

# 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. For the past few months we've taken a break from our study of 1 Corinthians to look carefully at Psalm 51. But now we're ready to return to this long and important letter by the apostle Paul. He wrote it to the church at the city of Corinth in probably the year A.D. 54, which was about three or four years after he visited the city and started the church there. But during that time the church of Corinth began to experience a variety of problems. And the first one that Paul addressed in this letter was the lack of unity in the church. That theme was Paul's major focus starting in chapter 1 and verse 10 after he finished his introduction in the first nine verses. And he continued to deal with this issue until the end of chapter 4.

So before we jump into chapter 5, let's review the first major section in this letter. Thankfully this long section can be broken down into 11 paragraphs, and the first three of them are in chapter 1. They're found in verses 10–17, 18–25, and 26–31. In verses 10–17 Paul commanded the believers in Corinth to end their petty divisions. They were split into factions based on excessive loyalty to various Christian leaders like Peter and Apollos. And so Paul urged these people to get on the same page and remember that the gospel is the foundation of our faith. Then in verses 18–25 Paul elaborated on the gospel. He focused on how the cross of Christ is unimpressive in the world's eyes. Unbelievers see the gospel as foolishness, but in reality it's an expression of God's wisdom. And he saves those who believe in this message. In verses 26–31 Paul said that the recipients of the gospel are also unimpressive in the world's eyes. Most of us don't have worldly wisdom, power and influence, or a noble birth and a wealthy background. Instead God chose to save those who are despised and viewed as nothing by the world. And so we don't have any basis for boasting about our salvation. It's purely a gift of God's grace.

In chapter 2 we looked at the fourth and fifth paragraphs in this section. They're found in verses 1–5 and 6–16. In verses 1–5 Paul reflected on what he did do and what he didn't do when he arrived in the city of Corinth. He preached about the crucifixion of Jesus, but he didn't use persuasive words of wisdom. In other words, he didn't use the rhetorical eloquence that was so popular in Corinth during that time. It was basically a form of manipulation because it involved impressing people with your cleverness and sophistication. It emphasized manner over message and style over substance. It appealed to the emotions instead of the intellect. Instead Paul just spoke the truth and relied on the Spirit's power to work in people's hearts.

Then in verses 6–16 Paul gave some clarification about his view of wisdom. He was opposed to the worldly wisdom of rhetorical eloquence, but he wasn't opposed to wisdom in general. When he preached

about the crucified Christ, he was actually communicating God's wisdom. But Paul's main focus in this paragraph was on how God used the Spirit to reveal his wisdom to us. First we saw the doctrine of inspiration, which is focused on how the Spirit moved various men of God to write down his words. Then we saw the doctrine of illumination, which stresses that the Spirit helps us to understand God's words.

But unbelievers don't have the Holy Spirit living in them, and so they can't understand spiritual things. They don't welcome and accept God's truth because it's foolishness to them. They can't make a proper appraisal of divine revelation and assess it accurately. They don't even evaluate us correctly. They certainly attack us and criticize us, but their evaluation is seriously flawed. However, we don't have this problem as Christians. Because we have the Spirit, we are marked by evaluating all God's revealed truth accurately. We can even evaluate each other and help each other to grow spiritually. And the reason we can do this is that we have the mind of Christ. God is helping us to renew our mind so that we think and act more and more like Jesus.

In chapter 3 we looked at the sixth, seventh, and eighth paragraphs in this section. They're found in verses 1–9, 10–17, and 18–23. In verses 1–9 Paul rebuked the believers in Corinth for their worldliness. They were filled with envy and strife, which were revealed by their divisions. As Paul already mentioned in chapter 1, they were separating themselves into factions based on excessive loyalty to a prominent Christian leader. And he listed himself and Apollos as examples. So Paul confronted this sinful behavior by labeling himself and Apollos as simply servants and coworkers. In God's providence they had different roles in the church of Corinth. Paul planted or started the church, and Apollos watered or nurtured it. But God was the one who gave the growth. He was working behind the scenes the whole time, and his involvement was what really mattered in this process.

Then in verses 10–17 Paul switched his image for the Corinthian church from a field to a building. Paul laid the foundation for the building when he started the church. And this foundation was the person and work of Jesus Christ. Then there were others who built on that foundation in Corinth. So Paul talked about some of the different building materials that might be used in constructing the church. If we use imperishable materials like gold and silver, our work will survive the fire, and we will receive a reward on judgment day. If we use perishable materials like hay and straw, our work will get burned up, and we will experience a loss of reward on judgment day.

