

“You Were Bought With a Price”

The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; Genesis 2:15-25

No question, it was very difficult to be a Christian in First Century Corinth. No question, it is very difficult to be a Christian in Southern California. Corinth was a highly sexualized, promiscuous, and litigious society. So is ours. The Corinthians loved pagan wisdom, celebrity athletes, superstitiously sought the blessings of the “gods,” and were prone to depreciate the body because of a pagan conception of the soul. Pretty much the same is true in modern America. Apparently, the Corinthians were clear about how sinners were justified, but they weren’t very clear about the fact that Christians need to stop thinking and acting like pagans once they came to faith in Christ. That is probably true of our age as well. Paul’s solution to all of these matters is for Christians to think about all of these issues in light of the cross. If we are were bought with a price—the blood of Jesus—then we cannot do and think as we please. We now belong to a risen Savior, who not only purchased us, but will raise us bodily from the dead.

We return to our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. We have made our way as far as the closing section of chapter six wherein Paul is addressing a number of serious issues that had been reported to him by members of Chloe’s family (or others). These include a man who had taken his father’s wife creating a huge scandal (chapter 5), Christians suing each other in secular courts (chapter 6:1-11), as well the misuse of Christian liberty so as to indulge the flesh (chapter 6:12-20).

As we have seen throughout our series so far, Paul is writing to people whom he knows well. These are relatively new Christians struggling to learn how to think and act like Christians. In a city with many pagan temples and guild halls known for their prostitutes and partying, with graphic sexual imagery found in homes, in public buildings and baths, and in a culture steeped in Greek and Roman paganism, it was difficult for these new Christians to begin to leave pagan religion behind, adopt a life-style of chastity and moderation, and to serve as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul has instructed them in many of these matters, but the Corinthians are not moving on to maturity, and many are still acting like the pagans they recently were. While staying in the city of Ephesus, Paul received word of this conduct going on back in Corinth—which is the reason Paul writes this letter.

In verse 12, Paul makes a remarkable statement, a statement about Christian liberty which, apparently, was being cited out of context and turned by some into an excuse to indulge the flesh.

Paul sets the Corinthians straight. “*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.*” The phrase “*all things are lawful for me,*” appears twice in this verse, and again in 1 Corinthians 10:23. There is every indication that these words had become a kind of motto within the Corinthian church—probably based upon something Paul himself had said in response to Jewish legalism.¹ These words are true, *if* understood in a particular way: we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, so we are now free to obey God and enjoy all of the good things which come to us from our heavenly father.

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 95.

Paul does not mean by this statement that Christians are free from all rules and external constraints, as some of the Corinthians were apparently contending. Understood properly, Paul's point is that the death of Christ frees us from any form of legalistic scheme of self-justification (i.e. Jewish legalism). Since God has created all things good (there are no dietary restrictions or monasticism), and since all things can be sanctified by prayer, Christians are not forbidden from eating certain types of food, and so on. This is what led Augustine to state the essence of the Christian ethic as: "Love God, and do what you will." Understood in this way, a Christian can indeed say that "all things are permissible," a statement which virtually echoes what Paul says in Galatians 5:13: "*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*" But this raises yet another question, "what is it that a Christian desires to do?"

Apparently, some of the Corinthians had seized upon this phrase, removed it from its theological context, and then turned it into a slogan to justify their ungodly behavior. "*All things are lawful*" took on new meaning—there are no limits. "I can profess faith and Christ and still live like a pagan!" This is why Paul reiterates the phrase as true, but with a very important qualification, "*not all things are helpful.*" In other words, freedom can be abused to the point that it becomes positively harmful to both body and soul. So while all things are permissible (in a certain sense), not all things ought to be done. Peter puts it this way in his first epistle: "*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God*" (1 Peter 2:16). Reformed theologians have fleshed this out under the heading of prudence—which is the art (skill) of enjoying Christian freedom, while at the same time engaging in self-discipline and discretion based upon godly wisdom and Spirit-enabled self-control.

