

1 CORINTHIANS 5:3

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. We're currently working our way through 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've seen in the first verse of chapter 5 that the believers in Corinth were tolerating sexual immorality among them. And Paul clarified at the end of the verse that he was talking about incest. He said that a man was "sleeping with his father's wife." And most likely what Paul meant was that this woman was the man's stepmother. She may have been a widow at this point, but their relationship was still sin in God's eyes, even if they got married.

Now you would think that the Corinthian Christians would have found this situation to be unacceptable. After all, Paul said in verse 1 that 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 Christians didn't just ignore the sin of incest in the church. In the beginning of verse 2 Paul went on to say that they were arrogant. Now at first glance we might think that they were arrogant because of the incest. Perhaps they thought that this man's relationship with his stepmother wasn't really sin. And so they would have thought highly about themselves because they tolerated this situation.

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. So I think it's more likely that these people were arrogant in spite of the incest, not because of it. 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. In verse 6 there he said that they were showing their arrogance by favoring one spiritual leader over another. So in chapter 5 Paul 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 nose. So Paul tried to wake them up and help them see

the situation more clearly. At the end of verse 2 he told them how they should respond to this sin in the church. And he did that by appealing to them with a 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 to this question is yes. The Corinthian believers should have been filled with grief over this sin instead of continuing to be arrogant.

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. And sometimes that 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. That’s what happened when Achan and Jonah sinned.

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. At the end of verse 2 he said that these people should have removed from their congregation the one who did this wicked deed. And it’s important to observe 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. Now this doesn’t mean that she was off the hook. If she consented to this relationship, then she was committing sin as well. But most likely she wasn’t a professing Christian and wasn’t part of the church. So there was no need for the Corinthian believers to remove her from their congregation.

Now the Greek word for remove normally refers to picking something up and carrying it to another place. But I don’t think Paul was using the word that literally here. Instead he was using it more figuratively to talk about excommunication. The idea was that they were not to allow this man to gather and worship with them anymore. They were to exclude him from their fellowship and prevent him from participating in church activities. Now there is some uncertainty about how to relate this action to the church discipline process that Jesus laid out in Matthew 18. In verses 15–17 he gave us four steps to follow, and it’s not until the last step that excommunication takes place. 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.

So was Paul contradicting Jesus here? Was he telling the Corinthian believers to ignore the church discipline process on this occasion? I don’t think so. I believe it’s safer to assume that the first three steps in the church discipline process had already been completed. We know that there were some mature believers in the church, and so 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 verse 2 Paul used a rhetorical question to appeal to the Corinthian believers. He wanted them to realize that they should have grieved over the sin of incest among them. And this attitude should have led them to take the action of removing the man who committed incest from the church. This step 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. If we tolerate sin in the church, then we're basically minimizing the seriousness of sin. We're not holding other Christians accountable to grow in holiness. Instead we need to pursue holiness first in our own lives and then in the lives of our fellow believers.

Now let's move on to verse 3 and cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:3: "Even though I am absent in the body, I am present in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who has been doing such a thing." Now the Christian Standard Bible has two sentences in this verse, but in the original Greek there's just one sentence here. That fact is reflected in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. But sometimes those translations are not very easy to read, and that's especially true in this verse. So the Christian Standard Bible gives us two sentences here to make the verse smoother and more readable.

But unfortunately the Christian Standard Bible is missing an important word at the beginning of this verse. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible both start this verse with the word "for." This term normally introduces an explanation for what was just written or spoken. At the end of verse 2 Paul talked about the need to remove the man who committed incest from the church. Then in verses 3–5 he explained how that was to take place. And in verse 3 Paul got started with a small but significant word. It's the pronoun "I." This word is actually pretty emphatic because the Greek word here comes first in the verse. In English we need to start with the conjunction "for," but in Greek the word order was more flexible. Terms could easily be rearranged, and usually the first word in the sentence carried the most emphasis.

