

1 CORINTHIANS 5:10B

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. We've been seeing in this chapter that the Christians in Corinth were tolerating sexual sin. A man in the church was sleeping with his stepmother. But Paul said that this man should have been removed from the church. And so he called on the believers to hand this man over to Satan and send him back into the world. The hope was that he would repent and stop giving in to his sinful tendencies. Then he would show himself to be a genuine believer who wouldn't have to face God's wrath on judgment day. Then in verses 6–8 Paul used an illustration about bread to show the seriousness of this situation. He was comparing the Corinthian church to an unleavened batch of dough, and the stepson was like leaven. His sin would eventually spread and infect the whole church if the believers continued to tolerate it. If we don't take sin seriously, then others in the church will start indulging in sin as well. The lack of accountability naturally leads to an increase in sin.

Then last week we began looking at the third and final paragraph in this chapter. In verse 9 Paul said, "I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people." Paul had already written an inspired letter to the Corinthian believers that hasn't been preserved for us. And in that letter he told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. The Greek word for associate is a double compound word that literally means "to mix up together." Just imagine that you're making a cake, and you have all these ingredients that you mix together in a bowl. You stir them up really well so that they're blended thoroughly. That's basically what we do as Christians when we gather together. We develop close relationships as we fellowship and associate with each other.

But of course Paul was talking about the need to avoid associating with certain people. And he said that the Corinthian believers were not to associate with sexually immoral people. The Greek word for sexually immoral people comes from the same root as the term that Paul used in verse 1 to refer to the sin of the stepson. So it's pretty clear that in verse 9 Paul was pointing back to the sin of incest. But he used a term that can refer to a person who practiced any kind of sexual sin, whether it's adultery, prostitution, incest, or homosexuality. Scripture is clear that sexual intimacy should only be enjoyed between one man and one woman who have made a commitment to be lifelong companions.

So the Christians in Corinth should have already known what to do with the stepson. They should not have associated with this man or had any fellowship with him. In other words, they should have removed him from the church and stopped tolerating him and his sin. They were ignoring the seriousness of his sin and the impact it would have on the church. But the reason for this failure wasn't just stubborn rebellion. It was also based on a lack of understanding. The Corinthian believers apparently failed to compre-

hend Paul's instructions to them in his earlier letter. They misunderstood what he had been trying to teach them.

But Paul was very patient with the Christians in Corinth. In verse 10 he proceeded to clarify what he meant in his earlier letter. Look at what he wrote in the beginning of this verse: "I did not mean the immoral people of this world." So in verse 9 Paul wasn't referring to all sexually immoral people. He was not including the sexually immoral people of this world. Now the Greek word for world can be used in three major ways. The first one is the physical world, the second one is the world of humanity, and the third one is the evil world system. The first one is a place, the second one refers to people, and the third one is basically a set of principles. Now certainly these principles are believed by many people who live on the earth. But the main focus with this third nuance is on a system of values that are opposed to God.

And this last meaning is the one that I believe Paul intended in verse 10. When he referred to the sexually immoral people of this world, he wasn't talking about anyone on the planet who sinned in this way. Otherwise the man in the church who committed incest would have been included! And as we're going to see in verse 11, Paul wasn't including him or any other professing believers in the church. So in verse 10 Paul was talking about the sexually immoral people who belong to this evil world system. He was talking about unbelievers who haven't made a profession of faith and aren't part of the church. They're living under the power of sin and the dominion of Satan.

So when Paul told the Corinthian believers in his previous letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, he was not talking about unbelievers. In other words, we are not forbidden from interacting with sexually immoral who don't know the Lord. How else are they going to learn about what Jesus has done for them unless we spend time evangelizing them? And Jesus is the perfect example for us in this area. The gospel writers tell us that he ate with tax collectors and sinners, and there's no doubt that these sinners would have included people who were sexually immoral. Jesus compared himself to a doctor, and of course we know that doctors don't spend much time with healthy people. Their focus is on helping those who are sick.

