

Eastwood Baptist (7/10/'18) **"LET US KEEP THE FESTIVAL"** (1 Corinthians 5-6)

Introduction Do you enjoy celebrations? Some people enjoy them more than others. For all of us, even those who don't enjoy them much, celebrations are an important part of life. This applies not only to things like birthdays and weddings, but to the life of faith. It is good to celebrate special Christian occasions, especially Christmas and Easter. It is good to mark Jesus' death for us whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, and to mark his resurrection by worshipping every Sunday. We have carried on the practice of such celebration from our Jewish forerunners. The Jews celebrated a number of festivals, but the most important was (and still is) the festival of Passover, when the Jewish people remember God's bringing his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. It is this festival to which Paul refers in **1 Corinthians 5:7-8 – read**. Paul is referring particularly to the Jewish practice of cleaning all the old yeast out of the house in preparation for Passover, during which they ate unleavened bread. But he is doing two important things in the way he refers to Passover. First, he is giving it fresh meaning for Christians by identifying Jesus Christ as our Passover lamb, the one who has died to take away our sins and set us free. Second, he insists that the most important way of celebrating what Christ has done for us is not by any act of formal observance, but by living new lives dedicated to Christ. Paul is urging the Corinthians to live lives of sincerity and truth, and he applies this to three specific situations which don't seem to trouble them but which trouble him a great deal.

Don't Condone Blatant Sinning (5:1-5, 9-13) Here is the first situation, and Paul's response to it – **read 5:1-5**. A man in the church is having incestuous sexual relations with his stepmother, and the church is doing nothing about it. Indeed, Paul says that they are proud rather than grieved. This may mean that they are proud in general about themselves, despite this scandalous situation, or even that they are proud of the situation itself. If it is the first, then it is likely that the man is rich and influential in the church, so that they have been reluctant to take action. If it is the second, then it is likely that they have a distorted idea of Christian freedom, so that they take pride in not conforming to normal moral standards. Certainly Paul challenges the assertion that "everything is permissible" in the next chapter. Paul insists that they now take disciplinary action. The expression "hand this man over to Satan" has caused both discomfort and debate. It helps a lot if we interpret it in the light of what follows: "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord". The purpose of this discipline is the ultimate salvation of the sinful man, so I think that this handing over of him to Satan is a solemn declaration that the man has placed himself in Satan's camp, made with the desire that he will come to his senses and repent. In vv.9-13 Paul speaks more generally about the need for discipline. He directs that they are not to associate with those whose lives are blatantly inconsistent with their profession of faith in Christ, and specifically that they are not to eat with them. Again there is debate concerning what Paul means. Certainly whatever he intends must be consistent with the goal of ultimately reclaiming such people. I think that it is most likely that he has in mind a solemn declaration that the offender is out of fellowship with Christ's people, a declaration acted out in exclusion from the fellowship meals of the church. It can't mean ceasing to have all contact with the offender, since that would block the purpose of restoration. Historically, Christians have tended to oscillate between failing to exercise

discipline and exercising it harshly and unlovingly. Neither is beneficial either to individuals or the church. We should endeavour to act in the manner which Paul describes in another of his letters – **read Galatians 6:1-2.**

Don't Wrong One Another (6:1-8) The second situation which Paul addresses involves taking fellow Christians to court – **read 6:1-2.** Whereas the previous situation involved condoning behaviour which even the pagan world condemned, here they are simply behaving like the pagans. If someone has wronged me, even a fellow Christian, they would have said, then I have a right to the same remedy as anyone else. If I am in the right under the law of the land, then I am justified in going to court. Paul opposes this way of thinking on two grounds. First, he asks them why they have more confidence in the ability of those outside the church to provide justice than in other Christians who have the spiritual gift of wisdom. Second, he challenges their assumption that they are in the right. Shouldn't they prefer to suffer wrong rather than to do wrong? Shouldn't they care more about the health of the church than about their personal entitlement? And might it not be the case that those who claim to have been wronged have in fact wronged others? We need to hear what Paul says both in its most immediate application and in terms of broader principle. One Christian should not take another to court, unless every effort has been made to resolve the issue without doing so and the other Christian has consistently refused to respond to such efforts. But the broader principle is more often relevant. We are not to put our individual rights ahead of healthy relationships with other Christians. We should seek reconciliation with fellow Christians who have offended us, rather than seeking to defeat them or humiliate them. We should remember that we ourselves are forgiven sinners, and our Lord expects us to be ready to forgive one another – **refer to the parable of the Unmerciful Servant.** When reconciliation is difficult to achieve, we should follow the Peacemaking principles which we learnt about in February.

Flee from Sexual Immorality (6:9-20) The third situation, like the first, involves sexual immorality. But before focusing on this, Paul reminds them in vv.9-11 that they now belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So they should not be living the kind of sinful lives which they had once lived. His list of examples of sinful living is much wider than just sexual behaviour. Then he comes to this third situation, and it becomes clear that some of the Corinthian men are going to prostitutes. **Read 6:15-17.** What is behind this problem? It looks as though they have a distorted understanding of Christian freedom, since Paul prefaces his words about prostitutes with words about freedom and the body. **Read 6:12-14.** Their distorted understanding may have arisen in part from Paul's own emphasis on Christian freedom. But Paul's words about the body suggest that it also owes something to the idea common among Greeks and Romans in the first century that the soul, or spirit, was good and valuable while the body was at best of little value and at worst actually bad. Some of those who believed this insisted that the body had to be brought under strict control, but others said that it didn't matter what you did with your body. Some Corinthian Christians seem to have accepted this idea, and hence claimed that going to a prostitute didn't matter – it involved the body, not the soul. Paul contradicts this idea, teaching that the body, which was made by God, is meant to serve God's purposes. He points out that God raised Jesus from the dead in a bodily resurrection,

therefore the body must matter to God. Having made it clear that it is not right for a Christian man to go to prostitutes, Paul ends with a positive word about what a Christian should do with his, or her, body. **Read 6:19-20.** If we are Christians, the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within our bodies, so our bodies are holy. If we are Christians, we belong to Jesus Christ who died for us, and this includes our bodies. Therefore we are to honour God with our bodies. This means that we shall not give our bodies over to sexual immorality. But this is not all it means. It means that God is interested in everything we do with our bodies, in what we eat and drink, in whether we exercise or not, in whether we look after our health, and certainly in whether we care about the bodily welfare of other people.

Conclusion I'd like to end by coming back to the idea of "keeping the festival". If Passover is the most important Jewish festival, Easter as its Christian equivalent is the most important Christian festival. How are we to keep the festival of Easter? We might say that as it comes around each year we should mark it by worshiping together, and by appropriate observances beyond that, such as reading through the Gospel passages concerning Easter. These are good things to do, but what Paul has to say in Chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Corinthians suggests to me that there is an even better answer. We can celebrate Easter all the year around by living so as to give thanks to Jesus for what he has done for us, by living as his faithful disciples. Among other things, this will be evident in how we honour God with our bodies and how we treat one another.