Paul reiterates the phrase yet a second time, but adds an additional qualification: "*I will not be enslaved by anything.*" Paul's point is based upon the fact that he considers himself a bond-servant of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 7:22). He refuses to allow himself to be mastered by anything other than Jesus Christ. The paradox is that because Paul is a servant of Christ, he is free from Jewish legalism. So, while all things are permissible to him, Paul will not be bound by anything he is free to do. He is bound only to Christ. His fear is that a Christian may become enslaved to the very things they are now free to do.

That this is Paul's concern can be seen in verse 13, when, once again, Paul cites another slogan of the libertine party in the church and responds to it. "*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.*" Apparently, some in the church were using the slogan—food is for the stomach—to justify their self-indulgence. It is a parallel of sorts to another pagan slogan Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15:32, "*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.*" For a Greek, the body doesn't really matter—it's the soul that counts. So, they say to themselves, let's indulge ourselves and not only eat all kinds of things, but let's enjoy them in great quantities.

The theological error of the Corinthians is that gluttony and lust are not merely "bodily urges," they are sinful manifestations of fallen human nature! The Greeks believed that the soul was pure and trapped in the prison house of the body. This led to the erroneous assumption that the body—not the soul—is the source of all sinful urges. Since the body is not as important as the soul, some believed that the body can be abused and gratified with little impact upon one's soul. Other Greeks took the opposite route and denied any pleasure to themselves altogether. The former kind of thinking leads to gluttony and sexual immorality. The latter leads to abstinence from things God permits us to enjoy. To the libertines, if the soul is all that matters, why not enjoy the pleasures of the flesh? To a stoic Greek legalist, we should deny ourselves things God says are good to keep the body from experiencing any pleasure.

Paul's response to this misuse of Christian liberty is to remind the Corinthians of the importance of the body, but in a way in which they might not have expected. Contrary to the pagan assumption that the body is meaningless and that the soul is what truly matters, Paul begins by reminding his readers that both food and stomach will be done away with. All such temporal things will be destroyed when this present age gives way to the age to come. This is Paul's point in Romans 14:17, when he writes "*for the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" Paul points out that our bodies will be raised and transformed on the day of Christ Jesus, when God raises the dead with imperishable bodies. There is no necessary connection between hunger and gluttony. Bodily urges are good and natural—they are part and parcel of human existence. But gluttony is sin. Furthermore, our bodies were never made for lust, just as they were never made for gluttony. Our bodies were made for God—for his service, for his honor and glory.

This flies directly in the face of the gnostic impulse which was not only prominent in Corinth, but which is equally prominent in our own. It is paganism (and its corresponding matter-spirit dualism) which depreciates matter and the body. As C. S. Lewis once put it, "God likes matter, he invented it." Being image-bearers, in part, entails bodily existence. Redemption from sin, includes the redemption of our bodies (Cf. Ephesians 1:13-14). This is why Paul will go on to say in verse 20, "*glorify God in your bodies.*" Therefore, one of the sure signs of pagan influence is the depreciation of the matter in general and the body in particular. This is yet another manifestation of the Corinthian's infatuation with pagan wisdom. In this we see the spiritual and theological immaturity which plagues this congregation.

That God is concerned with the redemption of material things is Paul's point in verse 14. "*And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.*" The resurrection of the body is one of the central themes of early Christian preaching and Pauline theology. By his power, God raised Christ bodily from the dead. This was Jesus' own testimony in Luke 24:39: "*See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*" The resurrection body is described by Paul later in this letter—1 Corinthians 15:35-58.

But even as Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, so too shall we. In 2 Corinthians 4:14, Paul writes, "*knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.*" Paul takes the Corinthian slogan and turns it on its head to make a very important point. "*Food is for the stomach and stomach is for the body, and the end of both is destruction. The body is for the Lord and the Lord is for the body, and the resurrection is the destiny of both.*"

The resurrection of our bodies is the Christian hope. God will redeem all of creation, including our bodies. Therefore, the pagan conception that the body is nothing but that the soul is what really matters, flies directly in the face of Christian teaching, in which the person (a psycho-somatic unity) is what matters. This is why death is so horrible. That which God has joined together is torn apart. But this is why salvation from sin is so great—God will redeem both body and soul and in the resurrection reunite them, and glorify the unity when reunited! There is a direct connection between the depreciation of the body and sexual immorality. If true, how can the Corinthian libertines continue to depreciate the body?

