

1 CORINTHIANS 5:5A

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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. Even if she was a widow at this point, their relationship was still sin in God's eyes. But the Corinthian believers tolerated this sin, and they were arrogant in spite of the incest that was happening among them.

So Paul told these people in verse 2 that they should have been filled with grief instead of continuing to be arrogant. And he wanted the attitude of grief to lead to the action of removing the stepson from the church. They were to excommunicate him and not allow him to worship with them anymore. And in verse 3 Paul took the lead in helping them with this action, even though he wasn't physically present with them. But he was present with them through the Holy Spirit, who lives in every believer. And so he said that he had already pronounced judgment on the stepson.

Now many people think that it's always wrong to judge others. 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 can judge others provisionally as long as we're doing it in accordance with God's righteous standard. And that's exactly what Paul was doing in 1 Corinthians 5. His judgment was good because it was based on the teaching of God's Word. Leviticus 18 teaches clearly that it's wrong for a man to have sexual relations with his stepmother. And so Paul pronounced judgment on this stepson and told the Corinthian believers to remove him from the church.

Then in verses 4–5 of our passage Paul continued to give instructions about what he wanted his readers to do with this man. Look at what he wrote in these two verses: "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." Last week we looked at verse 4 and the first half of this sentence. This verse shows us the timing and circumstances of what Paul told the Corinthian believers to do in verse 5. They were to hand the stepson over to Satan when they were assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. This is something that early Christians did on the first day of the week. And it's a tradition that we continue to follow today. After all, Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, and so it's appropriate that we gather together weekly on that day to worship him.

But Paul went on in verse 4 to say that when the Corinthian believers assembled, he was with them in spirit. He used the same Greek word for spirit that we already saw in verse 3. And I believe Paul was talking about the Holy Spirit in that verse. But in verse 4 he used a first person singular pronoun, and so he was pretty clearly talking about his human spirit or immaterial being. But we need to understand verse 4 in light of verse 3. The reason Paul could say that his human spirit was with the Corinthian believers was that the Holy Spirit lived in all of them. Because of the special bond between our human spirits and the indwelling Holy Spirit, there's a sense in which our spirits are joined together, even when we're not physically with each other.

Paul concluded verse 4 by adding the phrase "with the power of our Lord Jesus." Paul was saying 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. I love the repetition that Paul used in this verse. He used the phrase "our Lord Jesus" twice for emphasis. And he was also clarifying in the second phrase what he meant in the first phrase. To gather in the name of our Lord Jesus means that we have his power backing us up. Now when Paul referred to God's power back in chapter 2, his focus was not on Jesus but on the Spirit. In verses 4–5 he 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." Paul was saying here that instead of using rhetorical eloquence, he just spoke the truth and relied on the Spirit's power to work in people's hearts.

And so in chapter 5 and verse 4 I believe 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 Jesus here because he was the one who sent the Spirit to live in us. And since both Jesus and the Spirit are God, they have the same unlimited power. So when we assemble in the name of our Lord Jesus, we can be sure that God's power is at work. And of course the context here is focused on the theme of judgment. When we gather together to put someone under legitimate church discipline, we have God's power supporting us. Whenever we act in obedience to God's Word as a church, we can be confident that God is working powerfully through us.

So in verse 4 we've seen the timing and circumstances of what Paul told the Corinthian believers to do in verse 5. Now let's take a closer look at verse 5 and try to figure out what exactly he wanted them to do. This verse is one of the trickiest verses not just in this letter but also in the whole Bible. And so we need to proceed slowly and carefully as we look at this new material. In verse 5 Paul said, "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 it sounds like Paul was giving his readers a command at the beginning of this verse. But in the original Greek there's an infinitive here, not an imperative. An infinitive is normally a subordinate verb and not the main verb in a sentence. For example, here's a sentence that I hear in my house regularly: "I want something to eat." The infinitive is the phrase "to eat," and the main verb is the word "want." If we take off the infinitive, we still have a full sentence, but the infinitive provides clarification.

