

INATTENTION TO TRUE SEXUAL FREEDOM

SERIES: MORAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

by Doug Goins

This is a significant year for PBC as a church family. September 21, 1948, was the first Sunday morning service of a group of folks who called themselves "Peninsula Bible Fellowship." They met in the community center up the street. So this year is our 50th anniversary. The week beginning September 21, this year, we're going to have a wonderful time together celebrating what God has done, considering what is going on now among us, and hopefully anticipating our next 50 years of life together.

The passage of Scripture that we're looking at in this message, I think by God's providence, is a paragraph that has at its heart the words that are inscribed on the wall at the front of our auditorium, "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." We're picking up where we left off last August in the book of 1 Corinthians, but God decided that he wanted us to consider these words that describe basic Christian reality in the first message preached in 1998. When the elders built this building (43 years ago), they wanted us to be reminded of this liberating truth every time we entered this room. We have been freed from the tyranny of self-direction through the redemption of Jesus Christ and the filling of his Holy Spirit.

The specific context of Paul's statement of this great truth in 1 Corinthians 6, concerns the area of our sexuality. In verses 12-20, Paul corrects misunderstandings we have about sexual freedom and sexual bondage. He explains what it means to glorify God in our bodies, to enjoy true sexual freedom.

These Corinthian Christians to whom Paul was writing, struggled with their sexuality, as we do today. How are we to be Christian and sexual at the same time? The sexual revolution was not invented in the 20th century. Believers in this first-century church in Corinth also had to struggle with how to be faithful to God in a totally permissive society.

By way of quick review, 1 Corinthians is a very practical, issue-oriented book. In the first four chapters, Paul was primarily concerned about the problems the church in Corinth was having with competitiveness, pride, prejudice, and divisiveness--relationship struggles in the body. In chapters 5 and 6, Paul has been dealing with some specific moral and ethical issues in that church. Chapter 5 dealt with incest that was going on there. The first half of chapter 6 dealt with a tendency these Christians had to sue one another. They were almost fixated on lawsuits and gaining their own rights legally.

The passage before us in 6:12-20, concentrates on the Corinthian Christians' inattention to true sexual freedom. First-century Corinth was a lot like our western society today. People were committed to self-gratification. Sexual permissiveness was the norm. The temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sex, dominated not just the skyline of the city, but also the economy. It was like a tourist center. People from all over the world came to worship sex at the temple of Aphrodite.

The Christians in that city struggled to maintain lives of purity and chastity. Again, it sounds much like our experience today. These believers in Corinth were relatively new Christians, and they still reflected much of their Greek cultural origins. Corinth was a city of intellectual arrogance, moral depravity, and unbridled materialism. All three of those things fueled the confusion over dishonoring and honoring God with their bodies, the misunderstanding of sexual freedom and sexual slavery. Some of these baby Christians in Corinth were still actively involved in sexual immorality, specifically in prostitution. It was hard for them to break the old patterns, and if they did break them, it was easy to fall back into them. We've seen for five-and-a-half chapters that they struggled to break old patterns in all kinds of areas--love of human wisdom, pride, divisive

spirit, love of lawsuits. In the same way, it was difficult for them to give up their immorality.

I was thinking of an example of that this week. A dear friend of mine here at PBC, who has walked with the Lord for years, talked about how he accepted the Lord in college through the ministry of InterVarsity, and how he was overwhelmed with the joy of having his sins forgiven and his conscience cleansed. Then, he said, he found out he had to quit sleeping with his girlfriend. Nobody had told him that was part of the deal and it was a very difficult pattern to break. To him, that was normal.

Verses 12-20 offer a powerful argument for sexual purity. They're going to give us tremendous insight into what's wrong with casual sex. The Corinthian Christians may have struggled with prostitution, but this text is relevant for anybody today who enters into a sexual encounter outside the marriage relationship, whether they're a high school or college student experimenting with sex, a single adult involved in an immoral relationship, or a married person having an affair with somebody besides their spouse.

Paul begins his counsel in verses 12-13a, with two quotations that apparently were used by some of the people in the church in Corinth to justify their continued involvement in sexual activity outside the sanctity and protection of marriage. One was, "All things are lawful for me," and the other was, "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food." These were popular Corinthian slogans that perhaps the church had claimed as its own. But their embracing of those maxims showed that they were misunderstanding and misusing their sexual freedom, and dishonoring God in their bodies. Let's look at Paul's response:

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. Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food; but God will do away with both of them.