But Paul warned the Corinthians that if any of them destroyed the church through their divisions, God would destroy them. Instead of being in heaven with very little reward, they would be punished in hell for all eternity. After all, the church is not just an ordinary building; it's a temple. The Holy Spirit lives in every believer, and so when we gather together, we become a larger temple that's full of mini temples. And because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we are holy and consecrated to God. We belong to him, and he should come first in our lives. Our goal should be to please him in everything we do. If we do that, the church will be marked by unity instead of division.

Then in verses 18–23 Paul warned his readers about the danger of self-deception. Many of them thought that they were wise in this age, but Paul told them that they had to become fools in the world's eyes to

become truly wise. They needed to stop boasting in human leaders and refuse to pretend like they belonged to one of them. After all, each of these leaders belonged to the Corinthian believers! They were all servants of the Lord who contributed to the church in different ways. And so we need to realize that we belong to Jesus, not to any human leader. There's not really any benefit that comes from belonging to a fallen human leader. That only brings about turmoil and division in the church. But the benefits of belonging to Jesus are wonderful and will never come to an end.

In chapter 4 we looked at the ninth, tenth, and eleventh paragraphs in this section. They're found in verses 1–5, 6–13, and 14–21. In verses 1–5 Paul told the Christians in Corinth how they were supposed to think about him and other spiritual leaders. They were simply servants of Christ and managers who needed to be found faithful in God's sight. And so the evaluation of the Corinthian believers just didn't matter that much to Paul. He knew that even his own evaluation of himself could be easily tainted by pride. His conscience wasn't accusing him of sin, but he knew that his conscience wasn't perfect. That's why he refused to rely on self-evaluation as the ultimate proof of his faithfulness to God. The only evaluation of us that ultimately counts is God's. One day Jesus is going to return to bring us with him to our heavenly home. At that time we're going to stand before his judgment seat, and each one of us will receive praise from God.

Then in verses 6–13 Paul confronted the arrogance that his readers showed by favoring one spiritual leader over another. They thought too highly of their leaders, and so Paul focused on how lowly he and the other apostles were. He compared them to people who were condemned to die. He also said that they had become a spectacle. The idea is that they were like captives who were fed to wild animals at an amphitheater. So the apostles experienced mistreatment regularly, but they did not repay evil for evil. Instead when they were reviled and insulted, they blessed their enemies. When they were persecuted and harassed, they endured and tolerated it. When they were slandered and falsely accused, they responded graciously and urged their enemies to repent and believe in Jesus. This is the same way that we need to respond today when we're mistreated.

Then in verses 14–21 Paul concluded this section by reminding his readers about his special relationship with them. He was their spiritual father in a limited sense because many of them came to saving faith through his ministry. And so he urged them to imitate him. In fact, he had even sent Timothy to them so that he could help them in this area. But Paul also wanted to visit Corinth personally, because he knew that there were some arrogant people in the church. And so he made plans to check on their ministry effectiveness and see if God's power was at work through them. Instead of being enamored with rhetorical eloquence, these people needed to be preparing for life in God's kingdom when Jesus returns to reign on the earth. They needed to be vessels that God could use to demonstrate his power through the gospel.

In verse 21 Paul finished the chapter by asking his readers how they wanted him to come to Corinth. He was basically asking them how they were going to respond to his warnings in this letter. Would they repent of their sin or continue in their sin? If they repented of their sin, then Paul would come in love and a spirit of gentleness. If they continued in their sin, then he would come to them with a rod. The Greek word for rod refers literally to a slender piece of wood that could be used for a variety of purposes. For

example, in Hebrews 1:8 it refers to the scepter of a ruler, and in Mark 6:8 it refers to a staff that was used when traveling. But in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word is often used as an instrument of discipline. That's especially true in the book of Proverbs. In chapter 22 and verse 15 Solomon wrote, "Foolishness is bound to the heart of a youth; a rod of discipline will separate it from him."

And so it's likely that Paul was talking about the rod of discipline in 1 Corinthians 4:21. Now this doesn't mean that Paul was talking about physically punishing the believers in Corinth if they didn't repent. Instead he was probably speaking about the rod figuratively to refer to church discipline. After all, that's what we're going to see him talking about in chapter 5. And as we're going to see, church discipline doesn't involve any physical punishment. Instead it results in separation and excommunication. So if the Corinthian believers failed to repent of their sin, then Paul would be going to start the church discipline process with them. But if they turned away from their sin, then he would come to them in love and a spirit of gentleness. Now this doesn't mean that proper discipline is not a form of love. In Proverbs 13:24 Solomon said, "The one who will not use the rod hates his son, but the one who loves him disciplines him diligently."

