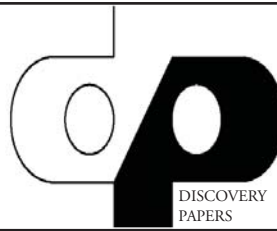


SEXUALITY: HOW TO LIVE IN YOUR BODY

SERIES: THE SKIPPING STONE OF THE SPIRIT



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1 Corinthians 6:12-20
6th Message
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We are wrapping up our series looking at significant cultural issues that we face today. Unfortunately, we've worked our way through all the interesting ones, so we're left with a boring one: sexuality. Even though it might be boring, this topic is a very relevant one in our culture.

We are absolutely surrounded by sexuality. Sex dominates our news with stories of sex scandals, sex abuse, and sex education. Sex is a political issue, whether it is gay marriage, military rules for homosexuals, or the sex lives of our politicians. Sex is a personal issue. Many of us have struggled with temptation, pornography, lustfulness, or adultery.

It's no secret that the church has always had something to say about sexuality. But it's not always clear what we should say. How do we as followers of Christ respond to the sexual issues in our lives and in our culture. How do we live in these bodies of ours?

To help us think about these issues, there's a scene in the movie *Toy Story 3*¹ which takes place right after Woody and all the other toys have just been donated to a day care facility. The resident toy, who has lived at the daycare facility for quite a while, explained to Woody and his friends that the benefit of living at the facility, instead of living at Andy's house, is that they wouldn't be owned; there would be no heartbreak. So they were now free to love and be loved by many children, year after year. They wouldn't have the fear of rejection because there was always someone new to love them. What I want us to notice right now is the freedom that these toys felt because they were separated from a long-term relationship with Andy. But Woody felt differently. He felt strongly that they belonged to Andy.

This scene raises issues of freedom, relationship, and ownership. We'll dig a bit deeper as we continue. Now it's probably not immediately obvious what this scene has to do with sex, but it will become clearer as we continue.

We can't possibly answer all the questions there are about sex this morning. Instead, my hope is to lay a foundation for how we think about our sexuality. How does our

relationship with Christ change our sexual behavior? How should it change the way we interact with the world?

To begin this conversation on sexuality, we'll be looking at three different eras, as we've been doing throughout this series. We're following the Spirit as a stone skipping across a pond. We're going to start with Scripture. We'll be looking at a provocative passage in a letter to the Corinthians. Then we'll move into the 20th century to look at an invention that changed how our culture views sexuality forever. We'll find out how Christians responded and what we can learn from that. Finally, we'll begin to ask some questions about the issues we see today and how God might be leading us to engage with those issues.

1 Corinthians 6: Be owned

As we've been doing, we're going to start off by looking at a biblical passage that addresses the issue we're talking about. This morning we'll be looking at a passage written to the Corinthians during the time when the church was trying to figure out what it meant to be the church. Paul founded the church at Corinth somewhere around 50 AD and spent a year and a half getting it started. He left behind a thriving church, but its rapid growth meant that there were some questions to figure out. Three or four years after he left, he wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians in order to help them through some of the issues they were facing.

In particular, the Corinthians were confused about how to behave sexually. They had heard this new message about life in Christ. They had become part of a new kingdom. And they knew that this radical change in their life meant that something had to be different with how they thought about sex. They just didn't know how it was different.

It's clear from Paul's letter that they were moving between two extremes. The first was an "anything goes" attitude where they could do whatever they wanted sexually because their real lives were their spiritual lives. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebukes them for approving of a man who has a sexual relationship with his father's wife. He has to explain

that being a Christian does not mean anything goes. The other attitude was a “nothing goes” attitude. This is where they swear off sex altogether. In chapter 7, Paul explains that it’s good for those who are married to enjoy sex with their spouse. Life in Christ does not mean denying their sexuality, but fulfilling it in its intended context: between a husband and wife.

But in between these passages, Paul offers some foundational guidance on how Christians ought to think about their sexuality. This is what we want to look at. It’s found in 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20. Let’s read these verses and see what we can observe about our sexuality from them.

