



SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Corinthians 6:12-20
Seventh Message
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Our nation is immersed in a political crisis over a moral scandal involving the leader of our country. We have read the reports, watched the testimonies, and listened to the experts. All of us should be willing to admit that something is terribly wrong. As the crisis continues, the weeks and months ahead will be very interesting.

The thing that amazes me about all of this is the opinion polls. The president's approval ratings are still very high. Many people are expressing the opinion that what the president does in his private life is none of our business. They urge us to get over it and move on. What does this say about the state of our society?

It indicates to me that not only our president, but the whole nation is on trial in this moral dilemma that is being played out before our eyes. A situation that is centered on sexuality has led to a national discussion of spirituality. But there is something terribly wrong with our spirituality if we have become so callous as to simply dismiss so easily the issue that confronts us. The problems in the White House are a signal that we have business to attend to. What is God trying to tell us in all of this?

As a church we are in the middle of a series dealing with the spiritual life. In recent weeks we have talked about worship, sabbath, and our church. In the coming weeks we will hear about singleness and marriage, among other things. Today I want to talk about sexuality and spirituality. I will not have anything to say about politics.

There is nothing more confusing to our spirituality than our sexuality. We live in a sensual and sexual world. Following a visit to a Third World country, re-entering the United States has the effect of hitting you like a blast furnace. Sensuality oozes out of every nook and cranny, and the senses go on overload. Almost every appeal made by Madison Avenue is directed towards our sexuality. Our world is bombarded by sexual temptation. The things that are available on the Internet today make Playboy magazine seem benign. We are told that sex is no big deal. It is part of our humanness, we hear, so we are free to engage in it whenever we desire.

It is obvious that what we need to hear is truth, not relative truth or cultural truth, but the absolute truth of God's word. That is what will clear up the confusion and set us free. God's word clearly teaches that there is a close connection between sexuality and spirituality.

Mankind's problem is that we often get the two confused.

Our text this morning is taken from chapter 6 of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Corinthian society was rather like ours in that the worship of sex had infected all of society. In the city of Corinth in Paul's time, a thousand priestesses/prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, entered the city every night to ply their trade. Sex was a part of the cultic worship that was ingrained in that society. "To live as a Corinthian" meant to live in luxury and immorality. We could probably say the same today about living as Californians.

Paul himself had founded this church in Corinth and taught that these activities were wrong. But some people were misinterpreting the apostle's word in an effort to support sexual immorality and cultic prostitution, to the confusion of the church. In response, Paul wrote this passage to clear up the issue. As we will see, his words could hardly be more relevant for us today.

A. The truth about grace (12)

At the outset, Paul wants to clear up something he was reported to have said. We begin reading at verse 12 of chapter 6:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor 6:12, NASB)

This phrase, "all things are lawful," is surrounded by quotation marks in the RSV. It is quite likely that Paul did use this phrase. It was part of his teaching on grace. In Christ, we are saved by grace. We are no longer under law, but under grace. But some people in Corinth were using this argument as a pretext to spread license and engage in wrong sexual practices. Here we should say that "immorality" means any kind of immoral sexual practice, any kind of behavior that is outside of God's design for marriage, including prostitution, fornication, adultery, and pornography.

Paul explains that there are limits to grace. Certainly, grace does not give us the freedom to sin. "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable or helpful," says Paul. If we engage in activities that hurt ourselves or others, that is not grace. Grace creates wholeness. It does not seek to destroy. All things are lawful, yes, but we should not be mastered by anything. Grace leads to freedom, but sin leads to slavery. We lose our freedom in Christ when we engage in sin, because we become

enslaved by it. In other words, immorality, or any other sin, will have power over our lives. Paul says that the goal of grace is freedom, not slavery.

B. The truth about our body (13-14)

Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food; but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. (6:13-14)

Here Paul becomes more specific so as to clear up any confusion about the body. Food is for the belly and the belly is for food. There is a one-to-one correspondence between them. We satisfy our natural hunger by eating. However, there is not the same correspondence between immorality and our body. When we feel sexual desire, do we automatically act on that desire just as we do when we are hungry? The world would say yes, but God says no. The apostle declares that the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.

Paul is saying that there is a big difference between our appetite for food and our sexual appetites, between our belly and our body. Food and the belly are temporary; they will both be done away with. But that is not the case with the body. There is something much deeper going on with the body.

Men and women are very different from the animal world. Animals simply follow their sexual desires by instinct. But that is not the case with us. We are not to live by the motto, "if it feels good, do it." Our bodies are not to be used for self-gratification. God has a permanent, eternal plan for them. They are designed to be an eternal instrument through which we declare the glory of God. Just as Jesus was raised up bodily, so also will the Christian. God has a purpose for our bodies in this life and also in the life to come. The body is for the Lord. It is a sacred place that is indwelt by God.

