## The phrase

“ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ”  
“in the name of the Lord Jesus”

## Three main attachment options

1. **Attached to the gathering** (common in many translations):  
“When you are assembled **in the name of the Lord Jesus...**”
2. **Attached to Paul’s judgment**:  
“I have judged **in the name of the Lord Jesus...**”
3. **Attached to the offender’s act** (Gorman’s and Billy’s preferred option):  
“I have judged the one who did this **in the name of the Lord Jesus...**”

## Why option 3 clarifies Paul’s intensity

If the man is acting “in Jesus’ name,” the sin is not merely moral failure; it’s a **claim about Jesus**. The offender is not simply doing wrong; he is **rebranding wrong as faithful Christian freedom**. The church’s arrogance then is not a soft tolerance; it is an “enlightened” endorsement that functions as theological misinformation.

This ties directly to why the church becomes an “antiwitness” (see below). They aren’t merely failing; they are communicating a false gospel-shaped identity.

## 5) “Deliver this man to Satan” (v.5): interpretive options and guardrails

This phrase can be misheard in sensational or abusive ways. Here are the main interpretive options with pros/cons.

### Option A: Formal excommunication / removal from the church’s fellowship (most widely held)

**Core idea:** “Delivering to Satan” means removing the offender from the sphere of the church’s communal life (where Jesus’ lordship is confessed, where accountability and care operate) into the sphere outside.

#### Arguments for

- Fits Paul’s “inside/outside” framework (vv.12-13).
- Matches the social reality: being excluded from the gathering and table fellowship is a serious consequence.

- Parallels 1 Timothy 1:20, where handing over to Satan has a corrective aim.

### **Arguments against / cautions**

- Needs precision: removal is not abandonment; it must preserve a path toward repentance and restoration.
- Must never be used to silence victims or protect abusers.

### **Option B: A kind of severe affliction (less common; sometimes argued historically)**

**Core idea:** “Destruction of the flesh” could imply some form of physical suffering allowed by God.

### **Arguments for**

- Some see a Job-like pattern in Scripture where Satan is permitted to afflict.

### **Arguments against**

- The text itself emphasizes salvation as the goal, not spectacle.
- It can encourage harmful spiritualization or fear-based ministry.
- It’s less connected to Paul’s clear ecclesial inside/outside logic.

### **Option C: “Flesh” as sinful pattern / orientation rather than body (strongly supported in Pauline theology)**

**Core idea:** “Destruction of the flesh” targets the old, sin-dominated way of life (*sarx*)—not the physical body (which Paul elsewhere treats as destined for resurrection).

### **Arguments for**

- Coheres with Romans 6:6 (old self crucified) and Galatians 5:16-24 (flesh vs Spirit as moral orientations).
- Avoids Greek dualism (body bad/spirit good), which is not Paul’s view.
- Fits Paul’s pastoral telos: that the person might be saved.

### **Arguments against / cautions**

- Must be explained clearly so the church doesn’t flatten “flesh” into “body” or “sexuality.”

### **The “two spheres” explanation**

2 Corinthians 4:4 and 1 Timothy 1:20 give us a solid interpretive idea: Paul speaks of Satan’s influence over the present evil age. “Handing over to Satan” then can be explained as removing

the person from the church's recognized sphere of allegiance to Christ, so the consequences of their chosen path are no longer buffered by communal affirmation.

## **6) Intertextual lens: Passover, leaven, Exodus (vv.6-8)**

Paul's metaphor is not random; it's canonical.

### **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (v.6)**

Leaven is a metaphor for pervasive influence. Paul uses it elsewhere (Gal 5:9). The point is communal: tolerated sin doesn't remain private; it shapes the church's moral ecosystem.

### **“Cleanse out the old leaven... Christ our Passover has been sacrificed” (v.7)**

The Exodus background matters:

- **Exodus 12:** Israel removes leaven and eats unleavened bread as they leave Egypt.
- The leaven removal is not about yeast being evil; it's about marking a decisive break with the old life.
- Paul repurposes that imagery: the church is an “exodus people,” liberated by Christ.

Scholars, like N.T. Wright, often emphasize that the gospel is not only “how individuals get saved,” but the announcement that God has launched a new creation and formed a new people. This Passover framing fits that: Christ's sacrifice initiates a new identity and a new communal ethic.

