

# 1 CORINTHIANS 5:9–10A

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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 illustration about bread to show the seriousness of this situation. Now during New Testament times you couldn't just go to a grocery store and buy a loaf of bread like most of us do today. You had to make your own bread, and there was no such thing as pure yeast. Making bread was more complicated back in those days. The 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.

But of course Paul was making a spiritual point with this illustration. He was comparing the unleavened batch of dough to the Corinthian church, and apparently the leaven was a picture of the man who was committing incest. His sin would eventually spread and infect the whole church if the believers 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. Now there's a sense in which the church is already unleavened. We're sanctified in our position because we've been forgiven. Jesus was sacrificed as our Passover lamb to pay the penalty for our sins. But in our practice we still need to grow in our progressive sanctification. Our practice needs to match our position in Christ. 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.

Last week we saw in verse 8 that Paul concluded this illustration by focusing on the importance of holy living. He said that our lives shouldn't be filled "with the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." So first Paul started with the negative, and then he ended with the positive. Now the Greek word for malice often refers to a vicious attitude. But sometimes it just refers to

the general condition of being wicked. And that's basically what the Greek word for evil means as well. It just refers to the lack of moral values. I believe Paul was using synonyms here for emphasis. Paul was stressing the general idea of evil or wickedness without focusing on any specific sins.

Then Paul said that our lives should be characterized by sincerity and truth. The Greek word for sincerity is found only two other times in the New Testament, and in both places Paul used it to talk about his own sincerity. He wasn't trying to deceive the people he served. He was open and transparent in his ministry. He wasn't arrogant and boastful like the many of the Corinthian believers were. And that's why Paul commanded them to be people of sincerity. But Paul also wanted his readers to be people of truth. The Greek word for truth usually refers to the content of what we believe, and Paul certainly wanted the Corinthian Christians to believe God's truth. But sometimes this word refers to the quality of being truthful, and that was his focus here. After all, sincerity should lead naturally to truthfulness. These people loved to manipulate others with cleverness and sophistication. But Paul wanted them to be people of integrity who were honest and authentic.

And we need to be the same way 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 speak the truth with pure motives. After all, we need to imitate God, and he never lies. Titus 1:2 says that God "cannot lie," and Hebrews 6:18 says that "it is impossible for God to lie." And so Paul said in Ephesians 4:25 that we should put away lying and speak the truth to each other. Instead of manipulating and misleading people, we need to be truthful in every situation.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 5:9. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people." So in this verse Paul referred to a letter that he had written to the Corinthian believers. In other words, 1 Corinthians was not actually the first letter that he wrote to them! It was just the first one that has been preserved for us. The earlier letter doesn't exist anymore. Now does this mean that it wasn't inspired by God? I would say no. I think we can safely say that whenever the apostles wrote letters to God's people, these letters carried divine authority. The Holy Spirit moved these men to write down the exact words that he wanted them to write. We shouldn't view this lost letter any differently than the two preserved letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

So why didn't God preserve this letter for us in Scripture? It's hard to answer that question with any certainty. The most we can probably say is that God in his wisdom didn't think we needed it. We can say the same thing about the words and deeds of Jesus that aren't recorded in Scripture. When the apostle John was getting ready to finish his gospel, he made a comment along these lines. Listen to what he said in John 20:30: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book." So John and the other gospel writers were very selective about what they wrote. They could have said much more about Jesus, but they didn't. And of course we shouldn't conclude that the missing deeds of Jesus were insignificant. We shouldn't think that the unrecorded words of Jesus weren't inspired by God. Jesus is God, and so every word that he spoke came from God!

Now Paul wasn't Jesus, and neither were the other apostles. They didn't always speak without error. They were still sinners who made mistakes. But they did represent Jesus and carry his authority. And so when they wrote letters to the followers of Jesus, it's reasonable to conclude that he spoke through them and guarded them from error. Now it's theoretically possible that some of their letters were not divine in their origin. But I just don't see why God would have allowed that to happen. It would have been very confusing to the churches that received these letters. The people would have thought that all of them were authoritative, not just some of them.

So when we learn about letters from the apostles that don't exist anymore, we shouldn't conclude that these letters weren't inspired by God. He just decided not to preserve them for us, just like he didn't preserve all the words of Jesus for us. But we can be confident that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. That's what the apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 1:3. Now we don't know why Paul wrote this letter that he mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9. Maybe he was answering some questions that the people had. Or perhaps he was writing in response to some news that he had heard about the church. But we do know that one of the topics he wrote about was sexual immorality. He told them in that letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

The Greek word for associate is used only three times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. Two of them are found in this chapter; we're going to see the other one in verse 11. The third one is located in 2 Thessalonians 3. In this chapter Paul was also dealing with a church discipline situation. In verses 6–15 we can see that there were people in the Thessalonian church who were idle and were not working to provide for themselves. And so Paul said in verse 6 that the believers were to keep away from every brother or sister who was idle. Then in verse 14 he basically repeated himself. He said, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don't associate with him, so that he may be ashamed." The Greek word for associate is the same one that we have in our passage.

