

Biblical Body Image

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

We've got some mature content to cover this morning. If you've got younger kids in here it might raise some questions. Turn to 1 Corinthians 6...

One of the things I love to do is eat. I love food. When I was in high school, I think I could eat anything I wanted and as much as I wanted and I don't remember it having any effect on my body. I could eat everything on my plate and go back for seconds and I was known for eating from other people's plates as well. I was in sports and lifting weights and always active and overeating just didn't have an effect on me. It was wonderful.

But now I'm 43 and a few things are different. I can't eat as much as I want to anymore. One reason is I'll start gaining weight – it goes right to my love handles. I start to develop a bit of a muffin top. The other reason is that if I eat like I used to, I feel absolutely miserable about an hour later. I feel bloated and uncomfortable and my legs start going crazy. It's so frustrating and for a long time I was in denial and I fought against it. Whenever I'd go out to eat or go on vacation or have a holiday feast, (or go to a graduation party) I'd eat as much as I wanted and then I'd enter the pit of misery. I did this for a long time, but finally I'd been through enough that I reluctantly decided to change my behavior. So I don't eat as much anymore. My body just can't handle it. I had to pay attention to my body...

Our passage for today brings attention to how we view and treat our physical bodies. Each of us has a body and our bodies are a highly significant part of our being – they are our earthly tent from which we live. And because of that we face a lot of decisions that affect our bodies. Should I eat this or not? How much should I eat? Should I exercise or not? Should I jump off this roof or not? Should I lift this rock or not? Should I play this sport? Should I wear sunscreen?... All kinds of things affect our bodies.

We also face the deeper questions of: Does it matter how we treat our bodies or what we do with them? Does God care? Is there a divine purpose for our bodies that should affect what we do and how we treat them? Since they're going to wear out and return to dust does it really matter?

If I think about the decisions I've made that affect my body in some way, I've made them based on a number of different factors, but there hasn't really been a guiding goal or theology. I just did what I thought I should do based on my circumstances and perspective. And maybe you've been the same. It seems like people are all over the place when it comes to decisions affecting their bodies, and if you're like me you haven't really been aware of biblical guidance to know what God's will is.

Apparently the Corinthian believers had some confusion as well because they were doing things with their bodies that Paul points out were wrong in our passage for today. They were violating God's purpose for their bodies. And in confronting their sinful behavior he teaches them some important things about their bodies – what God's purpose is and how he wants us to use them. So I want us to see what he has to say so that we won't do what the Corinthians were doing, but also so that we will have biblical direction for all the decisions about how to use them.

The city of Corinth was largely influenced by the Greco-Roman culture and part of that was religion. People worshipped all kinds of Greek gods and goddesses and they had temples devoted to them where people could go to worship. Two of the common worship practices included feasting on meat that had been sacrificed to idols and indulging in temple prostitution. So when people became Christians in that culture, these practices were big issues they had to work through. Paul taught them what to do and his instruction was very different when it came to the two issues. They weren't supposed to be treated the same.

But apparently some of the Corinthians were doing that – they were taking Paul's teaching about meat sacrificed to idols and applying it to temple prostitution. So Paul wrote part of this letter to correct their faulty practice.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-14.

¹² "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³ "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

When it came to eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul would have taught them the principles of Christian freedom – we'll actually see that in detail when we get to chapter 10. They were free to eat the meat as long as they weren't causing others to stumble into sin. There was nothing inherently evil about the meat or eating meat, and since the idols were nothing, a Christian could go ahead and eat that meat, so long as their conscience was clear. They weren't supposed to attend the idol feasts, but if someone invited them into their home and offered them meat that came from one of the feasts they could go ahead and eat it. They were free to do so even though some Christians might think it was wrong.

So, in regards to eating meat, Paul would have taught them things like "All things are lawful for you." Go ahead and eat the meat. It is not violating God's law and you are free to do so. He would have also taught them that eating was just part of a natural bodily function – it's why we have a stomach: "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food." So again, go ahead and eat.

But should you also apply this teaching to the practice of going to see a temple prostitute? It appears that's what the people in Corinth were thinking. They were using the same line of reasoning for both: "All things are lawful for me." In other words, we are free not only to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but also to visit a temple prostitute. And, "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food," which they turned into: "Sex is for the body and the body for sex." It's just a natural bodily function, so go ahead and do it.

