

FOR WHAT HAVE I TO DO WITH JUDGING OUTSIDERS?

The above rhetorical is posed by the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 5:12, with the obvious implication that he did not view this as his responsibility before God. But why? There are two reasons. In the immediate context of this epistle, the apostle is seeking to correct a misunderstanding that resulted in a misapplication by the Corinthian church, revealed in v9. His intention in telling them: **“not to associate with immoral people,”** was for the purpose of motivating them to exercise church discipline toward an individual within their fellowship, who was guilty of immoral behavior, detailed in 5:1-8.

But the Corinthians took that admonition and twisted it to mean the very opposite: that they should radically separate themselves from the immoral people of our lost and fallen world (v10). Paul points out the practical impossibility of such a strategy at the end of v10 where he says, **“for then you would have to go out of the world.”** Nevertheless, that hasn't stopped many a Christian from keeping a relational distance toward unbelievers throughout Church history; whether in the seclusion of a monastery or sequestering oneself within an underground bunker of Christian sub-culture. At least in this case, it seems more than likely that the Corinthian misunderstanding was intentional (5:2). And the apostle wasn't about to put up with such hypocritical blame-shifting.

His correction is given with rapid fire succession in vv11-13. The “separation” must occur toward a believer, not an unbeliever, who is guilty of sin. He even indicates in v11, that this believer may not be a true Christian at all, because of his sinful behavior. And then in vv12-13, Paul removes all doubt as to what he originally meant, in admonishing the church to take action against the sinful behavior that was corrupting their fellowship from within. At the same time, he couples that remedy by reiterating this profound truth, uttered by our Lord and Savior in John 3:17-18 –

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

What are we to make of this statement of our Savior and how does it directly apply to each of us as His followers? First, our Lord isn't saying that God won't judge the unbelieving world. He will. As a whole, it is already under His judgment, cascading into a sinful downward spiral toward death and hell (Romans 1:18-32). In the meantime, in order to prevent our world from completely spiraling out of control, God is currently using the mechanism of human government to execute His judgment toward sinful behavior (Romans 13:1-7). But even that is limited in its effectiveness, since those governments are also occupied by sinful people, capable of as much harm as good.

So, this begs the following questions. Where does the Church, comprised of individual Christians under the New Covenant, fit into this multifaceted purpose of God, here and now? If Jesus did not come to judge but to save, should not our priority consist of sharing the good news of His gospel, so that people might be saved? If the apostle Paul considered the imposition of judgment upon a lost and fallen world to be none of his business, should we not be possessed of a similar mindset? If our world, consisting of millions of lost sinners, is on a downward spiral toward death and hell, is it our job to bring that spiral to a halt and even try to reverse it? *Or, is our Matthew 28:18-20 mandated responsibility, consist of rescuing as many people as possible from that spiral, by doing our best to persuade them that they should put their trust in Jesus Christ and His death, burial and resurrection on their behalf, for forgiveness of sin and eternal life?*