1 Corinthians 6: 12-20

¹²“Everything is permissible for me”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me”—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food”—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. ¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

One of the primary things that Paul is doing in this passage is responding to certain catch phrases that the Corinthians were fond of. We know that they had written Paul a letter asking them about a number of things and it looks like he is answering some of those questions. So phrases like “Everything is permissible” and “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” are probably

phrases that they were using to describe their new status as Christians. The basic idea behind these phrases is a kind of separation between spiritual and physical. What they are getting at is the idea that it doesn’t matter what I do with my body because I’m now a spiritual being.

This leads to either thinking that “anything goes” because if my body doesn’t matter, I may as well have sex with whoever I want. Or it can lead to thinking that “nothing goes” because if my body doesn’t matter, I should deny myself any type of bodily experience.

But Paul goes to great lengths to challenge this way of thinking. He points out that Christ’s body was so important that God went to the effort of raising it from the dead—not just as a resurrected spiritual being, but as a physical man. That’s why we have stories of Jesus eating breakfast after the resurrection. It’s important to realize that Jesus’ body was raised.

Paul goes on to use a very explicit analogy to drive home his point. This is one of the places the Bible becomes a bit R-rated. The Corinthians are saying that their bodies don’t matter—God will destroy them. But Paul tells them that their bodies are members of Christ. The word used here that is translated members is a word that refers to limbs or organs. There is some indication that Paul may have sexual organs in mind. This is why Paul says it is so offensive to have sex with a prostitute. As one commentator puts it, “The man who has sex with a prostitute is, in Paul’s construction, Christ’s ‘member’ entering the body of the prostitute.”²² Wow! That is some powerful imagery. Paul wants these people to understand that this body we live in is connected to our spiritual life. Your body matters to God, not just your soul. This leads to Paul’s conclusion in verse 18: “Flee from sexual immorality.”

Then Paul uses a metaphor to help the Corinthians understand how to think about their bodies. He says “You are not your own. You were bought at a price” (vs. 19b, 20). This is language of the slave market. But recall that the discussion has centered around prostitution as well. So I don’t think it’s unreasonable to think that Paul has some echoes of the idea of prostitution when he uses the language of being bought.

Paul is saying that God has bought our bodies. He owns us. Our bodies belong to God. We cannot do whatever we want with them. At first, this sounds terrible. But remember Woody, who insisted that they belonged to

Andy. Even in our secular culture, there is an appeal to being owned. So this is the first way that we respond. We realize that we are owned. Be owned.

Ownership is a complicated thing. On one level, we fight against the idea of being owned. Americans are all about freedom and independence. Nobody owns us. Ownership brings to mind one of the darkest periods in our history when forced slavery based on race shamed us as a country. Ownership can imply dominance, authority, and abuse.

But on another level, ownership can be positive. Have you ever bought a car? How did you treat it when it was new? You took care of it, protected it, and treasured it. In the context of relationships, ownership is a powerful statement. We long to give ourselves to another. We want to belong to someone. Song of Solomon records the woman saying to her lover, "I am yours." This is one of the most passionate things to say to a lover. Ownership can also imply tenderness, passion, and love.

So when we see these words: "You are not your own," what should we feel? Rebellion or passion? It depends on what you think of God. But what is true of God is that He is a good God and He cares for us carefully and passionately.

This phrase reminds us that God oversees our sexual lives. He owns our bodies. He takes care of us. He meets our needs. Our bodies are important to Him. They are extensions of Him. So that means that we can't do whatever we want, because a lot of what we naturally want to do isn't good for us. But it also means that we don't deny all of our bodily desires. Rather, we allow our owner to take care of them. We can rest in the fact that God will provide for us.

In the area of sexuality, this is a huge relief. The standards that God places on our sexual behavior can be difficult to adhere to. In our culture, where most people get married in their 20's and 30's, it could mean being sexually mature for 15 or 20 years before becoming sexually active. I know that was a difficult season for me. But being owned means knowing that God provides for my needs. If you're single, then being owned means knowing that God will provide for your needs even during a season of sexual abstinence.

But even those who are married don't have unrestricted access to perfect sexual fulfillment. Sex is a complicated

thing even in marriage. If you're married, being owned means knowing that God provides for my needs, instead of my spouse. Your spouse doesn't meet your sexual needs. God does. That means you can stop denying or demanding and start trusting God.