But there's another reason that the Greek word translated "I" is emphatic. It doesn't even need to be here! 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 word that could be the subject. In our verse we have a first person singular verb, and so the subject has to be a first person singular pronoun. In these cases the pronoun usually isn't there, but in this case it's here! Therefore we should conclude that Paul used this pronoun for emphasis. In the previous verse he used the second person plural pronoun to emphasize the Corinthian believers. And here in verse 3 he emphasized himself with a first person singular pronoun. He was making a contrast between them and himself.

Now in the Christian Standard Bible we actually see the pronoun “I” three times in this verse. We have the phrases “I am absent,” “I am present,” and “I have already pronounced judgment.” But in the original Greek there’s only one pronoun here, and it goes with the verb translated “pronounced judgment.” What Paul did here was put the pronoun right up front, and then he paused to give us a parenthetical remark about being “absent in the body” but “present in spirit.” That’s reflected pretty clearly in the New American Standard Bible. So in the Christian Standard Bible the phrases “I am absent” and “I am present” actually come from present tense participles in the original Greek. And normally Greek participles don’t function as main verbs. So a more literal translation here would be the phrases “being absent” and “being present.” The New American Standard Bible actually gives us a bit of an interpretation by adding the word “though.” But this idea is probably on the right track, and that’s why it’s in most translations, including the Christian Standard Bible.

So let’s talk about these two phrases. First Paul said that he was absent in the body. The Greek word for absent is used only eight times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. In every case it means “to be away from someone.” Paul was saying here that he was not physically present with the Corinthian believers when he wrote this letter. And he emphasized that fact by adding the phrase “in the body.” He was talking about his human body that was made up of flesh and bones. But then in the second phrase Paul said that he was present in spirit. And he stressed the contrast between these two phrases by using a Greek conjunction that normally means “but.” It’s not translated in the Christian Standard Bible, but the New American Standard Bible preserves it for us. It gives us the word “but” right between these two phrases.

But this second phrase is a lot harder to interpret than the first one. What exactly did Paul mean when he said that he was present in spirit? The Greek word for spirit can refer to either a human spirit or the Holy Spirit. And at first glance we might think that he was referring his human spirit. After all, he just mentioned his body or his material being, and so it would be natural to talk next about his spirit or his immaterial being. But if that’s the case, then Paul couldn’t have been speaking literally here. After all, James 2:26 tells us that the body without the spirit is dead. So unless God performed a miracle here, Paul’s spirit was still with his body. Otherwise he would have been dead! And his spirit would be with the Lord, not the Corinthians. So if Paul was talking about his human spirit here, he probably just meant that these people were on his mind.

But I think it’s likely that Paul was saying something more profound here. We’ve already seen the Greek word for spirit 11 times in this letter, and eight of them refer to the Holy Spirit. And so we should be inclined to think that Paul was talking about the Holy Spirit here as well. After all, Paul used the Greek article right before the word for spirit, and normally the Greek article should be translated with the definite article in English. A better translation would be the phrase “present in the Spirit.” But what does it mean that Paul was present in the Holy Spirit? Well, Paul already said back in chapter 2 and verse 12 that we have received the Spirit who comes from God. And in chapter 3 and verse 16 he said that we are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God lives in us.

So we know that the Holy Spirit indwells every Christian. And that’s why Paul can say in Romans 8:16

that “the Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children.” In other words, there is a unique bond between our human spirit and the Holy Spirit because of his indwelling presence. And I think Paul was thinking about this bond when he said in 1 Corinthians 6:17 that “anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.” So in our passage I think Paul was saying that because the special bond we have with the Spirit as believers, we are all linked together. Because the Spirit lives in each one of us and is united with us, there’s a sense in which we are always with each other. We are joined together in the body of Christ through the work of the Spirit.

Isn’t that a wonderful truth? Even when we’re not together physically, we can stand together spiritually. We’re united by our commitment to the truth of God’s Word. And we’re also united by prayer. We can lift each other before the Lord and intercede for each other. Romans 8:27 even says that the Spirit “intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Now of course there are times when it’s important for us to be together. Paul said in chapter 4 that he was planning to visit the Corinthian believers soon. But even when we’re not together physically, we can minister to each other spiritually. Paul wrote these people a letter, and we can do that plus much more. We can make phone calls, send text messages or emails, and interact on Facebook. We shouldn’t let our physical separation keep us from ministering to each other and praying for each other.

