

Prayers

Opening prayer

I praise You, Lord Jesus, because You have done for me something that is impossible for my mind to grasp, for my heart to comprehend or for my feelings to appreciate. You have loved me without condition, You have brought me at endless price, and turned my soul to You and made me Yours. Lord Jesus, I praise You for this unspoken yet powerful bond by which I am drawn heavenward, and I praise You for Your amazing love; I will never let You go! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Sit down and try to stop thinking about everything that currently occupies your mind. Make a conscious effort to be open to the Lord's voice and listen. Do not be afraid to believe that the Lord is indeed speaking to you in different ways, through your thoughts and even your feelings.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about air we breathe.** *Pray for meteorologists who work to predict the weather, and who supply us with information that helps everyone from farmers to sailors.*
- *Pray about the unfolding scandal of 'phone-tapping' involving news organisations, centred in the UK but affecting many news organisations across the world including the USA*
- *Give thanks to God for the faithful service of public servants whose work is largely unseen and unheard*

Meditation

Rejoice to see the day's beginning;
See the providential power of God at work,
Gloriously driving on the Universal Law
Of goodness, faith, and hope and love.

Dispel the demons of today's despair;
The menacing, destructive power of Evil,
Driving things backwards towards unhappiness
And leading the soul to gloom and despair.

Let the power of God reign now; let Jesus live!
Say, 'No contest, Satan – I am free!'
Let the Maker stamp His image on your heart
And taste the victory that's won by faith,
Yes, faith in Him who is your Christ!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

¹² 'All things are legal for me,' - but not everything is helpful.

'All things are legal 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!

Now 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. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are parts belonging to Christ? Shall I then take parts belonging to Christ and make them belong to a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'

¹⁷ But anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. ¹⁸ Avoid sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the one who commits sexual immorality sins against the body. ¹⁹ Or do you not even know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰ You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Review

This passage can seem very confusing, and some of what Paul says here is not clear at all! To begin with, he considers three points put to him by the Corinthians (6:12,13), but responds to their sense of liberty and freedom with some wise words of warning. Paul then turns to the subject of the human body, and in verses 13 to 16, he comes very close to describing the church as the '*body of Christ*', but confusingly, he adds some pointed comments about sexual immorality! Lastly, he calls on God's people to avoid such sin, because the body is a '*temple of the Holy Spirit*' (6:19), and he repeats the great salvation theme we have already found in chapter 6; '*you were brought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body*' (6:20 echoing 6:12).

Now it would be easy to pick one of these passages in isolation, but Paul did not write all this as a mere list for us to pick and choose. He was countering some very real problems in the Corinthian church, and if we remind ourselves of the general drift of Paul's letter, we will understand what he says here all the better.

Previous chapters have described the immorality of some at Corinth, especially, the man who was sleeping with his father's wife (5:1f.). Here, however, Paul responds to the attitudes that allowed such things to happen within the church, that is, the belief that once liberated, Christians could do what they wanted. The opening verses of our passage warn that freedom in Christ brings responsibility both to others and to God, and an 'anything goes' approach to life opens the door of the church to selfishness, domination and greed.

Halfway through verse 13, however, Paul takes the idea of the human 'body' and asks us to remember that it is not created just for bodily desires, it is connected through salvation to 'Christ'. Read this passage carefully, for although we never read the words 'body of Christ' as such, words we know from later on in this letter (see ch12), Paul's point is that bodily, God's people go together to make up 'Christ', He says this, '*do you not know that your bodies are parts belonging to Christ?*' (6:15). But why does Paul say this? He wants the Corinthians to know that they are not merely free to do what they want; they have been saved, and they are therefore interconnected in Christ. This is a theme of great importance throughout Paul's writing.

Now intermingled with this powerful theme is Paul's concern at sexual immorality in the Corinthians church; it is never far from his mind. This sin had arisen because people thought they could do what they wanted with their bodies, but Paul argued against this. He says controversially that the purpose of the human body is not procreation, instead, '*the body is ... for the Lord, and the Lord for the body*' (6:13). This agrees wholly with the Old Testament, in which Genesis records that men and women are made in God's '*image*' (Gen 1:26,27); their origin and destiny is in their Creator. Paul's teaching is also in line with that of Christ and the Psalms, which say that God's people are to shine and '*give glory*' to God (Matt 5:16, Psalm 115:1). So clearly, however important we rate sex, God does not intend that it dominates life!