And Jesus was doing the same thing in the spiritual sense. He ate with unbelievers because they needed to turn away from their sins! He wasn't accepting them as they were. And he certainly wasn't hanging out with them to condone their sins or indulge in their sins with them. He was calling them to repent and put their faith in him to save them from their sins. And we need to do the same thing today. We need to reach out to unbelievers with the hope of the gospel. We need to proclaim God's truth to everyone around us. Now we should certainly be careful when we're around the wicked people of the world. We should guard against developing close relationships with them, or we could easily fall into sin ourselves. But we shouldn't overreact and avoid contact with them completely. They need to hear the gospel, and we should be ready to give it to them.

Now we're ready to cover some new material. Let's look at the rest of verse 10. But we'll read the whole verse since we have one sentence here. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "I did not mean the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters; otherwise you would have to leave

the world.” So Paul started this verse by focusing on sexually immoral people who belong to the evil world system. But then he listed several other categories of sinners in the second half of this verse. You see, Paul’s instructions in this chapter don’t just apply to people who are living in sexual sin. They’re relevant for people who commit other sins as well. And the next type of sinner that Paul mentioned here was the greedy.

The Greek word for greedy is used four times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. Three of these occurrences are found in this letter. We’re going to see the word again in verse 11, and it also occurs in chapter 6 and verse 10. The other place where Paul used this word is Ephesians 5:5. There he said, “For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” So in that verse Paul mentioned sexual immorality and greed together, just like he did in our passage. And that makes sense, because these two sins are similar. Both of them involve taking something good and turning it into evil. Sex is a good gift from God, but it becomes evil when we enjoy it outside of marriage. Money is a very useful and beneficial thing to have, but we fall into sin when we become greedy. In fact, this sin is so dangerous that Paul called the greedy person an idolater.

We see a similar statement in Colossians 3:5. There Paul said, “Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.” Now it may seem harsh to refer to greed as idolatry. But Paul was simply following the teaching of Jesus here. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” Now on the surface it sounds like Jesus was just wrong here. After all, don’t many people have two jobs and like both of them? But the Greek word for serve here literally means “to be a slave of someone.” And when you’re a slave, your master owns you and has complete authority over your life. That’s why it’s not possible to have two masters. You can’t be a slave of both God and money. If you’re greedy for money, then money is your master, and you’re an idolater.

That’s why Jesus said in Luke 12:15 that we need to “watch out and be on guard against all greed.” And in Ephesians 5:3 Paul said that “greed should not even be heard of among you.” Now this doesn’t mean that it’s inherently wrong to be wealthy. Being rich isn’t a sin; wanting to be rich is the problem. Having money isn’t wrong; it’s when we love money that we run into trouble. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:9–10: “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

So when we love money and want to be rich, we get trapped and eventually fall into a variety of sins. Greed is a subtle but deadly sin that leads us away from the faith and plunges us into eternal destruction. After all, if we’re a slave of money, then we don’t belong to God. If we love money, then we don’t love God. And so we must keep our lives free from the love of money, as Hebrews 13:5 says. But how do we fight against greed? How do we keep our lives free from the love of money? The answer is right there in Hebrews 13:5. The writer went on to say, “Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will

never leave you or abandon you.” The secret to overcoming greed is to be content. And we can be content with just a little money because we have Jesus. He has promised to be with us always. When we think about everything that Jesus has done for us, money just doesn’t seem very important anymore. One day we’re going to be in heaven with Jesus, and we won’t be able to take our money with us!

And Paul stressed that point in 1 Timothy 6. Earlier I read verses 9–10, but now I’ll back up and read verses 6–8. Listen to what Paul wrote in these verses: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out. If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” So if all we had was food and clothing, we should be content. It’s nice to have shelter as well, but Jesus didn’t have a place to lay his head, and neither did Paul. In 1 Corinthians 4:11 Paul said that he was homeless, but that wasn’t because he was lazy and irresponsible. It’s because he was always on the move and sharing the gospel wherever he went.

So Paul knew how to be content, and he talked at length about his contentment in Philippians 4. In verse 11 he said, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.” Then in verse 12 he wrote, “I know both how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need.” And what was Paul’s secret to being content? The answer is found in verse 13: “I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.” The reason we can be content in difficult circumstances is that Jesus gives us the strength to endure. This verse isn’t talking about the strength to succeed in sports like many Christian athletes think. Instead Paul was talking about the strength to be content even when we’re poor.