Now this Greek term is unusual because it's a double compound word. The root has not just one but two prefixes attached to it. The first prefix means "together," while the second one means "up." And the root of this word means "to mix" or "to mingle." This root is used by itself in Matthew 27:34, which says that people gave Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink. And so the double compound word in 1 Corinthians 5:9 literally means "to mix up together." Just imagine that you're making a cake, and you have all these ingredients that you mix up together in a bowl. You stir them up really well so that they're blended thoroughly. That's basically what we do as Christians when we gather together. We develop close relationships as we fellowship and associate with each other.

But of course Paul was talking in verse 9 about the need to avoid associating with certain people. And he said that the Corinthian believers were not to associate with sexually immoral people. The phrase "sexually immoral people" comes from one word in the original Greek. It's used 10 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. This verse is the first place where it appears in this letter, but we're going to see it two more times in this chapter and once in the next chapter. However, we already saw a word that comes from the same root earlier in this chapter. Our word in verse 9 is pronounced  *pornos* , and it refers to a person who commits sexual immorality. But in verse 1 Paul used the word  *porneia* , which re-

fers to the act of sexual immorality. In verse 1 Paul said, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father’s wife.”

So it’s pretty clear that in verse 9 Paul was pointing back to the same sin that he mentioned earlier in this chapter. He was talking about the sin of incest, but he used a term that can refer to a person who practiced any kind of sexual sin, whether it’s adultery, prostitution, incest, or homosexuality. We see this same Greek word in Hebrews 13:4, which says that “marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.” This verse is clear that sexual activity is permissible only if it takes place within marriage. And this is why the definition of marriage is so important. It’s a covenant between one man and one woman to be lifelong companions. God requires us to make a long-term commitment before we enjoy the pleasures of sexual intimacy.

So when Paul wrote an earlier letter to the Corinthian believers, he told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. They were not to fellowship with people who were living in disobedience to God’s commands about sexual activity. And obviously the man who was sleeping with his stepmother fit into this category. So Paul’s point here is that his readers already knew what to do with this man. To avoid associating with him meant for starters that they needed to remove him from the church! And yet they hadn’t done that. They were tolerating this man and his sin by allowing him to remain in the church. They were ignoring the seriousness of his sin and the impact it would have on the church.

But the reason for this failure wasn’t just stubborn rebellion. It was also based on a lack of understanding. The Corinthian believers apparently failed to comprehend Paul’s instructions to them in his earlier letter. They misunderstood what he had been trying to teach them. And this is why it’s so important for us to study Scripture carefully. Even if we have good motives and want to obey the Lord, we can end up in sin if we don’t understand and apply God’s Word correctly. But when we’re arrogant and boastful like many of the Corinthian believers were, then we’re naturally going to be lazy in our study of Scripture. We’re not going to be diligent and work hard to avoid misunderstanding the text.

But Paul was very patient with the Christians in Corinth. In verse 10 he proceeded to clarify what he meant in his earlier letter. Look at what he wrote in this verse: “I did not mean the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters; otherwise you would have to leave the world.” Now in the Christian Standard Bible we have a new sentence in this verse. But the English Standard Version is more literal here. It begins this verse with the phrase “not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world.” And in this translation verses 9 and 10 are separated by a dash and not a period. In other words, verse 10 flows directly from verse 9. These two verses are connected very closely.

But the word “meaning” in the English Standard Version doesn’t really come from the Greek text. A more literal translation here would be to replace this term with the word “with.” The New American Standard Bible actually has the word “mean” and the word “with” side by side. But the word “mean” is in italics to show that it’s not based on the original Greek. It’s just been added to make the translation smoother. So what we have here are parallel statements in verses 9 and 10 that start with the word “with.” In verse 9

Paul said that he had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. And then in verse 10 he clarified by literally saying “not at all with the sexually immoral people of this world.” The Christian Standard Bible just has the word “not” here, but the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible are more accurate to give us the phrase “not at all.” Paul was emphatically denying that he was talking about not associating with the immoral people of this world.

The phrase “immoral people” comes from the same Greek word that we just saw in verse 9. It’s not referring to any immoral people but to sexually immoral people. And Paul was talking about sexually immoral people of this world. The Greek word for world is used 185 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 47 of them. But 21 or almost half of them occur in 1 Corinthians. And so it’s an important term in this letter. Now this Greek word can be used in three major ways. The first one is the physical world. For example, John 1:10 says that Jesus “was in the world, and the world was created through him.” The second nuance for this word is the world of humanity. This is how the word is used in John 3:16, which says that “God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

But there’s a third meaning for this word: the evil world system. The first one is a place, the second one refers to people, and the third one is basically a set of principles. Now certainly these principles are believed by many people who live on the earth. But the main focus with this nuance is on a system of values that are opposed to God. And we see the word used with this meaning throughout the New Testament. James 4:4 tells us “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God.” In other words, as Christians we shouldn’t align ourselves with principles and values that are opposed to God. In Ephesians 2:2 Paul said that we used to live “according to the ways of this world.” But then God saved us from the penalty of our sins by his grace.

