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## Epiphany 2 • 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 • January 18, 2015

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## Relevant Background

Acts 18:1–17 describes Paul’s eighteenth-month stay in Corinth. When both Silas and Timothy came to help him, he was able to spend all of his time ministering to the Jews (v. 5). But eventually, opposition to his message forced him to stop preaching in the synagogue. He moved next door to the house of Titius Justus and turned his attention to Gentiles. In addition to the Jews and proselytes who had left the synagogue with Paul, the congregation grew to include converts from both Jewish and pagan backgrounds. Socially, the church included people of high status (Erastus, a city official [Rom 16:23]), and low (Chloe, a domestic slave [1 Cor 1:11]).

The text is in a section of the letter in which Paul discusses problems in the Corinthian church (5:1–6:20). In the section that follows (7:1–14:40), Paul answers various questions that have arisen: Is celibacy the Christian ideal? Is it okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols? What behavior is appropriate in Christian worship? In 6:12–20,

Paul talks about how Christians should think about our bodies in relation to our sexual behavior.

What led to the problems in Corinth? Scholars discuss many possibilities. In a discussion on the influence of Hellenistic religions, D. R. de Lacey, gives a helpful summary relevant to 6:12-20: “Many of these religions developed a strongly dualist outlook . . . This easily led to a premium on knowledge; to a belief (also found in Hellenistic Judaism) in the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body; and, perhaps rather strangely, to both asceticism . . . and libertinism (in which the ‘good’ soul is held to be undefiled, no matter what the illusory body may do).”<sup>1</sup>

### **Text Notes**

Verse 6:12 “All things are lawful for me” In vv. 12-13, Paul echoes slogans used by some people to justify their behavior. Paul doesn’t dispute that the slogans have their proper use, but he works to correct their misuse. Here he counters, “but not everything is beneficial.” The “point-counter point” creates an interpretive space where Christians must use wisdom and discernment in their lives together.

“All things are lawful (ἔξεστιν) for me” is again countered with a nifty wordplay by Paul, “but I will not by mastered (ἐξουσιασθήσομαι) by anything.” Paul assumes that we are subject to one master, the Lord.

“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, but God will destroy them both” Scholars debate whether this entire utterance is the “slogan” or whether “but God will destroy them both” is Paul’s “counter point.” I favor the former for at least two reasons: 1. If one of the problems in Corinth is an extreme “dualism” (see notes above), Paul’s rejoinder would implicitly reinforce the problem he is trying to counter. 2. In connection with this, in the remainder of the text, Paul is arguing for the importance of the body. If this is his rejoinder, it would undercut his arguments here and in other parts of the letter (1 Cor 15).

“The body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” Throughout the text, Paul argues against the idea that our physical bodies are of little value and so the way Christians use their bodies is “morally irrelevant.” On the contrary, our bodies are incredibly valuable and are to be treated as such. They don’t belong to us. They belong to the Lord, and vice versa (v. 13). God will raise our bodies (v. 14). Our bodies are members of Christ (v. 15; Rom 12:1–5). The one joined to the Lord is one spirit with him (v. 17). Our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We have been bought with a price (vv. 19–20).

“Sexual immorality” (πορνεία) vs. “glorify God with your body” (δοξάσατε δὴ τὸν θεὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν) In Paul’s letters, these abstract terms are “filled up” by him in definite ways. In other words, the line between “sexual immorality” and “glorifying God with your body” is drawn so that the Christian community knows what he is talking about. It is worth mentioning because in other communities, and in our culture today, the lines between what is “moral” and “immoral” are blurry and ambiguous.

Verse 6:18 “Every sin which a person commits is outside his body” Scholars debate whether this is Paul’s assertion or a slogan of the Corinthians. I favor the latter. In other words, the Corinthians are using this slogan to justify their belief that anything done with the body is of no moral relevance. Paul argues against this kind of distinction in thinking of “sin.” The body is not an “amoral vessel.” It is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are to glorify God with it.

### Sermon Thoughts

The idea that the body is of relatively minor importance because it is merely a temporary vessel for the soul is still an assumption of many Christians. That assumption enables some Christians to adopt views about God’s Creation, and our place in it that are not necessarily in accord with God’s Word or his will for our lives. However, the text also speaks to an issue in the larger culture: the belief that this material world is all there is (materialism). There is no God, no soul, no meaning to life. We are not “being led” by One greater than us but must forge our own way. As a result, we have the freedom to do what we want with our bodies. We must shape our own morality.

In the *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt suggests two questions that we can ask ourselves:

1. Do you believe that your body is a playground? Or,
2. Do you believe that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?<sup>2</sup>

The way you reason about your life, justify your morals, and make moral decisions spins out depending on the answer you give.

### Opposing Moral Truths: Our Culture and the Human Body

If you believe that your body is a playground, it implies that we are “just animals with an extra serving of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> It implies that our mission in life is to satisfy our own desires. Under this vision of human flourishing, how does the culture shape our desire and behavior?

Paul captivates us with a countercultural vision of who and what we are. He argues for a different picture of what it means to be human: think about your body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. This implies that we are children of God and should act accordingly. It sees spiritual emptiness in our consumer society that trivializes sexuality. How does this vision of humanity direct our desires? What beauty do we see in it?

Tim Saleska

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> D. R. de Lacey, “Corinthians, Epistles to the,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* Vol. 1 (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 316.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 117–118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.