The day care toy leader promised that not being owned meant no heartbreak. That may be true: sometimes being owned by God can break your heart. But it's worth it for the provision and the passion. Being owned is good news.

The Birth Control Pill: Be fruitful

We've laid a bit of a biblical foundation to this issue of sexuality from 1 Corinthians 6. Now we'll take a skip ahead into a time in history where sexuality was a significant issue and ask how the church responded. Last week we looked at an invention that completely changed the way people communicate and had a huge impact on culture. This week we are looking at another invention that many people have compared to the printing press in terms of its impact on culture. This was invented about fifty years ago and has almost completely changed the way that our culture views sexuality. We know it by two simple words: the pill.

Let's get a bit of background. The idea of birth control has been around for a long time. The Romans had primitive forms of condoms and other contraceptives, so it's not as if birth control was invented in 1960. So even in the early church, there was debate about whether using these forms of birth control was appropriate. Most theologians concluded that it wasn't and that became part of standard church doctrine for a long time.

Then we get to the 20th century. The ability to manufacture high quality rubber led to the mass production of much more reliable condoms in the early 20th century. The United States government spent a large amount of money providing condoms to its soldiers during World War II. Birth control was catching on in a new way. And for the most part, the church still argued against it, though some Protestant denominations began to change their minds.

Then came the birth control pill. It was invented in the late 1950's and hit the mass market around 1960. It was a moment of huge celebration for a lot of people.

Women felt that they had finally been freed from their inability to control the possibility of pregnancy. Listen to how one activist described the arrival of the pill: *"In its effects I believe that the pill ranks in importance with the discovery of fire."* Another woman said that the pill has finally allowed women *"to realize their full potential as human beings."* That's a remarkable thing to say: that for most of the history of the world, the way women's bodies were designed to work have made it impossible for them to realize their full potential as human beings. I would think twice about crediting any invention with allowing someone to realize their potential as a human being.

So what about the church? How did they respond?

It's interesting to note that one of the main scientists who worked on it was a devout Catholic. Once the birth control pill was released, everyone waited to see how the church would respond. Protestant denominations, for the most part, were OK with it. But people didn't know how the Catholic Church would respond. It took the Church a few years to think it all the way through. There was even a committee assembled by Pope Paul VI to discuss the issue. They voted 30-5 in favor of allowing use of the birth control pill. But finally in 1968, the Pope issued a statement saying that the birth control pill was not allowable for Catholics to use.

He had several reasons for his decision. First, he felt that since the church had been pretty insistent about not allowing birth control for 2000 years, there would have to be a unanimous opinion to change things. But he was also concerned about what the birth control pill implied about sex.

Prior to the birth control pill, sex existed in a context of relationships, consequences, and family. The birth control pill allowed sex to be separated from all of that. Pope Paul VI was concerned about the birth control pill primarily because it communicated something about sex that Christians don't believe: I'm in charge of my sexuality. Listen to a quote from the Pope's statement,

*"Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties."*³

Pope Paul VI was essentially asserting the same thing

we just saw Paul saying in 1 Corinthians 6, "You are not your own." Your sexual activity cannot be separated from your relational obligations.

But the Pope also felt that allowing use of the birth control pill would separate sex from its intended purpose. Listen to another quote from his decision. He said that *"an act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life ... frustrates [God's] design."*³

What happened is that sex became entirely about me. Sex became separated from other relationships in my life. Sex became separated from the possibility of creating new relationships. I could do it whenever I want, with whomever I want because it was just about me. Sex became about personal fulfillment. It became about pleasure and experience because there were no implications of sex.

So how do we respond to this? I don't think it's necessary to prohibit all birth control. But as with any new technology, we need to be aware of what has been lost when we gained a greater degree of control over our sexuality. We need to be aware of the message that reliable birth control allowed our culture to believe and can tempt us to believe. Pope Paul VI had some valid concerns about the birth control pill. After all, what followed the introduction of the birth control pill was what people call the Sexual Revolution. All the ideas and rules about sex were rewritten because the birth control pill changed everything. It led people to believe that sex is about my fulfillment. That is one of the most dangerous lies we can believe about sex.

