

1 CORINTHIANS 5:8

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Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 5. We've been seeing in this chapter that the believers in Corinth were tolerating sexual sin. A man in the church was sleeping with his stepmother. But Paul said that this man should have been removed from the church. And so in verse 5 he told them to hand the stepson over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit would be saved in the day of the Lord. In other words, he wanted this man to be sent back into the world, which is under the dominion of Satan. And his hope was that this action would cause the stepson to repent and lead to the progressive destruction of his sinful tendencies. Then he would show himself to be a genuine believer who would experience God's spiritual deliverance in the future. He wouldn't have to face God's wrath during the coming time of judgment on the earth.

Then in verses 6–8 Paul used an interesting illustration to show the seriousness of this situation. In verse 6 he tried to wake up the Corinthian believers by asking them a rhetorical question. He said, "Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough?" And the obvious answer here is yes. These people would have understood the basics about making bread. But most people today just buy their bread at a grocery store. And so it's important for us to understand how bread was made during New Testament times. The 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.

But of course Paul wasn't trying to give his readers a refresher on how to make bread. He was trying to make a spiritual point here. 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. Now this passage doesn't tell us clearly what the leaven refers to. But I think we can safely conclude from the context that it's a picture of the man who was committing incest. His sin was like leaven because it started small, but eventually it would spread and infect the whole church if the people continued to tolerate it. If we don't take sin seriously, then others in the church will start indulging in sin as well. The lack of accountability naturally leads to an increase in sin.

So in verse 6 Paul confronted the Corinthian believers a rhetorical question. But then in verse 7 he took a stronger approach and gave them a direct command. He said, "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." Now in verse 8 Paul said that the stepson was like a little leaven. And that statement makes sense, because he was

apparently the only one in the church who involved in this sin. But then in verse 7 Paul said that this man was like old leaven. In other words, he had probably been committing this sin for a while. So Paul told his readers to clean out the old leaven or remove the stepson from the church.

Then Paul gave the purpose for taking this action. He said that it was so the Christians in Corinth could be a new unleavened batch. Now in verse 6 he referred to the church as a whole batch, but in verse 7 he talked about how it needed to be a new batch. It was like a whole batch in the sense that it was full of people. But it needed to be like 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 an unleavened batch of dough. And this reference to unleavened bread points back to the Old Testament. Right before God delivered the Israelites from slavery, he told them to eat unleavened bread as part of their final meal in Egypt. And God wanted his people to have a weeklong celebration every year to remember this event. It was called “the Festival of Unleavened Bread” because the people were not to eat any leavened bread during that time.

So just like the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, Paul wanted the Corinthian church to be freed from the influence of sin. He didn’t want the believers to tolerate any unrepentant sinners in the church. Instead he wanted them to take action that would reflect who they already were. In verse 7 he added the phrase “as indeed you are.” So in one sense the Corinthian Christians were already unleavened, but in another sense they needed to become unleavened. They were already sanctified in their position because they were forgiven of their sins. But in their practice they still needed to grow in their progressive sanctification. Their practice needed to match their position in Christ. They needed to become what they were. And their position in Christ is what provided the foundation for their practice to improve.

Then Paul ended verse 7 by giving an explanation for what he had just written. He showed the Corinthian believers why they were unleavened or sanctified in God’s eyes. He wrote, “For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.” The word “Passover” is just another way of referring to the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Now during that weeklong festival the people were not to eat any leavened bread. But on the first day of the festival they were to sacrifice a lamb as part of a special Passover meal. That’s because the Israelites killed a lamb and spread its blood on the doorframe of their house right before God freed them from slavery in Egypt.

But Paul could refer to Jesus as the Passover lamb because it was pointing forward to him. He died on the cross less than 24 hours after he and his disciples ate the Passover meal together in Jerusalem. He was the ultimate Passover lamb because he died to free us from slavery to sin. When we repented and trusted in him to save us, he forgave our sins. 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.

Now let’s move on to verse 8 and cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “There-

fore, let us observe the feast, not with old leaven or with the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Paul started this verse with the word “therefore,” which shows that he was drawing a conclusion. He was wrapping up his discussion about the illustration of bread in verses 6–8. And Paul concluded this passage by giving his readers another command. He said, “Let us observe the feast.” This statement comes from one word in the original Greek. It’s a first person plural verb in the subjunctive mood. Now normally commands are in the imperative mood, but in Greek there are no first person imperatives. So if a writer wanted to give a command in the first person, he used the subjunctive mood.

But why would someone even want to give a command in the first person? Normally commands are in the second person because they’re addressed directly to the listeners. But a first person plural command includes the speaker with his listeners. It sounds like he’s commanding himself as well as those who hear him. Now this doesn’t mean that Paul was trying to convince himself to do something in this verse. The context is pretty clear that Paul was already acting appropriately in this situation. He didn’t need to change his attitude or behavior. Instead he was trying to get his readers on the same page with him. He wanted them to join him in observing the feast.

