

1 CORINTHIANS 5:11B

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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 in verse 9 Paul talked about how 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 or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters." So Paul wasn't including sexually immoral people who belong to the evil world system. And he included other kinds of sinners here as well. 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! They need to hear that they're sinners who will be judged by God if they don't repent and put their faith in Jesus alone to save them.

So in verse 10 Paul focused on what he did not mean by the statement in verse 9 from his previous letter. And then in verse 11 he talked about what he did mean by that statement. Look at what he 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 Paul wasn't correcting himself here in verse 11. He wasn't trying to fix a mistake that he had made in his earlier letter. He didn't say one thing in his previous letter and then something

else in his current letter. The problem here was that the Corinthian believers had failed to understand his earlier letter correctly. And so Paul wanted to give them some clarification here. When he told them in his previous letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, he was talking about anyone who claims to be a brother or sister.

Now obviously Paul wasn't referring to physical siblings here. When he mentioned brothers and sisters earlier in this letter, he was talking about his readers. His focus was on how they were spiritual siblings in God's family. And I think it's clear that he was talking about a spiritual brother or sister here as well. He was referring to any man or woman who made a profession of faith and claimed to be a Christian. But the Greek word for claims here actually means "to name" or "to call." It's a participle in the passive voice, which means that Paul was not focused on what the person called himself. Instead he was talking about what other people called that person. And this distinction is important, because we shouldn't assume that everyone who claims to be a Christian is actually a brother or sister in Christ. We need to watch the person's life to see if there's any evidence to support that claim.

But if our assessment is that someone's profession of faith is genuine, then we should recognize that person as a fellow believer. And so we should call that person a brother or sister in Christ. This is the kind of person that Paul was talking about in verse 11. But of course he wasn't saying that we should not associate with anyone we recognize as a Christian. That would make no sense! Paul went on in this verse to give a list of different types of sins. So he was talking about someone who was recognized by the church as a Christian but 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. So 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 reach the final step in the church discipline process. And of course in this passage Paul was applying this principle to the man who was committing incest with his step-mother. That's why he started this list in verse 11 with sexual immorality. But of course this principle applies to other kinds of sin as well. And Paul gave us some examples by proceeding to list five additional types of sinners in this verse.

So let's move on to some new material and look at these five categories of sinners in the second half of verse 11. Paul didn't want us to associate with a recognized brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy. The Greek word for greedy is the same one that we've already seen in verse 10. And in both places it comes right after a reference to sexual immorality. 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.

In fact, the sin of greed is so dangerous that Paul referred to a greedy person as an idolater in Ephesians 5:5. That's a strong statement, but Paul was just following the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus

said that we cannot be a slave of both God and money. So if we're greedy for money, then money is our master, and we'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." 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. Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:9 that "those who want to be rich fall into temptation." And then in verse 10 he said that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

So we need to keep our lives free from the love of money, as we're told in Hebrews 13:5. And the writer proceeded in that verse to tell us how to do that. He said, "Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you." So the secret to overcoming greed is to be content. And we can be content with just a little money because we have Jesus. Before he ascended to heaven, he promised his followers that he would be with them always. And that promise still applies to us today! It's far better to have Jesus than lots of money. One day he's going to take us to our heavenly home, and we won't be able to take our money with us. That's why we should be storing up treasures in heaven. We should be investing our money in things that will last for eternity.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul said that he didn't want us to associate with a recognized brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy. And then he added four more types of sinners. Now if you have the Christian Standard Bible, you'll notice these four categories are listed in pairs, just like the first two. That's clear from the way the word "or" is used here. It appears three times: once between the first two categories, once between the third and fourth ones, and once between the last two. But in the original Greek text the conjunction that means "or" is actually used five times. It appears right after each type of sinner is listed until we get to the last one. The Legacy Standard Bible and New American Standard Bible both give us a more literal translation here. They're showing us that Paul wasn't listing three pairs of sinners in this verse. Instead he was just presenting six categories of sinners.

So as we move on to the next type of sinner in verse 11, we shouldn't think that it's disconnected from the previous one. The second category just flows directly into the third category. Right after Paul mentioned a greedy person, he referred to an idolater. The Greek word for idolater is the same one that we've already seen in verse 10. Now in that verse Paul didn't put the greedy person and the idolater right next to each other. But he did here in verse 11, and I think that's because he wanted to stress the close relationship between these two types of sinners. As I mentioned earlier, Paul called a greedy person an idolater in Ephesians 5:5. And he was using the same two Greek words in both places.

But in 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul didn't actually equate greed with idolatry. Instead he just listed them as separate sins. And so I doubt he was talking only about greed when he mentioned an idolater. 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.” So we need to make sure that God always remains first in our lives.

