

# 1 CORINTHIANS 5:12–13

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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. And so Paul commanded the believers to remove this man from the church. The hope was that he would repent and prove himself to be a genuine believer who would not experience God's future judgment. Then in verses 6–8 Paul used an illustration about bread to show the seriousness of this situation. He compared 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 apparently the Corinthian believers misunderstood these instructions in Paul's earlier letter. And so in verse 10 he proceeded to clarify what he meant in that 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 or other kinds of sinners 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!

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. He said, "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 when Paul told the Corinthian believers in his earlier letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, he was talking about anyone who claims to be a brother or sister. And obviously he wasn't referring to physical siblings here. He was talking about a spiritual brother or sister here. 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 as-

sume 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. He was saying that we should not associate with anyone we recognize as a Christian who is living in some kind of habitual sin.

And Paul gave us a list of six different types of sinners here. The first one is a sexually immoral person. The Greek word here refers to any kind of sexual sin, but of course Paul was thinking more specifically about the man who was committing incest with his stepmother. That's why he started the list with this sin. The second type of sinner is a greedy person. Paul didn't teach that it was a sin to have money or even be rich. The problem is when we love money and want to be rich. We tend to think of greed as a minor sin, but in Ephesians 5:5 Paul said that a greedy person is an idolater. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, we can't 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.

And that's exactly where Paul went next in 1 Corinthians 5:11. The third type of sinner that he listed here is an idolater. Now certainly greed is the root behind many idols, but ultimately an idol is just anything that takes the place of God in our hearts. So whatever idols tempt us the most, we need to guard ourselves from them. We need to make sure that God always remains first in our lives. Then the fourth type of sinner is the verbally abusive. The Greek word here refers to someone who insults and ridicules others. But of course Scripture tells us to do the opposite with our words. In Ephesians 4:29 Paul said, "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."

Then the fifth kind of sinner in 1 Corinthians 5:11 is a drunkard. This category follows the previous one nicely because drunkards are often verbally abusive. When people get drunk, they lose control of their faculties and often act inappropriately. 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 and avoid getting drunk. Now this doesn't mean that it's a sin to drink a little wine. After all, Paul told Timothy to drink a little wine for medicinal purposes. 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. Besides, it's a lot cheaper to drink water than alcohol beverages! But you're not sinning if you drink a little wine, as long as you don't get drunk.

In 1 Corinthians 5:11 there's a sixth and final kind of sinner: a swindler. We already saw this term in verse 10, and there it comes right after the reference to the greedy person. Paul was showing that these two types of sinners are closely connected. Greed is the attitude that leads someone to take the action of swindling others and stealing from them. But here in verse 11 Paul 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've already seen 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 believers. And the issue of drunkenness comes up again in chapter 11 and verse 21 in Paul's discussion about the Lord's Supper. So these six different types of sinners in chapter 5 and verse 11 were 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 verse 11 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 eating with someone seems like such a simple thing to do. But a meal between Christians involves fellowship and shows that we accept each other. It's an extreme measure to avoiding eating with a recognized Christian who is living in unrepentant sin. But we should be willing to do everything possible and permitted by God to motivate this person to repent and return to the Lord.

Now we're ready to cover some new material and finish this chapter. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 12–13: “For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don't you judge those who are inside? God judges outsiders. Remove the evil person from among you.” Paul started verse 12 with the word “for,” which introduces an explanation for what he had just written. In verse 10–11 he said that we should avoid associating with recognized believers who are living in sin. But he said that we can associate with unbelievers, and now we're seeing the basis for this distinction in verses 12–13. In verse 12 Paul asked two rhetorical questions, and then in verse 13 he made some follow-up comments.

So let's look at the first rhetorical question in verse 12. Paul asked, “For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders?” Now this isn't a very literal translation of the original Greek text. There is no Greek word for business here, and that's why you don't see this term in more literal translations like the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. But even those translations aren't very literal, because a literal translation here is not good English. Here's a pretty literal translation: “For what to me to judge those outside?” The main problem here is that there's no main verb. We do have the word “judge,” but it's an infinitive and not the main verb. And normally when the Greek text is missing a main verb, we just need to add a verb of being. That's exactly what we see in the Christian Standard Bible. The translators also added the word “it,” which just points forward to the phrase “to judge outsiders.”

Now I do think that the word “business” is a helpful addition. We see this word in both the Christian Standard Bible and the New International Version. But this term normally refers to a person's occupation or profession, and that's not what Paul was talking about here. So I think there's a different word that works even better here. The New Living Translation has the word “responsibility,” which has to do with being accountable or obligated to do something. Now I'm not saying that this Bible version gives us a lit-

eral translation here. It actually converts Paul's question into this statement: "It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders." But I do believe that this statement is exactly what Paul meant to convey with his rhetorical question.