So if Paul failed to exercise church discipline on any Corinthian believers who continued in sin, then he would have shown hatred toward them instead of love. He would have been minimizing their sin instead of dealing with it. If we truly love our fellow Christians, then we will confront them about their sin in love and gentleness. The Greek word for gentleness is the same one that Paul used in Galatians 6:1, where he commanded us to restore fellow Christians in sin with a gentle spirit. So there Paul showed us that restoration is the goal of church discipline. We should do everything we can to help other Christians repent when they sin so that they can be restored to fellowship with God and with us. But we should be gentle as we restore them.

So Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 4:21 wasn't that discipline shouldn't be motivated by love and done with gentleness. I think he was just acknowledging that sinners don't usually think of discipline as loving and gentle when they're experiencing it. Instead they tend to think of discipline as an expression of anger. After all, in Isaiah 10:5 God referred to the rod of his anger, and in Lamentations 3:1 Jeremiah mentioned "the rod of God's wrath." But we need to look at the big picture and think about the long-term situation. The point of being angry over sin is to bring about repentance. People need to understand the seriousness of their sin so that they're motivated to turn away from it. Our love may be veiled to some degree during church discipline, but it should still be there under the surface. And once people repent of their sin, our love for them can be on full display once again.

Now let's move on to the next section in this letter. In chapters 5–6 Paul shifted his focus from church unity to church purity. But these issues are closely connected, because the Corinthian believers were struggling in both areas as a result of their arrogance. And Paul had to bring up the subject of discipline in both places as well. So it's no surprise that we don't have a strong break between these two sections. Paul just moved smoothly from chapter 4 to chapter 5 here. Look at what he wrote in verse 1: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife."

So it was bad enough that the believers in Corinth weren't living in unity. But here we see that they were actually tolerating sexual immorality among them! The Greek word for actually comes from a root that means "complete." The idea here seems to be that there was no doubt about what was happening. Paul was confident that the report he heard was based completely on reality. The Greek verb for reported normally just means "to hear." But the verb is in the passive voice here, which just means that the subject is not doing the action of the verb. Instead it's receiving the action of the verb. And the subject here is the Greek word translated "sexual immorality." The news of sexual immorality among the Corinthian believers is what was being heard by Paul and others. We don't know for sure who told this news to Paul, but it could have been the same people who told him about the divisions in the church. Chapter 1 and verse 11 states that members of Chloe's people told him about that sin.

So whoever told Paul about the sexual immorality, the key is that he found out and addressed it. The Greek word for sexual immorality can refer to any kind of sexual sin, whether it's adultery, prostitution, or homosexuality. This word is used only 25 times in the New Testament and only 10 times in Paul's letters, but we see it in some significant places. In Galatians 5:19 when Paul listed the works of the flesh as opposed to the fruit of the Spirit, he started with this word. Clearly it was a serious sin against God. After all, Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 that God's will is for us to "keep away from sexual immorality." And in Ephesians 5:3 he said that "sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you." But that's exactly what was happening in the Corinthian church! Paul had heard about sexual immorality there.

Then Paul went on in 1 Corinthians 5:1 to give more details about this sexual sin that had been reported to him. He said that it was "the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles." There's actually no Greek word for tolerated in the original text, and so it's hard to be certain about what exactly Paul meant here. The New American Standard Bible has the word "exist" instead. So perhaps Paul was thinking about what the unbelieving Gentiles practiced and not what they tolerated. In other words, maybe he was emphasizing something uncommon and not something illegal. But many commentators point to plenty of extrabiblical evidence that the sexual sin Paul was talking about was forbidden under Roman law.

So the Christian Standard Bible is probably on the right track here by giving us the word "tolerated." This term is also found in the English Standard Version and the updated New International Version. The NET Bible has the word "permitted," which has a similar idea. The point here is that this sexual sin was so deviant that it was even rejected by people who weren't Jews and didn't have the Old Testament law. The word "even" stresses that this situation was a bit surprising. The unbelieving Gentiles normally indulged in all kinds of sexual sin, but even they didn't approve of this practice.

So at the end of verse 1 Paul mentioned the specific sexual sin that was taking place. He said, "A man is sleeping with his father's wife." Now notice that Paul didn't give us any names here. It's possible that he didn't have that information, but I think it's more likely that he just chose not to use any names. He probably expected everyone to know the people he was talking about. But unfortunately we don't know those details or many other things about this situation. We can make some educated guesses, but some-

times we're just not sure. For example, we don't know if the father was still married to this woman at the time. We don't even know if the father was still alive or not! But if he was alive and divorced from her, then we don't know if the son got married to her or if they were just living together.

