

1 CORINTHIANS 5:2A

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. Last week we started looking at the second major section in this letter. After the introduction in the first nine verses of the letter, the first major section starts in chapter 1 and verse 10, and it runs all the way through the end of chapter 4. This long section is focused on the need for church unity. But in the second major section the focus switches to the need for church purity. And this section is much shorter than the previous one. It takes up only chapters 5–6, which are both pretty brief. Together they have only 33 verses, which is shorter than chapter 7 by itself. So we should be able to finish this section before the end of the year!

Now last week we looked at the first verse of chapter 5. So let's review this verse before we move into some new material. In verse 1 Paul wrote, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife." So in the first major section we saw that the believers in Corinth were tolerating divisions among them. But here in this second section we see that they were also tolerating sexual immorality among them. The Greek word for sexual immorality is a broad word that can refer to any kind of sexual sin, whether it's adultery, prostitution, incest, or homosexuality.

But Paul went on in verse 1 to give some details about this sexual sin that was taking place in the church. The first thing he said was that this kind of sexual immorality was "not even tolerated among the Gentiles." So this sexual sin was so deviant that it was even rejected by people who weren't Jews and didn't have the Old Testament law. Unbelieving Gentiles normally indulged in all kinds of sexual sin, especially in the wicked city of Corinth, but even they didn't approve of this particular action. And at the end of verse 1 Paul spelled out clearly what this sin was. He said that a man was "sleeping with his father's wife." Now Paul didn't give any other details about this situation, and so we can't be sure about certain things. For example, we don't know if the father was still married to this woman at that time. In fact, we don't even know if the father was still alive or not! But if she was currently unmarried, then we also don't know if the son got married to her or if they were just living together.

However, there is one detail of this situation that we can be more certain about. I think we can safely conclude that this woman was not the son's biological mother. That's because Paul was probably pointing back to Leviticus 18:8. In that verse God said, "You are not to have sex with your father's wife; she is your father's family." So in both verses we have the phrase "father's wife." And Paul even used the same Greek words for father and wife that are found in the ancient Greek translation of Leviticus 18:8. So Paul was probably referring to this verse, and it's pretty clear that God was talking about a son's stepmother. After

all, this verse says that she was his father's family instead of his family. And we can confirm this conclusion by looking at the previous verse. In verse 7 God said, "You are not to violate the intimacy that belongs to your father and mother. She is your mother; you must not have sexual intercourse with her." So it's clear that verse 7 is talking about a son's biological mother, and therefore verse 8 has to be referring to a different situation. It has to be talking about a stepmother, and so Paul was most likely referring to a stepmother as well.

Now obviously if this woman was still married, then she would have been committing adultery by sleeping with her husband's son. But what if she was no longer married? In fact, what if her husband had already passed away? In 1 Corinthians 7:39 Paul said that a widow is free to be remarried to anyone she wants. So couldn't she get married to her stepson? But there are some conditions that need to be met for a widow to get remarried. Paul even spelled out one of them clearly in that verse. He said that the remarriage can be "only in the Lord." In other words, a Christian must marry another Christian. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul said, "Don't become partners with those who do not believe," and I think that statement applies to marriage.

But there are some additional conditions that must be met for a widow to get remarried. Paul didn't specifically mention any of them in 1 Corinthians 7:39, but I think they're obvious from the rest of Scripture. First of all, we know that marriage is between a man and a woman. So Paul was taking for granted that if a widow wants to get remarried, she must marry a man. But another condition from Scripture is that a person shouldn't marry a close relative. Leviticus 18 gives us a list of relatives who are off limits for a man, and they include his mother or stepmother, his sister, his stepsister, his sister-in-law, or his aunt. It would be incest for a man to have sexual relations with any of these women.

Now of course some of those women are not a man's blood relatives. It's pretty easy to understand why a man's mother, sister, and aunt are off limits. We know that there can be genetic defects with children born from those relationships. But that wasn't true in the early days of the human race, because Adam and Eve were created genetically perfect. And it took a while before mutations began to multiply. So we should conclude that Adam and Eve's children got married to each other. And we know that Abraham married Sarah even though she was his half-sister. That practice was acceptable during the time of Genesis, but God outlawed it during the time of Exodus. And one reason was probably to protect the human race from genetic defects.