That the Corinthians should have understood this can be seen in verse 15, when, for the fourth time, Paul appeals to his readers with a question which implies that they should know the answer.² "*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them*

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 97.

members of a prostitute? Never!” Paul asks the pointed rhetorical question, “do you not know?” indicating that what follows is something his readers/hearers *should* know—i.e., that Paul has already taught the Corinthians that all Christian believers are members of the body of Christ. Not only will Christ raise our physical bodies—meaning that our bodies belong to Christ who is both our creator and redeemer—but we are also even now united to the Risen Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit.³ As we are married to our spouses and united to them legally (and physically), so too, we are analogously united to Jesus Christ, our heavenly bridegroom.

For Paul, a sexual union with a prostitute is not strictly the same as a believer’s union with the ascended Christ. But Paul does indicate that sexual relations creates a bond between the two parties which certainly transcends a handshake! To have sexual relations with someone is to be united to them, something highly problematic to people with spouses and who profess to be Christian believers. The idea that believers compose the body of Christ is discussed by Paul quite extensively later in this letter: 1 Corinthians 12:12 ff., as well as in Ephesians 5:23 ff. Since all believers are “in Christ,” how can it be proper to take those who are members of Christ’s body, and now unite them with a prostitute in a pagan temple? The answer is Paul’s emphatic “*never*.”

Of special importance here is the fact that Corinth was filled with temple prostitutes (both male and female). By engaging in sexual relations with such a prostitute, it was thought that the patron was somehow united to the particular deity which the prostitute happened to represent. The holy—the Christian united to Christ—is now physically linked to the unholy.⁴ Given Paul’s view of each Christian as a member of the body of Christ, as well as his stress upon the resurrection of the body to be set forth in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul recoils in horror at the very thought of such a union between the holy and the unholy. May it never be!

Not only are there connections to idolatry implied in the union with a pagan deity through sexual relations, but for Paul, to substitute an illicit sexual relationship (fornication or adultery) for one sanctioned by God (marriage) has serious practical consequences (theological, moral and emotional). Sexual sins are especially destructive. As one writer points out, “sexual intercourse cannot be understood merely as a momentary act that satisfies a transient natural urge. Instead, it creates a mysterious but real and enduring union between man and woman The union of a member of the church with a prostitute . . . creates a real bonding with her; therefore, it creates an unholy bond between the Lord’s members and the sinful world. The result is defilement and confusion.”⁵

In verse 16, Paul writes, “*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.’*” Yet again, Paul begins with a question implying Paul’s readers/hearers know the answer. The Bible is not squeamish about sex nor sexual sins, and neither should Christians be squeamish about these things as well. We are sexual beings and sexual sins are part and parcel of church life—such things ought to be discussed frankly and openly as the apostle

³ Hayes, First Corinthians, 104.

⁴ Hayes, First Corinthians, 104.

⁵ Hayes, First Corinthians, 105.

does. In fact, Paul's insights into this matter are exceptional by first century standards.⁶ His question indicates that Paul had already taught the Corinthians about these matters in some detail. Since the sexual relationship involves two people becoming one flesh (as is taught in Genesis 2:24, from our Old Testament lesson this morning), the Corinthians must consider that such sexual encounters with prostitutes were hardly casual encounters without any theological or emotional consequences.

To engage in sexual relations with a temple prostitute is to become one (to form a union) with an individual in a relationship not only not sanctioned by God, but with someone who represents a deity directly opposed to God and to the gospel of his son! To engage in this conduct is to set in motion a series set of theological, moral, emotional and physical consequences. For a Christian, there is no such thing as "casual sex."