So let's talk about the key term in this question. The Greek word for judge is used 114 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 41 of them. Out of these 41 occurrences, 17 of them are in 1 Corinthians. And so this verb is an important word in the letter. Now we've already seen this term three times, and the first one was back in chapter 2 and verse 2. There it's translated with the word "decided." Paul wrote, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." But normally this word means "to judge," which is just a specific type of decision. After all, when someone is judged, a decision is reached about whether that person is guilty of committing a crime.

We can actually see both of these nuances side by side in the same verse. In Romans 14:13 Paul wrote, "Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister." So first Paul said that we shouldn't judge each other as Christians. But then he used the same Greek verb to tell us what we should do instead. We should decide not to cause our fellow believers to violate their conscience. But it's the nuance of judging that we see in the second occurrence of our verb in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 4 and verse 5 Paul said, "So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the heart. And then praise will come to each one from God."

So in both Romans 14:13 and 1 Corinthians 4:5 Paul told his readers not to judge. But the most famous verse in the Bible about not judging is found in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7:1 Jesus said, "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged." Our verb is used twice here, just like it was in Romans 14:13. But this time it has the same nuance both times. Jesus was saying that if we judge others, then we will be judged. So these three passages seem to teach that we should never judge anyone. But this Greek verb is not always used negatively in the New Testament. In John 7:24 Jesus said, "Stop judging according to outward appearances; rather judge according to righteous judgment." Once again we have two occurrences of our Greek word in the same verse. The first one refers to a bad kind of judging, while the second one refers to a good kind of judging. We should not judge based on external things, but we should judge according to righteous judgment. In other words, our judgment should be based on God's righteous standards.

So the commands in Scripture against judging are not absolute. And that's pretty obvious in 1 Corinthians 4:5. He said there that we shouldn't judge anything prematurely. Apparently the Corinthian believers were making judgments that were more definitive in nature. And during this life we shouldn't do that because our judgments are tainted by sin. But once Jesus comes back, we'll be completely free from sin! We'll no longer judge anything improperly. And we'll even get to help Jesus pass judgment on unbelievers! In chapter 6 and verse 2 Paul said that we're going to judge the world. That's going to be part of the wonderful blessing of reigning with Jesus.

So as long as we're judging according to God's righteous standard and we're not making a definitive

judgment, there's nothing wrong with judging. Otherwise Paul would have been sinning in 1 Corinthians 5! When he used this verb for the third time in this letter, he said in verse 3 that he had already pronounced judgment on the man who was committing incest. Now of course Paul wasn't saying that he was functioning as a literal judge in a court case against this man. But he was a representative of Jesus and had authority over the Corinthian church. And so he told the believers there about a decision he had reached regarding the stepson. He was saying that this man deserved to be removed from the church because of his sin.

But here in verse 12 Paul was basically saying that it wasn't his responsibility to judge outsiders. Paul referred to outsiders in three other passages: 1 Thessalonians 4:12, Colossians 4:5, and 1 Timothy 3:7. And in each case he was clearly talking about unbelievers who were outside the church. They were not part of the body of Christ, and they did not gather with believers to worship the Lord. Now Paul wasn't saying that we should never evaluate unbelievers or speak out against their sins. His point here was simply that we don't have jurisdiction over them. And so we shouldn't take any action against them when they sin. God hasn't given the church any authority to judge unbelievers during this present age.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:12 Paul started by asking, "For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders?" And the answer to this rhetorical question is that it was not his business or responsibility to judge outsiders. But we shouldn't conclude that this question applied only to Paul. He did use a first person singular pronoun here, but he was just referring to himself as an example. If he wasn't responsible as an apostle to judge outsiders, then as regular Christians we aren't either. And we can find confirmation of this conclusion in the second question. At the end of verse 12 Paul asked another rhetorical question: "Don't you judge those who are inside?" Paul switched to a second person plural pronoun here to stress that he wasn't just talking about himself. He was talking about the Corinthian believers as well.

And Paul emphasized this point with the pronoun that he used here in the original Greek. Now in English we have separate words for the subject and the verb, but in Greek that's not always the case. Greek verbs have suffixes to indicate person and number, and so when a verb is first or second person, there's no need for a subject. That's because there's only one word that could be the subject. For a second person plural verb like we have here, the subject has to be a second person plural pronoun. Now in these cases the pronoun usually isn't there, but Paul included it here! So we should conclude that Paul was using this pronoun to emphasize the fact that his comments here about judging applied to the Corinthian Christians. And by extension he was referring to all believers.

But notice that Paul didn't just switch from a first person singular pronoun to a second person plural pronoun in the second question. He also switched from talking about outsiders to those who are inside. Now he was referring to believers who are inside the church instead of unbelievers who are outside the church. But he was still talking about the theme of judging in this second question. He used the same Greek verb for judge that we saw earlier in the verse. And this time the verb is not an infinitive but a main verb. So the Christian Standard Bible gives us a more literal translation of Paul's second rhetorical question in this verse. And the obvious answer here is "yes"; we do judge those who are inside. They're under our jurisdiction because they're part of the church.

