

Bodily Spirituality **1 Corinthians 6:12-20**

What's true spirituality? All sorts of answers float around our world. Hindus are into various forms of spirituality. Buddhists are into different forms of spirituality. Different branches of the New Age movement proclaim different brands and levels of spirituality.

- Some say spirituality's all about losing yourself in the one great spirit – about adding the one little drop of your spirit into the vast ocean of spirit that's somewhere out there.
- Some say spirituality's all about looking inside you until you find the god and the power inside.
- Some say spirituality involves gaining control of your inner spirit so you can send it on all sorts of adventures through astral travel.
- Some say spirituality's all about keeping the body under very strict control so the spirit may be free to do what it likes.

There's a wide range to choose from.

What about Christian spirituality? What's that look like? Again, as you look at the various branches of Christianity – the various denominations – so also you see many Christian brands of spirituality on offer. Many look like slightly converted versions of what's on offer in the world. One reason for that is that many Christians adopt a Greek world-view.

The Greeks divided the world into the material and the spiritual. For them, the material didn't matter much; what really mattered was the spiritual. How did that impact how they thought of humans? They divided humans into

the material and the spiritual – we have our bodies and our souls. Do the bodies matter? Not particularly. What really matters is the soul – it's immortal; it survives the body at death; it goes on forever.

How's the Greek view compare with the Biblical view? They conflict.

- The Bible states the material world is God's good creation. It isn't unimportant or second-rate or evil.
- The Bible states humans are both body *and* spirit. We are whole persons. Having a body is part of who we are as persons.
- The Bible states our eternal existence will be a bodily one. Jesus' resurrection body is the first-fruits. Our resurrection bodies will be like His.

Some of the Christians at Corinth adopted Greek world-views rather than Biblical world-views. Their ideas on spirituality came from Greek teaching rather than the Bible's teaching. Some thought they were so spiritual that it didn't matter what they did with their bodies. Like the Greeks, they divided themselves into body and spirit. Like the Greeks, they thought the spirit was the important bit. Now they were Christians, they thought they had the secret to true spirituality. Their spirits were truly set free. So it didn't matter what they did with their bodies. They were free to join them to a prostitute. They thought that didn't affect their spirituality. Indeed, they probably saw it as a great expression of their true spirituality.

Misleading Slogans

Verses 12 to 14 introduce the problem. Our problem is Paul writes about something well known to the Corinthians. They knew exactly what he's talking about. We've

got to work it out from what Paul says about it.

"Everything is permissible for me" – but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me" – but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" – but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also.

It seems Paul here uses some of the Corinthians' slogans. The NIV indicates that by putting the words in inverted commas – that here Paul quotes the Corinthians' words rather than using his own words. That's highly probable. But it could also be that these slogans originated in Paul's own teaching – that originally they're his words – but the Corinthians took them out of his context and used them in different ways. In what he writes here, Paul doesn't totally disagree with these slogans – but he does disagree with how the Corinthians use them.

The first slogan is *Everything is permissible for me* – repeated twice here and a third time in chapter 10. When Paul preached the gospel, he did emphasise the freedom the Christian has in Jesus. For example, Romans 8:1-2

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

So, you could imagine someone like the Corinthians turning that into a slogan about total freedom. But, in doing so, they distort the essential gospel message. How the Corinthians define their freedom – to do whatever I want – is how the Bible defines sin. For Paul, Christian free-

dom is always qualified by being *in Christ*. It's like Augustine's famous statement:

Love God and do what you like.

And so here, Paul qualifies their slogan in two ways.

- First, is it beneficial? It isn't whether or not I have the freedom or the right to do something. It's whether it's beneficial or helpful or good – both to myself and to others. It's not demanding rights, but doing good to others.
- Secondly, will it master me? Slavery often disguises itself as freedom – drugs and gangs are two examples. Both seemingly offer freedom. But those accepting the offer soon find themselves in chains they can't escape.

Christian freedom is an important principle – but it must always be kept in proper context. As a Christian, Jesus has set me free. That's very true. But I must keep that in the context of what I'm set free *from* and what I'm set free *to*. I'm set free from slavery to my own sinful desires and set free to do what's right and what pleases God.

The second slogan is *Food for the stomach and the stomach for food* – and perhaps also *God will destroy them both*. It's hard to tell whether the second bit's part of the Corinthians' slogan or part of Paul's response. When Paul preached the gospel, he spoke of the Old Testament food laws as obsolete. Jesus fulfilled them, and thus declared all foods clean. Thus, what you put into the stomach and what comes out of the stomach – both are irrelevant in terms of God's kingdom and godliness. They belong to this present age which will pass.