Sometimes we actually promote that lie within our churches. When I was single, I was taught that Christians have the best sex. Because we know how to do it God's way, we experience more fulfillment. The message was that sex was about my fulfillment and God was on my side to maximize that experience for me. This was certainly a nice thing to hear as a young person, but it wasn't true. God is not in the business of maximizing my sexual fulfillment. He meets my needs, but those are very different things.

Sex is about intimacy, not fulfillment. It's about relationship, not personal pleasure. And intimacy in the Bible is always, always linked with fruitfulness. In John 15:5, Christ says "remain in me and I in you and you will bear much fruit." Spiritual intimacy with Christ results in fruitfulness. Sexual intimacy with our spouse results in fruitfulness. Where I differ from the Catholic Church is that I think the fruitfulness that comes from sexual

intimacy is about far more than kids. Making babies is only one kind of fruitfulness that comes from sex and it's clearly the most obvious kind. And separating sex from that kind of fruitfulness can tempt us to separate it from other kinds of fruitfulness.

So the charge to us is to be fruitful. First, we saw that we are to be owned. To recognize that God owns our bodies. What happened in history is that sexuality became separated from fruitfulness. Our calling as followers of Christ is to restore that link. Be fruitful.

And this charge to be fruitful can be carried out in a lot of ways. You don't have to be having sex to be fruitful. Fruitfulness is a way of life, a result of intimate relationships and the calling for every follower of Christ. Sex is one of the ways that God provides for two people to experience intimacy that results in fruitfulness. But it's not the only way. Sex can never be understood apart from the context of fruitfulness. But fruitfulness can happen apart from sex.

One of the problems we face in our culture is that we talk a lot about who I can have sex with and when it's OK. But we don't challenge the underlying assumptions about sex. We don't even realize that our culture thinks about sex the wrong way and they're teaching us to think about it that way too. That's where we need to speak up. Because if sex is all about my personal fulfillment, it's well and good for me as a married man to tell someone else that God says they can't have sex. But they will say that it doesn't make sense that God would deny them the opportunity to be fulfilled. And I would say that they are right. That doesn't seem right. But the problem is that sex isn't about my fulfillment. That's the idea that I need to challenge. Then we have a completely new starting point.

Our calling to be fruitful helps to free us from the unbearable demands that our culture puts on our sex lives. We can be fruitful through sex; we can be fruitful waiting to have sex; we can be fruitful apart from sex. Fruitfulness, not fulfillment is the highest calling. And as with a lot of things in the Christian life, you just might find that being fruitful ends up being more fulfilling in the long run.

Today: Be a family

So we've seen that our bodies are not our own. We can

be owned by God. And we've seen that in the last fifty years, sex has been separated from the ideas of intimacy and fruitfulness. But we can remember to be fruitful, with or without sex. So how is the Spirit leading us today? There are two areas that I'd like us to consider. First, how do we live out our own sexuality? Our personal lives? Second, how do we interact with our culture and the way they choose to live out their sexuality? The public sphere?

There's one image that I think we can use to help us think through each of these issues. The Bible uses this image repeatedly to describe how the people of God are to think of themselves. It's the idea of family. We are a family. As we think about how to live in our bodies sexually and how to interact with our world on issues of sexuality, we can be a family. Be a family.

As we think about our own sexuality, the idea of family helps us because it reminds us that we are interconnected. Our sexuality is about relationship. It is something that connects us to each other. The Corinthians were trying to compare sexuality with the stomach. They said that since the stomach would be done away with, it didn't matter what you ate. They saw sexuality the same way. And many people see sex this way: as just another appetite that can be satiated or denied.

I kind of have a thing for ice cream. Of any dessert possible, I'd probably pick ice cream 90% of the time. And after years of living this way, it has started to have some consequences, so I've been trying to cut back on it. But still every night, I have a craving for ice cream.

Some people view sexuality the same way: it's just a craving for an experience. But sex is different: it's relational. It's about another person. You don't want sex in the same way that you want ice cream ... or at least you shouldn't. Wanting sex is wanting to be with another person.

We're reminded of that when we think about sex in the context of the family. And it reminds us of where sex belongs. Sex belongs in the family. In an interconnected set of relationships. Even if a married couple have no children, they are still a family.

Think about where you've seen sex pictured in television, movies, and books. Now think about how many of those pictured sex in the context of a family. Our culture says that sex exists best outside of a family. That's simply wrong.

