

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6

March 6, 2022

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. Paul said that a man was "sleeping with his father's wife." But these people 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 the attitude of grief should have led to the action of removing the stepson from the church. They should have excommunicated him and not allowed him to worship with them anymore.

So Paul took the lead in helping the Corinthian Christians take action against the stepson. He said in verse 3 that he had already pronounced judgment on this man. But of course he wanted his readers to be involved in this judgment. So in verses 4–5 he told them what to do. When they were assembled together in the name of the Lord Jesus, they were to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. Now the word "flesh" here could just be referring to the body as a whole. In that case Paul would be saying that the stepson would be killed by Satan. But in verse 11 Paul talked about the need to avoid associating with a professing believer who is a habitual sinner. In other words, Paul assumed that this man would remain alive indefinitely.

So it's more likely that the word "flesh" has the figurative meaning of being dominated by sin. Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to hand the stepson over to Satan for the destruction of his sinful tendencies. Now this doesn't mean that our sinful inclinations can be completely eradicated during this life. 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. We need to remember that Paul was talking about excommunication in this passage. When we remove people from the church, we're sending them back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. The goal is that they will wake up and realize that they're no longer experiencing all the blessings that come from being part of the church. Then they will be motivated to repent and start obeying the Lord again. In his sovereignty God can use their time in Satan's realm for their good.

So in the beginning of verse 5 Paul gave the immediate purpose for telling the Christians in Corinth to hand the stepson over to Satan. He wanted the man's sinful tendencies to be progressively destroyed. But at the end of the verse we see a more distant purpose as well. Paul also wanted the man's spirit to be saved in the day of the Lord. His desire was for the stepson's immaterial being to experience God's spiritual de-

liverance in the future. Now we tend to think of salvation as something that we've already received in the past, and certainly that's true. Jesus died on the cross 2,000 years ago, and the benefits of his death were applied to us when we put our faith in him. But there's also a sense in which salvation will take place in the future. After all, we still sin and go through difficult circumstances on this earth. But in the future God's going to rescue us from this evil age, and we won't be punished for our sins on judgment day.

So as Christians we're not going to experience God's wrath in the future. And I believe this is what Paul was talking about at the end of verse 5. The key is found in the phrase "the day of the Lord." It points back to the Old Testament, where we see the phrase "the day of the LORD" used repeatedly. And normally it refers to a time of God's judgment on sinners. So we should expect to observe this nuance in the New Testament as well. And that's exactly what we see in 1 Thessalonians 5. Listen to what Paul wrote in verses 2–3: "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. When they say, 'Peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape."

So Paul was talking about a future day when God will judge sinners. And he wasn't referring to a literal 24-hour period of time. Sometimes the word "day" can refer to a longer time frame, and in this case he was talking about a period of judgment that will last for seven years. We can read about it in the Books of Daniel and Revelation. And what we see in Scripture is that these seven terrible years will culminate with the return of Jesus to defeat his enemies and rule on the earth for a thousand years. But as Christians we won't have to experience this future time of judgment. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 that "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." So we won't have to live through this time of judgment on the earth. Either we're going to die first, or Jesus is going to take us home to be with him before the seven years of wrath begin.

And this is what Paul wanted the stepson in 1 Corinthians 5:5 to experience as well. His hope was that this man's removal from the church would motivate him to turn away from his sin. Then he could be restored to the church, and he would show that he was a genuine believer. Instead of experiencing God's wrath, he would experience God's salvation. His spirit would be saved in the day of the Lord. Now this doesn't mean that only our spirit will be saved and not our body. Later in chapter 15 of this letter Paul emphasized that our bodies are going to be raised from the dead. But in chapter 5 Paul was emphasizing the salvation of our spirit. And this emphasis is appropriate, because our immaterial being is the core of who we are. What we do with our body flows from who we are in our spirit.