Now, it seems the Corinthians put these two slogans together something like this:

- Since everything is permitted; and
- Since food's for the stomach and the stomach for food (and God will destroy them both in the end); and
- Since all bodily appetites are fairly alike

Then that means the body's for sex and sex for the body – and God'll destroy both of them in the end as well. They applied their Greek thinking about material and spiritual and mixed it up with a few Christian-sounding slogans and came up with a wrong conclusion.

Paul challenges this conclusion at two points. **First**, he says our bodies are for the Lord. Our bodies aren't meant for immorality – that isn't God's purpose in giving us bodies, either before we became Christians or after. Our bodies are part of who we are as persons and so belong to the Lord. Paul expands this more fully in 19 and 20.

Secondly, he says our bodies won't be destroyed but will be raised from death – just as Jesus' body was. It's different from Greek thinking. The Greeks looked forward to the release of their souls from their bodies. At death, their bodies would be destroyed, but their souls would fly free to immortality. That isn't the Christian view. Just as God raised Jesus from death with His new, imperishable body; so also God will raise us. Our bodies are destined for resurrection, not destruction. Our bodies are stamped with eternity. Paul develops this further in chapter 15.

Do you not Know?

In verses 15 to 17, Paul asks two more of his "Do you not know?" questions – questions to which they should have

known the answers.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh". But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit.

The first question flows from the idea that the body's for the Lord. Christians are joined to Christ and become members of His body. It's a metaphor:

- *Body* refers to the body of Christ – not His earthly body, but the church throughout the world.
- *Members* refers to individual bits of Christ's body – the various members of the church.

Paul uses this picture to explain the reality of what happens when a person becomes a Christian.

When a person becomes a Christian, they're joined to Christ in such a way that Paul can write in Romans 6:3-5

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection.

The Corinthians should've known this.

And so Paul asks the further question: *Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?* Put that way, the answer's obvious. Am I to involve the

pure and holy Son of God in sexual immorality? Am I to take my body, which is a member of Christ's body, and to unite it to a prostitute? Of course not.

With the second "Do you not know?" question, Paul approaches the same subject from a different angle. He quotes from the Old Testament account of creation.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The Bible says the sexual relationship is a "one flesh" relationship. We don't have time to go into detail about that tonight. But, at the very least, it means the sexual union of a man and woman brings a bond between the two. For the Christian, unless it's within the context of marriage, that bond isn't consistent with the bond they have with Christ.

Some think Paul here refers especially to temple prostitutes. Many pagan temples then had prostitutes attached to them – both male and female. Part of pagan worship was having relations with these prostitutes. It'd be wrong for a Christian to join with a temple prostitute, because that would take a member of Christ's body and join it to another pagan deity. That'd add that extra element.

But I don't think Paul's comments should be confined just to temple prostitutes. It adds another important dimension, but Paul's point here is much broader. *The body is not meant for sexual immorality* in general (13). *Flee all sexual immorality* (18) seems to be the command.

Honour God with your Body

Paul draws two conclusions as to what they should and

shouldn't do with their bodies – conclusions that apply to all Christians. Verses 18 to 20:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

First, what they shouldn't do with their bodies. They shouldn't use their bodies for immorality. That includes not going to prostitutes, but it also includes not being involved in immorality of any kind. And it isn't just immorality as the people of Corinth define it; it's immorality as God defines it.

Secondly, what they should do with their bodies. They should use their bodies to honour God. Many religions focus only in the inner spirit. The body's treated as unimportant. That isn't the case with Christianity. God treats us as whole persons. Yes, the spirit's important and we renew the inner being by the gospel. But the only way that's demonstrated is through the body. The Christian life's lived through the body. There's no other way.

In between those two commands, Paul gives some more theological reasons as to why we should behave this way – especially as to why we should *flee sexual immorality*. The first isn't easy to understand: *All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body*. We've got lots of questions:

- Does this mean sexual sin is worse in God's sight than other sins?

- What's it mean to say all other sins are outside the body? What about suicide? What about gluttony? Aren't these sins somehow inside the body?
- And what about lying? Sure, that's directed against others, but doesn't it affect our minds as well? And aren't our minds part of our bodies?

It's important to interpret these words in the context of this passage. Paul doesn't say sexual sin's worse than other sins. That's not his point. What he says is that sexual sin's against our own bodies in a way other sins aren't. When a person joins their body to a prostitute, the person takes what's a member of Christ's body and makes it a member of the prostitute's body and puts it under the prostitute's mastery. Immorality places one's body under the wrong master and thus sins against one's own body.