What Paul is beginning to hint at is that there is a close connection between the expression of our sexuality and our spirituality. Both are very powerful forces in our lives. It is easy to confuse the desires of the body and the desires of the soul. But the body is designed for something very special. Immoral sexual practices interfere with how God wants to use our bodies.

C. The connection between sexuality and spirituality (15-17)

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one with her? For He says, "The two will become one flesh." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. (6:15-17)

What then is the connection between sexuality and

spirituality, and why do we get these confused? Paul goes on to explain.

When we come to Christ, our body becomes part of his body. We become one with him. However, if we join ourselves to a harlot, we become a member of a harlot. Our bodies unite, because we have become one flesh. The word "join" here means to cleave, to be glued together. Paul reminds us of the verse in Genesis that gives the goal for marriage: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Sexual intercourse always brings about a complete union of two people, body, soul, and spirit. To join oneself to a harlot, to engage in wrong sexual activity, is to involve Christ in that sin, destroying the union that we have with him.

Paul is saying that the connection between sexuality and spirituality is oneness. This is the crux of the issue.

Both sexuality and sensuality go to the very core of our beings. They both touch the same place. Sexuality and sensuality are mysteries. They are centered in our desire for worship, which is a form of sexual expression. We worship God with our bodies because we are one body with him.

God has given each one of us a deep desire for intimacy, for oneness. We desire to possess and to be possessed. All of our spiritual and sexual quests are efforts to satisfy these deep longings. The reason we pursue so many different spiritual paths, why we pursue sexual intimacy and marriage, why we have the urge to merge, is due to our God-given desire for oneness. Our deep desires for sexual intimacy point to the greater reality—our desire for oneness and intimacy with God.

This is what Jesus prayed for his disciples in the Upper Room. He used the language of intimacy so that they might experience oneness: "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us" (John 17:21a). What wonderfully intimate language! Jesus prayed that his disciples would experience the same sense of oneness that he had with his Father.

Oneness is at the heart of the Godhead. God exists in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet God is one. The three Persons of the Trinity share oneness. And God in his infinite wisdom wants us to share in that oneness. He has made us male and female, sexual beings, in order to lead us to this greater reality.

The Old Testament Song of Songs was given originally to express the beauty of love within the context of marriage. But many church fathers held that this book is an allegory that speaks of intimacy with Christ. During medieval times, this text was studied more than any other by the monastic orders. It was the source book for intimacy with God and devotion to Christ.

A world without God will seek to satisfy these longings for oneness in sexual immorality, sexual pervers-

sion, and unnatural relationships, because mankind yearns to worship. For the non-Christian living in our sensual society, sex becomes the highest form of intimacy. The bedroom becomes the place of worship. So it should not come as a surprise to us to see our world enslaved to immoral sexual practices, to find pornography so tantalizing and so available, or to see the leaders of our country entangled in illogical and unwise relationships. This has been going on since time immemorial. The world is seeking to worship because this is what God made us for. The fact that some are willing to give the president a pass in this whole matter indicates that we live in a country that is spiritually bankrupt, a nation in desperate need of God, a land that is not worshipping God.

But, let us not fall into the temptation of pointing our finger at President Clinton and the world. Sexual temptation can be a problem for Christians, too. Remember that this letter was written to Christians. Even as Christians, our sexuality and our sexual expressions can override and take priority over our spiritual life. Even as Christians, this can be the place we go to for worship, where we seek our greatest intimacy. Even as Christians, we can struggle with pornography and unhealthy physical relationships prior to marriage. This is why we give ourselves to lustful fantasies.

We can even do this in our marriages. We can look for our marriage partner to be the one who gives us our greatest sense of intimacy. Even as married Christians, sex can be our primary source of worship. This is natural for us, because this is how we acted prior to becoming believers. Thus we find it difficult to re-channel these God-given desires into a relationship with Christ. The challenge is find the kind of intimacy we desire with God and cultivate a relationship with Christ that becomes our first love and our place of primary worship, where all of our soul and all of our body is engaged.

I have found in pre-marital counseling that if the couple involved are having sex, that is symptomatic of a deeper spiritual issue. Christ is not first in their relationship. Instead, they have unhealthy dependencies on one another. The affection they receive from each other is more important than the affection they are receiving from Christ. Invariably I ask them to be pure for a season prior to marriage, not so that they can look right to the world, but so they can first cultivate oneness with Christ. Then they will be free to enjoy the physical relationship within marriage that God intended.

D. The cost for misdirected sexuality is severe (18-20)

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (6:18-20)

The apostle indicates that the cost of immorality is severe. There is something that differentiates sexual sin from any other kind of sin. All sin is damaging, of course. Sin can destroy our physical body. We can damage it with drugs and alcohol. We can cause stress to our bodies with over activity and workaholic tendencies. But sexual sin is particularly devastating, because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Notice the reference to the Trinity here: Our body is for the Lord, our body is a member of Christ, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So when we engage in sexual immorality, pornography, and sexual fantasy, we are abusing God's dwelling place. Sexual sin affects us deep in our soul. It affects our oneness and intimacy with God. It inhibits our worship of God. It destroys the very purpose for which we were made.