However, what we do know with more certainty is that this woman was probably not the son's biological mother. That's because Paul was most likely pointing back to Leviticus 18:8, which also has the phrase "father's wife." In that verse God said, "You are not to have sex with your father's wife; she is your father's family." That verse is pretty clearly talking about a son's stepmother, because it says that she is his father's family and not his family. And we can confirm this conclusion by looking at the previous verse. In verse 7 God said, "You are not to violate the intimacy that belongs to your father and mother. She is your mother; you must not have sexual intercourse with her." So it's clear that verse 7 was talking about a son's biological mother, and therefore verse 8 has to be referring to a different situation. It has to be talking about a son's stepmother.

Now some people might wonder what was so bad about this situation if the father was dead. After all, wasn't this woman free to be remarried to anyone she wanted? That's what Paul later told us in chapter 7 and verse 39. But of course what Paul meant there was that she could get remarried to anyone who was eligible. Scripture teaches that a Christian must marry another believer of the opposite gender who isn't already married and isn't a close relative. Now this doesn't mean that cousins weren't allowed to get married. Leviticus 18 tells us which relationships are considered incest, and cousins aren't included. But any closer relatives are off limits, including a stepmother, a stepsister, a sister-in-law, and a daughter-in-law. The only exception under the Old Testament law was that a younger brother was obligated to marry his older brother's wife if he died without any children. Then the younger brother would raise up children in his name to preserve his family line. But this practice doesn't apply to the church today, and so we should consider a brother-in-law or sister-in-law completely off limits.

Now obviously the reason a stepsister or a sister-in-law is off limits has nothing to do with genetics. We could use this reasoning to explain why blood relatives like sisters, aunts, and nieces are off limits. We know that there can be genetic defects with children born from those relationships. That wasn't true in the early days of the human race because Adam and Eve were created genetically perfect. And it took a while before mutations began to multiply. So we know that Adam and Eve's children must have married each other, and we know that Abraham married Sarah even though she was his half-sister. That was allowed during the time of Genesis, but God outlawed it during the time of Exodus, and one reason was probably to protect the human race from genetic defects.

But genetics is not the only reason that God outlawed incest, because otherwise he wouldn't have made stepmothers and stepsisters off limits. In those cases God had a different reason, and I think it's simply that God wanted family members to live together and enjoy close relationships without sexual overtones. Otherwise there could be constant tension in the family. And with a stepmother I think there's an additional reason that we can point to. The Bible commands us to honor our parents and treat them with great respect, especially as they get older. That's true for in-laws and stepparents as well! But if a man wants to marry his widowed stepmother, I don't think an appropriate level of respect is maintained. Be-

sides, Genesis 2:24 says that a man leaves his father and mother when he gets married, but he wouldn't be doing that if he married his stepmother!

So I think it's safe to say that God has never allowed a man to marry his stepmother. But in 1 Corinthians 5:1 I doubt the man here was even married to his stepmother. The Christian Standard Bible simply says that he was sleeping with her. Now that's not a very literal translation; the New American Standard Bible says that "someone has his father's wife." The Greek verb here just refers to possessing someone, and it's obviously referring to a sexual relationship. It's in the present tense, which implies an ongoing action. In other words, this wasn't just a one-night stand! So this could be a reference to marriage, but I doubt it because that would have been illegal under Roman law. It's more likely that he was just sleeping with her like the Christian Standard Bible says. But either way this relationship was sin in God's eyes, even if she was no longer married to the man's father. We don't know what his status was, but ultimately it's irrelevant. Even if the stepmother wasn't committing adultery, this relationship was just plain wrong.

So what we're seeing so far in this passage is that we cannot ignore sin in the church. Paul already spent four chapters dealing with the general sin of disunity. But here in chapter 5 he went after a specific situation of sexual immorality. He was not willing to tolerate sin among these believers, and we should have the same attitude today. If we learn about someone in the church who is living in clear sin, we need to rebuke that person. We need to show that person the error of his way and plead with him to repent. That person needs to turn back to the Lord and start living in obedience again. Otherwise that sin could spread to others in the church!

But there's another problem that we face when we tolerate sin in the church. Our testimony before the world can be easily damaged. Unbelievers are watching us to see if we're hypocrites or not. In Philippians 2:15 Paul said that we should "be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world." In Titus 2:8 Paul said to Titus, "Your message is to be sound beyond reproach, so that any opponent will be ashamed, because he doesn't have anything bad to say about us." But the church in Corinth was tolerating sin that even the Gentiles didn't accept. They certainly had bad things that they could say about that church! The believers there were basically dragging the name of Jesus through the mud. Why would anyone want to become a Christian if the followers of Jesus behaved that way? This is one of the reasons that we must obey him and live in purity. Let's close in prayer and ask God to help us please him and have a good testimony before the world.