But genetics is not the only reason that God outlawed incest, because otherwise he wouldn't have made stepmothers and stepsisters off limits. In those cases God must have had a different reason. And I think the most natural conclusion is that God wanted family members to live together and enjoy close relationships without sexual overtones. Otherwise there could be a lot of tension in the family. And with a stepmother I think there's an additional reason that we can point to. The Bible commands us to honor our parents and treat them with great respect, especially as they get older. And that's true for in-laws and stepparents as well! But if a man wants to marry his widowed stepmother, I don't think an appropriate level of respect can be maintained. Besides, Genesis 2:24 says that a man leaves his father and mother when he gets married, but he wouldn't be doing that if he married his stepmother!

So I think it's safe to say that God has never allowed a man to marry his stepmother. But the man in 1 Corinthians 5:1 probably wasn't even married to his stepmother. The Christian Standard Bible simply says that he was sleeping with her. Now that's not a very literal translation; the New American Standard Bible says that "someone has his father's wife." The Greek verb here just refers to possessing someone, and it's obviously referring to a sexual relationship. It's in the present tense, which implies an ongoing action. In other words, this wasn't just a one-night stand! So theoretically Paul could have been talking about marriage here. However, that marriage would have been illegal under Roman law, and so it's more likely that they were just sleeping together. But either way this relationship was sin in God's eyes, even if the stepmother was a widow.

So what we've seen in this verse is that we cannot ignore sin in the church. We need to have the same attitude toward sin that Paul did. If we learn about someone in the church who is living in clear sin, we need to rebuke that person. We need to show that person the error of his way and plead with him to repent. That person needs to turn back to the Lord and start living in obedience again. But if we ignore sin in the church, then our testimony before the world can be easily damaged. The Corinthian Christians were tolerating sin that even the unbelieving Gentiles didn't accept! The believers there were basically dragging the name of Jesus through the mud. Why would anyone want to become a Christian if the followers of Jesus behaved that way? This is one of the reasons that we must obey him and live in purity.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 5:2. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 2: "And you are arrogant! Shouldn't you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?" Notice that Paul started this verse with the word "and." He was creating a close connection between verses 1–2. He wanted to stress the relationship between the people's toleration of sexual sin and their arrogance. And Paul stressed the arrogance of the Corinthian believers with the pronoun that he used. 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. In these cases the pronoun usually isn't there, but it is here! Therefore we should conclude that Paul used this pronoun to emphasize how arrogant the Christians in Corinth were.

The Greek word for arrogant is used seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. Six of the seven occurrences are found here in our letter. The other one is found in Colossians 2:18. Listen to what Paul said in that verse: "Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind." Our Greek word is translated with the word "inflated" there. And that's actually a pretty literal translation of this word. It basically means "to puff up." Just imagine that you're preparing for a party. In my family we celebrate a lot of birthdays, and one of the things that we like to do is inflate some balloons. We're adding air to them and puffing them up so that they're bigger than they were originally.

But of course we use this kind of language in a figurative way to talk about people. If we say that someone is inflated or puffed up, we mean that they're proud or arrogant. They have a high view of themselves.

That's what Paul was talking about in Colossians 2:18. He was referring to people who claimed that they had access to visions. These people were inflated or proud. And that's how Paul used the word in 1 Corinthians as well. We've already seen the first three occurrences of this word in our letter, and all of them are in chapter 4. In verse 6 Paul said that he wanted the Corinthian believers to learn "the meaning of the saying: 'Nothing beyond what is written.'" In other words, he didn't want them act in any way that goes beyond Scripture. And he said that the purpose was that none of his readers would "be arrogant."

