

1 CORINTHIANS 5:4

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Brad Norman

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 Christians in Corinth 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. Back in chapter 4 and verse 6 Paul said that they showed their arrogance by favoring one spiritual leader over another. And they were arrogant in this way even though there was incest happening among them. Their arrogance had made them blind to the seriousness of the incest that was happening right under their nose.

So Paul tried to wake up the Corinthian believers and help them see their situation more clearly. At the end of verse 2 he told them how they should respond to the sin of incest 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. 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. He wanted them to excommunicate this man and not allow him to gather and worship with them anymore. They were to exclude him from their fellowship and prevent him from participating in church activities.

Now at first glance it seems like Paul was telling the Christians in Corinth to skip the first three steps in the church discipline process that Jesus laid out in Matthew 18. It sounds like Paul was telling them to jump ahead to the fourth and final step and just excommunicate the stepson immediately. But I think it's likely that the first three steps in the church discipline process had already been completed by some of the more mature believers in the church. After all, Paul seemed to be assuming that the whole church already

knew about the incest taking place, and that's what happens in step three of the church discipline process. But then the process apparently came to a halt at this point.

So at the end of verse 2 Paul talked about the need to remove the stepson from the church. Then starting in verse 3 Paul explained how that was to take place. He said, "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." Paul started this verse by making a contrast between being absent in the body and being present in spirit. He wasn't physically present with the Corinthian believers when he wrote this letter. But he was with them in spirit, and this statement could just mean that they were on his mind. However, I think he was saying something more profound. The Greek word for spirit refers to the Holy Spirit eight times earlier in this letter, and so I believe Paul was talking about the third member of the Trinity here as well.

But what does it mean that Paul was present in the Holy Spirit? Well, Paul 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 could say in Romans 8:16 that "the Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children." In other words, there's a unique bond between our human spirit and the Holy Spirit because of his indwelling presence. And since the Spirit lives in every believer, 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. Even when we're not together physically, we can stand together spiritually.

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." The Greek verb translated "pronounced judgment" is a key word in this letter. He used it 17 times here and only 24 times in his other letters. We've already seen it 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.

And it's the nuance of judging that we see in the second occurrence of our verb in the letter. 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 Paul told the Corinthian believers not to judge, and that fits with what Jesus said in the most famous verse in the Bible about judging. In Matthew 7:1 he said, "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged." So it sounds like we should never judge anyone. But in John 7:24 Jesus said, "Stop judging according to outward appearances; rather judge according to righteous judgment." So there's a bad kind of judging and 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, because Paul 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 will no longer judge anyone or 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. Verse 3 even says that we will judge angels! Making final and definitive judgments will be part of the wonderful blessing of reigning with Jesus.

But 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 during this life. Otherwise Paul would have been sinning in 1 Corinthians 5, because in verse 3 he said that he had already pronounced judgment on someone. And his judgment was good because it was based on God's righteous standard taught in Scripture. It was also good because it wasn't a final and definitive judgment. If the stepson had repented of his sin, then Paul certainly would have withdrawn his judgment. After all, the goal of church discipline is restoration. We need to be ready to welcome excommunicated sinners back into our fellowship if they turn away from their sin and return to the Lord.

Now let's move on to verse 4 and look at some new material. But we'll read verses 4–5 together since there's one sentence in these two verses. Look at what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:4–5: "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I am with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." Now I wish we could cover this whole sentence today, but verse 5 is very difficult to interpret. It's not just one of the trickiest verses in this letter but also in the whole Bible! So we'll stick with just verse 4 today and then wait until next week to tackle verse 5.

But it's important at this point to note that verse 4 is dependent on verse 5. It's showing us the timing of what Paul told the Corinthian believers to do in verse 5. We can see that from the first word of verse 4. The word "when" shows that Paul wanted his readers to hand the stepson over to Satan under certain circumstances. Now there's actually no word that means "when" in the original Greek text here. But this concept is implied by the grammatical construction that Paul used. He included a participle and a pronoun in the genitive case, and normally a phrase with those two words indicates a temporal idea. That's why almost every Bible translation has the word "when" in verse 4. And the timing that Paul was talking about was when his readers were assembled.

The Greek verb for assembled is used 59 times in the New Testament, but this is the only place where Paul used it. In fact, this is the only place where it's used in any of the New Testament letters. This verb is pronounced *sunago*, which sounds a lot like the word "synagogue." In fact, when the Greek root here is used as a noun, we get the Greek word for synagogue, which refers to a place for the Jews to assemble for worship. But the Greek verb just means "to gather together." And it doesn't always have a religious nuance, but of course that meaning is pretty standard in the New Testament. For example, this word is used in Mark 2:2, which tells us what happened when Jesus entered the city of Capernaum. This verse says, "So

many people gathered together that there was no more room, not even in the doorway, and he was speaking the word to them.”