The Greek word here for observing the feast is used only here in the New Testament. But we can find it 16 times in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And two of those times are found in Exodus 12, where God gave Moses instructions about how to prepare the Passover meal and protect their homes from the tenth and final plague. But these instructions weren’t just relevant for that time and place. They had ongoing significance for the Israelites. Listen to what God said in verse 14: “This day is to be a memorial for you, and you must celebrate it as a festival to the LORD. You are to celebrate it throughout your generations as a permanent statute.”

So the Hebrew word for celebrate here is translated into Greek with the same word that we have in 1 Corinthians 5:8. And I do think that Paul was talking about celebrating and not just observing in verse 8. To observe a feast could imply that you’re going through the motions and doing something out of duty. But to celebrate a feast suggests a joyful and grateful attitude. And we do see the word “celebrate” used in a variety of other Bible translations, including the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New Living Translation. So in Exodus 12:14 God was talking about celebrating the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and in 1 Corinthians 5:8 Paul was clearly referring to the same festival. But we need to remember that this festival was fulfilled in Christ. And Paul was using bread an illustration of the Corinthian church. So it’s very unlikely that he wanted these believers to celebrate the literal Festival of Unleavened Bread.

Now some Bible scholars see a reference to the Lord’s Supper here. After all, in many ways the Lord’s Supper is the New Testament equivalent of the Passover meal. The Passover pointed forward to the death of Jesus, and the Lord’s Supper points backward to his death. The Passover anticipated the cross, and the Lord’s Supper remembers it. But the rest of verse 8 shows pretty clearly that Paul wasn’t just concerned about how the Corinthian believers celebrated the Lord’s Supper. We will see that theme later in chapter 11 of this letter. But in this passage the focus is broader. Paul was dealing with sin in the church and the

need for the believers to remove the man who committed incest. The church was to be pure, and therefore the believers needed to treat sin seriously and pursue holiness.

So I believe along with most of the commentators on this letter that Paul was talking about holy living and moral purity in verse 8. To celebrate the feast is just a reference to the Christian life as a whole. And Paul used the Greek present tense here to stress this point. The main idea with the present tense is not present time but continuous action. Paul was emphasizing our need to live in ongoing obedience to the Lord. And he wasn't just focused on sexual purity in this verse. His teaching in this chapter was relevant for dealing with all types of sin. In verse 11 we're going to see a list of different sins like greed, drunkenness, and theft. We need to make sure that we take all sin seriously.

So in verse 8 Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to celebrate the feast, which is a general reference to living as a Christian. And then Paul went on to tell us what that does and doesn't look like. He started with the negative and ended with the positive. First he said, "Not with old leaven or with the leaven of malice and evil." The phrase "old leaven" comes from the same two Greek words that Paul used in the previous verse. Now in that verse this phrase was a reference to the man who committed incest. When Paul commanded his readers to clean out the old leaven, he was telling them to remove this man from the church.

But here in verse 8 Paul was drawing a broader conclusion about the Christian life. He wasn't talking specifically about the stepson and his sin of sexual immorality. He was talking more generally about any kind of sin. We shouldn't let any sin gain a foothold in our lives or in our church. And Paul went on to clarify this point. After he used the phrase "old leaven," he referred to "the leaven of malice and evil." But he wasn't talking about two kinds of leaven here! He was explaining in the second phrase what he meant in the first phrase. The word "or" between these phrases is just introducing another way of describing the old leaven. In this verse it's a reference to malice and evil.

The Greek word for malice is used 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. And this word can have three different nuances. One of them is found in Matthew 6:34. There Jesus said, "Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." In that verse our Greek term is translated with the word "trouble," because it seems to be referring to difficult circumstances. But we can see second nuance for this word in Colossians 3:8. In that verse Paul said, "But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth." In that verse our Greek term is translated with the word "malice," because it seems to be referring to a vicious attitude. Anger, wrath, and malice are the sinful attitudes that are expressed through the sinful speech of slander and filthy language.

But there's a third and final nuance for this Greek word, and we see it in Acts 8. In this chapter we learn about a man named Simon who wanted to buy the power to give people the Holy Spirit. Listen to how Peter responded to him in verse 22: "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, your heart's intent may be forgiven." In that verse our Greek term is translated with the word "wickedness," because it seems to be referring to the general condition of being evil or wicked. And

this is the nuance that we see in the only other place where Paul used this Greek word in 1 Corinthians. In chapter 14 and verse 20 he said, “Brothers and sisters, don’t be childish in your thinking, but be infants in regard to evil and adult in your thinking.” In that verse our Greek term is translated with the word “evil,” because Paul was just talking about this general condition of being evil or wicked.

But how was Paul using this Greek word in chapter 5 and verse 8? The Christian Standard Bible has the word “malice,” and so do most other Bible translations, including the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. These translations seem to be interpreting the word as referring to a vicious attitude, like we saw in Colossians 3:8. But most commentators interpret this word as referring to the general condition of being evil or wicked, like we saw in Acts 8:22 and 1 Corinthians 14:20. This interpretation is not common in Bible translations, but we can find it in the New Living Translation, which has the word “wickedness” here.