So in verses 1–5 Paul taught the need to excommunicate professing believers who are living in sin. Now of course we should follow the four-step process of church discipline that Jesus gave us in Matthew 18. But if the sinner refuses to repent at each stage, then we need to conclude the process by removing that person from the church. And when we do that, we're sending this person back into Satan's realm. Our immediate goal is the destruction of the sinner's flesh. In other words, we want his sinful tendencies to be increasingly destroyed. And our ultimate goal is that he will be saved in the day of the Lord. Our hope is that he will repent of his sin and show himself to be a genuine Christian. That way he won't have to experience God's wrath in the future.

Now we're ready to cover some new material. In verses 6–8 Paul used a fascinating illustration to show the seriousness of the situation that he was addressing in this chapter. But today we'll just get started with verse 6. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough?" Paul started this verse by referring to the boasting of the Corinthian believers. The Greek noun for boasting is used 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 10 of them. Now we haven't seen this word in 1 Corinthians before. But we have seen a verb that comes from the same root as this noun. In fact, we've seen this particular verb five times now.

So let's do some review and look at the five places where we've seen the Greek verb for boasting. The first three are found at the end of chapter 1. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 28–31: "God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence. It is from him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, in order that, as it is written: Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." So the first place where we see the word "boast" is in verse 29. Paul was giving the reason that God has chosen to save lowly and unimportant people. He didn't want us to brag about how we deserved to be saved! We didn't contribute anything to our salvation. We weren't worthy of this wonderful gift.

Then we see the Greek word for boast twice in verse 31. Paul was quoting a shortened version of Jeremiah 9:24. And what we see here is that boasting is not inherently wrong. In verse 29 he talked about boasting negatively, but in verse 31 he referred to it positively. So there's a time when it's okay for us to boast. But Paul said that we should only boast in the Lord. And this statement is consistent with how Paul spoke elsewhere in his letters. In Philippians 3:3 he said that we "worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh." In Galatians 6:14 he stated that he would "never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now this doesn't mean that Paul only boasted specifically about a wooden crossbeam. Instead he was talking about the place where Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. He was boasting in the Lord, as he said in 1 Corinthians 1:31.

Now let's review the fourth time when Paul used the Greek verb for boast in this letter. It's found in chapter 3 and verse 21. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 21–23: "So let no one boast in human leaders, for everything is yours—whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." So in verse 21 Paul said that we shouldn't boast in human leaders, and then he went on to mention himself, Apollos, and Cephas. We know from chapter 1 and verse 12 that the Christians in Corinth were divided into factions based on excessive loyalty to one of these men. And that's why Paul told them in chapter 3 not to boast in human leaders.

Now this doesn't mean that it's always wrong to boast about our spiritual leaders. Listen to what Paul himself said in 2 Corinthians 5:12: "We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in outward appearance rather than in the heart." So Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to be proud of him and his co-workers. And the Greek word for proud there is the same word that we have in 1 Corinthians 5:6. In the

English Standard Version it's translated with the word "boast." And later in 2 Corinthians Paul even boasted about himself. But he wasn't motivated by a desire for prestige and recognition. Instead his focus was on the good of the Corinthian church. The believers there were in danger from false teachers, and Paul knew that he needed to defend his authority so that they would listen to him.

But even then Paul's boasting was focused mostly on his suffering. At the end of 2 Corinthians 11 he gave a long list of the hardships that he experienced in ministry. And in verse 30 he summarized by saying, "If boasting is necessary, I will boast about my weaknesses." Then in the next chapter he revealed why he took this approach. In chapter 12 and verse 9 he wrote, "I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me." So the reason Paul wanted to boast about his weaknesses was that they left a void to be filled by the power of Jesus. Paul wanted God to get the glory for his ministry. His boasting was appropriate because he had pure motives.

But in 1 Corinthians 3:21 Paul had to tell his readers not to boast in their spiritual leaders because they had sinful motives. In their arrogance they viewed their leaders as competitors instead of teammates. They judged their leaders based on worldly criteria like rhetorical eloquence. And ultimately their boasting led to disunity in the church. Then Paul confronted their boasting again in chapter 4. At the end of verse 6 he said that he didn't want them to be arrogant and favor one person over another. Now look at what he said in verse 7: "For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?"

