

1 CORINTHIANS 5:11A

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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 two weeks ago we began looking at the third and final paragraph in this chapter. In verse 9 Paul said that he had already written a letter to the Corinthian believers. And in that letter he had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. So the Christians in Corinth should have already known what to do with the man who was committing incest. They should have stopped associating with him and removed him from the church. But the reason for their failure in this area wasn't just stubborn rebellion. It was also based on a lack of understanding. The Corinthian believers apparently failed to comprehend 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. He said that he "did not mean the immoral people of this world." So Paul wasn't including sexually immoral people who belong to the evil world system. In other words, we are not forbidden from interacting with unbelievers who haven't made a profession of faith and aren't part of the church. We need to share the gospel with these people! And Paul didn't just focus on those who were sexually immoral here. He listed several other categories of sinners in the second half of verse 10. He also mentioned the greedy, swindlers, and idolaters. So his 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.

So right after Paul talked about sexually immoral people, he mentioned the greedy. These two sins are often listed together in Scripture because they're 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. So

it's not 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. That's why Jesus said in Luke 12:5 that we need to "watch out and be on guard against all 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 and the greedy, he added swindlers to his list of sinners. And there's a close relationship here between the greedy and swindlers. Greed is the attitude that leads someone to take the action of swindling others and stealing from them. 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. They manipulate the situation for their own financial gain. It happens all the time today, whether it's in politics, banking, or medicine.

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. Today the Catholic Church has become so wealthy that it's 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 these pastors are just greedy charlatans who are swindling people to finance their expensive lifestyle. Scripture teaches clearly that church leaders should be marked by a lack of greed. In Titus 1:7 Paul said that one of the qualifications for an elder is that he cannot be "greedy for money." And in 1 Timothy 3:8 he said that same thing about deacons.

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 words for greedy and idolaters are also used together in Ephesians 5:5, where Paul said that a greedy person is an idolater. But here in our passage Paul wasn't talking only about greed when he mentioned idolatry. He was speaking more broadly about anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Greed is certainly the root behind many idols, but some people are seduced by other types of idols, like power and pleasure. Whatever the idol is, we need to guard ourselves from it, as John said in 1 John 5:21. We need to make sure that God always remains first in our lives.

But in 1 Corinthians 5:10 Paul's focus was not on the need for Christians to avoid being sexually immoral, greedy, swindlers, and idolaters. Instead his point was that we are not forbidden from associating with these kinds of people if they are unbelievers who have not made a profession of faith. And Paul ended this verse by giving us the reason for taking this approach. He said that otherwise we would have to leave the 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 from everyone.

Now certainly a day will come in the future when we will leave this world. Jesus is going to return, and we're going to ascend to meet him in the air. Then we will go with him to a special place that he has pre-

pared for us. 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. In other words, 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. We should call on them to turn away from their sins and put their trust in Jesus alone to save them.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 5:11. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul said in this verse: "But actually, I wrote you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister and is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person." So let's review Paul's train of thought in this paragraph so far. In verse 9 he talked about a statement that he wrote to the Corinthian believers in his previous letter. Then in verse 10 he gave them some clarification and told them what he did not mean by that statement. Now in verse 11 we see what Paul did mean by that statement. He started this verse by saying, "But actually, I wrote to you."

Now this opening statement can be interpreted differently. The English Standard Version and the New International Version both have this statement: "But now I am writing to you." So these Bible translations have the word "now" instead of the word "actually." And the Greek word here is usually translated with the word "now," because normally it refers to the present time. But there are some exceptions, and we can see a clear example in John 18. In this chapter Jesus was being questioned by Pilate. Look at what Jesus said to him in verse 36: "My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

So this verse has the Greek term that is normally translated with the word "now." But most Bible versions don't have this word here. Instead the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "as it is." Jesus wasn't making a contrast between what had been true about his kingdom in the past and what was true about his kingdom at that present time. Instead he was making a contrast between a hypothetical situation and what was actually true. And I think we have a similar contrast in 1 Corinthians 5. In verse 10 Paul talked about what he did not mean in his previous letter, and then in verse 11 he talked about what he did mean. So the word "actually" is a pretty good translation that stresses the contrast here.

But there's another major difference between the standard Bible translations in this verse. All of them have the verb "to write," but the verb is in different tenses. The Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have a past tense verb, while the English Standard Version and the New International Version have a present tense verb. So which one is correct? That question is not as easy to answer as you might think. The Greek verb is in the aorist tense, which normally describes a past action from the perspective of the writer. And if that's what Paul meant here, then he was clearly talking about the letter that he had already written to the Corinthian believers. In other words, he was referring to the same letter that he mentioned in verse 9.

