Question: How to Deal With A Believer Living in Sin?

Manuel Seibel · 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 · October 13, 2025



1 Corinthians 5:1–13

> 1 It is universally reported that there is fornication among you, and such
> fornication as is not even among the nations, so that one should have his
> father’s wife. 2 And you are puffed up, and you have not rather mourned,
> in order that he that has done this deed might be taken away out of the
> midst of you. 3 For *I*, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already
> judged as present, 4 to deliver, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (you
> and my spirit being gathered together, with the power of our Lord Jesus
> Christ), him that has so wrought this: 5 to deliver him, I say, being such,
> to Satan for destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the
> day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a
> little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Purge out the old leaven, that you
> may be a new lump, according as you are unleavened. For also our
> passover, Christ, has been sacrificed; 8 so that let us celebrate the feast,

> not with old leaven, nor with leaven of malice and wickedness, but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. [9] I have written to you in the epistle not to mix with fornicators; [10] not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the avaricious and rapacious, or idolaters, since then you should go out of the world. [11] But now I have written to you, if any one called brother be fornicator, or avaricious, or idolater, or abusive, or a drunkard, or rapacious, not to mix with him; with such a one not even to eat. [12] For what have *I* to do with judging those outside also? *you*, do not you judge them that are within? [13] But those without God judges. Remove the wicked person from among yourselves.

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Question:

One person in my immediate family has turned away from the Lord and gone into the world and, as far as I can tell, is living in an ungodly relationship with an unbeliever. However, this person has not yet participated in breaking the bread.

I have always understood from the Word of God that the family may, or even should, continue to have contact with such a person in order to point this family member to the Lord.

But now I have another question: What about friends? I am specifically concerned with the verse in 1 Corinthians 5:11: "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person." That made me feel insecure. Specifically, does this mean that I cannot invite this person when believing friends are visiting?

Does "brother" in this context mean someone who has already been in fellowship at the Lord's Table or also someone who has generally been a brother/sister in the local assembly?

Answer:

It is important to stick to God's Word on this subject as well.

What is 1 Corinthians 5 about?

Before I address the question of who is a "*brother*" according to 1 Corinthians 5:11, it seems appropriate to me to explain the principles that the apostle presents to us in 1 Corinthians 5. In Corinth, someone who was considered a believer had sexual intercourse with his stepmother. Paul uses the image of leaven to explain the principle that fellowship with someone in such an evil state defiles (verses 6-8). God does not tolerate such a union among believers because it dishonors and offends Him and makes the believer who allows himself this fellowship unclean with regard to his life of faith. God calls sin "*leaven*". Leaven is characterized by the fact that it spreads throughout a dough. It is the same with sin that is not confessed and left alone. **It has the character that it spreads and contaminates everyone who gets involved with it or the one who lives in sin.** God, therefore, expects us to separate ourselves from this leaven and actively sweep it out. Only by separating ourselves from someone who lives in sin is it possible to correspond practically to what we are positionally: pure.

The apostle then applies this principle to the Corinthians and thus to the practical life of faith of the congregation. He shows that it is not a question of not allowing any contact with the people in the society around us (verses 9-10). Then, we would have to go out of this world because our culture is teeming with people of this sinful way of life. We cannot leave this world. But we must give up contact with those who are counted among the believers.

The apostle gives a number of examples of how a Christian can be in a sinful state (verse 11) to illustrate the principle explained earlier. This list is exemplary and not exhaustive. **Only by consistently turning away from someone who is called a Christian, whom Paul calls "*wicked*," can we fulfill the responsibility that God's Word imposes on us. This includes not associating with such a person in any way, not even eating with them.** It is precisely by eating together that

fellowship is expressed in this case.

Paul justifies this attitude and behavior by saying that we have to judge those who are inside. They are known as Christians, so we have duties towards them that we cannot fulfill towards unbelievers "outside." By "judging", Paul means the ability to discern, to judge, and, in this case, also to condemn the sinful lifestyle.