THE HIGH COST OF SEXUAL SIN

Paul believed that everything was permissible, or lawful, for a Christian. Paul was the great champion of Christian freedom. But it was always freedom in Christ. Listen to what Paul says to the Galatians in 5:1: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." And in 5:13: "For you were called to freedom, brethren..." In Romans 8:21, Paul rejoiced in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." In Romans 6:14, he said, "...You are not under law, but under grace." Our salvation isn't maintained through self-effort, or by works of the law. Romans 7:6: "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."

The only thing that saves us initially is the grace of God, and it is only the grace of God that keeps us secure in our salvation relationship with God. As Christians, we are righteous, holy, fully justified in God's sight. Paul said in Romans 8:33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies." There is no sin that we can commit as Christians that isn't already covered by the grace of God. No sin can forfeit our salvation. No accusation can stand against us. God is the supreme court, there is no higher appeal. He has declared us righteous, and that settles the issue.

These Corinthians embraced that reality. Unfortunately, they ignored the principle that Paul states so succinctly in the second half of Galatians 5:13: "...Only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh..." Theirs was the kind of behavior that Paul challenged passionately in Romans 6:1: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be!" As we're tempted to do today, those believers in Jesus Christ had rationalized their sinful thinking and behavior. They didn't understand how harmful sexual sin is to everybody involved, and they didn't understand how it gains control of those who indulge in it.

Paul touches on both of those issues in verse 12. Sin is harmful, not profitable. And sin will master us; it has an agenda to control us. Paul says, "Every sin I commit as a Christian is forgiven in Jesus Christ. But no sin ever produces anything good or right. Ultimately, no sin can ever be worthwhile or profitable." That word "profitable" means to confer a benefit, to be advantageous or useful. In a sense, we as believers are no longer under the penalty of the law in any way--all things are lawful for us. But the price of doing some things is

terribly high. Sin is very unprofitable.

Sexual sin brings tremendous disadvantage. It never brings profit, it always brings loss in an eternal sense. No sinful behavior that we engage in has more built-in problems and destructiveness than sexual sin. It has broken more marriages, destroyed more homes, caused more disease and heartache, and shattered more lives than drugs and alcohol combined. It provokes attitudes of bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, and hatred. It allies itself with other destructive, sinful behaviors like lying, stealing, gossip, cheating, slander, and even murder. All you have to do is read the newspaper or watch the evening news on television to see that graphically played out. The destructive result of sexual sin is frighteningly unprofitable.

THE ENSLAVING NATURE OF SEXUAL SIN

Now let's look at Paul's second response to this slogan: "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Again, Paul was free in the grace of Christ to do as he pleased, but he refused to allow himself to be controlled or enslaved by anything or anyone but Jesus Christ. He wouldn't be in bondage to any thought, habit, or custom--certainly not to sexual sin. We already read Romans 6:14: "...You are not under law, but under grace." In the first half of that verse Paul says, "...Sin shall not be master over you..." No sin is more enslaving than sexual sin. It begins with fantasy in the thought life, with fixation. Then come small indulgences and indiscretions. They always lead to greater ones, and finally end with flagrant vice. Like all other sinful temptations that aren't resisted, sexual sin will grow. Eventually it will corrupt and destroy us, and often innocent people around us as well.

A number of years ago, a woman in our body, who was then in her early seventies, came to me for counsel. She had just found out that her husband of more than 50 years had basically been living a double life of homosexual promiscuity, and had contracted AIDS. She was fearful for her own health and life. Sexual sin is destructive and controlling, and the Corinthian Christians didn't understand that they were playing with fire.

SEXUAL SIN VIOLATES OUR PERSONHOOD

The second slogan, in verse 13, is, "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food." Paul responds, "...But God will do away with both of them." Some people in the church of Corinth were rationalizing their lifestyle of sexual involvement outside of marriage by saying that sex is a normal, biological appetite to be satisfied, just like eating. They were not seeing sex as a gift from God to be cherished. It's true that food and the stomach were created by God, and they were created for each other. But that relationship, Paul says, is purely biological. There is a profound difference between our physical and our sexual appetites. We can't compare food and the digestive process to sexual intercourse, because sex is not a purely physiological act. Unlike eating, it's an act of the whole person, to be expressed thoughtfully and carefully. To deal casually with sex is a violation of the whole Christian view of how God created our personhood.

Tragically, we live today in a very Corinthian society. We have prostituted sex in virtually every area of human activity, reducing it to an appetite that just needs to be satisfied. And in the process we've degraded men and women and children who are made in the image of God. You probably agree that hard-core pornography is destructive to personhood. But I've got to confess that I end up being desensitized to the soft-core pornography of the advertising industry. From *Cosmopolitan* and *Gentlemen's Quarterly* to athletic shoe commercials, sexuality sells the product. The Gold Rush cheerleaders sell the Forty-Niners football team. This week I was reading *People* magazine, and in one of the ads some hunky, shirtless male model was selling Hagar pants. But the Scriptures are clear that human sexuality is not something to be exploited or demeaned. Our sexuality is a beautiful, powerful, life-giving gift from God himself. We're to protect it and cherish it with gratitude to our heavenly Father who loves to give us good gifts.

