

# 1 CORINTHIANS 5:2B

January 30, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. Two weeks ago we started looking at the second major section in this letter, which is found in chapters 5–6. The focus in this section is on the need for church purity. We saw in the first verse of chapter 5 that the believers in Corinth were 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 at the end of verse 1 Paul clarified that he was talking about incest. He said that a man was "sleeping with his father's wife." Paul was probably pointing back to Leviticus 18:8, which also has the phrase "father's wife." In that verse God said, "You are not to have sex with your father's wife; she is your father's family." The context there shows that God was talking about a man's stepmother, and so Paul was most likely referring to a stepmother as well.

Now we don't know for sure what this woman's marital status was at the time. But even if she was a widow, this relationship was unacceptable to God. And obviously the reason didn't have anything to do with genetics. They weren't blood relatives, and so there was very little risk that any children born to them would have genetic defects. God must have had a different reason for making a man's stepmother off limits to him. And I think the most natural conclusion is that God wants family members to enjoy close relationships without sexual overtones. God also wants us to honor our parents and treat them with great respect. And that's true for in-laws and stepparents as well! But if a man wants to marry his widowed stepmother, I don't see how he can maintain an appropriate level of respect for her.

But I doubt that the man in 1 Corinthians 5 was 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.

Now you would think that the Corinthian Christians would have found this situation to be unacceptable. After all, even the unbelieving Gentiles didn't approve of this kind of relationship. But instead the believers in Corinth tolerated this sin. And as a result they were ruining their testimony before the world. But these believers didn't just ignore this incest in the church. In the beginning of verse 2 Paul went on to say that they were arrogant. The Greek word for arrogant literally means "to puff up." Just imagine that you're

inflating a balloon, and you've got the right idea. When you puff something up, you're making it bigger than it was originally.

But of course we use this kind of language in a figurative way to talk about people. If we say that people are puffed up or inflated, we mean that they're proud or arrogant. They view themselves as being a bigger deal than they really are. And that's what Paul was saying about the Corinthian believers. They were arrogant. But this wasn't the first time that Paul referred to the arrogance of his readers. In chapter 4 he used the same Greek word for arrogant three times to describe them. In verse 6 Paul said that he wanted them 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."

But then 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. Paul used the Greek word for arrogant two more times in chapter 4. In verses 18–19 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 just four verses later Paul once again referred to the arrogance of the Corinthian believers. In chapter 5 and verse 2 he said very plainly and boldly, "You are arrogant!" But Bible scholars disagree on how exactly we should understand the arrogance 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 problem. 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 seen as sin.

But there’s a pretty glaring problem with this viewpoint. 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. So I lean toward the view that 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. And so when Paul called them arrogant in chapter 5, he was probably talking about 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?

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. Arrogance in one area of our lives can easily lead to problems in other areas of our lives. And that’s exactly what was happening in the Corinthian church! The arrogance of the believers about spiritual leaders had made them blind to the seriousness of the incest that was happening right under their noses. So Paul tried to wake them up and help them see the situation more clearly. And he told them how they should respond to this sin in the church. We already saw Paul’s statement at the beginning of verse 2 that they were arrogant. Now let’s move on to some new material and look at the end of verse 2: “Shouldn’t you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?”

Now in the Christian Standard Bible we have a question here. And that’s also the case with a few other Bible translations like the New International Version and the NET Bible. But the New American Standard Bible and a few other translations don’t have a question here. Instead they just have one long sentence in this verse. The New American Standard Bible says, “You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.” So why do some translations have a question here and others don’t? The answer is that our ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts don’t have punctuation or even spaces between words. The scribes only copied the letters of the words to save money on writing materials. So Bible scholars just have to make their best guess about spaces and punctuation.

Now usually there’s widespread agreement about which punctuation marks should be used where. But here in verse 2 we have one of those rare exceptions. Scholars disagree about the number and type of sentences here. The New American Standard Bible has one sentence, the Christian Standard Bible has two sentences, and the English Standard Version has three sentences. Some translations have a question here,

and others don't. But the Christian Standard Bible reflects the interpretation held by most current scholars. They see two sentences here with the first one being a statement and the second one being a question. And I think this interpretation makes the most sense. Paul was probably using a question at the end of the verse to appeal to his readers.

