

Anger to Anticipation

Choosing Wisely When Culture Clashes Series, October 2 & 3 | 1 Corinthians 5:9-13
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ACT 1, EXPOSITION: MEET THE CAST

In this series, we're asking how to Choose Wisely When the Culture Clashes.

Our culture does, at times, clash with our Christian faith.

When that happens, how do we respond? We want to respond biblically.

In asking how to respond, we've been studying 1 Corinthians in the New Testament.

The city of Corinth in Greece in the first century was surprisingly like the culture around us today. The Christians in Corinth had to deal with their culture. Sometimes they struggled to respond in biblical ways, and Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to encourage them to choose wisely when their culture clashed. So, Paul's words apply to us today.

So far, we have discovered three mental moves Paul encouraged them to make.

First, Paul encouraged them to move from relying on their own reason to relying on God's revelation through Jesus and the Bible as their source of authority in life.

Second, Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to move from partisanship, which was dividing them from one another, to being fully integrated participants in Jesus' Church.

This week we are considering a third mental move Paul called us to make. **We must move from anger at the world to anticipating what God can do through us.**

Today we're going to look at what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians through the lens of a five-act play.

Looking at what Paul wrote through the structure of a five-act play will help us to see more of what happened and to see what Paul's words mean to us.

Five-act plays are classic ways to tell stories. Shakespeare masterfully told stories in five acts.

Act 1 in a five-act play is where we get "Exposition," the back story. We see the world of the story, meet the characters, and get to know how they fit into that world.

Romeo and Juliet may be Shakespeare's most famous play. In Act 1, we are introduced to the city of Verona and learn that the Capulet and Montague families have been in a feud for a long time. Romeo and Juliet meet at a party and fall in love, only to discover that their families are enemies. That's Act 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Here in Act 1, Exposition of this five-act drama in 1 Corinthians, we Meet the Cast.

Corinth was located on the narrow isthmus connecting the peninsula of Greece with the mainland. Because of its strategic location, Corinth was a center of land and sea trade. Merchants and goods travelling to and from the Greek peninsula went through Corinth. Goods flowing east to west across the sea usually went through Corinth as well, since the route around the peninsula by sea was dangerous.

Corinth brought people together from a surprisingly large array of cultural backgrounds. Corinth was diverse socially speaking—there were fantastically wealthy merchants as well as a large population of poor workers and slaves. These people came from all over the ancient world. They all brought their cultures, philosophies, and religions to Corinth.

Most of the Christians in Corinth came from pagan backgrounds. They had only been Christians for a short time.

Paul knew this because he had introduced many of them to Jesus. Now Paul was writing to them to help them understand what it really meant to follow Jesus. Would they listen? That leads us to Act 2, Rising Action.

ACT 2, RISING ACTION: IMMORALITY CAUSES CONFLICT

Act 2 usually shakes up the status quo and launches the characters on a new journey.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo decides to pursue Juliet even though their families are feuding.

Juliet decides to marry him, the couple make plans, and they are ultimately married.

Act 2 in our drama kicks into full swing in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, where we find conflict between Paul and the Christians in Corinth over questions of sexual morals. Paul wrote:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Correspondence had gone back and forth between Paul and the church in Corinth.

Paul started the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey.

Now, on his third missionary journey, Paul was working in Ephesus for around three years.

Ephesus was just across the Aegean Sea from Corinth. During Paul's stay in Ephesus, letters and messengers went back and forth repeatedly.

One message came from Corinth asking for Paul's guidance on questions about appropriate sexual conduct for Christians.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth that they should avoid sexually immoral people.

The Church in Corinth took Paul's guidance on sexual morality in entirely the wrong direction.

They assumed that Paul meant to avoid their sexually immoral neighbors.

Corinth was known as a place of loose conduct even by ancient standards.

Some people took Paul's teachings very literally and retreated into a tight circle of contacts.

Others found Paul's teachings to be completely impractical. They concluded that to avoid sexually immoral people, they would not be able to relate with any of their neighbors or do business in Corinth. It would be impossible.

Furthermore, they didn't see Paul's advice as fitting with their understanding of Christianity. To them, Christianity meant that what they did with their bodies didn't matter to God. They felt free to behave however they pleased sexually!

One member of the congregation went so far as to live with the wife of his father. It's unclear if his father was still alive. What's completely clear, however, is that this conduct was shocking. Even the pagans of Corinth found this conduct shocking. Some of the Christians in Corinth, by contrast, celebrated such freedom in Christ.

Paul heard about their response and was shocked.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 5 to set them straight.

He condemned the actions of this individual.