Corinthian culture misunderstood and misused sexual freedom, and the result was that they dishonored God in their bodies. But we struggle with the same temptations today. People live wrongly because they believe wrongly. And what Paul wants to do now, beginning in the middle of verse 13, is tell us the truth about what's right about human sexuality, about how God has created our bodies. Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, "And do not be conformed to this world..." The world is always trying to press us into a mold. Salvation, Paul says, is spiritual transformation "by the renewing of your mind..." And what he's going to do in the rest of the

paragraph is renew our mind.

We're going to look at chapter 7 in the next couple of messages, which will deal with the specific issues that are faced by single people and married people, respectively, in dealing with sexuality. But here in chapter 6, Paul deals with spiritual principles pertaining to sexuality that apply to all of us, no matter what our age or our marital status. And there are three important realities about the uniqueness of our bodies. All three of them are mysterious and tremendously exciting. This is divine revelation. Our Corinthian culture doesn't have a clue about this eternal truth. Only the Bible tells us what our bodies were created for. The first one is found in the middle of verse 13: "...The body is not for immorality, but for the Lord..." The second is found in verse 15: "...Your bodies are members of Christ." And the third is found in verse 19: "...Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit..."

That word "body" appears seven times in these verses. It's the Greek word *soma*. There are a number of different Greek words for the physical body. This one has a very consistent usage and definition. It refers to our physical body, which was created to live in relationship with God; the totality of the human being, including the personality, created for interpersonal communication. We have a dog named Fletcher. He does not have a *soma*. He has a dog body. He can't enjoy all the things I enjoy, being created in God's image. God designed us for much more than biological functioning. And he doesn't address us only as intellects or emotions or wills either, but as persons with bodies. So the physical aspect of our nature is very important.

OUR BODIES HAVE AN ETERNAL PURPOSE

The first statement in verses 13b-14, says that our bodies were created for an eternal purpose. Our God-designed and God-controlled sexuality will last forever.

**...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.**

Involving our bodies in sexual immorality of any kind violates the higher purpose of being a vessel of the Lord for his use and his glory.

That word "immorality" comes from the Greek word *porneia*, from which we get our word "pornography." That word is used a number of times in chapters 5 and 6. And one of the points Paul makes is that any use of our bodies sexually outside the marriage relationship, from God's perspective, is pornographic, whether it's solitary sex, fornication, adultery, or whatever. God created a body for the Lord Jesus when he lived here on the earth, and that body became an instrument that demonstrated the glory of God, the power of God, the beauty of God's holiness. We are given bodies just like Jesus'. They are not to be used for self-indulgence. We are not playmates or boy toys. We are men and women who are eternal instruments through which the glory of God and the grace of God are to be displayed. We're vessels that contain the very character of God.

Our bodies weren't designed to serve the Lord in this life only, but in the life to come. In chapter 15, Paul is going to amplify the statement in verse 14 about our bodies being raised up, and we're going to learn that these bodies are going to be changed. They'll be resurrected, glorified, heavenly bodies. They belong to God now, and they'll belong to God forever. Listen to how Paul described it in Philippians 3:20-21: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state [the way we are here and now] into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." What our physical, emotional, volitional state will be like in our glorified, heavenly bodies, I don't know. That's a mystery that we'll find out when we get there. Will there be sexual activity in heaven? Well, not in any physical sense that we can understand in our mortal bodies. But we are sexual beings, and our bodies will be resurrected. God is preparing us for something way beyond our ability to imagine. So let's not undermine our eternal purpose with sexual immorality. The call is to sexual purity because of our eternal destiny.

OUR BODIES ARE MEMBERS OF CHRIST

The second important truth is found in verses 15-17. Our spirituality and our sexuality are mysteriously

intertwined.

...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 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.

There are three important things in these two verses. First, for us as Christians, our bodies are members of Christ himself. These three verses describe the mystery of our union with Christ. Jesus described it in John 15:4: "Abide in Me, and I in you." Paul described it in Colossians 1:27, as "Christ in you, the hope of glory." When we become Christians, we're joined in spirit with Jesus Christ. He comes to live in us, and whatever we do with our body implicates our resident Lord Jesus.