But the New American Standard Bible is correct to put the word "and" right after the word "arrogant." Paul started this verse with the word "and," as we see in the Christian Standard Bible. And then he used the same Greek conjunction again just a few words later. He was linking this question with his previous statement about the arrogance of the Corinthian believers. He was adding an alternative approach that he wanted them to take. Instead of continuing to be arrogant, they should have been filled with grief. The word "grief" is a noun, but it actually comes from a verb in the original Greek. The Christian Standard Bible adds the verb "filled," which isn't based on the Greek text. A more literal translation here would be to eliminate the phrase "filled with" and just go with the verb "grieve." The verb "mourn" would also work since the Greek verb just refers to the experience of sadness.

But this Greek verb here is in the aorist tense, which normally refers to a simple past action. And that's the way the verb is translated in most Bible versions. So at this point I don't think Paul was focused specifically on the attitude that he wanted them to have in the future. Instead he was probably talking about the attitude that they should have had in the past. As soon as they heard about the incest in their church, they should have grieved instead of being arrogant. Now the Christian Standard Bible doesn't have the word "instead" here in verse 2. But that word or the word "rather" is found in most other Bible translations. It comes from a Greek word that usually means "more." But sometimes it doesn't refer to something larger or greater. Instead it refers to something that is basically the opposite of something else. And that's how Paul was using the word here. He was saying that arrogance and grief are opposites.

Now there are many possible reasons for people to grieve. Perhaps the main one is to mourn over the death of a loved one. Many people in our church are experiencing that kind of grief right now. Thankfully most of their loved ones are with the Lord right now, and so they don't have to grieve without hope. They certainly miss their loved ones, but one day they're going to be reunited with them in heaven. Now obviously this is not the kind of grief that Paul was talking about here in verse 2. It's pretty clear that the grief the Corinthian believers should have had was related to the sin of incest in the church. They should have grieved because someone in the church had fallen into sin.

We see this Greek verb for grief used elsewhere with this nuance. It's found only ten times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote just two of them. The other one is found in 2 Corinthians 12:21. There Paul said, "I fear that when I come my God will again humiliate me in your presence, and I will grieve for many who sinned before and have not repented of the moral impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality they practiced." So in this passage Paul was talking about a future visit that he was planning to make to Corinth. And he was afraid that when he arrived, he would grieve for professing believers there who had fallen into sin and had not repented. He even used the same Greek word for sexual immorality that we have in 1 Corinthians 5:1. Apparently this man who committed incest was not the only Corinthian believer who ended up falling into sexual sin.

So Paul showed us in both of his preserved letters to the Corinthians that sorrow is the appropriate response to the sin of our fellow believers. We see this principle taught in the Old Testament as well. The same Greek word is used in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to grief over sin. A good example is found in Ezra 10. In this chapter Ezra just found out that some of the Israelite men had married women from the wicked groups of people who lived around them. And in verse 6 we see how he responded to this troubling situation. This verse says, “Ezra then went from the house of God and walked to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, where he spent the night. He did not eat food or drink water, because he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.” So Ezra grieved because his fellow Israelites had sinned and were unfaithful to God.

Now there’s a variety of reasons that we should grieve when a fellow believer sins. The main reason is that we’re following God’s example. Ephesians 4:30 tells us that when we sin, we grieve the Holy Spirit who lives in us. God is sad whenever his people disobey him because he’s a holy God who is completely separate from sin. But we should also grieve over the consequences of sin. When we sin as Christians, we face God’s loving but painful discipline. That’s a good thing for us to experience, but it’s certainly not fun! However, sometimes God’s discipline affects the people around us. Not only do we bring shame on the church because of our sin, but occasionally we put some people around us in harm’s way.

We can see this principle taught clearly in the Old Testament. Numbers 14:18 says that “the LORD is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generation.” So clearly our sin can have a negative effect on our descendants. But sin can also have consequences for our contemporaries. When Achan sinned in Joshua 7, his disobedience caused the Israelites to lose their next battle. When the prophet Jonah ran away from God’s assignment for him in Nineveh, God brought a big storm on the ship that he was traveling on. His disobedience put not only his life in danger but also the lives of everyone else on that ship!

So the Corinthian believers had a variety of reasons that they should have grieved at the sin among them. But their grief was not supposed to be an end in itself. Paul wanted this attitude to lead to action. In 1 Corinthians 5:2 he said, “Shouldn’t you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?” Now earlier I told you that Paul actually started this question with the Greek conjunction normally translated with the word “and.” But in the middle of this question we have the opposite problem. The Christian Standard Bible has the word “and” here even though there’s no Greek word with this meaning in the original text. Instead we have a conjunction that normally indicates purpose or sometimes result. That’s why the New American Standard Bible has the phrase “so that.” The idea here is that the grief of the Corinthian believers should have resulted in the removal of the sinner from the church.

