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1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Tenth Message

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GLORIFYING GOD IN YOUR BODY

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Having spent over 11 years of my ministry working with students, I have had numerous conversations, and opportunities to teach, about sex. It was a topic of great interest and concern to them. Perhaps this letter from a student reflects contemporary understanding about sex: “Why do people insist upon making sex such a big deal? Sex is something different in every relationship. Sometimes there is a lot of personal emotion involved, and that’s great, but other times it’s just fun and exciting. Even if you tell each other you’re in love, you both know it’s not so serious. Why do people draw up rules that make something complex out of something very simple?”

The Bible has a very different perspective on sex. In fact, it says that sex is a mystery. In other words, we will not understand it apart from revelation. Maybe you are surprised to learn that the Bible has a great deal to say about sex, but we must never forget that God is the author of sex. He created our bodies, and he is very gracious about sharing with us instructions for its intended purpose.

Ancient Corinth, much like the Bay Area, was given over to the worship of sex. The city was filled with shrines and temples, but dominating it was an almost 2000-ft high hill on which stood a large temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The 1,000 priestesses of the temple, who were sacred prostitutes, came down into the city when evening fell and plied their trade in the streets. Corinth was absorbed with sex. In fact, in the ancient world they coined the verb “to Corinthianize,” which means, “to practice fornication.” They worshipped sex. Much of the social and religious life of the city revolved around sexual activity, therefore it was accepted and even highly regarded in that culture. In fact, Demonsthenes wrote, “We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for faithful guardianship of our homes. So long as a man supports his wife and family there is no shame whatsoever in extra-marital affairs.”

When Paul entered Corinth and began to preach the gospel, the truth of the Scriptures confronted this sexual laxity—but not without opposition. Some in the church claimed their right of sexual freedom, especially the right to engage in sexually-oriented religious activities. Some had even used Paul’s teaching of their freedom in Christ to justify their actions. Thus Paul was forced to tackle head-on the confusion that existed in Corinth over the question of sexuality.

The apostle begins his discussion by quoting a contemporary saying in Corinth which some had used to defend their activity:

I. Understanding spirituality: A proper view of freedom (6:12)

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)

The NIV places the words “all things are lawful for me” between quotation marks to highlight and set them apart from the rest of the verse, recognizing that it is indeed a quotation. It had become a Corinthian password.

Let me give you a little background on Greek thought to help you understand their perspective. The Greeks had a very stoic attitude toward the body. They regarded it as a prisonhouse for the soul. It was the soul that mattered, they felt, not the body. One Greek proverb described the body as a tomb. So they trivialized the body and exalted the soul. The soul was eternal and would live forever, but the body was to be discarded at death. Because of this assumption, it was logical to develop one of two attitudes toward the body: either you battered it into total subjection and ruthlessly controlled all your desires (which led to the asceticism of the Middle Ages, when monks and others did extreme things to their bodies), or you let the body go and satisfy every one of its desires because it was of no significance anyway; all that mattered was the soul. Apparently this latter extreme was the direction the Corinthians had gone. They felt you could engage in any illicit sexual activity because what you did with your body didn’t matter.

Remember also they had heard Paul’s teaching that they were free from the law. Perhaps the apostle had even made this statement, “All things are lawful for me.” However, they were now using that phrase to justify the fact that they could do anything they wanted with their bodies. They had put all this together and reasoned that all things were now lawful for them.

Notice that Paul doesn’t disagree with that statement, because there is truth in it. Everything that God has made is good. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4: “For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is sanctified (put to its intended use) by the word of God and prayer.” Titus reminds us, that “To the pure all things are pure.” God has given us all things richly to enjoy. Everything God has given us is good. There is nothing basically evil. Satan doesn’t create evil. He can’t create anything. He takes the good things that God creates and distorts and twists them. So there are certain things that are prohibited because they are destructive to us. That is because Satan has come along and perverted those things that are good and used them in wrong ways. You can see Paul’s point: sex is lawful, it is good, it was given to us by God.

It is at this point that we can see the difference between legalism and genuine Christianity. The legalist looks at life and says that everything is wrong unless it we know it is right. However, the Bible says that everything is right unless we know it is wrong. If I say that everything is wrong unless I know that it is right, then I am afraid and always suspect of everything, wondering if I am going to do something wrong that I didn’t know was wrong and God will be angry with me.