So what Paul was implying here was that every good thing the Corinthian believers had was a gift from God. As James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." But the Christians in Corinth failed to recognize this truth. Instead they were boasting as though they got the things they had apart from God. So the Corinthian believers were not boasting appropriately. And that's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:6 that their boasting was not good. The Greek words for not and good are the first two words in this verse. Paul took advantage of the fact that Greek word order is flexible, and he put these two words first for emphasis. He was stressing the fact that the boasting of the Corinthians was evil instead of good. It did not bring glory to God or please him.

Now in the context of chapter 5 it's possible that Paul was talking about boasting because of the incest in the church. In other words, the Christians in Corinth may have been boasting because they tolerated this sin. Perhaps they viewed themselves as more enlightened than other believers because they didn't see a problem with this situation. But I think it's more likely that Paul was still talking about the same boasting he addressed earlier in the letter. He was confronting them about the fact that they boasted inappropriately in different spiritual leaders and created factions in the church. So their boasting was not because of the incest but in spite of it. Paul was rebuking them for boasting even though they had this huge problem in the church. That was his focus in verse 2 when he addressed their arrogance, and here in verse 6 he was making the same point about their boasting.

Then Paul followed his rebuke with a rhetorical question at the end of the verse. He asked, "Don't you

know that a little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough?” And the obvious answer here is yes. Of course these people would have understood the simple fact that Paul mentioned here. Anyone with a little knowledge about how to make bread would have known what he was talking about. But it’s clear that Paul was using this illustration to prove a spiritual point. And it was a point that the Corinthians believers should have understood. In fact, I think it’s likely that they did understand Paul’s point here, but they just weren’t living accordingly. And so Paul had to do some review and teach them about something that they already knew.

The phrase “don’t you know” is actually very common in 1 Corinthians. We see it a total of nine times in this letter. We’re going to see it six times in chapter 6 and two times in chapter 9. In fact, if we look at the Greek phrase that Paul used here, we can find it one additional time. We already saw this one back in chapter 3 and verse 16. For some reason the Christian Standard Bible has the extra word “yourselves” in that verse, even though there’s no basis for it in the Greek text. Now what’s interesting is that Paul used this phrase only once outside this letter. So why did he use it so many times in 1 Corinthians? I think the reason is that he was trying to teach the Corinthian believers a lesson. They thought too highly of themselves and boasted in their knowledge and wisdom. So Paul knocked them off their pedestal and brought them down a few notches. He showed them that they still had much to learn. And even when they did actually have knowledge, they often weren’t living in accordance with that knowledge.

So what was Paul’s point in asking this simple question in chapter 5 and verse 6? Why did he ask the Christians in Corinth about something as mundane as baking bread? Well, I think it’s pretty clear from the context that he was applying this illustration to the current situation in the Corinthian church. After all, look at what he said in the beginning of the next verse: “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new unleavened batch.” We’ll study this verse more carefully next week. But for now we can observe that Paul was comparing the Corinthian church to a new unleavened batch. The pronoun “you” in that verse comes from a word that’s plural in the original Greek. So in verse 6 when Paul referred to the whole batch of dough, he was obviously talking about the church in Corinth.

And this wasn’t the only time that Paul used the illustration of leaven in bread dough. He used the exact same wording in Galatians 5, but there he made a statement instead of asking a rhetorical question. In verse 9 he said, “A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.” But Paul was just following the example of Jesus when he used this illustration. Listen to what Matthew 13:33 says about Jesus: “He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened.’” So there Jesus used the illustration of leaven positively to talk about the growth of God’s kingdom.

But in Matthew 16 Jesus used this illustration again, and this time it had a negative connotation. In verse 6 Jesus said to his disciples, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” But the disciples had a hard time understanding what Jesus meant by this statement. They were confused because they thought he was speaking literally. Listen to what he said to them in verse 11: “Why is it you don’t understand that when I told you, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,’ it wasn’t about bread?” But thankfully at this point the disciples figured out what Jesus was talking about. Listen to verse

12: “Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the leaven in bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

So what was the point that Jesus was trying to make here? Why did he refer to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees as leaven? Before we can answer that question, we need to discuss the historical background of this illustration in more detail. It's easy for us to approach Scripture through the lens of our modern-day experience. And some of our Bible translations even lead us astray here. The New International Version, the New Living Translation, and the NET Bible all have the word “yeast” instead of the word “leaven.” And that's not just true in Matthew 16 but also in 1 Corinthians 5 and the rest of Scripture. But during Bible times there was no such thing as pure yeast like we have today. The process for making bread back then was a bit different from what most people in our country use today if they make their own bread.

