

1 CORINTHIANS 5:7

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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. 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 at first it sounds like Paul was saying that the stepson would be killed by Satan. But it's more likely that Paul was talking about the progressive destruction of this man's sinful tendencies. His removal from the church would put him back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. And the goal was that he would wake up and miss the blessings that come from being part of the church. Then he would be motivated to repent and start obeying the Lord again.

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. 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 deliverance in the future. When Paul referred to the day of the Lord, he was talking a future time of judgment when God will pour out his wrath on the earth for seven years. But as Christians we won't have to live through this terrible time, because Jesus is going to take us home to be with him. And that's what Paul wanted the stepson to experience as well. His hope was that this man would show himself to be a genuine believer who wouldn't be punished for his sins.

Then in verses 6–8 Paul used a fascinating illustration to show the seriousness of the situation that he was addressing in this chapter. Last week we 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?" So Paul began this verse by referring to the boasting of the Corinthian believers. And this wasn't the first time that he talked about their boasting. In chapter 3 and verse 21 he told them not to boast in human leaders. And

the reason was that they were divided into factions based on excessive loyalty to various men like himself, Apollos, and Cephas. They viewed these men as competitors instead of teammates, and their boasting led to disunity in the church.

So we shouldn't be surprised to see Paul say in chapter 5 and verse 6 that the boasting of the Corinthian Christians was not good. And yet they continued to boast even though a man in their church was committing incest! They thought highly of themselves despite the fact that their church was in critical condition. And Paul tried to wake them up by asking them a rhetorical question at the end of the verse. He said, "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 Paul wasn't trying to give these people a refresher on how to make bread. Instead he was giving them an illustration to make a spiritual point. And I think it's pretty clear from the context that he was applying this illustration about leaven and dough to the current situation in the Corinthian church. After all, in the next verse he compared the church to a new unleavened batch. So we know that when Paul referred to the whole batch of dough in verse 6, he was talking about the church in Corinth. But he wasn't so clear about what he meant by the word "leaven." And before we can make an educated guess, we need to pause and think about the historical background for this illustration. After all, most people today don't even make their own bread, and the few who do normally use yeast.

But during Bible times there was no such thing as pure yeast like we have today. The ancient leavening process was slower and more complicated. It 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. So when Paul used the word "leaven" in verse 6, he was referring to something that starts small. But then it spreads and consumes whatever it comes into contact with. And so based on the first five verses, I think we can conclude that the leaven was a picture of the man who was committing incest. His sin would infect the whole church if the people continued to tolerate it.

So Paul wasn't just concerned about the spiritual welfare of the stepson, as we saw in verse 5. In verse 6 we can see that he was also concerned about the spiritual welfare of the church as a whole. He used the illustration of leaven to show how a relatively small problem can turn into a pretty big problem. It started with just one person, but before long it would have a negative impact on all the other believers. After all, 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. So the lack of accountability naturally leads to an increase in sin. That's why we need to follow the church discipline process whenever our fellow believers fall into sin. It provides a strong motivation to pursue holiness.

Now let's move on to verse 7 and cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Clean

out the old leaven so that you may be a new unleavened batch, as indeed you are. For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.” So at the end of verse 6 Paul asked a rhetorical question, but here at the beginning of verse 7 he didn’t pull any punches. He issued a direct command to his readers. He told them to “clean out the old leaven.” The Greek word for clean is a verb that’s used only one other time in the New Testament, and this one was also written by Paul. In 2 Timothy 2:21 he said that “if anyone purifies himself from anything dishonorable, he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.” In that verse our Greek verb is translated with the word “purifies,” which means basically the same thing as the word “clean.”

So Paul stated in this verse that people are useful to the Lord if they purify or cleanse themselves. And he was basically saying the same thing in 1 Corinthians 5:7 except that he was talking about a group of people. He wanted the believers in Corinth to clean their church. Now we all know what it’s like to clean something. When we were kids, our parents told us to clean our rooms. Then as we get older, we learned to clean the kitchen and the garage. My least favorite was cleaning the bathroom. But cleaning has to get done, because otherwise we won’t be able to find things that we need. Plus we’ll end up with lots of germs, and we might even get sick.

