

Sunday Mar. 21, 2021
Lesson 3: Physical Holiness
Scripture: 1 Cor. 6:12-20

Context:

The next part of our section on holiness comes from the New Testament in the book of First Corinthians. The purpose of the lesson is to recognize how living a holy life includes understanding our body is a temple and God calls us to take care of it. As we look at the letter, we understand how our physical behaviors are tied to our spiritual formation.

Any exploration of the contents of any of the Corinthian letters should begin with an examination of the city of Corinth. Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroads in classical antiquity, overlooking the two ports of Cenchreae and Lechaeum, located on the Isthmus of Corinth.¹ Corinth was then overtaken by the Roman empire and the new colonists were former slaves looking for economic and social advancement, leading to a focus on freedom within the culture.² This was paired with the older, pre-Roman Corinth reputation as a center of sexual promiscuity.³ In fact, the comic playwright Aristophanes, coined the verb *korinthiazesthai*, meaning “to fornicate.”⁴ The port had a reputation for freedom, sexual promiscuity, and wealth; all things which when paired together can lead to a city full of issues.

Because of the background of the city, it is no wonder the church in Corinth faced conflict and a lack of boundaries. Paul is not deterred though to the statement of “I am free to do anything” as he stakes a claim on how personal freedom has its own drawbacks as their autonomy has led to destruction of their community.⁵ Paul insists God created the body as a good part of creation and as such, it should be revered.⁶ Some of the Corinthian ethos has denigrated the body as transient and trivial, with no difference to what we do with our bodies.⁷ Just because you can visit the prostitute (legal in Corinth) does not mean you should do it.

For Paul, this relates to how the body is a temple. The people should honor it, respecting how our bodies were indeed created for sexual purposes. Yet our bodies are

¹ Richard B. Hays, “First Corinthians,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*,

not just our own, they also belong to the Lord and we should honor them as such.

Application

If one looks at the history of the United States and Corinth, there are numerous parallels. Both have advocated a place of personal freedom with social mobility and a focus on selling goods to gain even more money. We love the discussion and practice of liberty as we pursue whatever makes our heart content.

Yet there is a dark side to personal freedom and complete autonomy. “I am free to do anything” may lead to a sense of personal validation, but if not considered in a community context, this same freedom can upend the social fabric in a negative manner. Both individuals and communities can be torn apart when one person’s freedom completely invalidates a whole group of people.

For Paul’s case, the issue of how people understand their sexual desires and act upon those are causing divisions within the community. There are some who appear to believe satisfying their sexual urges with whomever comes their way and with those involved in the sex trade is completely valid because they can do so. As we find in the rest of the letter, this belief has caused strife between spouses, families, and even the church leadership.

In today’s western culture, we find some of the same attributes. Sexual commodification is something our culture stresses. The saying “sex sells” is commonplace.

Yet even the pushback to this thought process has its hidden and just as dangerous philosophy. Sexual promiscuity, even in our Bible belt areas, is something everyone knows takes place and yet because of good Southern manners, no one says a word. The thought process is that if we don’t know, then it isn’t happening. Other churches and communities go to the extreme, focusing on sex as evil, something only to be sought after for procreation purposes. Our teenagers and young adults take the silence and run with it in their own interpretation.

Paul’s words remind us that we were created as sexual beings; God designed us that way. There is nothing wrong with those parts of our bodies and the fact that those urges are a part of our experience. God created our bodies and their various functions to enjoy.

Yet Paul’s concern is a valid one. Because of the beauty of God’s creation with our physical bodies, they belong to the Lord first. As such, they are to be treated with reverence. Just as we watch what we eat, we are to have boundaries when it comes to sexual promiscuity and who we share intimate acts alongside. There is nothing wrong with sex and there is nothing wrong with being celibate. They are both important and needed in the church.

My experience with sex and the church is that matters of sexual promiscuity can split congregations and leads to years of hurt and pain. Whether it is young teenagers who make the decision to “go all the way,” or the partner who cheats on their spouse with another church member, someone always gets hurt. Sometimes, parties can move on from the damage and learn, while others can wreak havoc as those same personalities seem to think they can do whatever they want.

In the local church, we should not hesitate to engage in discussion around sex. In fact, as I discovered with the curriculum “Created by God” for middle school kids, our

young people especially have questions around their bodies and all the beautiful and terrifying changes they see taking place. Where better for them to learn their bodies are temples for the Holy Spirit and that the Lord loves every inch of them? The church is where we learn how God has made us and our bodies are a gift which first and foremost belong to God.

Why do you think the saying “I am free to do anything” can be a double-edged sword? How has our culture either been hyper-sexualized? How has the church sometimes painted sex as inherently sinful? What are the ways we can celebrate our bodies as gifts from God? Why do you think it is important to know boundaries when it comes to sex in relationships? How can we teach our children and youth how to be good stewards of their bodies?

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