Paul didn't see it that way at all, so he brings correction to their wrongful use of those teachings. You can't say "All things are lawful for me" when it comes to sexual immorality, because you also have to consider that not all things are helpful or beneficial. There are major physical, relational and spiritual ramifications if you unite yourself with a temple prostitute. Furthermore, you can't use that excuse because as Christians we are not supposed to be dominated by anything in this world which is what happens with immoral sexual lusts and gratification. We are not to be mastered by anything, but to have self-control and serve the Lord as our Master. So you can't use the "all things are lawful" excuse.

You also can't use the excuse: "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" and the reason Paul gives is because the stomach and body have very

different purposes to God. Paul points out that both food and the stomach are just natural and temporal – God is going to destroy them both. But sex and our bodies are different – our bodies have a spiritual element to them. Paul says the purpose for the body is not sex or sexual immorality. The body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body. God has a sacred purpose for our bodies. We were given bodies to be his image bearers and for him to dwell in. And even though these bodies will die, Paul says in verse 14, they will be raised again and glorified like Christ's body.

So Paul shows them why they can't treat temple prostitution the same as eating meat sacrificed to idols – they're just not the same. And then he goes on to explain why sexual immorality is a sin against God.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-17.

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 prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

The huge problem with temple prostitution or any form of sexual immorality is that our bodies belong to Christ. Verse 15 says that our bodies are members of Christ and verse 17 says that when we're joined to the Lord, which is what happens when we put our faith in him, we become one spirit with him. So not only do our bodies belong to the Lord, but Christ is living in us. As much as our spirit is dwelling in our body, Christ's Spirit is as well. Our bodies are Christ's.

So what happens when a person uses their body to unite to a prostitute? Paul says that we take what belongs to Christ and make it a member of a prostitute. He points out that when a person is joined to a prostitute they become one body with her – that's how God created sex to work: "The two will become one flesh." So we're taking our body that is united with Christ and making it one with a prostitute. We're taking Christ's body... and uniting it with a prostitute. Very troubling and way different than eating meat sacrificed to idols.

For us to understand the sin of sexual immorality, we'd have to think of the disturbing idea of offering your very own spouse to a prostitute. Would you ever

take your spouse and offer them to a prostitute? Never! But Paul is pointing out that's what a person does to Christ when they unite themselves with a temple prostitute. That's NOT what your body was made for! So Paul goes on to write about how we should respond to sexual immorality.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

There are a lot of ways you could interpret this, but based on Paul's train of thought in these verses I think what he's saying is this: Since your body was meant to glorify God and the Holy Spirit dwells within you and since joining yourself to a prostitute makes you one body with her, when you commit sexual immorality, you destroy the sacred purpose for which God gave you a body – you sin against your own body in a way that's different than any other sin. You give Christ's body to someone else and therefore degrade your body.

Therefore, Paul says, flee from sexual immorality. Don't violate and degrade the sacred purpose of your body. Use it for the purpose God intended which is to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Christ died to purchase you for God. Therefore glorify God with your body.

So the direct application for us obviously has to do with sexual immorality. We are to flee from sexual immorality. We don't have temple prostitutes anymore, but we still face all kinds of temptation to indulge in sexual immorality. We live in an over-sexualized culture and sexual freedom is the norm. We must not make excuses like the Corinthian believers and like so many Christians today to give in to immorality even though it may be common around us. We need to flee from any sexual practices that are outside of biblical marriage – for the glory of God.

And I'll add a note here that this isn't the defining sin issue in a Christian's life. Sexual sin is common for Christians to struggle with. The temptation is very strong and very pervasive in our culture and it is likely that all of us struggle with it at various points in our lives. It's important for us to know that God doesn't view

sexual sin as being worse or more inexcusable than other sins. Oftentimes when we fail in this area we feel such shame and guilt before God that we feel that he could never love us or forgive us. Our failings keep popping up in our minds and we picture God just shaking his head at us with disgust. Sexual sin is not somehow more resistant to God's grace or the power of the cross than any other sin! It has been defeated! You are forgiven and loved by God through faith in Christ! Yes, he wants you to battle against it, just like every other sin, but when you fail it doesn't put you on God's special blacklist for sexual sinners. Such a list doesn't exist. You don't have to try to earn back God's love and favor after you fall by having a perfect record moving forward. You confess it, fight against it, and move forward.

So, fleeing from sexual immorality is the specific application, but there is a significant general application in these verses as well and that is that God has given you a body for a sacred purpose. It is a temple for him to dwell in. We were made in the image of God so that we could glorify him in particular by what we do with and how we treat our bodies. So any form of abuse or neglect or harm or degrading to our bodies should be avoided. We should not harm or treat with contempt what God has given for his glory. This has implications for all kinds of things – what we eat, exercise, body art, what we use our bodies for. The question to ask ourselves is this: Is the way I'm treating my body bringing glory to God?