The Greek word for remove normally refers to moving something from one place to another. Now I don’t think Paul meant that the Christians in Corinth should have literally picked up this man and carried him out of the church. He was using this word more figuratively to talk about excommunication. The idea was that they were not to allow this man to gather and worship with them anymore. Now I suppose there could be some physical ramifications for taking this approach. If the man tried to enter the place where

the believers were worshipping, they would have needed to keep him from coming in. But I think the primary way that the excommunication would have been carried out was through words. They would have told him that he was no longer permitted to worship with them. They were to exclude him from being part of their congregation.

The Greek word for congregation here just literally means “middle.” The New American Standard Bible has the similar but archaic word “midst.” The idea is that this man was surrounded by the other believers when he gathered with them. He was there right in the middle of them and enjoyed all the benefits that came with being part of the congregation. But Paul said that this situation should not have been happening. They should have removed the one who did this. The New American Standard Bible has the phrase “this deed,” which is a more literal translation. The Greek word for deed often refers to good deeds in the New Testament, but of course Paul was talking about an evil deed here. He was referring back to the incest that he mentioned in verse 1.

But notice that Paul was talking about one person here. Paul used a Greek word that is singular and masculine to describe the man who committed incest. In other words, he was clearly talking about only the stepson and not the stepmother. He was telling the Corinthian believers that they should have removed the stepson, but he didn’t say anything about what they should have done with the stepmother. Now Paul wasn’t saying here that she was off the hook. If she consented to this relationship, then she was committing sin as well. So why didn’t Paul address her side of the situation? I think the best solution here is simply that she didn’t profess to be a Christian, and so she wasn’t part of the church. Therefore there was no reason for the believers to take any action toward her. They were certainly to evangelize her, but they didn’t need to exclude her from the church.

However, the Corinthian believers obviously should have excommunicated the stepson from the church. He was clearly a professing Christian who would gather regularly with the other believers for worship. But because he was engaged in ongoing sin, he needed to be removed from the church. Now there is some uncertainty about how to relate this action to the church discipline process that Jesus laid out in Matthew 18. Look at what he said in verses 15–17: “If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn’t pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn’t pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.”

So there are four steps that Jesus gave us here. And it’s only in that fourth and last step that excommunication takes place. When Jesus said to let the Christian brother be like a Gentile and a tax collector, he was referring to people who were outsiders. Jesus certainly reached out to these people with compassion, but they couldn’t be part of the church unless they repented. And the same thing is true for professing believers who are living in sin. When we treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector, we don’t stop reaching out to them and pleading with them to repent. They just can’t attend worship services and be involved in church activities. They can’t fellowship with fellow believers and enjoy the blessing of being part of the church.

But in 1 Corinthians 5 it seems like Paul was telling the church to skip the first three steps in the church discipline process. It sounds like he was telling them to jump ahead to the fourth step and excommunicate the stepson immediately. In fact, he was actually saying that they should have already taken this action! So was Paul contradicting Jesus here? Was he telling them to ignore the church discipline process on this occasion? Many Bible scholars think so, but I really doubt it. As we're going to see when we get to chapter 7, Paul was definitely familiar with the teaching of Jesus. He would not have told the Corinthian believers in this inspired letter to ignore that teaching.

So I think it's safe to assume that the first three steps in the church discipline process had already been completed. There were definitely some mature believers in the church, and one of them probably completed step one and then took some other mature believers with him to complete step two. And it seems fairly clear that step three had also been completed at some point, because Paul wrote as though the whole church already knew about the incest that was taking place. But the process apparently came to a halt at this point. The Christians in Corinth failed to complete step four and remove this man from the church. We don't know why for sure, but many Bible scholars think that he may have been wealthy and had a lot of influence in the church. If that was the case, then they were showing favoritism toward him by not excommunicating him. And this is certainly a danger that we face today as well. We need to follow the church discipline process on any believer when necessary, regardless of the person's social status.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:2 Paul asked a powerful rhetorical question. He said, "Shouldn't you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?" And the obvious answer here is yes! The believers should have grieved over the sin of incest among them. And that attitude should have led them to take the step of removing the man from the church. This action may seem extreme and unloving, but it was for his good and also for their good, as we're going to see later in this passage. But the bottom line here is that God 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. 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.