The theological implications of this are to be seen in light of what Paul states in verse 17. "*But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.*" Believers are already united to Christ in a way analogous to a marriage between a husband and wife. As husband and wife become "one flesh," believers have already become "one spirit" with Jesus Christ by virtue of their union with him through faith. Being united to Christ in such a manner, how can they substitute an illicit relationship in the place of one sanctioned by God (marriage)? Or, even worse, perhaps, how can they be united to someone in the quest to become closer to a pagan deity? This is why paganism always seeks to distort the natural order of things. To justify their practices, the pagans must turn the unnatural into the natural.

Verse 18 contains Paul's command (imperative) to the Corinthians, as well as developing the emotional ramifications of such sin. "*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.*" It is vital to grasp the fact that the Corinthians are not commanded to resist sexual immorality, but to flee from it! There is a loud echo here from the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:12).⁷ The imperative carries with it the idea, "make it your habit to flee from sexual immorality!"⁸ The person most likely to give in to sexual sin is the person who tries to resist sexual temptation! Paul's imperative is clear in this regard: Don't try to resist sexual immorality, but flee from sexual immorality!

The reason for this command is that sexual sin effects us in profound way. Not only is the temptation especially great, especially in a sexually promiscuous culture such as ours where we are continually bombarded with sexually explicit images, but so are the consequences. This does not in any sense mean that sexual sins are worse than others in the sense that they make us guiltier before God than other sins. Rather, Paul's point is that sexual sins carry with them a certain sense of guilt and shame that other sins do not—hence, Paul's language to the effect that other sins are "outside the body," while sexual sins are sins against our own bodies, which may be a way of saying that these are sins against our own persons. It is possible that the language "outside the body" may be another slogan from the libertine party in the Corinthian church.⁹ Paul's point may be that sexual lust arises for the sole reason of self-gratification

⁶ Cited by Morris, 1 Corinthians, 98.

⁷ Hayes, First Corinthians, 105.

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 98.

⁹ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 150.

and is therefore one of the surest signs of how self-centered sin makes us. We'd risk everything for that one moment of gratification.

This is why sexual sins are serious (psychologically speaking) for a Christian who is already united to Christ, and especially for a Christian who is married. Such sins not only carry with them a profound sense of guilt and shame, they often bring about the most horrible of consequences: divorce, pregnancy, health issues, guilt and shame, etc. It is not uncommon for sexual sin to be connected with apostasy and falling away, depression, guilt, and self-destructive behavior. People who fall into sexual sin, will often stop coming to church, and then suddenly have doubts about whether or not Christianity is true. The pull toward sinful sexual behavior is a pull away from Christ. If you want to live in sin, you don't want to be reminded of what Christ has done for you and that he is your spiritual bridegroom.

In verses 19-20, Paul again asks a question which reminds the Corinthians of something he's already taught them. "*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, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*" For the sixth time, Paul asks a question to which his readers/hearers should know the answer. Christians are united to the Risen Christ through faith and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit dwells in us, so that we (collectively) are God's temple, although Paul does clearly speak here of each individual being a temple. Because we are Christ's, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are no longer our own. We have been bought with a price, the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Once again, the indicative (Christ purchasing us) precedes the imperative (glorifying God in our bodies). Therefore, instead of using our bodies as vehicles of self-gratification and engaging in self-destructive behavior, Paul exhorts us to honor God with our bodies, by living in modesty, chastity, and faith (the classical category for Christ ethics). Christ shed his blood to redeem us from the things which destroy us.

What then do we say by way of application?

When Paul discusses the importance of Christian chastity, no doubt his words here at the end of the chapter must be read in light of the apostle's previous statement in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 which precede this discussion: "*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*"

God can and does forgive all sin—even sexual sin. If we are in Christ, we have been washed, we have been sanctified and we have been justified. If we trust in Christ, then he has prepared us to be his bride as described in Ephesians 5:25-27. "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*" In Christ's eyes, we are all pure virgins. We are clothed in his perfect righteousness.

Because Christ has bought us with a price, and will save even our bodies—we have been truly liberated from bondage to these things. How can we attempt to justify living like we once did when we were non-Christians. We cannot. We have been bought with a price, so now we glorify God with our bodies. And that means living all of life in light of the fact that our bodies have been redeemed by Christ and will be

raised on the last day, because we are his spotless bride, and he is our bridegroom. Amen.