Now someone might object to this interpretation because it seems to create some redundancy in our passage. After all, we have a pair of words that are joined by the word “and” here, and the second one is the word “evil” in the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version, and it’s the word “wickedness” in the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version. So why would Paul give us two Greek words in quick succession that both refer to evil or wickedness here? The answer is that we’re looking at a simple case of synonyms for emphasis. Paul was stressing this general idea of evil or wickedness without focusing on any specific sins.

But let’s talk more about the second Greek word that Paul used here for evil or wickedness. It’s used seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote three of them. It just refers to the lack of moral values. And so it’s usually translated with the word “evil” in the Christian Standard Bible. Now there is one other place in the New Testament where we see these two Greek words together. In Romans 1 Paul was describing unbelievers at the end of the chapter. And in the beginning of verse 29 he said that “they are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness.” Our two Greek terms are translated with the words “evil” and “wickedness.” Paul used them in reverse order compared to 1 Corinthians 5:8, but they’re the same Greek words in both places.

So in Romans 1:29 the translators of the Christian Standard Bible interpreted these two words as synonyms. And I think we should follow the same approach in 1 Corinthians 5:8. Paul was using these terms synonymously to emphasize evil or wickedness in general. Any kind of sin is included under the umbrella of these two words. But at the end of the verse Paul shifted from talking about how we should not live to how we should live. He said that we should not eat the feast with the leaven of wickedness and evil “but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” The Greek word for unleavened here is the same one that we saw in the previous verse. It just refers to the absence of leaven in bread. But of course Paul was still using bread as an illustration here. And in this verse he was talking generally about how we should live as Christians. He said that our lives should be characterized by sincerity and truth.

The Greek word for sincerity is used only three times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. In fact, all three of them are found in his letters to the Corinthian church. The other two occurrences of

this word are found in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 1 and verse 12 he said, “Indeed, this is our boast: The testimony of our conscience is that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with godly sincerity and purity, not by human wisdom but by God’s grace.” Now in that verse our Greek term is actually translated with the word “purity.” I think the translators of the Christian Standard Bible were trying to avoid redundancy here, because earlier in the verse they translated another Greek term with the word “sincerity.” But once again we’re just seeing Paul use two synonymous terms for emphasis. And so the word “purity” in this verse isn’t a reference to sexual purity or even just general moral purity. Paul was talking about sincerity or purity in our motives.

Paul also used this Greek word in 2 Corinthians 2. In verse 17 he wrote, “For we do not market the word of God for profit like so many. On the contrary, we speak with sincerity in Christ, as from God and before God.” So here our Greek term is translated with the word “sincerity,” just like we have in 1 Corinthians 5:8. Now in both of these passages in 2 Corinthians, Paul was talking about his own sincerity as well as the sincerity of his ministry companions. They weren’t trying to deceive the people they served. They were open and transparent in their ministry. They weren’t arrogant and boastful like the many of the Corinthian believers were. And that’s why Paul commanded them to be people of sincerity in 1 Corinthians 5:8.

But Paul didn’t just want his readers to be sincere and have pure motives. He also wanted them to be people of truth. The Greek word for truth is used 109 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 47 of them. Now usually this word refers to the Christian truth that was preached by Jesus and his followers. In other words, it’s a reference to the content of what we believe. But sometimes this word refers to the quality of being truthful. And I believe this nuance is what Paul intended in our passage. He certainly wanted the Corinthian Christians to believe God’s truth, but his focus here was on their attitude. After all, he had just talked about their need to be sincere. And sincerity should lead naturally to truthfulness. He wanted them to be people of honesty and integrity.

And once again Paul was an excellent example for us in this area. He used the Greek word for truth with the nuance of honesty in 2 Corinthians 7. In verse 14 he talked his interaction with Titus about them. And he said, “For if I have made any boast to him about you, I have not been disappointed; but as I have spoken everything to you in truth, so our boasting to Titus has also turned out to be the truth.” So Paul’s life was characterized by being honest and authentic. He was a man of integrity who was sincere and truthful. And he wanted the Corinthian believers to live this way as well. I think he was probably giving them a subtle rebuke here for their love of rhetorical eloquence. They loved to impress people and manipulate them with their cleverness and sophistication. But Paul wanted them just to speak the truth with pure motives.

And we need to do the same thing today. We live in a culture where deception and manipulation are rampant. All we have to do is turn on the TV to watch the news, and within a short time we’re hearing lies. Most people today believe that it’s acceptable to lie to get ahead and advance your own agenda. But God wants us to be people who are sincere and truthful. We can imitate Paul’s example, but ultimately God is our perfect model. Titus 1:2 says that God “cannot lie,” and Hebrews 6:18 says that “it is impossi-

ble for God to lie.” And so we should strive in every situation to tell the truth and not mislead people. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.