So the Christian Standard Bible is more accurate to give us the broader word “leaven” in Scripture instead of the word “yeast.” The ancient leavening process usually involved setting aside a small piece of dough from a full batch of dough and then letting it sit for a while to ferment. Then eventually that small piece of fermented dough could be added to a new batch of dough. The result was that the small piece of fermented dough would infect the new batch of dough and cause it to rise. This is essentially how sourdough bread is made today. Now this is a slower way to make bread than the method most people use today. And there are also some health risks that come with this approach. This is one of the reasons that it's wise to hit the reset button and start over from scratch every once in a while. But in general this method for making bread works fairly well.

So when the word “leaven” is used in Scripture as an illustration, it usually refers to something that starts small. But then it spreads and consumes whatever it comes into contact with. So in Matthew 16:12 Jesus was saying that the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees started small. It was only in their minds at first. But when they communicated their teaching, it would spread to everyone who was listening. And if those people weren't careful, they would be consumed by the teaching. It would enter into their minds and persuade their hearts. They would believe what they were taught and live according to it, even though it was wrong at many points. That's why Jesus told his disciples in verse 6 to watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Now in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul didn't state clearly what the leaven represented in verses 6–8. But if we think carefully about what Paul was talking about in verses 1–5, we shouldn't have too much trouble figuring out the answer. It's fairly obvious that the leaven was a picture of the man who was committing incest. I believe Paul's point here was that this man's sin would infect the whole church if the people continued to tolerate it. It was just a little leaven at first because it only involved this one man. But Paul knew that it would eventually have a negative impact on all the other believers if he wasn't removed from the church.

So Paul wasn't just concerned about the spiritual welfare of the stepson, as we've already seen in verse 5. Now we're seeing in verse 6 that he was also concerned about the spiritual welfare of the church as a whole. That's why he used the illustration of leaven. It helps us to understand how a small problem can

turn into a big problem. Now if you've never made your own bread before, this illustration probably doesn't resonate with you very well. So let me give you a different illustration that might be helpful. Have you ever heard the statement "one bad apple spoils the whole barrel"? If you've ever bought apples before, you've probably come across some bad apples at the store. And maybe you noticed that one bad apple would impact the apples around it. Those apples would start to go bad as well. Perhaps you've even seen that happen in your refrigerator!

Now maybe you're not a fan of apples, and so I'll give you another illustration that most of you have probably seen. How many of you have pulled some food out of your fridge and seen something fuzzy and discolored growing on it? That happens at our house pretty frequently. It's easy for leftover food to get lost in the back of the fridge. And when we finally get around to pulling it out, we often find mold growing on it. It always starts small, but before long it's all over the food. Now if we can catch the mold right away, we can sometimes salvage at least some of the food. But often the best thing to do is just to throw away everything that's in the container. So that's a good picture of how dangerous sin in the church can be. The sin may start small with just one or two people. But if it isn't confronted, it can spread very easily to the rest of the church. And before long the church is ruined.

Now Paul didn't talk specifically in 1 Corinthians 5 about what it looks like for sin to spread in the church. But I don't think it's too hard to see how this works. If we tolerate sin in the church, we're showing everyone that we don't take sin seriously. It's not a big deal to us. So why should we fight against temptation so hard? We might as well indulge in whatever sins are appealing to us. After all, we won't be facing any immediate consequences. So the lack of accountability naturally leads to an increase in sin. That's why we need to confront our fellow believers when they fall into sin. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:20 about how to deal with elders who sin: "Publicly rebuke those who sin, so that the rest will be afraid." When we see sin being dealt with in the church, it should put the fear of God into us. We should be motivated to resist temptation and pursue holiness. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to treat sin seriously in our church.