So Paul was present with the Christians in Corinth through the Holy Spirit’s presence. And he capitalized on this fact in the second half of verse 3 in our passage. He said, “As one who is present with you in this way, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who has been doing such a thing.” So Paul used the same Greek word for present that we saw earlier in the verse. Now the Christian Standard Bible has a pretty long phrase at the beginning of this statement. A more literal translation here is simply the phrase “as being present.” But most of these extra words just clarify what Paul meant. However, the phrase “in this way” is actually in the wrong place in this statement. It really goes at the end of the verse, and so we’ll come back to it later.

So on the basis of Paul’s presence with the Corinthian believers through the Holy Spirit, he said that he had already pronounced judgment. The Greek verb translated “pronounced judgment” 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 a key term in the letter. Now we’ve already seen this word twice, 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 and 1 Corinthians 4 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 a verse that has two occurrences of our Greek word. The first one refers to a bad kind of judging, while the second one refers to a good kind of judging. We shouldn’t 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! In verse 3 he said that he had already pronounced judgment on someone. The Greek verb here is in the perfect tense, which is a special tense that usually has two nuances. It refers to a completed action with ongoing results. So Paul had passed judgment in the past, and he emphasized this fact with the word “already.” But his judgment continued to stand in the present when he wrote this letter. His judgment was still in effect at that time.

Now the Greek perfect tense is pretty rare in the New Testament, but we actually just saw it used in the previous verse. When Paul said that the Christians in Corinth were arrogant, he used the perfect tense. He was stressing that many of these people had become arrogant in the past, and their arrogance was continuing to thrive when he wrote this letter. And so Paul used the perfect tense again in verse 3 to strengthen the contrast between him and the Corinthian believers. They were arrogant and continued to be arrogant despite the incest in the church. But Paul pronounced judgment regarding that situation, and his judgment continued to stand. More specifically, he said that he “pronounced judgment on the one who has been doing such a thing.”

Now the phrase “has been doing” in the Christian Standard Bible sounds like it could be translated from another Greek perfect tense. But the verb here is actually in the aorist tense, which normally just refers to a simple past action. The English Standard Version represents this nuance more accurately; it has the

phrase “the one who did such a thing.” But the phrase “such a thing” is not the most literal translation. The original Greek text just has a pronoun that means “this.” It’s in the neuter gender, and so we could translate it with the phrase “this thing.” But right before this term we have a Greek word that means “in this way.” As I mentioned earlier, the Christian Standard Bible puts this phrase earlier in the verse. But it belongs here at the end of the verse. It reminds us that the man Paul was talking about didn’t just commit sexual sin. He committed a specific kind of sexual sin. He committed incest with his stepmother, which was so deviant that even the unbelieving Gentiles didn’t tolerate it.

So Paul responded appropriately to this situation and pronounced judgment on the stepson. His judgment was righteous because it was based on the clear teaching of Scripture. In Leviticus 18:8 God said, “You are not to have sex with your father’s wife.” That’s why Paul told the Corinthian believers that they should have removed this man from the church. But we need to remember that the purpose of church discipline is restoration. And so Paul wasn’t making a final and definitive judgment here. If this man had repented of his sin, then Paul certainly would have withdrawn his judgment. In other words, he was only making a provisional judgment.

And we need to do the same thing we complete the church discipline process with someone. Our goal shouldn’t be to rush through the process and just get it over with. We also shouldn’t drag our feet and let the process stall like the Christians in Corinth did. Instead we need to take a measured approach that’s designed to draw the sinner to repentance. But even after the process is complete, we need to continue rebuking the sinner and pleading with him to repent. We need to be ready to restore this person with a gentle spirit. And if the sinner repents, then we can withdraw our judgment and welcome this person back into the church with open arms. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to have the courage to judge professing believers in sin and also the gentleness to restore them when they repent.