And of course this wasn't the only time that people gathered around Jesus. He often drew a crowd to watch him heal people or listen to him teach. And gathering together is something that the early Christians continued to do. Listen to what Luke wrote in Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week, we assembled to break bread. Paul spoke to them, and since he was about to depart the next day, he kept on talking until midnight.” So we see here that these believers didn't gather on the Sabbath day or Saturday like the Jews did. Instead they met on the first day of the week, and that's probably because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday. And when they assembled, they broke bread together, which is probably a reference to celebrating the Lord's Supper. And they also listened to Paul teach, just like people used to gather together to hear Jesus teach.

But this gathering of Christians didn't just happen every once in a while. It became a weekly gathering that continues to the present day. And it wasn't just for celebrating the Lord's Supper and listening to the teaching of God's Word. It was also a time for believers to encourage each other. Listen to Hebrews 10:24–25: “And let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” The Greek word translated “gather together” there comes from the same root as our verb in 1 Corinthians 5:4.

So we can see how important it is for Christians to gather together on a regular basis. The writer of Hebrews said that we need to watch out for each other and encourage each other. But it's hard to do that unless we gather together. It's difficult for us to minister to each other unless we're together physically. This is why our church and so many others were willing to violate local health mandates during the recent pandemic. Once we could see that COVID wasn't life-threatening for most people, we reopened our church and resumed meeting together indoors. And we were fined several times by the government, but thankfully we didn't have to pay those fines because the courts sided with churches like ours. They recognized our right to gather together for worship. But even if they hadn't, we would still need to assemble in obedience to God.

So it's important for us to gather together, and when we do, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:4 that we “are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus.” But this phrase has generated a lot of disagreement among Bible scholars. And there are two main issues here. First of all, which words did Paul actually use? And second, how does this phrase fit in the passage? Let's start with the first issue. The phrase “our Lord Jesus” is used in most Bible translations, but a few translations have something a little different. The English Standard Version has the phrase “the Lord Jesus,” and the King James Version and the New King James Version have the phrase “our Lord Jesus Christ.” So does the first person plural pronoun belong here? And does the word “Christ” belong here?

The answers to these questions are not easy to determine. What we have here are some disagreements between the ancient copies of the New Testament at this point. I won't bore you with all the details, espe-

cially since the differences here are pretty subtle. But I will say that I think the Christian Standard Bible is correct here to include the pronoun but not the word “Christ.” The New American Standard Bible and the New International Version take the same position. All three of them are following Codex Vaticanus, which is one of our oldest and most reliable copies of the New Testament. But if someone wants to follow a different approach here, the meaning changes only slightly.

Now let’s talk about how this statement fits in the passage. In the original Greek the phrase translated “in the name of our Lord Jesus” actually comes first in this verse, and this fact is reflected in the New American Standard Bible. And so there’s a possibility that this phrase belongs with verse 3 instead of verse 4. The updated New International Version and the New Living Translation take this interpretation. At the end of verse 3 the New International Version says, “I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.” But there’s a problem with this approach. It doesn’t technically attach our phrase to the end of verse 3. Otherwise Paul would have been saying that the stepson committed incest in the name of our Lord Jesus. And while there are a few Bible scholars who like that view, I don’t think it holds much water. I really doubt the stepson thought that his relationship with his stepmother was allowed by God, and even if he did, that’s not really Paul’s focus in this passage.

So what the New International Version is actually doing is attaching our phrase to the middle of verse 3. This approach results in a statement that is very logical. It makes a lot of sense that Paul would have passed judgment in the name of Jesus. But the problem is that there are a lot of words separating the Greek verb for passing judgment and the Greek phrase translated “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And this is the main reason that so many Bible translations don’t take this approach. The Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and several others put this phrase with verse 4 instead. Now some commentators rightly point out that when this phrase is used in the New Testament, it usually comes after the verb it modifies. But word order is very flexible in Greek, and so I think it’s reasonable to conclude that Paul moved the phrase forward here for emphasis. He was stressing that when we gather as Christians, we do so in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I think Paul was just borrowing from the teaching of Jesus here. We’ve already talked about the church discipline process in Matthew 18. The four steps are laid out very clearly in verses 15–17. But it’s important to keep reading and consider what Jesus said next. Look at what he stated in verses 18–20: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.”

In these verses Jesus was continuing to talk about church discipline. The binding and loosing here have to do with putting people someone under discipline and releasing people from discipline. Jesus was basically giving his disciples and their spiritual descendants the authority to use church discipline. He was saying that when we legitimately discipline sinners who are professing believers, God recognizes that action and approves it. Now many Christians think that Jesus was talking about prayer meetings in verses 19–20. But the context is clear that he was talking specifically about prayer with regard to church disci-

pline. The mention of two or three people gathering together points back to the two or three witnesses in the second step of church discipline in verse 16. They're gathering together in the name of Jesus to exercise church discipline.