So what this means is that there's actually no main verb in verses 4–5. The New American Standard Bible tries to solve this problem by adding the phrase "I have decided" at the beginning of verse 5. But I don't

think this approach makes sense, because it seems like Paul was talking about something he wanted the people of the church to do. Otherwise it wouldn't need to happen when they assembled. And so I think the best approach is found in the King James Version, which does not start a new sentence in verse 4. Instead it gives us one long sentence in verses 3–5. And that's because we have to go back to verse 3 to find a main verb. In the Greek text it's the word translated "pronounced judgment" in the Christian Standard Bible. What the King James Version does is put a comma at the end of verse 3 and then start verse 5 with the phrase "to deliver."

But I think we can improve on the King James Version here and make it a bit smoother. The key is that we don't always have to translate a Greek infinitive with an English infinitive. I would start verse 5 with the phrase "that you hand over." This way we can include the word "you" to show that the readers were supposed to perform this action. And I like starting verse 5 with the word "that," because it points back to verse 3. It introduces a statement that shows what was involved in Paul's judgment against the stepson. And instead of putting a comma at the end of verse 3, I would put a colon there. It points forward to the statement about handing over in verse 5.

The Greek verb for handing over is used 119 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 19 of them. And often this word has a negative connotation. Certainly the English phrase "hand over" has a negative sense. If my kids are using one of our tablets, and I tell them to hand it over, the implication is that they weren't supposed to have it that long. Or perhaps they weren't even supposed to have it at all! We can especially see a negative connotation for this Greek verb in the Gospel of Matthew. It's used 31 times there, which is more than it's used in any other book of the New Testament. Let's take a look at a few of them. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 20:18–19: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death. They will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and on the third day he will be raised."

So Jesus predicted his death here, and he used our Greek verb twice. First he would be handed over to the Jewish religious leaders, and then they would hand him over to Gentiles to be crucified. Jesus went on to predict his death a second time in Matthew 26:2. He said, "You know that the Passover takes place after two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." And of course that's exactly what happened. Listen to what Matthew 27:2 says about the religious leaders: "After tying him up, they led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor." Then verse 26 says that Pilate "released Barabbas to them and, after having Jesus flogged, handed him over to be crucified." Pilate didn't personally crucify Jesus, but he handed Jesus over to his Roman soldiers who did it for him.

Now Jesus didn't reveal in these two predictions how this chain of events would get started. In other words, who would hand him over to the Jewish religious leaders? But Matthew was good enough to give us the details. Listen to Matthew 26:14–15: "Then one of the Twelve, the man called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' So they weighed out thirty pieces of silver for him." So Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus, and in fact our Greek verb is sometimes translated with the word "betray" in the Christian Standard Bible. Listen to Matthew 26:16, the very next verse: "And from that time he started looking for a good opportunity to betray him."

So clearly the Greek verb for handing over often has a negative connotation. And that seems to be the case in 1 Corinthians 5:5. After all, Paul told his readers to “hand that one over to Satan.” Whatever it means to hand someone over to Satan, there’s certainly an implication that something is wrong! And of course Paul was talking about the man who committed the sin of incest here. But the phrase “that one” in the Christian Standard Bible is not the most literal translation of the Greek text. The New American Standard Bible is closer with the phrase “such a one.” This phrase comes from a Greek word that we just saw in verse 1, where it’s translated with the word “kind” in the Christian Standard Bible. Paul was talking there about how incest was the kind of sexual immorality that was not tolerated among the Gentiles.

So in verse 5 Paul wasn’t just talking about the man who committed incest. He was also referring to anyone who was like this man. He was talking about a certain kind of person: a professing believer who falls into sin and refuses to repent. And so Paul wasn’t just addressing a unique situation here. He was laying down a principle that applies to other situations as well. Whenever a professing Christian is living in unrepentant sin, we need to hand that person over to Satan. The Greek word for Satan is used 36 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 10 of them. It’s pronounced *satanas*, and of course you can easily hear the similarity to our English word “Satan.” Bible translators are simply transliterating the Greek word in English. In other words, they’re giving us a letter-for-letter equivalent. That’s the normal practice for translating names in the Bible.