You see, Scripture clearly teaches us not to be puffed up and arrogant. We can see this just from looking at the book of Proverbs, because Solomon condemned this attitude over and over. In chapter 6 he gave a list of seven things that God hates, and in verse 17 we can see that the first one is "arrogant eyes." Sometimes our pride even shows up in the way that we look at people. Then in chapter 11 and verse 2 Solomon wrote, "When arrogance comes, disgrace follows, but with humility comes wisdom." Most translations have the word "pride" instead of "arrogance," but the idea is the same either way. If we're prideful and arrogant, we will end up being disgraced eventually. Solomon said that if we want to be truly wise, we need to humble ourselves.

But in Proverbs 16:18 Solomon took things up a notch. He said that "pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." Pride and arrogance don't just lead to disgrace; they also lead to destruction. That's often the case in this life, but it will definitely be true in the next life. God's going to judge prideful and arrogant sinners in hell for all eternity. But there's one more verse in Proverbs that speaks really well to the situation in the church at Corinth. In chapter 13 and verse 10 Solomon said that "arrogance leads to nothing but strife, but wisdom is gained by those who take advice." The Corinthian church was a powerful example that testified to the truthfulness of this proverb. The arrogance of the people was creating lots of strife in the church.

And in 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul talked about what this arrogance looked like. He said that it involved "favoring one person over another." The idea is simply that the Corinthian believers supported one spiritual leader and opposed another. Back in chapter 1 and verse 12 Paul pointed out that they would say, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas." And so the people created factions in the church that were based on excessive loyalty to these Christian leaders. Instead of seeing these men as colleagues, the people saw them as competitors. It was like they were fighting a boxing match, and the Corinthians rooted for one and against the other. In their arrogance they would argue about which one of them was better using worldly criteria. But they should have viewed these men as teammates instead! They needed to recognize that their leaders were just servants of the Lord. Ultimately our loyalty should be to Jesus and not to any human leader.

But thankfully not everyone in the church of Corinth was arrogant. Our Greek word for arrogant shows up again twice in 1 Corinthians 4:18-19. There Paul said, "Now some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk, but the power of those who are arrogant." So not all the Christians in Corinth were arrogant, but apparently some of them became arrogant after Paul left the city during his second missionary journey. So he made plans to return and deal with them personally. And he wasn't coming to admire their eloquent speech but

to inspect their ministry effectiveness. He wanted to see if they had spiritual strength as a result of God's power at work in them.

Then after Paul used the Greek word for arrogant in 1 Corinthians 5:2, he used it again in chapter 8. In verse 1 he said, "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'we all have knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Here our Greek word is translated more literally with the idea of puffing up. Paul was warning us that knowledge can lead to arrogance. But of course Paul wasn't saying here that there's anything inherently wrong with having knowledge. In 2 Peter 3:18 we're commanded to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." So obviously God wants us to increase in our knowledge of him and his truth. But Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 8:1 is that knowledge can be dangerous if we don't use it correctly.

Let's think about a knife, for example. A knife is a very valuable tool in a kitchen. It can be used to cut meat, cheese, or vegetables. We'd have a pretty hard time preparing food without a knife! But a knife can also be a deadly weapon. It can be used to hurt people or even kill them. Now we don't stop using knives just because they're dangerous. Instead we're careful in how we use them. And it's the same thing with knowledge. But the Corinthian believers weren't using their knowledge correctly. Instead they were careless and flaunted their knowledge. They used it to ruin fellow Christians who had a weak conscience and thought that they shouldn't eat food sacrificed to idols.

So when Paul said that "knowledge puffs up," he didn't mean that knowledge always leads to arrogance. He just meant that knowledge has the potential to lead to arrogance. And so we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love, because "love builds up." In other words, love will help us use our knowledge to encourage and strengthen our fellow believers. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul returned to the theme of love and described it in more detail. In verses 4–5 he said, "Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs." There's our Greek word for arrogant again. Paul said that love is inherently "not arrogant" or puffed up. It is by definition "not self-seeking."