So contentment is the key to overcoming greed. But there’s another way that we can fight against greed, especially if we’re rich. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:17–19: “Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share, storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life.” So Paul didn’t criticize wealthy Christians for being rich. Instead he said that our wealth is a gift from God to enjoy. But he also commanded rich believers to be generous and willing to share. God gives us wealth so that we can use it to bless and serve others. And when we do that, we’re storing up treasure in heaven.

So when we’re content and generous, we’re able to have victory over greed. But if we give in to greed, things can get worse. And in 1 Corinthians 5:10 Paul showed us what greed often leads to. After he mentioned the sexually immoral people of the world and the greedy, he included swindlers in his list of sinners. And notice that Paul switched the conjunction that he used here. Normally he used the word “or” when he linked the terms in this list together. But he used the word “and” to link the greedy and swindlers together. He was showing the close relationship between these terms. Greed is the attitude that leads someone to take the action of swindling others.

The Greek word for swindlers is used five times in the New Testament. Paul wrote three of them, and all

three are found in this letter. The word appears again in verse 11, and then we will see it in chapter 6 and verse 10. Those verses should sound familiar, because they're the same places where I told you that Paul used the Greek word for greedy. We're going to continue seeing a close connection between these terms. Now it's one thing to walk into a bank and rob the place at gunpoint. But most thieves are more subtle than that. They use a measure of deception to pull off their robbery. That's what we see Judas Iscariot doing in John 12. When Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with an expensive perfume, Judas objected. In verse 5 he asked, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

Now at first glance this objection seems to be legitimate. But it wasn't coming from a pure heart. Listen to what John wrote about Judas in verse 6: "He didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it." So Judas tried to manipulate the situation for his own financial gain. And the same thing happens today all the time. It's actually quite rampant in politics. Many politicians use their positions of leadership in government to accumulate great wealth for themselves. They don't have a huge salary, but they game the system. For example, Nancy Pelosi's salary is only about \$200,000, but her net worth is well over \$100 million.

And we see the same thing with various businesses as well. The housing market crashed about 15 years ago because banks were underwriting all sorts of foolish loans to get lucrative mortgage fees. Around the same time Bernie Madoff's investment company was operating the largest Ponzi scheme in history and ended up defrauding investors of about \$65 billion. And during the last two years Pfizer and Moderna have made billions of dollars from persuading people to get COVID vaccines. Even in religion this sort of thing is prevalent. For years the Roman Catholic Church manipulated people to buy indulgences with the false hope that their punishment for sin could be reduced. In fact, Martin Luther criticized the Catholic Church strongly over this issue during the Protestant Reformation. Today the Catholic Church is so wealthy that it's estimated to be worth over a trillion dollars.

But plenty of Protestant churches are guilty of manipulating people to give them money. This practice is especially prevalent in charismatic churches. Many charismatic pastors preach the prosperity gospel, which promises health and wealth to those who give generously to the church. But in large charismatic churches the pastor tends to be very wealthy, while the people are fairly poor. These pastors have expensive clothes, fancy cars, large homes, and private jets. And those things are all paid for by the people they've deceived and manipulated into believing their false gospel and financing their wealthy lifestyle. These pastors are essentially greedy charlatans who swindle people.

Now some people might be surprised to hear that there are so many greedy swindlers in the church. But Scripture warns us that this is exactly what we should expect to see. The apostle Peter addressed this theme in his second letter. Listen to what he said in 2 Peter 2:1-3: "There were indeed false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, and will bring swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved ways, and the way of truth will be maligned because of them. They will exploit you in their greed with made-up stories. Their condemnation, pronounced long ago, is not idle, and their destruction does not sleep."

So in verse 1 Peter said that these false teachers would be within the church, and in verse 3 he said that they would be marked by greed. And he stressed their greed by mentioning it again later in the chapter. In verse 14 he said, “They have eyes full of adultery that never stop looking for sin. They seduce unstable people and have hearts trained in greed. Children under a curse!” But church leaders are to be marked by a lack of greed. And Peter had already stressed this point in his first letter. Here’s what he commanded the elders to do in 1 Peter 5:2: “Shepherd God’s flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but willingly.”