Now let’s move on to the fourth type of sinner in 1 Corinthians 5:11. The first three categories of sin are sexual immorality, greed, and idolatry. And then Paul mentioned the verbally abusive. This phrase comes from one Greek word, and it can also be translated with the word “reviler.” That’s what we see in the English Standard Version. Now this Greek word is used only twice in the New Testament. We’re going to see it again in chapter 6 and verse 10 of this letter. But Paul did use a Greek word that comes from the same root back in chapter 4 and verse 12. In the middle of this verse he said, “When we are reviled, we bless.” The Greek word for reviled is the verb form of the noun that we have in chapter 5. It just means to insult or ridicule someone.

So Paul knew what it was like to be insulted or ridiculed. When he traveled from place to place to preach the gospel, he would often face opposition. And he was just following in the footsteps of his master. When Jesus was on the cross, people insulted and mocked him. But 1 Peter 2:23 says that “when he was insulted, he did not insult in return.” Instead he prayed these words in Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” So Jesus showed us how to respond to insults, and Paul followed this example. In 1 Corinthians 4:12 he said, “When we are reviled, we bless.” And whenever people insult and ridicule us, we should respond the same way. In 1 Peter 3:9 we’re told that we should not be “paying back evil for evil or insult for insult but, on the contrary, giving a blessing.”

Now we should expect to be mistreated and reviled by unbelievers. After all, they hate Jesus, and so we shouldn’t be surprised that they hate us as well. But when a fellow Christian is verbally abusive toward us, it’s kind of shocking. We’re on the same team! We’re supposed to love each other. Jesus said in John 13:35 that this is how people would know we’re his disciples. In fact, we’re even supposed to love our enemies! That’s what Jesus taught us to do in Luke 6:27–28. He said, “Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” When people curse us and mistreat us, we should respond by blessing them and praying for them, just like Jesus did.

So Scripture is clear that Christians should not be marked by reviling others and being verbally abusive toward them. Instead we should do what Paul said in Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.” Paul said something similar in Ephesians 4:29: “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.” Now we know that it’s a sin to be verbally abusive. But we have a tendency to think of it as a minor sin that we can tolerate in the church. We treat it like it’s not a big deal. But in 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul warned us not to think this way. He said that we should not associate with a recognized Christian who is marked by being verbally abusive. The church discipline process isn’t just for a few sins that are more scandalous in nature. We should confront a fellow believer who is engaged in any kind of sin.

And Paul proceeded in verse 11 to address a fifth kind of sinner. The first four categories of sin are sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, and verbal abuse. And then Paul mentioned a drunkard. The Greek word for

drunkard is used only twice in the New Testament. We're going to see it again in chapter 6 and verse 10 of this letter. In fact, we're going to see all six categories of sinners that are listed here when we get to chapter 6. But of course 1 Corinthians isn't the only letter where Paul condemned drunkenness as sin. In Galatians 5:21 he included drunkenness among the works of the flesh. In Romans 13:13 he said, "Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness."

But the most famous verse that Paul wrote about drunkenness is Ephesians 5:18. In this verse Paul wrote, "And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit." So there's a contrast here between being drunk with wine and being filled by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in every Christian, but we hinder the Spirit's sanctifying work in our lives if we get drunk. That's because we lose control of our faculties when we're drunk. But Paul said in Galatians 5:23 that part of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. We can't please the Lord unless we remain in control of our faculties. The way that God helps us grow spiritually is through the use of our minds. We need to study Scripture carefully and think about how to apply it to our lives. But we can't do that if we get drunk!

Now this doesn't mean that it's a sin to drink wine in general. We need to maintain a distinction between drinking wine and getting drunk with wine. God allows us to drink wine as long as we don't get drunk. And the strongest proof for this distinction is found in 1 Timothy 5:23. Listen to what Paul said to Timothy in this verse: "Don't continue drinking only water, but use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses." So notice that Paul actually commanded Timothy to drink a little wine! Paul wouldn't have given Timothy that command if it was a sin to drink wine in general. Now I'm not saying that this command applies to us today. Paul was telling Timothy to drink some wine for medicinal purposes. And even today we have alcohol in various medicines. For example, some forms of NyQuil contain 10% alcohol. That's not much lower than the average alcohol content in wine today.

So it's not a sin to drink some wine as long as you don't get drunk. When Paul listed the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3, he said in verse 3 that an elder must not be "an excessive drinker." In other words, he needs to avoid getting drunk. And there's a similar qualification for deacons in verse 8 of that chapter. Paul said that a deacon should not be "drinking a lot of wine." But I do think that it's a good idea not to drink any alcoholic beverages at all. That's because these beverages can be pretty addicting. For many people it's very difficult to drink just a little wine. So I personally don't drink any alcohol beverages as a general rule. The last time I had any wine was when I took communion in Macedonia during a missions trip in 2006.