Now this concept of love is completely contrary to the way that most people talk about love today, especially when they say that they're "in love" with someone. What this statement usually means is that they find this person to be extremely attractive. They're infatuated with this person. But from a biblical perspective this idea is closer to lust than it is to love. Lust is self-centered, while love is selfless. Lust is about receiving, while love is about giving. Lust tears people down, while love builds them up. Lust is usually full of pride and arrogance, while love is completely empty of pride and arrogance.

But many of the Corinthian believers lacked love. Instead they were puffed up and arrogant. And Paul focused on that problem in the beginning of the second major section in this letter. In chapter 5 and verse 2 he said very plainly and boldly, "You are arrogant!" The Greek word for arrogant is actually a participle in the perfect tense. This is a special tense that usually has two nuances. It refers to a completed action with ongoing results. But normally the focus is on one of those nuances, and here I think the emphasis is on the results of the action. That's why the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Ver-

sion, and the New International Version give us a present tense verb. These people had become arrogant in the past, and their arrogance was continuing to thrive when Paul wrote this letter.

But Bible scholars disagree on how exactly we should understand the arrogance of the Corinthian believers in this verse. And there are two main views here. Was Paul referring to being arrogant about their tolerance of the incest in the church? Or was he referring back to chapter 4 and the arrogance of favoring one spiritual leader over another? In other words, were these people arrogant because of the incest, or were they arrogant in spite of it? Was the arrogance that Paul was talking about here driven by the incest or not? This decision is a tricky one because both views can find support in the context. In chapter 6 and verse 12 Paul apparently quoted a popular statement in the Corinthian church and then refuted it. They would say, "Everything is permissible for me." In other words, they seemed to believe that their Christian freedom allowed them to do basically anything that they wanted to do. They may have believed that because of their supposedly exalted spiritual state, their bodily actions were irrelevant.

So perhaps the Christians in Corinth didn't think that the incest was a big deal. That view would certainly explain why they were tolerating it! And it's easy to see how they would have become arrogant about their tolerance. They would have thought highly about themselves because they believed they had the correct approach to incest and other bodily actions that were traditionally viewed as sin. But there's a pretty glaring problem with this interpretation. Paul did not take the time here to argue that incest was wrong! Instead he seemed to assume that he and the Corinthian believers were on the same page about incest being sinful. If that observation is correct, then their problem was not theological but practical. In other words, they understood that incest was wrong, but they just didn't deal with it properly.

So I think it's more likely that the arrogance Paul addressed in chapter 5 and verse 2 was the same arrogance that he mentioned back in chapter 4. He wasn't saying that they were arrogant about tolerating incest. He was still talking about the arrogance of favoring one spiritual leader over another. He was rebuking them for being arrogant even though they had this huge problem in the church. How could they think so highly of themselves when there was incest happening among them? Sadly, their arrogance had made them blind to the seriousness of this sin in their midst. They were overlooking the impact that it would eventually have on their church. They just didn't think that it was a big deal, and so they basically swept it under the rug and ignored it.

So what we can see here is the dangerous situation that we put ourselves in when we become arrogant. Pride can spiral out of control so easily if we don't rein it in. That's why Paul warned us in Romans 12:3 not to think of ourselves more highly than we should think. We must remember that even as Christians we're still sinners. We need to be quick to recognize our sin and turn away from it. But many times God uses our fellow believers to help us see our sin. That's why it's so important to be part of a good church! But we need to do more than just attend church regularly and build relationships with other Christians. We also need to make sure that we're open to correction from them. Proverbs 15:5 says that a person who accepts correction is sensible, but Proverbs 12:1 says that the one who hates correction is stupid.

And so we must be on guard constantly against the temptation to become arrogant and think too highly

of ourselves. We need to remember the words of James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5: “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” We need God’s grace to endure this difficult life on earth, but we must humble ourselves if we expect to receive his grace. And in Philippians 2:3–4 Paul showed us what humility looks like. He said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” That’s exactly what Jesus did when he came to earth and died on the cross for our sins. And we need to follow his example. Instead of focusing on ourselves and thinking too highly of ourselves, we need to view ourselves as servants and put others first like Jesus did. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.