In the latter part of our text (6:16-18), Paul shows his concern about the power of sex to distract the soul from its godly purpose. He refers to the basic Scriptural teaching that sex unites a man and a woman (6:16 see also Gen 2:24, Matt 19:5,6). However, if marriage is the safe place in which spiritual and physical union makes sense, casual sex outside of marriage is an affront to 'the body' (6:18), meaning the whole church of God, and Christ Himself. This is strong language, for Paul is horrified that people who claim Christ submit their bodies not to their Lord, but to sex!

It is in this light that Paul says these words; '*do you not even know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God ...*' (6:19). Moreover, Paul writes this not in the singular but in the plural; so it is not personal advice, it is advice for the common good, and so that immorality does not affect the entire 'body of Christ'. God abides in His temple, which is Christ, and we are Christ's 'body', and God therefore dwells in us, through Christ! What a blessing we have if we accept that this is our purpose and destiny.

This passage has led us on a fascinating journey, but it is one with many lessons, about sex, relationships, and the unity and identity of the Christian in Christ. Above all, Paul teaches us that those who do what they

want, especially in matters of sex, are in danger of destroying the church. I suggest that the same is true of the church today.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Attitudes (6:12,13)
- The 'body' and sex (6:13-15)
- Sexual practice (6:16-18)
- The body as a temple (6:19,20)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V12 'all things are permissible for me'

The Greek word for 'permissible' also means legal, proper, or lawful, and many translations prefer lawful. Most scholars accept that this is a quote from something said by the Corinthians, hence the quotation marks here and in verse 13. For a discussion of this see study.

V15 'do you not know that your bodies are parts belonging to Christ?'

In this sentence, the Greek has a word 'melo' that refers to 'body parts' or 'members' of a body, meaning arms, legs etc. I have translated this word as 'parts belonging to' because the word 'part' or 'member' (as found in most translations) does not give an adequate sense of what is being said here. As we read further in Corinthians, we will find this word features more, especially in chapter 12.

V16 'for it is said "the two will become one flesh"'

The quote here is from Genesis 2:24, which says; 'therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and becomes one flesh with her.' We should note that where the Hebrew says 'cling together', the Greek here in verse 16 says 'join together', and in each case what is meant is sexual union. Also, the formula of words, 'for it is said', is not usual, but clearly refers to a direct quote from scripture (i.e. from Genesis 2).

V17 'But anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.'

The Greek is far stronger than can easily be translated, and says literally; 'anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.' The unity in spirit with the Lord is therefore emphatic.

V19 'or do you not even know that your body ...'

I have added to the word 'even' to add an emphasis that is present in the Greek (with the particles 'he ouk'). It suggests incredulity on Paul's part that the people do not know the role of the Holy Spirit within them.

V19 'whom you have from God, and you are not your own?'

Some translations stop the sentence after 'whom you have from God. They then add 'You are not your own' to the next verse; 'you were bought with a price ...' It is quite possible that both are correct (there is no punctuation in the ancient Greek text)

Attitudes (6:12,13)

Paul faced a problem, which was that in preaching the Gospel, he declared that a Christian was set free from the rules and regulations of Judaism, and was bound only by the rule of Christ's love. Unfortunately, this preaching gave some people the impression that because of salvation, they could do what they wanted. The sexual immorality at Corinth was therefore the unintended consequence of such attitudes.

Now in the story of his missionary journeys in Acts 17 and 18, we discover that when Paul went to Corinth from Athens, he stopped preaching at a synagogues, and began evangelising straight to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6). In his previous preaching of religious liberty to Jews, Paul's message about salvation was well understood as 'liberty from Judaism'. However, when Paul preached about the liberty of Christ to the Gentiles at Corinth he was more readily misunderstood, for the Gentiles, this message was pure liberation, and they revelled in it. Those who heard him did not necessarily appreciate the difference between liberation from 'ritual' law, and freedom from 'law' in general, including the social norms of sexual relationships. However, Paul was probably aware from the start of this. Certainly, his ultimate objective in writing to the Corinthians seems to have been to deliver a powerful message not just of condemnation of sexual wrongdoing, but of the true love of God. This is what we find in the great centrepiece of the letter, 1

Corinthians 13. It is remarkable therefore that without thinking too much about the details, society today has taken this great chapter as a standard 'reading' for marriage services!