Further, he chastised the congregation for enabling and celebrating this kind of behavior.

Then he commanded the congregation to remove fellowship from this individual to protect the church and lead him to repentance.

That's Act 2, where we see events happen that put Paul and the congregation in Corinth on a path that would force them each to clarify what they believed and make decisions about who they would be and what they would do in the future. That brings us to Act 3, Climax.

ACT 3, CLIMAX: PAUL RULES OUT ANGER

In Act 3, we reach the defining moment.

Decisions are made that set in motion the rest of the play. It's the place from which everything must change.

In Act 3 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is caught up in a street fight in which he kills a relative of Juliet. Romeo is banished from Verona as a result. Not knowing about her secret marriage, Juliet's parents arrange a marriage for her. Juliet decides to fight this arranged marriage and stays loyal to Romeo, even if it costs her life. It's the defining moment that sets the rest of the action into motion.

Act 3, the climactic decision in our drama, arrives in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

Paul was brutally realistic about the world, particularly Corinth.

Paul had spent 18 months in Corinth. He knew the conduct of the people there. He knew that they engaged in loose behavior. He also knew that they were greedy; that they were willing to cut corners, cheat, and even steal, if necessary, to get what they wanted. Furthermore, he knew their motivations—they were idolaters, worshippers of false gods who worshipped creation instead of the Creator and who declared themselves lord instead of serving the one, true Lord.

Paul knew that the Christians of Corinth had every reason to condemn the people around them, to judge the people around them, and to distance themselves from their neighbors.

However, Paul ruled out anger at the world.

When he wrote to them, Paul clarified that the Christians in Corinth had misunderstood him.

Those who concluded that their neighbors were morally corrupt were right. Moreover, they were also correct in concluding that if they were to avoid their morally corrupt neighbors, they would have to move out of town. Paul affirmed that they were right.

Paul's defining decision here was that the clash of culture itself cannot be addressed by getting angry at the people around us.

In many ways, it would be simpler if we judged our neighbors, turned our backs on them, withdrew from our world, and lived in our own Christian subculture.

However, Paul knew that wouldn't work or honor Jesus. He decided that we can't solve anything by getting angry with the world, and that is the climactic decision in this drama. Everything else hinges on that decision. Plus, it leads us to an important first principle on moving from anger to anticipation:

Principle #1: Moving from Anger to Anticipation requires realism.

We need to be honest about the condition of our world. Our world is broken. We live in a modern-day Corinth. Our culture is as immoral as Corinth, if not more so!

That's why this series is about what to do when the culture clashes with Christian faith. It happens all the time! Let's be honest about the truth.

Let's also be honest about our response! We tend to get angry with the world when it behaves in such a morally depraved way. We expect everyone to behave rightly and act like Christians. When people behave like pagans, we are surprised. We recoil in shock and get angry.

Anger is a natural response and an easy response!

However, getting angry at the culture is unproductive. No one is sitting around asking themselves, "What do Christians think about what I'm doing?" And when we express moral outrage at the world, no one thinks, "Wow, since Christians are angry about what I'm doing, I better do something differently!" No! Getting angry is unproductive, and Paul knew that.

Worse, our anger keeps us from turning our attention to where Paul told us to put it—on ourselves.

That leads us to Act 4, Falling Action.

ACT 4, FALLING ACTION: PAUL DEALS WITH CHRISTIANS

Act 4 is called "Falling Action," but that doesn't mean that Act 4 is peaceful.

Act 4 is where we see the implications of the choices made in Act 3.

It's frequently where most of the action occurs!

In Act 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's family is busy planning her wedding. However, Juliet is planning to fake her own death so that Romeo can whisk her away after she is buried. Juliet takes the poison and seems to die. Her family found her, assumes she is dead, and turns their wedding plans into funeral plans.

Act 4 of our drama can be found in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 where Paul dealt with sin inside the Church.

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the

church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

Paul distinguished insiders from outsiders.

Those who are outside are those who are not part of the Church and not in a saving relationship with God through Jesus.

Those who are inside are those who are part of the Church and in a saving relationship with God through Jesus.

The two groups of people are not the same. They won't behave the same, nor do the same expectations work for them both.

Paul fundamentally challenged insiders to see that they had embraced idolatry.

What Paul was addressing is the fact that some sins tend to take over our lives, to shape our identity, and to become controlling influences over us.

Sexual immorality and greed particularly tend to control us.

The word "idolater" occurs only seven times in the New Testament. In six of those instances, idolatry and sexual immorality are linked. Why? Because sexual immorality is a form of idolatry, and they go together. In five of those instances, idolatry and greed or covetousness are linked. Why? Because wanting what we don't have is also a form of idolatry.

