

Sex without Recrimination

1 Corinthians 6:12-7:5

Before we leave Revelation for this year (we will return next year to finish the book), we tie up a couple of loose ends. So far we have worked our way through each of the oracles to the seven churches, focusing on the main message of each passage. Now we take a couple weeks to pay special attention to the two clearest warnings among the oracles: the prohibitions against sexual immorality and food offered to idols (2:14, 20).

Jesus (through John) condemns these two practices without elaboration, detailing instead the judgment that will follow, or some other related matter. Since the passages focus elsewhere, so have the sermons. But it would be a deep regret to move on to the next sermon series without taking the opportunity to consider these sins, why God finds them so objectionable, and how we can avoid falling under their penalty.

We look at the prohibition against sexual immorality this week, and at the prohibition against idol food next week. While the prohibitions originate from Revelation 2, since that text does not elaborate, we look elsewhere: this week, in 1 Corinthians 6.

Day 1: 1 Corinthians 6:16b ‘The two shall become one flesh’

We begin our consideration of sex where Scripture does, with Genesis 2:24, affirming the sanctity and deep significance of sex. From creation, we see that sex is good, not bad, if used as God intended, and within the boundaries that he established. Sex is the creation of God, one of his good gifts to mankind. More than good, it is incredibly powerful, strengthening the emotional bond, and creating a mystical bond, between husband and wife. Because of this powerful effect, sex fits only within that relationship.

So no discussion of sex rightly begins with a focus on immorality. Instead, we start by affirming its goodness, pleasures, and emotional impact. Our culture is entirely right to celebrate and pursue sexual relations. Even in its lasciviousness, contemporary society preaches a portion of the gospel, affirming the goodness and kindness of God. Admittedly, the fall has, to some extent, debilitated sex, so that even between husband and wife, it is not always as rich and meaningful as God intended and created it to be. Sometimes it is complicated by emotional tension or physical dysfunction. That acknowledged, in its headlong pursuit of sexual congress, our culture is entirely right on one point: few physical sensations or emotional experiences surpass sex at its best. So, rightfully, the word ‘sex’ does not pair naturally with ‘immorality’ but with ‘grace’.

And in its panting after sex, our culture gives unintended witness to the goodness and kindness of God.

Day 2: 1 Corinthians 6:12-14 Freedom – and grace – are not absolute

Often, our culture dismisses sexual morality or restrictiveness as ‘Victorian’, i.e., old-fashioned. To the contrary, biblical parameters for sex were innovative in their day, and so met considerable resistance, including among first-century Christians, especially those from Greco-Roman backgrounds. We see their argument in this text, as Paul cites their rationale and then refutes it. The Corinthians develop three lines of argument to justify sexual immorality; we look at the first today.

The Corinthians argue, first of all, that Christian freedom permits them to live however they choose; they are not subject to restrictions. The NIV translates this, “Everything is permissible for me.” The precise thrust of their argument is clearer with a more literal translation: “All things are *lawful* for me.” Here the Corinthians use Paul’s theology against him. Coming from a Jewish background, where acceptance with God depended on obedience to Old Testament law, many of the first Christians retained the idea that to be saved, people must not only believe in Jesus, they must also obey the law (including circumcision, Sabbath, and dietary restrictions). Paul insisted that the Law is no longer binding; that salvation comes by grace through faith alone; that those who believe in Jesus are free from obligation to the Law. So some Christians latched onto this, and made the principle absolute: if they no longer need obey the Law, if ‘all things are now lawful’, then they can live however they want.

Such an argument is rare among Christians today, but we have our own parallel. In our day, ‘grace’ and ‘forgiveness’ are as valid – and abused – as ‘freedom from Law’ was in Paul’s day. Like the Corinthians, many Christians today seize hold of grace and elevate it to the ultimate theological and moral principle which trumps all sin: God requires nothing of me, but freely grants grace and forgiveness, no matter how I live; so, while sexual profligacy may not be ideal, it is not fatal. No, Paul insists, freedom is not absolute, and he would say the same of grace and forgiveness. Other principles also apply, such as avoiding whatever is detrimental or addictive. Today, few things hurt and enslave more people than sex run amuck. So we cannot appeal either to freedom or to grace in the effort to justify sexual immorality.