But truth must always be held in balance, thus Paul qualifies this with two other statements. First, he maintains that though “all things are lawful, all things are not profitable.” Because the message of the gospel is one of freedom it does not mean that everything is helpful or advisable. There are some things that when used in certain ways are destructive and hurtful to ourselves or others. Paul desires that everything he does have a positive result on his life and on the lives he touches day by day. That is a great principle to apply in the whole arena of interpersonal relationships, especially between sexes. Secondly, Paul says, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.” Barclay translates it this way, “All things are allowed me, but I will not allow anything to get control of me.”

Paul reminds us that freedom is not being able to do anything you want. To indulge your desires in unsuitable ways is to make yourself a slave of that desire. No, says Paul, I will put everything to its proper use. Sex is good and proper when it is enjoyed in its intended place. And, as we saw very clearly in Proverbs 5 a couple of weeks ago, the proper place for sex is in marriage where there is commitment together for life. Outside of that sex is destructive and hurtful. That is why God is against immorality. It was a wonderful day for me when I discovered that things are not evil because God calls them sin. God calls them sin because they really are evil. God didn't arbitrarily make a list of ten things that are immoral or illegal or fattening.

Before we can ever get a handle on understanding sexual immorality we need to first understand the wider problem of man's disobedience and what God is doing to restore his plan. Whenever I think of this truth I am reminded of the story Mel White shares about his brother, who as a 12-year-old was riding his bike down a beautiful park trail in Portland, Oregon. The path went past a scenic reservoir and through beautiful fields of flowers. But near the end of the trail, unknown to his brother, a construction crew had cut through the path to make a road. No warning signs had been posted and no barriers had been built. Suddenly, rounding the corner, the trail ended and dropped 40 feet to the road below. His brother hurtled into space and was killed. Evil works that way. You start down what looks like a beautiful mountain trail. Slowly, your speed increases until you lose control and hurtle into space. The beautiful trail is in reality a death trap. God loves us too much to leave the trails unmarked. And he marks those trails sin. That is why our attitude towards those living in sin is never to be one of arrogance, of looking down on them, but one of sorrow, compassion and concern for them because what they are doing is damaging to themselves.

Before giving his rich exposition on the body Paul deals with another contemporary saying in Corinth that was used by those who were attempting to justify their physical indulgences: “Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.” They drew from that saying the idea that nature demands satisfaction. The body's desires were made to be satisfied, in other words. When you are hungry you eat. Nobody claims you are sinning when you satisfy that desire. God has equally given us sexual desires. And when I feel that urge I ought to merge. That is how they were reasoning. It is a common argument today.

But Paul's answer is a profound revelation of the difference between our physical and our sexual appetites. There is all the difference in the world between food which is digested by the stomach and passed out through the bowels, and sexual intercourse, which affects the entire personality and can't be dismissed flippantly as a purely physiological phenomenon. The apostle finishes that statement with his own judgement: “God will do away with both of them.”

The stage is now set for Paul to unfold his view of the body. This is in contrast with all the prevailing views held by pagan philosophers and followed by untaught Corinthian Christians. It might even challenge some of your own presuppositions.

II. Understanding sexuality: A proper view of the body (6:13-20)

I would like to point out three significant statements Paul makes about the body. These are very powerful statements which lead to his conclusion in verse 20, “therefore, glorify God in your body.”

We need to remember that Paul is talking about our physical bodies—bodies which become tired and wear out, which sweat and bleed and vomit, and which grow out of shape. It is our bodies that are instruments for evil or good. It is our bodies that Paul urges us to present to God as a living sacrifice. Obedience and disobedience are expressed in our bodies or they are expressed nowhere. Obedience for the Christian is a body activity. God does not address us purely as minds or emotions or wills, but as people with bodies. His concern is not for abstract acts, like adultery in theory, or immorality in theory, but for the whole person who does these actions.

The first statement Paul makes is in verses 13-14:

A. Our bodies have an eternal purpose in the Lord

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)

As we said earlier, there is a tremendous difference between the stomach and the body. One is transient, animal tissue, of no eternal significance; the other is who I am. There can be no analogy between the use of the stomach for digestion and the body for fornication. The body is intended to be used by God. God has a purpose for our bodies, a purpose that does not terminate with death. The Lord is for the body. He loves your body. I remember Dave Roper saying, “It doesn't matter to him whether it is tall, dark and handsome; or short, shot and shapeless.” God is for your body. He created it to be an instrument by which you can display his character in the world, to use your body as God intended: your mouth, your ears, your hands, and your sex organs as well.