Sex belongs in a family.

My sexual decisions have consequences to people in my family. If you're single and you're having sex, then that affects everyone in your family. There are costs to your actions. If you're looking at pornography, you may think that it only affects you, but that is a lie. It affects your relationships, I promise you. There are costs to your actions. If you are married and you are holding yourself back from your spouse or pushing yourself too hard, your actions are affecting your whole family.

The birth control pill is just one of many things in our culture that tell us that our actions don't have consequences. But it is all a lie. This verse says that I am not my own. Someone paid a price for me. There was a cost to God purchasing me. It wasn't free. Neither are my actions free. We need to find ways to support each other in our sexual lives. To talk more openly about them. To encourage each other. If Paul is right about how closely linked our bodies and souls are, then we must ask how the Spirit is leading us as a community to live in our bodies well. We must help each other.

That's one way the Spirit might be leading us as believers within our community. But what about the issues that are raging in our culture. Issues of homosexuality, promiscuity, and abuse? How do we interact with our world? What is our position? I think the image of family can help us here too. If we are a family, then we have something to offer the world. But it's a bit different from what we usually offer.

Too often, Christians are focused on changing the sexual behaviors of people outside the family. We want people who don't know Christ to act like people who do. That's kind of a ridiculous thing to expect. People who do know Christ have a hard enough time living like it—how can we possibly expect those outside the church to live lives that honor God? All of the New Testament letters are focused on getting the church to act like the church, not on getting the world to act like the church. There is a clear acknowledgement that the church is different: there is a different standard of behavior for those within the family.

Paul talks about this in Corinthians in the same context as the previous passage we read. In 1 Corinthians 5, he tells them not to associate with immoral people within the church, but says that of course they are to associate with immoral people outside of the church, because it would be impossible not to. He concludes in verse 12 by saying,

“what business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?” This is pretty clear instruction. Our role is not to judge the sexual standards of those outside the church.

But this is exactly what a lot of Christians end up doing. This is what the world perceives us doing. Our primary attitude toward the world has been one of criticizing, condemning, and complaining. But this is not how it is supposed to be.

If we think of ourselves as a family, then our primary role is to be a family and invite others into our family. Our role is to open our arms to those outside the family and offer them our hospitality. We welcome them into our family. Then we worry about their behavior. We provide a safe place for those who have been hurt sexually and an open place for those who are sexually confused. We offer a place at the table of Christ. Once they start eating with us, we help them to learn some table manners. We have good news about sex to share with people. Not that when you become a Christian, you can maximize your sexual fulfillment, but when you follow Christ, you recognize what place sex plays in your family.

Conclusion

We live in a world dominated by sex and sexuality. Sex plays a big part in our culture. And our sexuality plays a big part in our lives: whether we are having sex, waiting for sex, frustrated by sex, or abusing sex. How we live in these bodies is part of our relationship with God. We worship a God who took on a body and resurrected that body after it died. Our God takes bodies seriously.

The world will tell us that my sexuality belongs to me. That my body is my own. That sex is about my fulfillment. And that my decisions only affect myself. This is the sexual ethic of our culture: anything goes as long as there is mutual consent.

But the Spirit leads us differently. We've seen that our bodies are not our own; we are owned by God. Ownership can lead to a kind of heartbreak. But the promise that our culture offers of individualism, independence, and personal fulfillment comes with a different kind of heartbreak. It's the burden of never quite being able to meet your own needs. Of striving to take care of yourself and always falling short. Of being alone and having no one but yourself to rely on. That can feel fine when things are going well, but as soon as things get hard, that promise

falls apart.

So we can rest in God. We can be owned. We can be fruitful and we can be a family. May the Spirit lead us to live in our bodies well; to do what Paul called “honoring God with our bodies” (v. 20). May the Spirit enable us to invite others into our family so that they may know the freedom of being owned. What we have to offer the world is good news. May the Spirit help us to share it.

NOTES

¹Toy Story 3 © Disney / Pixar. All rights reserved.

²Martin, D.B., *The Corinthian Body*, p.176. Copyright © 1995 by Yale University. All rights reserved.

³Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*. (Given at St. Peter's, Rome, on the 25th day of July, the feast of St. James the Apostle, in the year 1968, the sixth of Our pontificate.) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html

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