However, even as Christians the allure of the evil world system can be very strong and hard to resist. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul mentioned some of his ministry companions, but in verse 10 he said that Demas deserted him because “he loved this present world.” Even a man who served alongside Paul ended up giving in to worldliness! This is why the apostle John warned us in 1 John 2:15 not to “love the world or the things in the world.” He said that “if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” It’s really quite simple: if we love the evil world system, then we don’t love God. And we know from 1 Corinthians 16:22 that “if anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him.”

So worldliness is very serious business! And thankfully John gave us some insight on how to deal with this problem. In 1 John 2:16 he said that “everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one’s possessions—is not from the Father, but is from the world.” What John did here was focus on our sinful tendencies that draw us toward worldliness. First he warned us about the desires of our bodies that can easily spiral out of control. For example, eating food is a good thing, but it can turn into gluttony if we’re not careful. Then John warned us about a particular part of the body that often brings temptations to us. Our eyes are the primary means by which we take in the world around us. But sometimes we see things that stimulate our sinful desires, and so we need to guard our eyes. Finally, John warned us about the temptation to take pride in what we have. It’s easy to think that we obtained

our money and possessions by ourselves. But we need to remember that God gives us the strength to work and earn money.

Then in verse 17 John gave us some motivation to avoid worldliness. He said that “the world with its lust is passing away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.” He closed by reminding us that the evil world system is temporary. We shouldn’t love it because it’s not going to last! One day God’s going to defeat Satan, and this evil world system will be gone for good. But if we live in regular obedience to God’s revealed will in Scripture, then we can have confidence that we will enjoy God’s blessings for all eternity. This doesn’t mean that obedience is the basis for our salvation. Instead it’s the fruit of our salvation; it’s the evidence that our faith in Jesus is genuine. So we need to obey God’s moral will consistently, and part of his will is that we not love the world.

Therefore we need to guard ourselves against the evil world system and resist the desire to indulge in even a little worldliness. Listen to what Paul wrote in Titus 2:11–12: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age.” So we need to fight back against the desires we experience to live according to the evil world system. We experience pressure all around us to conform to the world’s way of thinking. Most of the media and entertainment industries are pushing principles and values that are opposed to God. But we need to follow the instructions that we’ve been given in God’s Word. We must strive to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way.

But sadly the Corinthian believers were indulging in worldliness. More specifically, they were enamored with the eloquent wisdom of this world, but in 1 Corinthians 3:19 Paul told them that it’s “foolishness with God.” In chapter 1 and verse 20 he went even further and said that God has “made the world’s wisdom foolish.” And I believe that Paul was talking about the evil world system in chapter 5 and verse 10 as well. When he referred to the sexually immoral people of this world, he wasn’t talking about anyone on the planet who sinned in this way. Otherwise the man in the church who committed incest would have been included! And as we’re going to see in verse 11, Paul wasn’t including him or any other professing believers in the church.

So in verse 10 Paul was talking about the sexually immoral people who belong to this evil world system. He was talking about unbelievers who haven’t made a profession of faith and aren’t part of the church. They’re living under the power of sin and the dominion of Satan. So these are the people Paul was not talking about when he wrote his earlier letter and told the Corinthian believers not to associate with sexually immoral people. In other words, we are not forbidden from interacting with the sexually immoral people of the world. How else are they going to learn about what Jesus has done for them unless we spend time evangelizing them?

And Jesus is the perfect example for us in this area. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 5. In verses 17–26 we see the story of Jesus healing and forgiving a paralyzed man. Now let’s look at Luke 5:27–32: “After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ So, leaving everything behind, he got up and began to follow him. Then Levi hosted a grand banquet for him

at his house. Now there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others who were guests with them. But the Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ Jesus replied to them, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’”

So Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, and there’s no doubt that these sinners would have included people who were sexually immoral. And we can see clearly why Jesus spent time with these sinners. He compared himself to a doctor, and of course we know that doctors don’t spend much time with healthy people. Their focus is on helping those who are sick. That’s what Jesus was doing in the spiritual sense. He ate with unbelievers because they needed to turn away from their sins! He wasn’t accepting them as they were. And he certainly wasn’t hanging out with them to condone their sins or indulge in their sins with them. He was calling them to repent and put their faith in him to save them from their sins.

And we need to do the same thing today. We need to reach out to unbelievers with the hope of the gospel. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, we need to let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. We shouldn’t hide our light under a basket! We need to proclaim God’s truth to everyone around us. Now we certainly need to be careful when we’re around the wicked people of the world. Paul warned us in 1 Corinthians 15:33 that “bad company corrupts good morals.” We need to guard against developing close relationships with unbelievers and spending excessive time with them, or we could easily fall into sin ourselves. But we shouldn’t overreact and avoid contact with them completely. They need to hear the gospel, and we should be ready to give it to them. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.