And that's what was going on in 1 Corinthians 5 as well. In verse 4 Paul used the same Greek words for assembled and name that Jesus used in Matthew 18:20. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "gathered together" in Matthew and the word "assembled" in 1 Corinthians, but the Greek word is the same in both places. Paul wanted the believers to gather together to complete the church discipline process on the stepson. And they were to assemble in the name of our Lord Jesus. The Greek word for name is used over 200 times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote only 22 of them. Six of them are in this letter, and we've already seen four of them. Paul used this word in chapter 1 and verses 2, 10, 13, and 15. In verse 2 he talked about how believers call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Then in verse 10 he urged his readers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to be united and get rid of their divisions. Finally, in verses 13 and 15 he talked about how improper it would have been for people to be baptized in his name instead of the name of Jesus.

Now in modern times we tend to think of a name as just a way to refer to someone. But during Bible times names were much more significant. A person's name was connected to his character and reputation; it represented who he was. And so the meaning of biblical names is very important, and that's certainly true about the name Paul referred to in chapter 5 and verse 4. The name "Jesus" is used almost 1,000 times in the New Testament, and the fourth occurrence is very significant. In Matthew 1 an angel told Joseph through a dream that he was to take Mary as his wife, even though she was pregnant. And in verse 21 the angel said that when she gave birth to her son, Joseph was "to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

So this name has a special connection to the theme of salvation. The English word "Jesus" is actually the Latin form of the Greek name *Iesous*. And this name is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*, which we pronounce "Joshua." This Hebrew name simply means "Yahweh saves." Yahweh is God's name; it's used over 6,000 times in the Old Testament. In most Bibles it's represented with the word LORD in all caps. But a better way to communicate this name is with the word "Yahweh," because that's probably how the name was pronounced. So the name "Jesus" refers to the fact that God saves. When Jesus came to earth about 2,000 years ago, he died on the cross to save us from our sins. He took our place and suffered the punishment that we deserved. In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul said that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That's the heart of the gospel right there!

But Jesus didn't just come to be our Savior. He came to be our Lord as well. And that's why Paul used the phrase "Lord Jesus" in 1 Corinthians 5:4. The Greek word for Lord is a title that usually just means "master." It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows here that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. We can't receive him as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. And I love that Paul referred to him as "our Lord Jesus" in 1 Corinthians 5:4. We have a special relationship with him because of what he has done for us. So when we gather together as Christians, our goal shouldn't be to draw attention to ourselves or make

ourselves look good. Instead we gather to praise the name of our Lord Jesus. Everything that we do both individually and corporately should bring him honor and glory.

So in verse 4 Paul talked about the regular time when the Corinthian believers gathered together in the name of our Lord Jesus. And then he added the phrase “and I am with you in spirit.” A more literal translation here would simply be the phrase “and my spirit.” He was saying that when these people gathered together for worship, his spirit was with them as well. The Greek word for spirit is the same one that we saw last week in verse 3. And there I concluded that Paul was referring to the Holy Spirit. But in verse 4 he was pretty clearly talking about his human spirit or immaterial being. After all, he used a first person singular pronoun here.

But we need to understand verse 4 in light of verse 3, where Paul said that he was present with the Christians in Corinth through the Holy Spirit. Because of the unique bond between our human spirit and the indwelling Holy Spirit, there’s a sense in which our spirit is joined together with the spirits of our fellow believers, even when we’re not physically with each other. And the main way that we can demonstrate this special unity is through 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.” But we’re also united by our shared commitment to Scripture. We don’t give in to the pressure to conform to the world’s idea of truth. Instead we stand firm on the truth of God’s revealed Word.

Paul concluded 1 Corinthians 5:4 by adding the phrase “with the power of our Lord Jesus.” The Greek preposition translated “with” just indicates association. The idea is that the power of our Lord Jesus accompanied the Corinthian believers and Paul’s spirit when they were assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. Did you hear the repetition there? Paul used the phrase “our Lord Jesus” twice in this verse! And this is the main reason that some Bible scholars put the first phrase with verse 3. But Paul was just using repetition to bring emphasis. He wanted to stress how important the Lord Jesus is to our Christian faith. But he was also clarifying in the second phrase what he meant by the first phrase. To gather in the name of our Lord Jesus means that we have his power backing us up.

The Greek word for power is used 15 times in this letter, and we’ve already seen the first six of them. In chapter 1 and verse 18 Paul said that “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.” The point is that God works powerfully through the gospel message to save people from their sins. And so in chapter 2 and verses 4–5 Paul said, “My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God’s power.” In other words, instead of using rhetorical eloquence, Paul just spoke the truth and relied on the Spirit’s power to work in people’s hearts.

So in chapter 5 and verse 4 Paul was probably making a subtle reference to the Spirit’s power at work through us when we gather together. But Paul could refer to the power of our Lord Jesus here because he was the one who sent the Spirit to live and work in us. And of course the context here is focused on the theme of judgment. When we assemble in the name of our Lord Jesus to put someone under church dis-

cipline, we have God's power backing us up. I love how John MacArthur states this point: "When a local church acts in Jesus' name, that is according to His Word, they can be sure they are acting in His power" (*1 Corinthians*, 125–26). Let's close in prayer and thank God for working powerfully through us.