What does "brother" mean in 1 Corinthians 5?

In general, believers apply these teachings of 1 Corinthians 5 to someone who participates in the breaking of bread. The apostle refers to this instruction as "*someone who is called a brother*." Who is he referring to?

Paul uses the term "*brother*" more than ten times in this letter, the first time already in the first verse of the first chapter. One of the senders of this letter is Sosthenes, "the brother." Obviously, by "brother," Paul thinks of someone who believes in the Lord Jesus and whose sins are forgiven.

In 1 Corinthians 5:11, it does not say that the person addressed is a brother but that he is called one. This means that in Corinth he was regarded as someone who believed. He professed the Christian faith and lived among the believers.

How does one profess the Christian faith? By talking about it to others. And if one is baptized, that person professes through this act that they belong to the Lord Jesus. Of course, such a profession normally also involves putting faith into practice in daily life.

But a profession can be true or false. The person in 1 Corinthians 5 was known as a Christian and had previously lived a Christian life. **But then came a moment when this man began to commit fornication with his stepmother and thus led a life of moral sin. Now, he still professed his faith and stood with the believers, but his life no longer corresponded to this profession.**

Are you only a "brother" if you already take part in the breaking of bread (the Lord's supper)?

There are some Christians who are baptized and attend the meetings but do not take part in the breaking of bread. If they are baptized and have identified themselves as Christians, they are naturally regarded and respected as a "brother" (or sister). They are, therefore, examples of someone who is "*called a brother*" according to 1 Corinthians 5:11, even if they do not (yet) take part in that memorial meal. And their responsibility is correspondingly high.

Incidentally, it is a mistake to think that because you do not take part in the breaking of bread, you are free to sin or live in sin. **Similarly, it is a mistake to think that because the person living in sin does not take part in the breaking of bread, we can continue to associate with them.** We are brothers even if we do not (yet) proclaim the Lord's death. Therefore, the principle of 1 Corinthians 5 also applies to such a person.

Friendships – Meetings

Some try to avoid assembly discipline by leaving the meetings and the believers in that place. Others have not participated in the breaking of bread and now join a Christian "church" of their choice. But in all cases, it is someone who is called a brother, and therefore, the principle of this chapter must be applied. However, things must be clearly evidenced. It is also necessary to communicate the matter to the brothers and sisters in the place concerned. Even if no such communication has (yet) been made, I am obliged to obey the instructions of 1 Corinthians 5. For I know of such a sinful state, and I also know that corresponding, intensive efforts to bring about repentance and restoration have been unsuccessful.

It should be clear that this putting out makes it impossible for young people to be together with someone who has revealed himself as "*evil*" (1 Cor. 5:13). We will deal with the special case of how to deal with the closest family members later. **But in my understanding of 1 Corinthians 5, interaction in the form of personal contact or eating together beyond the immediate family would be disobedience to**

these verses. According to verse 11, if you were previously friends with a Christian who is now living in sin, you can no longer associate with him. There is no need to emphasize that this makes it impossible to maintain a friendship. This also applies to the case mentioned in your question, ie inviting such a person together with other believing friends. Incidentally, this also applies to celebrations that go beyond the immediate family. This is not easy for the person concerned, and it hurts. But we can know that it is the way God intended – also for the restoration of the friend. This also gives us strength for such difficult situations.

Can't you help someone who has been "put out" by keeping in touch?

People sometimes ask whether it is not possible to win over someone who is now living in sin by keeping in touch. Is it not possible to point out his wrong life to him again and again? But 1 Corinthians 5 does not allow this. Verse 5 hints at the apostle's hope and prayer that the wicked will still come to insight, repentance, and a sincere confession: "*that the Spirit may be saved*" (1 Cor. 5:5). In fact, one goal of putting out is the restoration of the person concerned. He is to come to inner repentance, to experience "repentance unto salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10). But it is precisely because of his sinful state that he needs this "sadness" of separation from his brothers and sisters. The punishment from the many should end when his inner repentance has become clear and is also credible through a changed life. The assembly may and should then forgive and encourage him and show love to him (2 Cor. 2:7.8).

