

February 6, 2022

What Matters Most

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Joe had it made. His career was taking off. He and his wife had a beautiful, healthy three-month-old daughter. Then one day, while travelling on business, he had problems with his right hand. He couldn't hold a pen. He kept dropping it. He began to stumble. His right leg wouldn't work properly. His vision was going cloudy. The doctors did an MRI and a spinal and diagnosed Joe with Multiple Sclerosis. Life with MS, and all its challenges, had begun ...

"That first night," Joe says, "I lay in bed all night and I just shook. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do." The next day they went back to the doctor. "The prognosis is good, but you've got to figure out how to deal with it," the doctor had said. "And that's what we did," Joe says. "Judy and I sat down and we prayed and we prayed and we prayed. And we believed that God will give us the strength we need to deal with this. We're Christians. Looking back, this MS was one of the best gifts God gave us. It was a real wake up call. All of a sudden I had to realize that my family and my faith were what was really important. I was so busy going up and up in my career I'd lost sight of that. But seeing my own mortality reminded me of what's really important. It's got me back to my roots." We'll return to Joe ...

"Everything is permissible," but ...

1 Corinthians is a letter answering a letter from the church. Here, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians had written, *"Everything is permissible for me' or 'I'm allowed to do anything.'"* Paul is not saying this. Paul comments, *"But not everything is good for you"* (6:12).

On the one hand, the Corinthians' comment is true. There was a group of Christians who insisted believers had to keep all 613 Old Testament laws, from circumcision to diet. Paul emphasizes we are "free" from those sorts of nit-picky laws (see also Romans 5-7).

Taken out of context, however, the slogan implies we can do anything and everything (even SHOULD do anything and everything). The Corinthians apparently were doing just that: one man is sleeping with his stepmother, others are greedy, worshipping idols, demonstrating abusive behaviour, drunk, swindling, prostitution (6:5:1-2, 9-11. 6:15-16). Paul explains that, though we are not saved by Law, we still must follow God's basic moral principles. Many things are not beneficial or good for us, the church, for other people. In fact, many things we could do are downright hurtful to us, the community, others, and our relationship with God. *"Even though 'I am allowed to do anything,' I will not be mastered by anything"* (6:12).

The Corinthians had another saying – *"Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food' and God will destroy them both"* (6:13), meaning they could eat whatever they wanted, right? Again, drawing the distinction with the strict dietary laws of the Old Testament, this was true. But we know – don't we – that eating whatever we want, whenever we want,

however much we want isn't always best for our bodies. Some things are bad for us.

They also applied this "*I'm allowed to do anything*" adage to sexual ethics. It was OK to have any kind of sexual relationship (in a town with 1000+ prostitutes that opened up all sorts of "possibilities"). After all, our bodies are only around for a little while, so why not eat, drink and be merry as much as possible? The way most people present eternity, eating and sex seem limited to this life, so does it really matter what we do here and now? Go for it!

Paul's reply was: "*The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body*" (6:13). It DOES matter, says Paul. Sexual promiscuity affects one's whole being – it's more than just a physical act. From the very beginning God created our sexuality as a core part of our (good) identity. Sexual intimacy, then, is more than just a physical act. It's an emotional and spiritual union with a person, too. Our whole beings – body, soul, mind, and spirit – are the Lord's. We need to treat them as such.

"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (6:19)

Some religions teach our bodies don't matter: they are just physical, and what's really important is the spiritual – our souls. Christianity doesn't teach that. It speaks of our bodies as wonderful; God created them, and He loves them. It is significant that, in Jesus, God took on a human body. God's Holy Spirit lives within each of us who believe (John 14-16, 1 Corinthians 6:19). Our bodies are not JUST physical. Our bodies are holy temples.

In Paul's world, a temple is a building in which a God dwells. There were hundreds of pagan temples with images of their gods inside; that image of the god represented the real presence of the god. Jewish people believed God was physically, personally, powerfully present in the inner sanctum of the temple of Jerusalem. A temple is NOT something you worship, but it is something you treat as holy because of Who dwells within it – God Himself. So, when Paul says, "*your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit*," he is saying God Himself is personally, powerfully present within us (he does NOT say "*your soul is a temple of the Holy Spirit*"). Physically and spiritually, God dwells in us. Your body is holy. We treat it as such.