And Paul addressed this theme in some of his letters as well. Listen to what he said about the qualifications for an elder in Titus 1:7: “As an overseer of God’s household, he must be blameless: not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not greedy for money.” In 1 Timothy 3:3 Paul said the same thing; he wrote that an overseer or elder must not be greedy. And in verse 8 he also said that deacons must not be greedy for money. But Paul didn’t say one thing and do another. He led by example. Listen to what he said in 1 Thessalonians 2:5–7: “For we never used flattering speech, as you know, or had greedy motives—God is our witness—and we didn’t seek glory from people, either from you or from others. Although we could have been a burden as Christ’s apostles, instead we were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children.”

So Paul didn’t have greedy motives, and he even made sure that he wasn’t a burden to the people he served. Now he certainly had the right to receive financial support from his fellow believers. In 1 Corinthians 9:14 he said, “The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by the gospel.” But here’s what he said about his reward in verse 18: “To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel.” Now it was much easier for Paul to do that than most pastors today. After all, he was single and could work as a tentmaker from time to time. But no pastor should be greedy for money or swindle the believers under his care. And the same thing is true for Christians in general. None of us should be marked by greed or by swindling people.

But in 1 Corinthians 5:10 Paul listed one more type of sinner for us. When he wrote earlier that his readers were not to associate with sexually immoral people, he “did not mean the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters.” The Greek word for idolaters is used seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. Four of these occurrences are found in this letter. We will see it again in verse 11, and then later we will see it in chapter 6 and verse 9 as well as chapter 10 and verse 7. But Paul also used this term in Ephesians 5:5, which I read earlier. There Paul said that a greedy person is an idolater. And the Greek word for greedy person is the same one that he used earlier in our verse. So we have the same two Greek words used together in both of these passages.

But in 1 Corinthians 5:10 I doubt Paul was talking only about greed when he mentioned idolatry. I think he was probably speaking more broadly here about anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Greed is certainly the root behind many idols, including the physical idols that were so prominent in Bible times. People usually worshiped physical idols because they thought that those idols could bless them with physical prosperity. But greed is not the only kind of idol, even though it’s very prominent. Many people are seduced by other types of idols, like power and pleasure. But whatever the idol is, we need to

have the same response to it. Listen to how the apostle John ended his first letter in chapter 5 and verse 21: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” We need to make sure that God always remains first in our lives.

So Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 5:10 is that we are not forbidden from associating with the sexually immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters. And I think it’s clear that the phrase “of this world” applies to every kind of person on this list. In each case Paul was talking about unbelievers who have not made a profession of faith and are not part of the church. We should be interacting with these people for the purpose of evangelism! Then Paul ended this verse by saying, “Otherwise you would have to leave the world.” But there should be a conjunction at the beginning of this phrase. The English Standard Version has the word “since,” and the New American Standard Bible has the word “for.” The Greek word here is just introducing the cause or reason for something. The Corinthian believers couldn’t stop associating completely with unbelievers, because then they would have to leave the world.

The Greek word for world here is the same one that we already saw earlier in the verse. And there it referred to the evil world system, but here it clearly refers to the physical world. It’s very difficult to live on the Planet Earth and not interact at all with unbelievers, because they’re all around us. And God doesn’t want us to become reclusive hermits who are completely isolated. Now certainly a day will come in the future when we will leave this world. Jesus is going to return, and according to 1 Thessalonians 4:17, we will ascend to meet him in the air. Then we will go with him to a special place that he has prepared for us, as he told us in John 14:3. In 1 Peter 1:4 we’re told that we will receive “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

But we don’t know when Jesus is going to come back. We can be certain that he’s going to return, but it will happen in God’s timing. And so in the meantime we need to be in the world but not of the world. Listen to what Jesus said in John 17:15–16: “I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” So we are strangers and exiles on this earth. This world is not our home. But we should not retreat from the people of the world. Instead we should be witnesses and tell them what Jesus has done for us. And we should live differently than the people of this world so that they will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.