### **“Let us keep the feast... sincerity and truth” (v.8)**

Paul's moral vision is not grim. Holiness is meant to be lived as the joyful integrity of a redeemed community. This guards against legalism: Paul's “purging” is not moral obsession; it's identity protection.

## **7) Intertextual lens: Deuteronomy's “purge the evil” and covenant identity (v.13)**

Paul quotes the Deuteronomic refrain: “Purge the evil person from among you.”

This is crucial:

- Paul is applying Israel's covenant logic to the church.
- But he is not calling for civil penalties; he is calling for ecclesial clarity and communal integrity.

- The church is to be a holy people—not by coercion, but by truthful community boundaries.

G.K. Beale’s work (broadly on the people of God as God’s temple) can help conceptualize why holiness is not moralism but “temple logic”: God’s dwelling among his people implies a life shaped by his presence. In that sense, 1 Corinthians 5 is a “temple purity” passage, without collapsing into ceremonial legalism.

## **8) The “inside/outside” distinction and moral advocacy (vv.9-13)**

Paul limits the church’s disciplinary jurisdiction:

- The church is not told to police the world.
- The church is told to practice integrity within its own confession.

This does **not** mean Christians stop caring about righteousness in society. Paul’s point is about covenant accountability: those who do not claim Christ are not to be treated as if they have sworn allegiance to him.

There is a strong communal nature of early Christian ethics: the church is meant to be a distinctive kind of society within society. That distinctiveness begins at home, with integrity, repentance, and restoration.

## **9) Why Paul is so concerned: witness and “antiwitness”**

Gorman’s language of “antiwitness” is sharp and needed.

The issue is not merely that immorality exists; it’s that the church’s posture communicates a false message about Jesus:

- When the church defends sin in Jesus’ name, it proclaims an alternate “lordship.”
- When the church is proud rather than grieved, it signals that the gospel has not reshaped its moral imagination.
- When the church covers up sexual sin or abuse, it becomes a living contradiction of its own message.

This is why the passage must be taught with particular care in modern contexts scarred by church scandals. The text is not a tool to protect institutions; it is a call to protect people and preserve truthful witness.

## **10) Restorative telos: linking to 2 Corinthians 2:5-11**

A vital canonical connection is Paul's posture in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, where he urges forgiveness and comfort for someone disciplined, lest the person be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Even if scholars debate whether it is the same individual, the principle is unmistakable: **Paul's discipline is not an endpoint.** The telos is always restoration.

This supplies an interpretive guardrail for 1 Corinthians 5:

- Discipline is meant to awaken repentance, not cement shame.
- Boundaries exist to open a door back, not lock someone out forever.
- The church's "no" is meant to serve a future "yes" if repentance occurs.

## **11) Pastoral distinctions the text itself requires**

### **Arrogant defiance vs. repentant struggle**

Paul is confronting:

- public,
- ongoing,
- defended,
- identity-claiming behavior.

He is not targeting:

- private struggle,
- confessed sin,
- people seeking help,
- victims of exploitation.

This is essential to teach explicitly so that tender consciences are not crushed and predators are not protected.

### **Protecting the vulnerable**

A faithful reading of 1 Corinthians 5 cannot become a mechanism for:

- silencing victims,
- pressuring reconciliation without repentance,
- prioritizing institutional reputation over safety.

If the church becomes “antiwitness,” it is often because it treats power as sacred and people as expendable, the exact inversion Paul confronts.

## Summary for deeper reflection

1 Corinthians 5 is not a proof-text for harshness. It is a call for the church to be a truthful, cruciform community whose love is strong enough to tell the truth and whose truth is shaped by the cross.

- The **grammatical hinge** (“in the name of the Lord Jesus”) clarifies the theological nature of the offense.
- “Deliver to Satan” is best read as **removal from affirmed fellowship** for the sake of salvation.
- Passover and leaven imagery place holiness inside the story of **exodus identity**.
- The Deuteronomy quote frames discipline as **covenant integrity**, not institutional control.
- The wider Pauline witness (2 Cor 2) insists discipline must be **restorative**.