But in verse 7 Paul said that the Corinthian believers needed to clean out the old leaven. And he used the same Greek word for leaven that we just saw in verse 6. But this time he didn’t use the phrase “a little leaven.” Instead he talked about “the old leaven.” Both statements accurately describe how bread was made during Bible times. But the word “old” stresses the fact that a small piece of dough would sit for a while and ferment before it would be added to a new batch of dough. And of course when Paul talked about leaven here, he was still referring to the man who committed incest. This man was like a little leaven because he was apparently the only one in the church who was involved in this sin. But he was also like old leaven because he had probably been committing this sin for a while.

So Paul told the Corinthian believers to clean out the old leaven. In other words, he wanted them to stop tolerating the stepson and remove him from the church. And then Paul gave the purpose for taking this action. He said, “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new unleavened batch.” The Greek word for batch is the same one that we saw in verse 6. And in both places he was talking about the church in Corinth. Now in verse 6 he referred to the church as a whole batch, but here in verse 7 he talked about how it needed to be a new batch. It was a whole batch in the sense that it was full of people. But it needed to be a new batch because one of its members was an unrepentant sinner. The Corinthian believers needed to hit the reset button and remove this sinner from the church so that they could be like a new and clean batch of dough.

Now the Christian Standard Bible also describes this new batch with the word “unleavened.” And there is a Greek word in verse 7 that has this meaning. But it doesn’t occur until the next phrase, where Paul said “as indeed you are.” A more literal translation here would be the phrase “as you are unleavened.” And the grammar in the original Greek confirms this conclusion. The Greek words for new and batch are singular to stress the one church in Corinth. But the Greek word for unleavened is plural to emphasize that there were many believers who made up the church. And so the word “unleavened” cannot modify the word

“batch” because they don’t match in number. In Greek grammar an adjective cannot modify a noun unless both of them are either singular or plural.

So after Paul said that he wanted the Corinthian church to be a new batch of dough, he added a Greek phrase literally translated “as you are unleavened.” The Greek word for unleavened comes from the same root as the Greek word for leaven that we saw earlier in this verse and in the previous verse. The only significant change is that the Greek word for unleavened has a prefix. That prefix is the letter alpha, which is equivalent to our letter A. Now when we put the letter A in front of a word in English, it often negates the meaning of that word. So for example, the word “theism” refers to believing in the existence of God. But the word “atheism” has the opposite meaning. It refers to not believing in the existence of God. And we have the same thing with the Greek word for unleavened. It refers to the absence of leaven in bread.

Now if you know anything about making bread, you know that most of the bread we eat is leavened and not unleavened. That’s because leavened bread generally tastes better. So this fact raises some important questions. Why did Paul speak negatively about being like a leavened piece of dough? And why did he speak positively about being like unleavened bread? To answer those questions we need to go back to the Old Testament and specifically the Book of Exodus. In the early chapters of Exodus the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and they were being severely mistreated. So they cried out to God for help, and he appointed Moses and Aaron to deliver them. Through them he brought a series of ten plagues on the land of Egypt. And the tenth and final plague involved the death of all the firstborn males, including both people and livestock.

But God protected the Israelites from experiencing all these plagues. And with the last plague he gave them some special instructions to follow so that all their firstborn would be spared. These instructions are recorded in chapter 12. The people were to kill a lamb and then spread some of its blood on the door-frame of their house. That’s what we see God instructing them to do in verse 7. Then look at what he said in verse 8: “They are to eat the meat that night; they should eat it, roasted over the fire along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.” So unleavened bread was an essential part of Israel’s final meal in Egypt. And in verse 14 God said that this day would be a memorial for the Israelites. He wanted them to celebrate it as a festival to Yahweh.