Now the Greek word for Satan is always used as a name in the New Testament, and it always refers to the same individual. But the Greek word is actually a transliteration or letter-for-letter equivalent of a Hebrew word that’s used 27 times in the Old Testament. And this word is sometimes used as a name, but sometimes it’s not. For example, we can find this word 14 times in the Book of Job, and in each case it’s translated as a name in the Christian Standard Bible. But in 1 Samuel 29 it’s used as a common noun and not a proper noun. At this point David was living among the Philistines because he was trying to hide from King Saul. And he was about to fight with them against the Israelites. But listen to what the Philistine commanders said about him in verse 4: “Send that man back and let him return to the place you assigned him. He must not go down with us into battle only to become our adversary during the battle.”

So in that verse the Hebrew word for Satan is translated with the word “adversary.” And that’s exactly what the word means. It can refer to either a human adversary or an angelic adversary. And whenever it refers to an angelic adversary, it’s pointing to the same individual, whom we call “Satan.” He’s the leader of the angels who rebelled against God, and he’s our primary adversary. He’s the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days. He’s the one who entered Judas Iscariot and energized him to betray Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul said that “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” He wants to deceive us and lure us away from the truth. In 1 Timothy 5:15 Paul said that “some have already turned away to follow Satan,” and that’s still happening today.

But what did Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 5:5 when he told his readers to hand the stepson over to Satan? Before we can answer that question, we need to keep going a little further and see the purpose of this action. Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to “hand that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” The Greek word for destruction is used only four times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all

of them. In 1 Thessalonians 5:3 it refers to the physical destruction of the future seven-year period of tribulation on the earth. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 it refers to the eternal destruction of separation from God in hell. In 1 Timothy 6:9 it refers to the spiritual destruction that comes from pursuing wealth.

So the Greek word for destruction can refer to different kinds of destruction. But in our passage Paul was talking about the destruction of the flesh. The Greek word for flesh is used 147 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 91 of them, which is well over half. Now this Greek word can have different nuances. Sometimes it has the meaning that we normally associate with the English word “flesh.” It can refer to the part of our body that covers our bones. For example, we sometimes see the phrase “flesh and blood” in Scripture. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul said that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... evil, spiritual forces.” And in that phrase the word “flesh” clearly refers to the part of our body that covers our blood vessels.

But the Greek word for flesh can also represent our bodies as a whole. In Colossians 2:5 Paul said, “For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit.” The Greek word for body there is the same one that we have in our passage. The King James Version and the New King James Version both have the word “flesh” instead of the word “body.” But most Bible translations give us the word “body” because it’s obvious that Paul wasn’t talking only about part of his body. He couldn’t remove his flesh from the rest of his body and leave his flesh behind while traveling. That’s complete nonsense! And so he must have been talking about his whole body.

But there is another possible nuance for our Greek word. Sometimes it has the more figurative meaning of being dominated by sin. And Paul was especially fond of this nuance. He used it in a variety of key passages. For example, we see it in Galatians 5:16–17. There Paul said, “I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want.” Then in verses 19–21 Paul gave a list of the works of the flesh, and he followed it with the fruit of the Spirit in verses 22–23. The point with this contrast is that the flesh and the Spirit are opposites. The flesh pulls us toward sin, and the Spirit steers us toward righteousness.

Now this doesn’t mean that there’s anything inherently evil about our flesh or our bodies. For example, the cravings that we have for food and intimacy are not wrong in themselves. God gave us those basic desires, and he provided the proper ways for us to satisfy them. He gave us many different kinds of food to enjoy, and he created the covenant of marriage to be enjoyed by one man and one woman. So in Galatians 5 Paul wasn’t talking about the flesh on our bodies or even our bodies in general. Instead he was referring to the root of our sinful actions and attitudes. And our sin doesn’t start in our bodies; it goes deeper to our hearts and our spirits. We have sinful desires that lead to sinful behavior if we don’t keep them in check. Both our material and immaterial beings have been corrupted by sin.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:5 the big question is how Paul was using the Greek word for flesh. It probably doesn’t refer to the part of our body that covers our bones. But many Bible scholars think that it refers to our bodies as a whole. And so they think that Paul was talking about physical death when he referred to

the destruction of the flesh. Now there are certainly several points in favor of this interpretation. The simplest and most straightforward way to understand the phrase “destruction of the flesh” is with the idea of physical death. And we can find examples in Scripture of professing believers who died because of their sin. In Acts 5 God killed Ananias and Sapphira because they lied about the money that they gave to the church. And in 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul said that some of the Christians in Corinth had died because they didn’t prepare themselves properly to participate in the Lord’s Supper.