Paul's words in the first two verses are entirely general, but they are worth remembering as general guidelines. They indicate that the unfortunate consequence of libertarian attitudes are firstly selfishness (i.e. not be 'helpful'), secondly domination (that Paul will not submit to) and thirdly gluttony and submission to bodily desires (which God will destroy). Suffice to say that when we see selfishness, domination and excess in the life of the church, then we know that people have taken their eyes off Christ.

The 'body' and sex (6:13-15)

Paul's opening remark (6:13) in this section is this; '*the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*' This is a passage worth remembering, because it reminds us that God has made us as we are. The excesses of people today are shown in such mores as over-eating or under-eating, fashion, cosmetic surgery or body piercing, but whatever they are, this great text tells us that our bodies are made for the glory of God, and we should not be ashamed of them. Perhaps we do not even need to emend them or alter them in any way. They are God's handiwork.

Verse 14 continues the theme, by saying more about God's concern for our bodies, declaring that God will raise them! Christian faith has always insisted that the resurrection is a bodily resurrection, meaning that life after death is not some ethereal spiritual existence devoid of physical reality. At the end of Corinthians Paul insists that at the final 'resurrection' we will be '*raised a spiritual body*' (1 Cor 15:44), for God has a spiritual home in heaven for His people, and within this we will have a new physical form devoid of the sin and evil of this world. So when Paul speaks about the things of the 'body' here in Corinthians, he does so with this future in mind.

Verse 15 lies at the heart of this passage, and it makes two points. Firstly, Paul says that our own bodies belong to 'the Lord' (as in verse 14), but he goes further to describe them as '*parts belonging to Christ*'. This is the first hint we have in Corinthians of a great theme that will eventually flower in 1 Corinthians 12, a chapter that describes the purpose of the spiritual gifts as given to different body 'parts' (i.e. individuals) making up the whole body of Christ (i.e. Jesus). With this in mind, Paul responds with disgust to the idea that anyone should submit their bodies to immoral sex, symbolised here by sex with 'a prostitute' (6:15). Although he has more to say about this, the immediate effect of this is surely to make us recoil at the thought that what is so treasured by God should be so abused. The body so valued by God is given to another, to Christ.

Sexual practice (6:16-18)

However, Paul has more to say about this, and his sequence of thought opens up what we might call a 'can of worms'. The question Paul asks is put plainly; '*or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her?*' We will understand Paul's point if we know that in this passage, the word he uses for 'becomes one body' is the Greek equivalent to the word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe a man 'clinging' to his wife. The connection is intended. Paul wants us to understand that physical sex brings a spiritual union between man and woman, according to God's plan for the world.

The consequences of what Paul has said here are considerable. If sex creates such a union, then it cannot be entered into lightly, as is so very common throughout society today. Having multiple sexual partners leads people open to a multiplicity of unions with others that do not simply 'go away' with the experience of sex, as people will often testify. Paul's words remind us that God intends men and women to have unique and exclusive relationships, and sex is perhaps the most powerful sign of that union, and at its best, marriage is the celebration of this unique gift of God. Of course, God loves all kinds of people with all manner of sexual experiences and feelings, moreover, he loves sinners and all who turn to Him after experiencing the heartbreak of difficult sexual relationships. But we cannot fail to say that if a sinner wishes to find peace in this life, then it will not be found as Paul says here '*with a prostitute!*' It is to be found in secure monogamous relationships. This is not because God wishes to constrain people, it is because this is how He has made us all.

Paul continues by emphasising the spiritual unity of the Lord and His people; '*But anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him*' (6:17). This is where our heart's desires should rest, not merely on sexual fulfilment! He draws a distinction between all other sins and the sin of sexual immorality, saying that all others are 'external' to the body, but sexual immorality is 'internal'. If you think about this, you might realise that plenty of sins do in fact have considerable effects upon the body, and it is only if we think about sex in terms of its spiritual significance, that this passage makes any sense!