I want to say here that I abhor what Hollywood has done with sex. They have cheapened our sexuality. They have made sex impersonal by their efforts to eliminate the differences between male and female. They dehumanize us as people. They try to reduce us to the status of animals with their philosophy that sex is just another physical act, like eating and drinking. If you are hungry, satisfy your hunger by eating something. If you are sexually hungry, indulge yourself, we are told. Many among us bought into these lies and deceptions in the past, with the result that we suffered much hurt and pain. Anyone who has experienced this knows very well that sexual sin affects you inside your body. The picture that Hollywood paints is a lie. Immorality leads to the giving away of part of our soul. Instead of oneness we experience division.

But I also hate what the church has done with sex. We too have cheapened sex. The church has portrayed it as evil, ugly, and cheap. We have cast all kinds of doubt and darkness on the mystery of our sexuality.

When we understand this biblical concept of oneness and intimacy, sex in marriage becomes a very beautiful and sacred thing. God elevates sex and gives it to us as a gift. But it is a gift that is designed for marriage. That is where we can learn about intimacy and oneness. But, remember that it points to a greater reality—oneness with the Father. God has given us these desires so that we can share a wonderful intimacy with him. Even if we are not married, we can still experience the kind of intimacy for which we were designed. That is the greater reality. In heaven, marriage will end, because everyone will be married to the Lamb. We will be the bride of Christ, in a relationship of intimacy that will last for all eternity. But if we twist our sexuality and seek self-gratification, and indulge our bodies for self-pleasure, we thwart God's longings for us and our longings for him.

How should we respond to what Paul has said?

E. The exhortations are to flee and glorify

The apostle gives us two commands: flee, and glorify. The negative command is, flee immorality. Run away.

Get out of town as quickly as you can. It is never wise to dabble with fantasy, to stay and fight, to try to overcome. The one who is wise changes the channel, walks out of the movie, throws away the magazine, and refuses to go down the road that leads to danger. As the proverb says, do not go down that road, because that is the way that leads to destruction.

But it is never enough to simply try to suppress these physical desires. The positive command is that we glorify God in our bodies. The solution to controlling our sexual drives is to deepen our spirituality. The solution is not found in legalism, where we try to control all of our desires by rules and regulations. The solution is to allow these desires to lead us to the greater reality of oneness with God and intimacy with Christ. The solution is to allow our bodies to become the sacred dwelling of an awesome God. The solution is to give our bodies to God for his use and his glory, to allow him to fully possess us.

The reason we are called to do this is, as Paul writes, "you are not your own...you have been bought with a price" (6:19-20). It cost God dearly to purchase your body. He owns it and he wants to use it. We do not have the final rights to our bodies. Jesus is Lord of our life, Lord of our bodies, and Lord of our sexuality. The amazing truth is that what was once common, profane, something that we thought nothing of has become sacred and holy. Christ lives in our bodies. Our bodies are the new holy of holies. Involving ourselves in sexual sin is taking what is sacred and making it common. It is a desecration of the temple of God. To glorify God in our body is be who God intended us to be. We can live without sex, but we cannot live without God. We can satisfy physical hunger with food, but we can never satisfy our desire for intimacy and oneness until our hearts and bodies are filled with Christ.

Now my purpose this morning is not to make you feel guilty or condemned or judged. My purpose is to center your worship, your oneness on God. Remember that even if you have been involved in some of these things in the past, God forgives. He cleanses us and erases all the records when we come to Christ. Keep in mind that Paul wrote these words to a people who had been involved in some very nasty and hurtful things. Yet, his word to them was, "Glorify God in your bodies." This too is my desire for us as a church: that we will be a place that is holy and set apart for God, a place where we can be intimate with Christ.

I want to say a particular word to the men now. I know that for men, the issue of sexual temptation can be very powerful. Are you willing to be the spiritual leaders of this community? Will you put away all the fantasies that are thrown your way every day? This is not easy to do. But remember that any sort of sexual perversion diminishes your ability to be a spiritual leader. Remember Paul's word to Timothy, when he called on men to pray, to be spiritual and lead the way. Find a place where you can share the deep hungers of your soul and expose the desires of your heart for intimacy and love. Then you will have found the resources to be the spiritual leaders in your homes, your church and your work places. This is what the world longs to see.

As we come to the communion table, we glorify God through sharing the bread and the cup. Our bodies are sanctified when we feed on the body of Christ, and purified when we drink the cup that cleanses. Through him we have been resurrected to newness of life so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who is our hope of glory.

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