Both draw us to the worship of creation instead of the Creator and tend to make us lords of our own lives instead of allowing the LORD God to be in charge.

Paul told the insiders to purge the evil from their midst.

Paul told us that it's not our job to judge the outsiders, the world around the Church.

That job belongs to God himself, and God will do that job when the time is right.

Instead, Paul told us that it is our job to identify that kind of conduct in our midst and remove it from our fellowship.

Paul focused the attention and scrutiny on the Christians themselves, which leads us to a second principle:

Principle #2: Moving from Anger to Anticipation involves introspection.

Paul is telling us that instead of judging the world for its sin, we need to deal with our own sin.

The sin we see in the world around us is probably lurking in our own hearts and in our own relationships as well.

To move from anger at the world to anticipation of what God might do through us, we need to take a much closer look at our own conduct and motivations.

Paul was also calling the church to look carefully and introspectively at the conduct and motivations of our brothers and sisters. If we let the culture's motivations and behaviors loose in the Church, they will spread quickly.

We need to look carefully at ourselves and at one another, identify our sin, and deal with it.

Paul made that very clear to the Christians in Corinth. However, that's not easy!

How would this drama end?

ACT 5, RESOLUTION: THIS DRAMA ENDS IN TRAGEDY

Act 5 is all about resolution.

It's time to tie up the loose ends and follow events all the way to their conclusion.

In Act 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo returns to see Juliet one last time. Unaware that Juliet is merely asleep, Romeo arrives at her tomb with his own poison in hand, prepared to take his own life. He drinks his own vial of poison, kisses Juliet, and dies. Juliet awakens, finds Romeo dead, takes a dagger, and kills herself.

It is a tragic ending with the only redeeming value of bringing peace to the warring families.

We don't find out until 2 Corinthians how this drama turned out.

It turns out that Paul's instructions to the Christians in Corinth on this topic ended in tragedy.

After Paul sent the letter we call 1 Corinthians from Ephesus to Corinth, the Christians there rejected Paul's advice and the apostle himself. Paul received word of their rejection.

Eventually, Paul went to Corinth to bring order and godliness back to the Church. He failed.

Upon returning to Ephesus, he penned a harsh letter and sent it to Corinth in the hands of Titus, his trusted emissary.

There is more to the story, but the story never ends neatly for the Christians in Corinth.

The Christians in Corinth were too mired in their own culture and so happy with their own behavior that they could not shift from anger to anticipation.

How might we avoid a tragic ending ourselves? Paul showed the way in 2 Corinthians.

In **2 Corinthians 5:20**, Paul wrote,

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

To avoid the tragic ending of the drama recorded in 1 Corinthians 5, we need to understand that we too are ambassadors for Christ and unpack what that means.

It means that we can be realistic about the culture around us. The world around us is broken.

But we know that our true home is elsewhere. As ambassadors of Christ, we know that our true home is with him in the Kingdom of God.

We are sent cross-culturally to this present-day Corinth. We are representatives of Christ. We are loyal subjects of our true king, Jesus, and represent him to the people of this world.

We are appealing to a world that is broken and in rebellion against God to repent, believe, and be reconciled to God. Our identity as ambassadors leads us to a third principle:

Principle #3: Moving from Anger to Anticipation fixes our foundation.

Thinking of ourselves as ambassadors **repairs** our flawed thinking and **stabilizes** our identity.

Our identity as ambassadors of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom of God anchors us firmly to God's Story from Creation to Conclusion.

In chapter one, "Creation," we are reminded that we were created by God to love him and to be loved by him. So was the entire world.

However, chapter two, Brokenness, points out what we know: that we all sinned, we broke ourselves, we broke our relationship with God, we broke our relationships with each other, and we broke the world around us.

Chapter three, Jesus, tells us that Jesus died to pay the price for our sin. Now, those of us who repent and believe are forgiven. We're adopted as children of God; we're made citizens of the Kingdom of God with God as our Father and True King.

Our identity as ambassadors comes directly out of chapter four, the Church. Chapter four reminds us that we are filled with the Holy Spirit so that we can live for God, and we are sent out as ambassadors of Christ to represent him in the world until he comes again.

Remembering that fact can change how this drama ends. Now, instead of being angry with the world for not living up to our expectations, we can anticipate what God is going to do through us to redeem and remake this broken world.

When the culture clashes with our Christian faith, let's move from anger at the world to anticipating what God can do through us by thinking of ourselves as ambassadors of Christ to our culture.