Then in verses 15–20 God laid out the instructions for this festival. We see an overview of these instructions in verse 15. Look at what God said here: “You must eat unleavened bread for seven days. On the first day you must remove yeast from your houses. Whoever eats what is leavened from the first day through the seventh day must be cut off from Israel.” So it’s appropriate that in verse 17 God referred to this weeklong festival as “the Festival of Unleavened Bread.” It was a reminder that the Israelites ate unleavened bread right before God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy 16:3 tells us that the reason God told them to eat unleavened bread was that they “left the land of Egypt in a hurry.” They didn’t even have time to wait for their bread to rise! God delivered them right after he brought the tenth plague on the Egyptians.

So every year the Israelites celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and they didn’t eat any leavened

bread for a whole week. In fact, they weren't even allowed to have any leavened dough in their houses during that time. It's not that there's something inherently evil about leaven. God created leaven for us to enjoy! But it was just off limits during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. And so now we can understand why Paul spoke positively about being like unleavened bread. He was drawing from the foundation of the Old Testament. Unleavened bread was a reminder of how God saved his people from slavery. That's why it was appropriate for Paul to describe the Christians in Corinth as being unleavened.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul said that he wanted the Corinthian church to be a new batch of dough. And then he added a Greek phrase literally translated "as you are unleavened." The word "as" indicates that Paul was making a comparison. First Paul told his readers what he wanted them to be. And then he made a comparison with what they already were. They were to be a new batch of dough just like they were unleavened. But it sounds like Paul was contradicting himself here. After all, a new batch of dough would have been unleavened. But then Paul said that they were already unleavened! So how do we resolve this tension? Why did Paul tell them to become something that they already were?

The solution here is that Paul was talking about being unleavened in two different senses. First he focused on their practice, and then he talked about their position. God viewed them as being unleavened because he had forgiven their sins. That's why Paul said back in chapter 1 and verse 2 that they were already sanctified. But of course we know that many of these people were far from perfect in their behavior. They still needed to grow in their progressive sanctification. And that's true for all Christians to at least some degree. Our practice needs to match our position in Christ. We need to become what we are. We need to pursue holiness as Hebrews 12:14 says. And the reason we can become more sanctified in practice is that we're already sanctified in position. Our position in Christ is what allows our practice to improve. We have the Holy Spirit because we're already sanctified, but the Holy Spirit also helps us to grow in sanctification.

So in 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul basically told his readers to excommunicate the stepson so that their church could become more holy and match more closely the position they already had in Christ. And then Paul ended the verse with this statement: "For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed." This statement begins with the word "for," which introduces an explanation for what Paul had just written. He was showing the Corinthian believers why they were unleavened or sanctified in God's eyes. And he emphasized this explanation by adding a Greek word that's not translated in most of our Bible versions. Normally it just means "and," but that nuance doesn't fit here. The New King James Version gives us the word "indeed," and that's probably on the right track. The Christian Standard Bible actually has this word as well, but it comes too early, just like we already saw with the word "unleavened."

So why were the Corinthian believers unleavened or sanctified in God's sight? The emphatic answer is that indeed "Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed." Notice that Paul didn't refer to Jesus by name here. We tend to think of the word "Christ" as the last name of Jesus, but it's actually a title. It's a transliteration or a letter-for-letter equivalent of the Greek word *christos*. It's parallel to the word "Messiah," which is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *mashiach*. Both of these words mean "anointed one." Now in the Old Testament there were three types of people who were anointed. The first group of people and

the one that most Christians are familiar with are kings. For example, in the book of 1 Samuel we see that Saul and David were both anointed by the prophet Samuel to be kings of Israel.

But kings weren't the only group of people who were anointed in the Old Testament. We can see that priests were also anointed. For example, Leviticus 8:12 states that Moses anointed his brother Aaron as the first high priest of Israel. And God said in Leviticus 6:22 that when Aaron died, one of his sons would "be anointed to take his place." But there's one final group of people who were anointed, and they were prophets. For example, in 1 Kings 19:16 God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place. But Deuteronomy 18:15 teaches that one day God would raise up a special prophet. And Jeremiah 23:5–6 shows that a special descendant of David would rule as king and deliver his people. Psalm 110:4 shows that this future king would be "a priest forever according to the pattern of Melchizedek."