That went cross-grain to what the Corinthians believed. They thought the gods didn't care about the body. Christianity is almost the only great religion which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God himself took on a human body.

Notice also that the purpose God has for our bodies is not thwarted by death: “God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through his power.” It is an eternal purpose.

Paul makes an important point in linking our bodies as an integral part of our indestructible personality. Notice when he says “God will raise us up,” he has in mind the raising of our bodies. Now it apparently will be made of different materials, but it will be recognizable. We will be able to recognize one another. We will never be disembodied spirits.

The body is not inconsequential. It is not a plaything. It is an instrument designed for an eternal purpose. Do not abuse it. It is not an instrument for self-gratification. Find out what God wants you to do with your body and do it!

This purpose is explained more fully in the remainder of the passage.

The second fact is found in verses 15-17:

B. Our bodies have been united with and possessed by the Lord

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take 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 body 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)

There are two wonderful mysteries revealed here that we would never have known apart from God revealing them. The first is the remarkable truth of our union with Christ.

The truth that the human body of Christians and the Lord himself are intertwined is described in the phrase in verse 15: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" That is not just symbolical truth, but a wonderful reality. Remember Jesus described it to his disciples this way, "I in you and you in Me." Our physical bodies are limbs of Christ. In fact, the measure of our union is described in the phrase: "the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him." He has possessed us.

There is another mystery that is revealed here in this truth, and that is the nature of the sex act. Paul says that something goes on in the act of sex that creates a union far deeper than the merely passing pleasure of the moment. The two personalities become one, so merged that Paul uses the same phrases to describe the Christian's interaction with Christ as he used to describe a person's actions in joining himself to a prostitute.

Notice that Paul goes clear back to Genesis. He takes the word that was spoken to Adam and Eve in the garden, the foundational truth about marriage, and applies it to a passing relationship with a street prostitute. It is much more than your feelings will ever recognize. Even the most casual sexual relationship, done strictly on a cash basis, with no personal or emotional involvement is, according to Paul, the one-flesh joining of people. We would like to think that those two scenarios are not analogous, but they are. It is part of the mystery that God set forth in the garden. Men who have been involved in a number of sexual relationships will testify to this truth. There is an intimacy that can never be forgotten. It is the sharing of a mystery together. Sexual intercourse unites two people in such a way that they are never able to separate themselves completely.

Lewis Smedes in his book, *Sex for Christians*, writes, "No one can really do what the prostitute and her customer try; nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside."

The world will never tell you that truth. People will tell you that you can go from one affair to the next and it will have no effect on you, that you can just forget it. But the Scripture tells us that act so unites the two personalities that they can never be completely torn apart.

Now it is the revelation of those two mysteries that makes the apostle's point so powerful. If we are so inseparably linked to Christ that we are one spirit with him, if our bodily members are actually limbs of Christ, it is inconceivable (as well as immoral) to abuse that body to resort to sexual intercourse with prostitutes.

This is also the strongest reason why believers ought not to marry unbelievers. The physical limbs of a Christian are members of Christ; those of non-Christians are not. If a Christian therefore

chooses to have sexual intercourse with an unbeliever, he "becomes one body with her," according to the foundational truth expressed in the phrase, "the two shall become one flesh." But it is impossible for that one flesh relationship to be integrated with the "one spirit" relationship between that believer and his Lord. Such a believer is from that point on leading a disintegrated life.

Os Guinness has some comments on the implications of this truth:

This is the ideal that judges all the rest of Christian sexual ethics in the Scriptures. That is what is behind every prohibition in this area. Why is adultery wrong? Why are homosexual practices wrong? Why is pre-marital intercourse wrong? Simply because there is no true oneness and therefore there should be no one-flesh either. And that is precisely what Paul argues here. The point is not that some Corinthian Christians were sleeping with a prostitute. Paul could just as easily talked about the good looking housewife down the street, or the good looking athlete down the stairs. He says "he" because it was men in Corinth who tended to have double standards; and he says "prostitute" because in Corinth that was the particular problem. But the true problem was that there was intimacy without intention, and there was communion without commitment.

It should be positively affirmed that virginity is one of the most creative, releasing, purifying and beautiful gifts which can be brought to Christian marriage.