Now I wouldn't mind drinking a small amount of wine in the future if I'm in a church where the people drink wine instead of grape juice during communion. But otherwise I don't drink alcohol beverages because I don't want to risk putting myself in a position where I'm tempted to get drunk. Besides, it's a lot cheaper to drink water than alcohol beverages! And thankfully we have access to pretty clean water in our country today. But you're not sinning if you like to drink a little wine. Just be careful not to get drunk, and be cautious about drinking around fellow believers. If you're with any Christians who believe that it would be wrong for them to drink alcoholic beverages, then you need to follow Paul's instructions in Romans 14. In verse 21 he said, "It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that

makes your brother or sister stumble.” We should never do anything that would cause our fellow Christians to sin against their conscience.

So we’ve now looked at the first five types of sinners in 1 Corinthians 5:11. Paul said that he didn’t want us to associate with a recognized brother or sister who is sexually immoral, greedy, an idolater, verbally abusive, or a drunkard. And then he added a sixth and final kind of sinner: a swindler. The Greek word for swindler is the same one that we’ve already seen in verse 10. And in that verse it came right after the reference to the greedy person. These categories of sin are connected by the word “and” to show that they are closely related. Greed is the attitude that leads someone to take the action of swindling others. To swindle is basically to steal, and normally some kind of deception is utilized.

And of course Scripture teaches clearly that it’s wrong to steal from others. God commanded the Israelites not to steal in the eighth of the Ten Commandments. That command is recorded for us in Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:19. There’s also a command against stealing in Leviticus 19:11. And the Old Testament also has instructions about what to do with someone who steals. Exodus 22:1 says that “when a man steals an ox or a sheep and butchers it or sells it, he must repay five cattle for the ox or four sheep for the sheep.” So a thief had to make either fourfold or fivefold restitution if he stole an animal. It wasn’t good enough to do a simple 100% restoration. The thief had to well beyond that standard, and I think the point was to create a strong deterrent against stealing.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:10 Paul linked the greedy person and the swindler closely together. But in verse 11 he separated these two types of sinners. The greedy person is in the second position in this list, and the swindler is in the sixth and final position. And I think the reason is that Paul wanted to delay the reference to the swindler for emphasis. I believe he was preparing us for the next chapter when he would focus on believers who were acting like swindlers by taking each other to court. And we can see that every type of sinner in this list is connected to something Paul wrote in this letter. We already know that sexual immorality is his major focus in chapter 5. The reference to greed probably points forward to chapter 6 and the court situation. Idolatry is the focus in chapters 8–10; in chapter 10 and verse 14 Paul told his readers to “flee from idolatry.” The reference to verbal abuse seems to point back to chapters 1–4 and the divisions in the church, which led to strife among the people. And the issue of drunkenness comes up again in chapter 11 and verse 21 in Paul’s discussion about the Lord’s Supper.

So this list of six different types of sinners in chapter 5 and verse 11 was not chosen randomly. Paul created this list very thoughtfully as a way to rebuke the Corinthian believers for their sin. They were struggling in all these areas, and they need to make some progress. But if anyone in the church was sinning in one of these ways and refused to repent, then the other believers were to follow Paul’s instructions here. At the beginning of the verse Paul said that they were not to associate with that person. And then at the end of the verse Paul gave some clarification about what that meant. He said, “Do not even eat with such a person.”

Now in the Christian Standard Bible there’s a new sentence here. But in reality the Greek word for eat is just an infinitive. It’s parallel to the Greek verb for associate, which is also an infinitive. And so the Eng-

lish Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have a more literal translation here. They just give us a dash and then the phrase “not even to eat with such a one.” Now some Bible scholars think that Paul was just referring to the Lord’s Supper here. But there’s nothing in the immediate context that would suggest this limitation. It’s more likely that Paul was referring to any meal that believers would share together. These meals involved fellowship and showed that the people accepted each other.

We see a reference to these meals in Galatians 2. In verses 11–12 Paul talked about how he opposed Peter to his face because he stopped eating with Gentile believers. He was afraid of the Jews, because they believed that you had to be circumcised to be saved. Peter didn’t actually believe that these Gentiles weren’t saved, but he stopped sharing meals with them. And this action shows that those meals were very important to the early Christians. But if a person who was recognized as a Christian was living in unrepentant sin, then the other believers were not allowed to eat with that person. And Paul used the word “even” in 1 Corinthians 5:11 to show that this was a pretty extreme measure. But desperate times call for desperate measures! Our refusal to associate with this kind of person needs to extend even to sharing meals together. We should be willing to do everything possible and permitted by God to motivate this person to repent and return to the Lord.

And Paul wasn’t just limiting the application of his teaching here to these six categories of sinners. He ended verse 11 with the phrase “such a one.” In other words, we need to stop associating and eating with any recognized believer who is living in any kind of unrepentant sin. We shouldn’t limit the church discipline process only to so-called major sins. All sin is serious in God’s sight, and we shouldn’t ignore any sin that begins to take a foothold in our church or in our own personal lives. Now this doesn’t mean that we should be nosy busybodies who meddle inappropriately in people’s lives. But we do need to “watch out for one another to promote love and good works,” as we’re told in Hebrews 10:24. We should be checking on our fellow believers to see how they’re doing spiritually and encourage them to walk in obedience to the Lord. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.