We must remember that God knows better than we do how such a wicked person (verse 13) comes to repentance. God explicitly says that we should not associate with such a person, not even eat with him. Us abiding by this principle is the best prerequisite for him to come to his senses. Of course, he must also want to do that. By keeping in touch, perhaps with the well-intentioned aim of helping him inwardly, we virtually destroy the chastising action and achieve the opposite of the intended purpose. It is particularly unfortunate when some keep to this word while others undermine the discipline and, for example, attend a meeting with a "wicked person". This division among believers has repeatedly caused harm.

Those who live in sin feel of one mind with those who continue to welcome and receive them. From their point of view, these are the Christians who live "Christian" lives, although, in reality, the opposite is the case. At the same time, they reject the believers who adhere with a heavy heart to the discipline of the local assembly and isolate the "*wicked*." As a result, discipline fails to have the desired effect. Paul once even speaks of the fact that one can, perhaps unintentionally, despise the assembly of God (1 Cor. 11:22). It is important to realize that unbiblical behavior can make us guilty with regard to the person who is under discipline and their restoration.

Some also believe that Christians who are living in sin, for example, through addictions (alcohol, drugs, etc.), should at least be given pastoral or therapeutic help. However, it should be borne in mind that in 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle refers to the drunkard, which is an example of an addiction. **Even in this case, he is not talking about giving spiritual help, as a shepherd, during the period of putting out and before being reinstated.** In fact, such advice would already have been given in the run-up to the act of discipline. If the person concerned has not accepted this, it is an indication that they do not want to. They are unlikely to have forgotten the recommendations themselves if they have been put out from the meeting. We should not go beyond God's word on this point, either. God knows what He does when He Himself wants to deal with the "wicked": "*But those who are outside, God judges*" (v. 13). Of course, this does not mean that a person affected cannot still go to a (believing) doctor for medical help, for example. The doctor does not treat him as a believer but as a patient.

What about the Person's Family?

After considering the principles of the Word of God on this question, your initial question remains: What if it is my close relative?

This question is not so easy to answer, for we do not find a concrete answer in the New Testament. It is clear that the apostle Paul is not talking about the (blood-related) family in 1 Corinthians 5 but about relationships in the assembly of God. This should make it clear that relationships in the closest natural sphere (parents, physical siblings) remain. My physical brother remains my brother, even if he lives in sin. The

husband of a believer who turns out to be wicked remains a spouse.

Does this mean that we should continue to use this relationship in a specific case to continue to work pastorally with the person who is living in sin? **It is not a matter of setting rules but of sharpening our focus on the principles.** Then, the Lord will also work on spiritual behavior in each specific case. In any case, we must be careful not to act contrary to the teachings of 1 Corinthians 5. In my understanding, the prohibition of further dealings with "*evil*" according to 1 Corinthians 5 shows that the person concerned could not be persuaded to give up his sinful life by biblical instructions. If someone has decided to persist in sin despite warnings, exhortations, and other help, the spiritual efforts of the congregation have expressly come to an end. It then hands such a person over to the Lord so that He can bring the person to understanding through His divine discipline. **The family may and will ask the Lord for wisdom to take this into account in their contacts without completely abandoning family relationships with the person that had to be put out.**

This topic is not easy; it causes a lot of distress, some tears – and hopefully also intense prayer. We should also appropriately express our sympathy to the families/friends of such people. Parents in particular, but also friends, will feel a deep sense of loss. We need grace and wisdom in dealing with each other. But we can be sure of this: Being obedient to the Lord is a blessing – for the person concerned, for our fellow believers, and also for ourselves. This is how we will honor God.

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