So there would be a special Messiah or anointed one who would fulfill all three of these roles. That's what we should be thinking about when we see Jesus called "Christ" in the New Testament. He's the supreme prophet because he always speaks God's words. In John 12:50 he said, "I speak just as the Father has told me." But Jesus is also the supreme priest because he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice once for all. Hebrews 10:10 says that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time." And one day he will return and reign as the supreme king on the earth. Revelation 19:16 calls him the "King of kings and Lord of lords."

So the word "Christ" is a profound title that tells us a lot about Jesus. And in 1 Corinthians 5:7 it's even more emphatic than usual, because Paul moved this Greek word to the end of the sentence. The first word in a sentence is usually the most emphatic one, but the last word can be pretty emphatic as well. Sometimes we like to save the best for last! And I think Paul was probably emphasizing the Messiah's priestly role here. After all, he went on to call Jesus "our Passover lamb." The Greek word for Passover lamb often just refers more generally to the Passover holiday, which was another name for the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Luke 22:1 tells us that while Jesus was in Jerusalem, "the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called Passover, was approaching."

But sometimes the Greek word for Passover refers more specifically to the lamb that was sacrificed as part of the special Passover meal. That's how we see the word used a few verses later in Luke 22. Verse 7 says, "Then the Day of Unleavened Bread came when the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed." So the Festival of Unleavened Bread lasted for a week, but the Passover lamb would be sacrificed on one of those days. And Mark 14:12 tells us that this was done on the first day of the festival. Now in Luke 22:7 the writer obviously wasn't talking about sacrificing the Passover holiday. That concept doesn't make any sense. Instead Luke must have been referring to the Passover lamb. That's why almost every Bible translation includes the word "lamb." There's no separate Greek word for lamb there; the word "lamb" is implied by the Greek word for Passover in this context.

And I think we're seeing the same thing in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Paul wasn't just talking about the Passover holiday in general but the Passover lamb more specifically. And of course the Passover lamb is just pointing back to Exodus 12 and the lamb that the Israelites killed before the tenth plague. They were protected

from that plague because they spread some of the lamb's blood on the doorframe of their house. But Paul could refer to Jesus as the Passover lamb because it was pointing forward to him. God used the original lambs in Exodus to save the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. But Jesus provided salvation from an even worse kind of slavery. We're all born into the world as slaves to sin. But Jesus freed us from slavery to sin. He forgave our sins when we turned away from them and trusted in him to save us. That's why Paul called him "our Passover lamb." He's our lamb because he died for our benefit! Paul said that "Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed."

The Greek word for sacrificed is used 14 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote three of them, and all three are found in this letter. We're going to see the word two more times in chapter 10. This word just means "to kill," but sometimes it refers to killing an animal as an offering to the true God or a false god. And in several passages it refers to killing the Passover lamb, which was not technically an offering. But it was the foundation for all the offerings God commanded the Israelites to sacrifice. This Greek word is used in Luke 22:7, which I read earlier. That verse talks about the day when the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. We also see this word used with these two nuances throughout the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But in 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul used this word to refer to the sacrifice of Jesus, the ultimate Passover lamb. He died on the cross less than 24 hours after he and his disciples ate the Passover meal. He was the fulfillment of this meal; it was pointing to him and his death to pay the penalty for our sins.

Now the Greek word for sacrificed is in the passive voice here, which stresses that the subject did not do the action but received the action. So Paul was emphasizing that Jesus was killed by others. Now there's certainly a sense in which Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice. God was completely sovereign over his death. But he was crucified by wicked sinners. Most of the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah, and they convinced the Romans to put him to death. So the reason that we're unleavened or sanctified in God's sight is that Jesus sacrificed himself as our Passover lamb. The cross shows us the great cost that God paid to redeem us. And so when we ignore sin in the church, we're slapping Jesus in the face and treating his death as trivial. God didn't save us so that we would continue to treat sin lightly. We need to deal seriously with sin in our own lives first and then in the lives of our fellow believers. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.