- **Our bodies are good.** Most of us probably have something we don't like about our bodies – God has nothing at all He doesn't like about your body. Before you were ever born, He created you, including your body. It is His masterpiece.
- **We can enjoy our bodies (responsibly).** God gives us the ability to enjoy tasting fantastic food, hugging, wearing nice clothes, smelling good, feeling the warmth of the sun, listening to music, running, etc. God could have made us so those things meant nothing to us. He didn't. He wants us to enjoy our bodies (responsibly).
- **As His temples, God dwells within us.** Some people say we can do what we like with our bodies because *we* own them; they are *ours*. If we feel like abusing them by overeating, using drugs, etc., that's our business. If we want to be sexually

promiscuous, that's our issue. Paul says something different. Our bodies are God's temple. Even though God has given us the ability to enjoy our bodies in wonderful ways, He also gives us warnings that some things are not in good for us (or others). They may "feel" good in the short term (like that chocolate bunny or secret liaison), but they have long-term consequences. Wherever we are, whatever we do, wherever we go, God is within us (Psalm 139:7-12). We are always His temples.

- **We treat our bodies with care; they are holy.** God invites us to control of our bodies, not be controlled by them. We choose what we eat (written long before we knew the dangers of trans fats – God knew). We ought to be careful about our sexual relationships. This all affects our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

"Flee from sexual immorality ..."(6:18)

Paul focuses particular attention on sexual ethics in Corinth. In Corinthian society, sexuality was a free for all. A Greek politician, Demosthenes, wrote, *"We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for the day-to-day needs of the body, but we have wives in order to produce children legitimately and to have a trustworthy guardian of our homes."* Paul's argument is, just because that's the ethic in the society around you, doesn't mean we do it, too.

An alien visiting Earth would pretty quickly observe our culture is obsessed with sex, any and every expression of sex. The James Bond approach to sexuality is presented as "normal" in our culture. The Christian idea of sex as specific to a marriage relationship is mocked as prudish, even laughable. Paul's argument is that just because that's the ethic in society at large, that doesn't mean it's best for us. God might actually know better.

Paul uses a three-point argument to defend his position -- not on the basis of law, but on the basis of what's (really) best for us because of how God created us:

1. **Your body is the Lord's** – it is holy. God, the Holy Spirit, lives within you. He is with you, always and everywhere. You are His temple. That's a wonderful gift.
2. **When you have a sexual relationship with someone, it is more than a physical act.** We are integrated bodies-mind-souls. Genesis 2:24 (which Paul quotes) and other Scriptures emphasize when our body is joined with someone, so is our mind, heart, and spirit. Sex is more than just a physical act.
3. **Sexual intimacy joins the Lord with *that* person as well as ourselves.** Since our bodies are the Lord's temple, what we do with our bodies involves every other part of our lives, including our relationship with Jesus. It's problematic, Paul says, if the Lord's temple – our body – should be in an unholy relationship. The holy temple would no longer be holy. Our relationship with God suffers. Our bodies are wonderful creations where God dwells – we ought to treat them accordingly, as holy.

Sexual promiscuity, Paul suggests, is different from overeating or otherwise indulging our bodies (6:18). Our sexuality is intimately linked with who we are, emotionally and spiritually, as people. Our self identity. Our personal security. Therefore, Scripture emphasizes that

while sex is one of God's wonderful gifts, it is also one of the most precious gifts, to be treasured, guarded, and kept holy within the boundaries of marriage.

"If it feels good ... think about it."

Human nature (like the Corinthians) says, *"If it feels good, do it."* What Paul is saying is *"If it feels good, think about it."* Many enjoyable things are great. That's wonderful. Some Christians would have us believe anything pleasurable is bad. That's nonsense. But not everything is good for us. There are consequences to our actions. *"Your body is the Lord's temple,"* Paul reminds us – make good choices. Look after your body well.

Sex – Paul says – is part of the wonderful way God created us. We have to recognize the decisions we make about our sexuality affect our relationships – with other people and with God. We could list a bunch of public health warnings, but that's not Paul's purpose. Paul wants us to consider that sexual intimacy involves an emotional and spiritual coming together as well as a physical one. That's how God made us. It's fundamental to our humanity. Expressed in the context of a loving, permanent marriage, our sexuality binds us together so *"the two become one."* Expressed outside of a marriage commitment, sex – without the emotional and spiritual components – becomes simply a physical act. It is a pale shadow of what it is intended to be. And it may leave us feeling emotionally and spiritually poorer.

What matters most

Back to Joe. Discovering his MS made him stop and think about what was most important in life. His career may not be as important as it seemed. He needs to spend more time with his family. He needs to spend more time with God. He needs to live differently.

What about us? Some of us – or people we love – have serious medical problems. We know how precious – and fragile these temples God has given us are. Like Joe, we have had to deal with those health issues. And like Joe, many of us have come back to what is really important. My own personal journey with chronic pain has forced me to take stock of what really matter, to make sure I take time (1) for Jesus and (2) for my family.

What about us? What is really important to us? What would we put on a list of "What matters most"? Do we prioritize our relationship with our family and closest friends? Our relationship with God? What else? How then do we live? Do we live out our values?

Do we treat your body like God's temple – in terms of what you eat, how you live, what you do? *"Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. Therefore, honour God with your body"* (6:19-20). What is Jesus saying to you?