Day 3: 1 Corinthians 6:12-14 Food : stomach is not analogous to sex : genitalia. The first Corinthian argument derived from law: if we are no

longer under obligation to obey the detailed requirements of the Old Testament law, then anything is permissible. The second Corinthian argument derives from biology: “Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food” (6:13). God designed food to fill the stomach, they argue, and he designed the stomach to digest food; so we legitimately eat whenever hungry, without ethical implication or restriction. Reasoning by analogy: God designed sex for the pleasure of the sex organs, and sex organs, to engage in sex; so we legitimately have sex whenever horny, without ethical implication or restriction.

Paul rejects the analogy. Every analogy depends on similarities between otherwise different realities. The issue in evaluating the analogy is to ask: where are the two legitimately similar, and where are they different? Eating and sex are similar: both are physical acts arising from biological appetites. Yet their effects are not comparable: food just passes through the body; sex fundamentally alters the body (given that in sex ‘the two become one’). Given that Christ died for our bodies, not just for our souls, we are obliged to use our bodies in ways which honor and serve him, and thus, abstain from sexual immorality.

Few of us are perverse – or creative – enough to develop such a theological argument to justify sexual immorality (though I did once know a professing Christian who argued, “God created me with these desires, so he will understand when I express them”). So Paul’s refutation of the Corinthian argument may not be necessary in our case. Still, his conclusion is relevant: Christ died for our bodies, not just for our souls; so we are obliged to use our bodies in ways which honor and serve him, and sexual immorality does neither.

Day 4: 1 Corinthians 6:12-14 This life and the next

The Corinthians argued not only from Law and freedom, and from biology, but also from creation and eternity. This third argument appears in the affirmation: “God will destroy them both” (note: the NIV closes the quotation marks too soon; this clause comes from the Corinthian argument, it is not Paul’s view). What they mean is that both eating and sex are limited to this life; neither food nor stomachs will be necessary in heaven, so however we use them now is irrelevant for eternity. By analogy, then, neither genitalia nor sex will exist in heaven, so how we use them in his life has no eternal implications.

Paul trumps the argument from creation by appeal to resurrection: “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.” Given that our bodies have eternal significance, how we use them in this

life has lasting implications. In this context, we could adapt and reapply the famous Weight Watchers' slogan: "A moment on the lips, *forever* on the hips." Live this life, Paul urges, with a view for eternity. A moment's temptation now can sully something our bodies, which are of eternal value.

Day 5: 1 Corinthians 6:15-17 Pimping Christ

Paul takes his argument two painful steps further. Given that we are one with Christ, and our bodies are limbs ('members') of Christ, then when we engage in sexual immorality, we force Christ to participate in sexual immorality. In his incarnate life, he faced as rigorous a temptation toward sexual immorality as the rest of us do. Yet he successfully resisted. Now we tarnish all that by forcing him to participate in our immorality. Given that sex has this effect of making the two one, then we join Christ to whomever we join ourselves sexually, even to a prostitute.

That is, yesterday's text made the point that sexual immorality demeans our bodies which are of eternal value. Today's reading takes it another dramatic step further: sexual immorality debases Christ himself.

Day 6: 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 Sinning against self and against Trinity

With these verses, we reach Paul's emphatic conclusion: sexual immorality sins against both ourselves and against the entire Trinity. Against ourselves: sexual sin is unique among all the sins; given that in the sex act, 'the two become one flesh', then in sexual immorality we uniquely sin against our bodies. Given that the Spirit indwells us, that Christ died for us, and that God gave both Christ and Spirit to us, then sexual immorality sins against Father, Son, and Spirit all at once. In every respect, it is disastrous. So Paul's entire argument comes to this point: "Flee from sexual immorality." Flee, with the same rigor that we would flee from a burning house, or from a falling skyscraper, or from someone with a fatal, contagious disease.

While Paul's argument ends there, our application need not. Is it enough to "just say no!"? No, and Paul never intends to affirm that it does. Elsewhere he reminds us that we do not walk alone: that we need help from others, just as they need help from us. "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently... Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ: (Galatians 6:1-2). James urges, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other." If you struggle with sexual sin, speak with one of our pastors, elders, deacons, or fellowship group leaders: while it may not be easy, you *can* find freedom. We can help.