So in verse 12 Paul was making contrasting points with his two rhetorical questions. In the first question he basically said that we are not responsible to judge unbelievers. But then in the second question he essentially said that we do have a responsibility to judge believers. That's what he did back in verse 3, and that's what he wanted the Corinthian believers to do as well. Then in verse 13 Paul made some follow-up comments. He gave us two statements that match the two questions in verse 12. The first statement corresponds to the first question, and the second statement corresponds to the second question. Paul was building on the obvious answers to his rhetorical questions.

So in verse 13 Paul started by saying that “God judges outsiders.” And the Greek word for outsiders is the same one that Paul used in the first question in verse 12. Once again he was talking about unbelievers. And he actually included a conjunction that normally means “but.” We see this word in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Paul was making a contrast between those inside the church at the end of verse 12 and those outside the church in the beginning of verse 13. We judge insiders, but God judges outsiders. So in verse 13 Paul used the same Greek verb for judges that we saw twice in verse 12. Now in verse 12 the verb was in the present tense both times, but there's some disagreement about the tense of the verb in verse 13. The Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible give us a present tense verb in English. But the Legacy Standard Bible, the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation have a future tense English verb.

What's going on here is that the Greek verb for judge is spelled the same way in the present tense and the future tense when it's third person singular. The only difference is the accent mark that's used, but there are no accents in our oldest Greek copies of the New Testament. The later Greek manuscripts have accents, but those accents are not inspired by God. They're just interpretations given by the scribes who copied the manuscripts. And the same thing is true with our modern Greek New Testaments. The editors of the standard Greek New Testament include an accent here that indicates a future tense verb. But that interpretation doesn't really make much sense here. In verse 12 Paul was talking about judging during the present age. So why would he switch to the future judgment in verse 13?

But the biggest problem here is that a future tense verb doesn't seem to fit with what Paul proceeded to say in the next chapter. It's certainly true that God will judge outsiders in the future. But as I mentioned earlier, Paul said in chapter 6 and verse 2 that “the saints will judge the world.” In other words, we're going to help God pass judgment on unbelievers! So I don't think Paul was saying in chapter 5 and verse 13 that God will judge unbelievers in the future, because we're going to participate in that. I think he was still focused on the present age, just like he was in verse 12. He was saying that God judges outsiders right now. Now this doesn't mean that God is currently righting all the wrongs of unbelievers. But he does use the governing authorities to bring about some justice on the earth. And sometimes he even acts directly to bring judgment on unbelievers. But in God's plan ultimate justice will take place in the future.

Then at the end of verse 13 Paul followed up on his second rhetorical question in verse 12. He said to the Corinthian believers, “Remove the evil person from among you.” The Greek word for remove is used only here in the New Testament. But it's used over 100 times in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation

of the Old Testament. And most Bible translations have a footnote here that points us back to the book of Deuteronomy. The Christian Standard Bible refers to chapter 17 and verse 7. In this passage Moses was telling the Israelites about what they needed to do to anyone who committed idolatry in the land. They were to stone the person to death. Verse 7 says, “The witnesses’ hands are to be the first in putting him to death, and after that, the hands of the people. You must purge the evil from you.”

In the Septuagint that final statement is exactly the same wording that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 5:13. In fact, we see the same statement in five other places in Deuteronomy: chapter 19 and verse 19, chapter 21 and verse 21, chapter 22 and verses 21 and 24, and chapter 24 and verse 7. Now in most of those verses Moses was talking about the death penalty. And it was appropriate for the Israelites to punish certain kinds of sinners with death because Israel was both a spiritual community and a physical nation. But the church is just a spiritual community and not a physical nation. And so Paul was using this statement to refer to excommunication and not death. But the result was the same either way: the sinner was no longer part of the community. The evil person was removed from among the people.

But the phrase “from among you” at the end of the verse is not a very literal translation. It’s used in most Bible versions, but there are actually two Greek pronouns here, and they come after just one preposition. A more literal translation would be the phrase “from you yourselves.” So Paul was emphasizing the Corinthian believers here. His focus was on preserving the purity of their church. There was an evil man lurking among them, and his sin was going to have an effect on the other believers unless he was removed. Paul certainly wanted the stepson to repent and avoid God’s future judgment, as we saw in verse 5. But he also wanted the other Christians to be protected from temptation and avoid falling into sin.

So back in verse 2 near the beginning of the chapter, Paul said that the Corinthian believers should have removed the man who was committing incest from the church. And now in verse 13 at the end of the chapter, Paul told them to do what they should have done earlier. He quoted the Old Testament and commanded them to remove this evil man from the church. And we need to do the same thing today whenever a professing believer in our church is living in unrepentant sin. We should certainly follow the church discipline process that Jesus laid out in Matthew 18. I believe the Christians in Corinth did that, but they failed to finish the process and complete the fourth and final step. Church discipline is not an easy thing to do, especially since the world attacks us for doing it. Many churches avoid it completely for that reason. But we need to follow God’s Word even when it’s unpopular. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to live in obedience to him.