That leads naturally to the question in verse 19 – yet another "Do you not know?" question. It's the other side of the equation. Just who owns the bodies of Christians? Is it not God?

- Is not God the One whose Spirit dwells within you? And God's Spirit isn't just any old spirit – He's the *Holy Spirit*.
- And didn't God buy you for Himself? Was not the price paid so you could belong to Him?

These things are part of the Christian gospel – basic things Paul told them when he first preached at Corinth.

In this, Paul shows them their bodies are important.

- It isn't just that God's Spirit has a wonderful time communing with their spirits. It's that God's Holy Spirit indwells their bodies.
- It isn't just that God redeemed their spirits when He

bought them out of slavery. God redeemed them as whole persons, including their bodies.

Paul strongly affirms the significance of the body in the present. Their bodies aren't their own to do immorality. Their bodies belong to God – and so they should honour God with their bodies, including this area of sexuality. Christianity is very much a bodily religion. What we do with our bodies matters.

Conclusion

Still today there are Christians whose spirituality looks more like the Corinthians than the Bible. In our culture, it still happens very much in the area of sexuality:

- Some claim they're free to leave their spouse to be joined to a new spouse. Now they're truly spiritual, God's provided a more spiritual partner for them.
- Some claim they're free to keep both their spouse and their mistresses. Now they're truly spiritual, they can benefit from multiple partners.
- Some claim they're free to experiment profitably without committing to marriage. Now they're truly spiritual, they're set free from religious constraints.

They want to assert their new-found freedom in Christ in ways that are, in fact, anti-Christ. They misunderstand Christian spirituality. Our bodies matter. Our bodies are part of what God made us as humans. What we do with our bodies matters. When supposedly Christian freedom looks exactly like the immorality of non-Christians it's time to ask serious questions. What Paul says here about the proper use of our bodies is important. We can't just join our bodies to any partner. That isn't a proper use of bodies bought by God and indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. And if you're tempted to think the Holy Spirit's telling your spirit otherwise, then let me assure you quite bluntly

it won't be the Holy Spirit doing that. The Holy Spirit's made His thinking on this matter quite plain in the Bible.

But we shouldn't simply restrict this to the example that underlies this passage. Paul's teaching here has broader application. It has implications for our thinking about spirituality in general. Some Christians still want to confine spirituality to a so-called spiritual realm with limited contact with the physical and material. But Christian spirituality doesn't divorce the spirit from the body. Christian spirituality involves both. God sees us as whole persons. This final statement's quite broad – *honour God with your body*. It doesn't really leave anything out, does it?

Have you come across the idea of *Sunday Christians*? Some people lived beautiful Christian lives on Sundays: they got all dressed up and went faithfully to church on Sundays; they kept control of their tongue on Sundays – no words of anger, no gossip, no swearing; they spent all Sunday resting and in spiritual activities like reading the Bible and praying. That's Sundays. The rest of the week was totally different. Then their real character came out: explosive anger, foul mouth, deceitful in business. On Sundays, they looked the perfect Christian; the rest of the week, they looked the typical pagan. Sunday was for the spiritual man; the rest of the week was for the material man. It's the same basic division: spirituality's one thing, the body's something else.

Similar things happen today. Have you ever had someone tell you about their marvellous quiet-time and then in the next breath run down one of their Christian brothers or sisters? Sometimes they do it without even trying to

disguise it as a prayer point. Or have you had someone tell you of their second blessing experience while driving 20km/hr over the speed limit? The problem isn't so much that they do wrong things. That is a problem – but that's a problem we all face. The problem is they don't see the inconsistency of their lives – the inconsistency in what they're saying and what they're doing. They think they're super-spiritual simply because of what happened in the spiritual realm. They make a division between the spirit and the body – the spirit's the important thing; the body's either not as important or irrelevant.

What we do with our bodies matters. God bought our bodies. It's very similar to Romans 12:1-2. Worship of God, the honouring of God, involves all our lives. It isn't simply having some great worship time on Sundays. There's nothing wrong with that – but it's only a small part of worship. Our worship extends to how we use our bodies 168 hours a week. It includes things such as:

- How we drive our cars.
- What we do with our money.
- How we relate to our neighbours.
- How we relate to people at school and work.
- How we eat.
- What we do with our non-working time.
- Whether we exercise.
- What medication we take.
- How we furnish our houses.
- And everything else we do with our bodies.

Worship isn't simply some spiritual activity. That's the Greek way of thinking. That divides the spiritual from the physical. The Biblical way of thinking sees us as whole persons. We're to honour God with our bodies. That's true Christian spirituality.