There is a third fact truth that is revealed:

C. Our bodies have been redeemed by the Lord

Verses 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)

In these verses Paul puts immorality in a different category from other sins. He says it is unique in its effect on the body. Many people have struggled with that verse because it appears that there are other sins that affect the body. Alcohol, drug abuse, even gluttony affect our bodies. But Paul says immorality is different from all these sins, and the reason he gives for that statement is found in verse 19: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?"

Our bodies are not just physical shells of remarkable composition: they are "a temple of the Holy Spirit." Do you realize that truth? God himself, the awesome God of the universe lives in your body.

That truth has been a tremendous encouragement to me and has kept me from doing things I know would have been destructive. Let me point out to you also that the word Paul uses for temple is not the word that refers to the temple complex but to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary. Our bodies are a sanctuary for God. Earlier Paul affirmed that the whole church of God at Corinth was God's temple, and he had stern warnings against anyone who might destroy that temple. Now he uses that same metaphor to remind individual Christians at Corinth that God has given to each the gift of his indwelling Holy Spirit, "whom you have from God."

That is what makes humanity so special. We have the capacity to hold God. And when God dwells in something, he turns it into a temple. But immorality defiles the temple. It offers it to another. It

brings the body of that person who is the temple into a wrong union, therefore it is idolatry. That is why Paul's command in this area is to flee immorality. Don't fool around with it. Don't play with it. There is too much to lose. Don't try to see how far you can go in this area. If you are reading a book and you come across a section that begins to arouse those desires, put the book down. If you are watching television and a certain scene begins to awaken those desires, change the channel or walk out of the room.

It is the unanimous advice of all of Scripture. Don't try to fight it. Don't try to deal with it. Get away from it. These are subtle, powerful forces. The widespread destruction that we see all around us is ample evidence to their subtle power. We need to deal harshly with ourselves in this area. Remember the man in Proverbs 5 who went after the harlot. He confessed at the end of his life: "I wish I listened to those who warned me. I have given my strength to strangers." He realized that he lost his manhood. His life had been drained away.

Paul's plea for purity is based on the cost of redeeming our bodies: "You are not your own. For you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body." Before they met Christ and experienced his freedom, the Corinthians were slaves to themselves, to their self-centered desires, to self-indulgence and bodily passions. Then along came a Master with the resources to set them completely free. He paid the necessary ransom. Their bodies were no longer like chunks of flesh up for sale to the highest bidder in the slave market. They had been bought with a price and they belonged to a new Master. He now intended every physical faculty they had within them to express the glory of God. So far from despising their bodies, he was committed to working out from within the redemption of their bodies.

So we are urged to learn from the Spirit of God what it means to glorify God in our bodies; not to pander to them, make excuses for them, or be flippant about the many powerful temptations to abuse them.

Listen to the psalmist,

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Ps 139:13-16 NIV)

I am sure many of you here this morning wish you would had heard this truth earlier, or wish you had obeyed it. A message like this brings painful memories, and perhaps a great deal of guilt, to the surface. Your question is, "What do I do now?" If you want to see how the Lord looks at you, read the eighth chapter of John. The Pharisees had trapped a young woman in the act of adultery. They dragged her to the temple courtyard and deposited her at Jesus' feet. Imagine the shame, embarrassment and fear that filled her being. In that moment we see how God responds to our sexual failures. Jesus paused, and then he spoke to her accusers the words, "He who is without sin cast the first stone." And they all left, beginning with eldest, the Scripture tells us. They left because they all knew they were guilty of their own sexual lusts. And then the One who had the right to judge her refused to judge, but rather set her free with the words: "Go and sin no more." It was the promise of a new beginning.

That is God's word to you today. You no longer need to fail. Don't dwell on the past. The Lord has paid for that. Your past failures are no excuse for your present disobedience. It has been taken care of at the cross. He does not hold it against you. It need no longer paralyze you from being who you need to be today.

In your present struggle with immorality talk to the Lord who lives inside you. Let him be your powerful ally.

Let me close by sharing with you a prayer that I often pray when sexual lust begins to dance in my head. Maybe it can be yours today:

Lord, I am tempted now. Don't let me forget Your long-range dreams for my life. Don't let me trade them in for some short-term sexual thrill. Keep me safe Lord, from the evil working on me this moment. Protect me. Make me strong. Guide me. I love you, Lord. I am yours. I want your will more than anything. I will not throw that away.

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