Second, in verse 16, it tells us that sexual intercourse unites two human beings physically and spiritually. That's the point of the Old Testament quotation from Genesis chapter 2, "The two will become one flesh." When the Lord brought Adam and Eve together, they entered into a sexual relationship that involved them as both physical beings and spiritual beings. And you can't tear those two things apart. D. S. Bailey describes sexual intercourse as "an act which by reason of its very nature engages and expresses the whole personality in such a way as to constitute a unique mode of self-disclosure and self-commitment." (1) There is no such thing as casual sex or inconsequential sex or recreational sex. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis says, "The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured." (2)

The third important point, in the second half of verse 15, is that for Christians, sexual intercourse outside the bond of marriage unites the members of Christ himself with that sex partner. And Paul's horror at the thought almost overwhelms him. "May it never be!" To use a part of Christ's own body in an act of sexual immorality, again whether it's solitary sex, fornication, or adultery, is dragging Jesus into our sexual indulgence. Now it's not as if Christ is personally tainted with our sin, as somebody has said, any more than a ray of sunshine is polluted by shining on a garbage dump. But his reputation is dirtied by our involvement in sexual sin.

OUR BODIES ARE THE TEMPLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The last three verses bring tremendous encouragement about the resources God has given us to live a life of sexual purity. It starts with two warnings in verse 18:

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.

Paul's counsel regarding sexual sin is the same that Solomon gives his son in Proverbs 5: Run for your life! Flee from sexual sin. Don't try to dialogue with it or manage it. Like Joseph, when he was confronted with Potiphar's wife's advances (Genesis 39), just take off and run. Paul has already made the point that the stakes are way too high to dabble in it or to think that we can somehow control it.

How is it that we sin against our own body in sexual immorality, as Paul asserts in verse 18? I don't believe that sexual sin is the worst possible sin, but it is the most unique in its character. It comes from inside the body, it's bent on personal gratification, and it drives us like no other impulse. And when it's fulfilled, it does have a way of internally destroying a person that no other sin has. Because sexual intimacy is the deepest uniting of two persons, its misuse corrupts on the deepest human level.

Listen to this profound insight from a Catholic theologian, Brendan Byrne, commenting on verse 18: "The immoral person perverts precisely that faculty within himself that is meant to be the instrument of the most intimate bodily communication between persons. He sins against his unique power of bodily communication and in this sense sins in a particular way 'against his own body.' All other sins in this respect by comparison

are 'outside' the body--with 'body' having in this verse the strong sexual overtones that appear to cling to it throughout the passage as a whole. No other sin engages one's power of bodily personal communication in precisely so intimate a way." (3)

But then Paul closes in verse 19, with this wonderfully positive, encouraging news about how we ought to view our bodies and express ourselves sexually. There are three important points in those last two verses. First, we are filled up with the Holy Spirit of God. He is resident within us. We are his temple, but literally it's not the whole temple, but the holy of holies, the sanctuary, the place in the temple where God dwelt. Each one of us, if we have a relationship with Christ, is the sanctuary of God. Paul calls us to sexual purity because we are the dwelling place of the eternal God of the universe. So how can we defile the place where God lives with sexual immorality?

The second word of great good news is in the middle of verse 19: We have been given the Holy Spirit as a gift. We have received him, and he lives inside of us, ready to help us in our battle against sin. One of the words for Holy Spirit in the New Testament is *parakaleo*, which means "counselor" or "helper." We have been given a divine resource in the battle against the flesh and against sexual sin. We don't have to be in bondage, because we have the power of the Spirit of God within us to supernaturally help us resist the temptation. It is possible to live a life of sexual purity.

Finally, we have been bought with a price, and we're not our own. So we have no right to pervert or misuse our bodies sexually, because they don't belong to us to do with what we will. We're not the masters of our bodies anymore. We have been purchased by God at tremendous cost, the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross for us. And that blood has cleansed us from sin. Again, how could we even think about profaning that atoning sacrifice that purchased our salvation? The call is to glorify God through sexual purity out of gratitude for what Jesus did. So we have the privilege of living lives that honor God physically, emotionally, relationally, in every possible way. Being sexually pure does affect our relationships with each other, but ultimately it's about the Lord. He is the only one to whom we owe adoration and ultimate obedience. This is an amazing reality--God can be glorified in the choices we make in expressing our sexuality. The Lord is honored when we resist sexual temptation. And he is also glorified when we express our sexuality in beautifully appropriate ways in the marriage relationship.

The call in this passage is to renounce dishonoring God with our bodies, and to rejoice in and to embrace what we're called to in glorifying God with our physical bodies. And God is committed to working in us to make us sexually pure, consistent, integrated, whole people.

NOTES

1. D.S. Bailey, quoted by Craig Blomberg in *New International Version Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. © 1995, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI., P. 128.

2. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Bantam Books, New York, N.Y. All rights reserved. P. 54.

3. Brendan Byrne, "Sinning Against One's Own Body," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, No. 45. © 1983. P. 613.

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