But there are some significant problems with this interpretation. First of all, the parallels with Acts 5 and 1 Corinthians 11 aren’t very strong, because neither passage mentions Satan. I think the most reasonable way to understand those passages is that God killed those people. But in 1 Corinthians 5:5 the idea seems to be that Satan would kill the stepson and others like him. There’s also a second problem with seeing a reference to physical death here. Paul went on in verse 11 to talk about the need to avoid associating with any professing believer who is a habitual sinner. But if Paul thought that the stepson and others like him would die shortly after being removed from the church, then there wouldn’t be much point in talking about the ongoing need to avoid associating with them.

So because of these problems, more and more Bible scholars are rejecting the interpretation of physical death in verse 5. But some of them just tweak this interpretation so that it refers to physical suffering instead. That way these people remain alive indefinitely, and Paul’s command to avoid associating with them makes much better sense. And there are some possible parallels for this interpretation as well. We know that God gave Satan permission to bring physical suffering on Job. And in 2 Corinthians 12:7 Paul said that a messenger of Satan was a thorn in his flesh and tormented him. But these parallels don’t work very well either. Job and Paul were both very godly believers, and so it makes sense that Satan would want to bring suffering on them. But why would he want wicked people to suffer? One of the reasons that so many ungodly people prosper during this life is that Satan lets them!

So I think the best interpretation of the word “flesh” in 1 Corinthians 5:5 is that Paul was talking about our inclination to sin. The best reason for taking this interpretation is that we have a strong parallel in 1 Timothy 1. In verse 19 Paul talked about how some people have shipwrecked their faith. And then in verse 20 he said, “Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.” Now we don’t see the Greek word for flesh in this verse, but we do have the same Greek verb that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 5:5. It’s translated with the word “delivered” instead of the phrase “hand over,” but the meaning is the same in both places. And of course Paul was talking about handing people over to Satan in both passages.

But it’s very clear in 1 Timothy 1 that Paul was not talking about physical death. After all, he said that the purpose of handing these men over to Satan was that they would learn not to blaspheme. That statement doesn’t make any sense if they were going to die! Paul was assuming that they would live for a while, and he was hopeful that they would return to the Lord and grow spiritually. And that’s what I believe Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 5 as well. He wanted the Christians in Corinth to hand the stepson over to Satan for the destruction of his sinful tendencies. He wanted this man to turn away from his sin so that he could be restored to the church.

Now at first glance this interpretation seems to be going too far. After all, our sinful inclinations are going to be with us until we die or Jesus comes back. So how could Paul talk about the destruction of our sinful tendencies? But we should realize that he used similar language elsewhere. In Romans 8:13 he said, “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” In Colossians 3:5 he said, “Put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.” In fact, Paul even said in Galatians 5:24 that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” So there’s a sense in which our sinful inclinations have already been crucified with Jesus. But now we need to apply this truth continually in our daily lives.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:5 I believe Paul was just talking about the ideal direction of our lives. He basically wanted the stepson to pursue holiness as a result of being handed over to Satan. Now of course Satan doesn’t voluntarily help people grow spiritually. And so we shouldn’t understand the handing over to Satan literally. Paul wasn’t implying that Satan would meet the Corinthian believers at the door of their church and take this man off their hands. Instead Paul was just talking about excommunication here. When sinners are removed from the church, they are sent back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. And so they no longer enjoy the spiritual protection and blessings that come from being part of the church. The goal is that they will wake up and realize what they’re missing. Then they will be motivated to repent and start obeying the Lord again.

Now it’s true that sometimes professing believers experience suffering when they are under church discipline. There was a time when we disciplined a man out of our church, and before long he was hit by a truck and seriously injured. So God can use suffering as part of his discipline to correct us and bring us back to himself. But the point in this passage is that the goal of excommunication is to provoke repentance and spiritual growth. We want people’s sinful inclinations to be increasingly destroyed after we remove them from the church. In his sovereignty God can use their time in Satan’s realm for their good. So we don’t kick them out of the church because we hate them but because we love them. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to love professing believers enough to discipline them when they sin.