But sometimes a writer would use the Greek aorist tense to describe a past action from the perspective of

the readers. Now in modern times there's not much difference between those two perspectives. If you write a letter and mail it to someone, it will arrive a few days later. And if you send someone an email, it usually arrives just a few seconds later. But during ancient times when you sent a letter, it probably wouldn't arrive for at least several weeks. And so it was natural that sometimes people would write letters from the perspective of their readers. When they would talk about something that they were about to do or something that they were in the process of doing, they could speak about it as though they had already done it. After all, by the time the readers received the letter a few weeks later, that thing was in the past.

We have a good example of this situation in Ephesians 6. As Paul finished his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he told them about the man he was sending to deliver the letter to them. Look at what he wrote in verses 21–22: “Tychicus, our dearly loved brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me so that you may be informed. I am sending him to you for this very reason, to let you know how we are and to encourage your hearts.” The Greek verb for sending is actually in the aorist tense here, and so it probably describes a past action. But when Paul was writing this letter, he hadn't send Tychicus to Ephesus yet, because the letter wasn't finished. And so Paul wasn't describing a past action from his own perspective. He was writing from the perspective of his readers. By the time they got his letter, Paul had completed the action of sending Tychicus to them.

But how should we interpret the aorist tense verb in 1 Corinthians 5:11? When Paul used the Greek verb that means “to write,” was he speaking from his own perspective or from the perspective of his readers? Was he referring to the letter that he had written earlier? Or was he talking about the current letter as though it was already finished? Now the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us a past tense verb, and so they're technically open to both options. But I think most people reading these translations would assume that Paul was speaking from his own perspective. So they would conclude that he was talking about the earlier letter. But the English Standard Version and the New International Version give us a present tense verb, and so they're clearly taking the interpretation that Paul was referring to the current letter. They just present his perspective to avoid any ambiguity.

So which interpretation is correct? I lean toward the view presented by the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. I believe Paul was talking about the past from his own perspective, which means that he was referring to the letter he had already written. And there's a good reason for holding to this view. Paul already referred to the current letter back in chapter 4, and it's important to observe how he spoke about it. Look at what he wrote in verse 14: “I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.” The Christian Standard Bible gives us a present tense verb here, and so does every other Bible translation that I looked at. I couldn't find a single translation that gives us a past tense verb, and that's because Paul didn't use the aorist tense here. Instead he used the Greek present tense, which normally refers to an action that happened in the present from the writer's perspective.

So here's the big question. Why would Paul have used the Greek present tense in chapter 4 to refer to the current letter and then switched to the Greek aorist tense in chapter 5 to refer to the same letter? That doesn't really make any sense. It makes much more sense that Paul switched to the aorist tense in chapter 5 because he was talking about a different letter. And of course we know from verse 9 that he had already

written a letter to the Corinthian believers. He used the aorist tense there to refer to that letter, and then in verse 11 he used the aorist tense again. I think the most natural conclusion is that he was referring to the same letter in both verses.

So what this means is that Paul was not correcting himself here in verse 11. He was not implying that he made a mistake in his previous letter. He wasn't saying that he had misled his readers at all. He wasn't trying to fix an error here that he had made earlier. He didn't say one thing in his previous letter and then something else in his current letter. When he told them earlier not to associate with sexually immoral people, he was sufficiently clear that he wasn't referring to unbelievers. So the problem wasn't that he failed to communicate accurately. The problem was that the Corinthian believers failed to understand him correctly. They were the ones who were in sin and needed correction. They were arrogant and boastful, and so it's no surprise that they didn't study Paul's previous letter very carefully. In their pride they failed to pay close attention to what he had written.

So in verse 11 Paul wasn't correcting himself; instead he was giving clarification. He patiently helped his readers understand what he was saying in his previous letter. He said, "But actually, I wrote you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister." The Greek word for associate is the same one that we already saw back in verse 9. It's an unusual term because it's a double compound word. The root has not just one but two prefixes attached to it. The first prefix means "together," while the second one means "up." And the root of this word means "to mix" or "to mingle." This root is used by itself in Matthew 27:34, which says that people gave Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink.

But the double compound word doesn't just mean "to mix." It's a more emphatic 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. Otherwise you might end up biting into a clump of sugar! And so this Greek word gives us a helpful picture of what we do as Christians when we gather together each week. We shouldn't just sit across the room from each other and go our separate ways right after the service. We're supposed to interact with each other and encourage each other. We should be developing close relationships as we fellowship together. That's what it means for us to associate together as believers.

But Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:11 that he didn't want us to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister and is sexually immoral or some other kind of sinner. Now the Christian Standard Bible isn't very literal at this point, and neither is every other Bible translation that I checked. So let me give you the most literal translation of the first half of verse 11: "But actually I wrote to you not to associate if anyone being called a brother is a sexually immoral person." Now that's not very smooth English, and so I'm not surprised that every Bible translation I looked at has the word "with" instead of the word "if." I don't mind this change, because it accurately conveys what Paul meant here. He wasn't saying that we shouldn't associate with anyone in the church if one believer is living in sin. He was saying that we shouldn't associate with that person.

But the Christian Standard Bible departs from a literal translation in a few other ways. It has the phrase

“anyone who claims to be a brother or sister.” But the English Standard Version and the new Legacy Standard Bible just have the word “brother” here instead of the phrase “brother or sister.” And that’s because there’s just one word in the original Greek here. It’s a masculine singular noun that refers to a sibling. But this word doesn’t always refer to a physical brother. We’ve already seen Paul use this word in the plural six times earlier in this letter to refer to his readers. He was referring to them as his spiritual siblings. He was stressing that they were all part of God’s family. And he wasn’t just talking about men. After all, he gave instructions to women at various points in this letter. In chapter 7 he gave commands to both men and women about marriage, and in chapter 11 he talked about the need for women to wear head coverings.

So I think it’s likely that Paul was using the Greek word for brother in the same way here in chapter 5 and verse 11. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “brother or sister.” Paul was talking about any man or woman who made a profession of faith and claimed to be a believer. But the Greek word for claims actually means “to name” or “to call.” It’s a participle in the present tense and the passive voice. So Paul was talking about a person who was called a brother or sister at that time. And his focus here was not on what the person called himself. The passive voice shows that he was talking about what other people called that person.

Now of course we wouldn’t refer to someone as a brother or sister in Christ unless that person claimed to believe in Jesus. If someone was visiting our church but never made a profession of faith or called himself or herself a Christian, we wouldn’t call that person or brother or sister in Christ. We would evangelize that person! So I don’t think it’s wrong to say that Paul was referring to someone who claimed to be a brother or sister. But that wasn’t his focus here. He was talking specifically about how other people referred to this person. And I think this distinction is important, because we shouldn’t automatically recognize a person’s profession of faith. We shouldn’t assume that everyone who claims to be a Christian is actually a brother or sister in Christ. We need to make sure that this person understands the true gospel and has responded properly to it. And then we need to watch the person’s life to see if there’s a change. After all, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that anyone in Christ is a new creation.

So if there’s no evidence that someone who claims to be a Christian is actually saved, then we should not refer to that person as a brother or sister in Christ. Now this doesn’t mean that our judgment is always going to be accurate. Occasionally we’re going to label someone as a Christian who isn’t really saved, and sometimes we’re going to label someone as an unbeliever who is actually saved. But we should try to make the best assessment that we can. And if we recognize someone’s profession of faith, then we should certainly call that person a brother or sister in Christ. This is the kind of person that Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 5:11. This person certainly claimed to be a Christian, but the key is that this person was recognized as a Christian by the church as a whole. This person showed signs of being a genuine believer in Jesus.

But of course Paul wasn’t saying that we should not associate with everyone we recognize as a Christian. That would make no sense! He went on in this verse to give a list of different types of sins. So he was talking about a fellow Christian who was sinning in one of these ways. And the first kind of sinner he mentioned was a sexually immoral person. The Greek word for sexually immoral is the same one that we’ve

already seen in verses 9–10. It refers to a person who practices any kind of sexual sin, whether it's adultery, prostitution, incest, or homosexuality. If a person is recognized by the church as a Christian but is living in sexual sin, then we need to stop associating with that person once we complete the church discipline process in Matthew 18.

And of course in this passage Paul was focused specifically on the man who was committing incest with his stepmother. In verse 1 when he referred to this man, he used a Greek word that comes from the same root as the term that he used here in verses 9–11. Now Paul went on to list other types of sin in verse 11, and we'll look at them next week. But he started with sexual immorality because it was so relevant to the current situation in the church. The believers were continuing to associate with this man even though he was living in sexual sin! They should have known from Paul's previous letter that they needed to stop associating with him and remove him from the church.

But that action is difficult and requires a lot of courage. Most churches today don't follow Paul's instructions in this passage because the world views church discipline as extreme and unloving. But we need to do it because it's what God has commanded us to do in his Word. And the reason he has given us this command is that he is holy and cannot tolerate sin. When we excommunicate someone from the church, we're reflecting the fact that we're a temple of the Holy Spirit. And so we are to be holy and separate from sin as well. In 1 Peter 1:16 the apostle Peter quoted the Book of Leviticus and said, "Be holy, because I am holy." If we tolerate sin in the church, then we're basically ignoring that command. We're not holding other Christians accountable to pursue holiness. So let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to pursue holiness first in our own lives and then in the lives of our fellow believers.