The body as a temple (6:19,20)

Far rather, says Paul, for us to regard our bodies as something special and to be honoured, rather like a sanctuary (or a Temple), a place where God dwells in His Holy Spirit (6:19). Now there is some discussion

in Christian circles about whether this passage of scripture refers to individuals or to the church as a whole. This is because it reads on the face of it as if Paul is speaking to individuals when he says '*your body is a temple*'. Nevertheless, this verse is written in the plural, and should therefore refer to the whole church. Personally, I read this passage as Paul talking about Christians when united within the church, for Paul was addressing the church precisely as a group of individuals. Paul's last phrase, '*You were bought with a price*,' is similar. It is written in the plural but spoken to individuals, for each individual is bought '*with a price*'; this is not individual benefit, for all who receive this do so as God's reward to those who respond to Him by faith.

It is right therefore for God's people to take these great statements of Paul and apply them to themselves, but with the caution that no privilege of God comes outside of the fellowship of God's people, the church. If we accept that we are 'temples of the Holy Spirit', then immense consequences follow. Holiness becomes not something to be grasped at as if it was something to achieve, but something to 'live out' by allowing God to work in us through the Spirit. Practical faith ceases to be a matter of being a certain kind of person, but being true to oneself and honest to the work of the Spirit in one's life, and more besides. The Old Testament Temple has long since gone, and God's dwelling has been 'with His people' for centuries; moreover, we who are God's people have become so at the expense of God's Son Jesus, who died for us (6:20). Selfishness and self-centredness are wholly inappropriate, for God's people are called to 'glorify God' in their bodies.

Discipleship

Application

Giving glory to God with the body

However, the concluding challenge is perhaps the most significant, and the one that highlights all the rest. How do we give glory to God with our bodies? A young couple must work with each other to find out how to please each other sexually, and handle each other with the respect and love which is a reflection of the true love God has given them. Any man or woman today must also learn to control their bodies and their sexual urges and feelings in the light of the bombardment of sexual images (largely but not wholly female) thrown at us by the world in which we live. Our eating, personal presentation and management of our bodies, should seek to honour not our feelings, but the image of God in which we are made, and the fact that God made us as we find ourselves. All of these and more are relevant to this challenge.

However, although all of these need our careful consideration, I am of the opinion that we should be careful about the public example we give of these things, and what they say to others. Sometimes, it is best to keep our practices quiet so that we do not drive people away from the Lord with the impression that God is a 'kill-joy'. We cannot explain that God's ways are the best to others, if we are thought of as people who simply quash what others believe. Our testimony must be a careful and considered response to the world in which we live, and at the least, we should be able to demonstrate that living by God's laws is a rewarding and long term joy; whether we are talking about sex, fashion or eating, for example. Discernment, of course, is one of the gifts of the Spirit; and all of us must seek the help of God's Spirit in deciding how to demonstrate to others the truths we hold dear.

Personal comment from author

I have not found it easy to write this. This passage raises some profoundly important subjects but they are hard to apply. I know very well that many people of good intent do not accept the teaching of this passage about sexual relationships and find themselves in dispute with others about these things. Also, where a church takes a strong stand on sexual matters, there can be much misunderstanding and indeed prejudice. We live in a complex world, and it is right that we all state where stand, but each one of us should do all in our power to seek God's will on these subjects. Sex goes to the heart of human relationships, and it is right that we seek to set this gift of God in its proper context so that men and women may find fulfilment both in God and each other.

Questions for groups

1. What does Paul mean by talking about the 'body' here in this passage of 1 Corinthians, and how does this apply to the church or to us?
2. What is special about the sexual union of a man and a woman? What does the Bible teach us about the purpose of men and women, and the marriage relationship?
3. How can the church best witness to its stance on sexual practice and marriage within a society that largely rejects its advice?

Discipleship challenges

- *Have a chat to one or two other folks at church and try to ascertain what they think about issues to do with sex and the teaching of the Bible about personal relationships. Be specific, and discuss sex before marriage and homosexuality and other difficult topics. Seek, where possible, a common mind, and compare your discussions with the teaching in this passage.*
- *Pray for those who live in sexual sin, and find it hard to accept that God's Word might be pointing them towards a different way of living. Pray for any you know who find it hard to accept the traditional Biblical teaching of no sex before marriage, and ask for God's mercy on all confessing sinners.*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Lord, lead Your people we pray into a true fellowship of faith, one in which those who know their salvation yearn to be a 'body' that lives according to Your will. Give us the courage to seek a common mind about what is right and wrong, and give us the strength to act according to the will of God made known to us, by grace. In all things, may we be like Christ our Saviour. AMEN
