

THE CHRISTIAN AND LIBERTY

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

November 20, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

It is often easy to become confused by the laws in our country. Laws are made to protect the rights of individuals, to preserve our freedom. However, these laws often appear contradictory, particularly as it relates the right to life. On the one hand, we have laws in many states that protect the woman's rights to an abortion. Nothing is said about the life of the unborn child and all credence is given to the woman's freedom to choose. So the legislated murder of millions of children goes by each year with no penalty exacted for such a crime. However, in one of these states a man was charged with second-degree murder in taking the life of an unborn child. So which is it? Is an unborn child "alive" or not? And if so, is it murder to take the life prematurely, whatever the method? Are not both premeditated?

To confuse things even more, these states that show little deference to the life of an unborn child give great esteem to the life of others. Many of the same states that have legalized abortion also have seat belt laws that make it illegal to be in a moving vehicle without a seat belt. Why? To protect one's life. All of these states have laws against the improper use of prescribed medications? Why? To protect one's life. All of these states have laws against illegal drugs? Why? To protect human life. Do you see the confusion? A double standard exists in our nation today, exposed in this issue of human life, which is driven by one's religious worldview and ideological mindset.

We expect this type of mindset in the world, but not in the church. We expect those outside the church to take the freedoms that have been established and twist them and turn them for their own benefit, but not inside the church. Yet this was happening at Corinth. As we have seen, there were many problems in the church at Corinth. In our text this morning, we look at another of those problems that Paul addressed in this letter. These at Corinth were abusing the liberty that they had in Christ. Their passions and ignorance had once again got the best of them. Paul's purpose in exposing this is to demonstrate that *the body of Christ suffers when liberty is mistaken for license.*

I. Christian Liberty Wisely Used (6:12)

Paul used two well-known slogans in Corinthian culture to lay the groundwork for his teaching on Christian liberty. The first slogan was, "**All things are lawful for me.**" He quotes this four times in 1 Corinthians, twice in this verse and then twice again in 10:23. Paul would not disagree with this slogan. He used it himself to distinguish between the legalistic tendencies of Judaism and the freedom that comes in trusting Christ and being delivered from a performance oriented religion. Who better than Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews and Pharisee of Pharisees (Phil. 3:5), to address this issue? The Corinthians, however, used this slogan, and perhaps Paul's use of it, as an excuse to justify their sinfulness, to continue to gratify the desires of the flesh. Better yet, the Corinthians *abused* this slogan to legitimize their actions, in this case, sexual immorality. However, while there was an element of truth in the slogan, "**All things are lawful for me,**" it was not a carte blanche for the Corinthians to live as they pleased.

This attitude may have arisen from their misunderstanding of "**all things.**" By "**all things**" Paul certainly did not mean things that God had plainly addressed as sin, things he mentioned in vv. 9-10, sins of sexual immorality (v. 9) and sins against others (v. 10). Paul would not call

those who practice these things “unrighteous” and then turn around and say that these things are lawful, or right, for a person, especially the righteous one. What Paul meant by “**all things**” was all things indifferent, all things that God had not explicitly or implicitly commanded. If God has not commanded it, if God has not spoken concerning an action, Paul says, then you are at liberty to do or not to do, free to commit or omit. You may have heard it expressed as “gray areas.” Christianity must not be reduced to a list of dos and don’ts. That is when the bondage of legalism rears its ugly head. In these matters the Christian has liberty of conscience. But the Christian is never to use this liberty as license to live as they please regardless of God’s Word.

So Paul sets out, not to retract this slogan, but to make clear that the slogan was never meant to justify their sinful actions. There are boundaries (as Roger Ellsworth calls them) for Christian liberty and the exercise of freedom. Oliver Wendell Holmes, in a Supreme Court ruling on freedom of speech, said freedom of speech does not give one the right to yell ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theater, unless, of course, there is a fire. Is one free to do so? Yes. Is it wise or beneficial? No. Here Paul sets forth the wise use of Christian liberty by establishing two boundaries.

1. Edification

Paul said, “**All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.**” Again, Paul is not addressing things that are inherently wrong, things evil in and of themselves. The believer has the freedom to live as he pleases in these matters. However, the question must be asked, “Is it helpful or profitable to exercise this freedom at this time?” That is the first boundary that Paul sets for Christian liberty. John Piper refers to this boundary as the law of Christian love and says the first question we should ask is, “What is HELPFUL to do?” not, “What do I HAVE to do?” [www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/85/090185.html]. This boundary considers the matter in relation to the whole, thinking of everything and everyone involved and/or affected by this action. You might have heard someone ask a person why he or she did this or that and the person responds, “Because I can.” Paul said, “**Not all things are profitable.**” A dog can lick a skunk at any time, but is it worth it? A cat can cuddle with a porcupine whenever he pleases, but is it wise to do so?

Paul’s concern here is that the believer shows discernment in those areas that are innocent but are not necessarily helpful and can hinder the Christian walk. The writer of Hebrews refers to these things as “encumbrances” (Heb. 12:1) in the Christian race. The actions are not necessarily sinful, but can lead to sin and at the very least impede a believer’s spiritual growth.

Let me give you an example. Some years ago, when Lori was pregnant with Bailey, I started collecting baseball cards. Now I think we would all agree that there is nothing inherently wrong with collecting baseball cards. I even had a pure motive – this would provide a wonderful opportunity for me to form those cherished memories with my son (Oh well!). But even after finding out that Bailey was not a son, but a daughter, I continued to collect cards. Not just baseball cards, mind you, but football, hockey, basketball, soccer, even Desert Storm! My hobby had turned into an almost all-consuming passion. I spent hours (and dollars!) on baseball cards. This greatly affected my walk with the Lord. I was not a good steward of time or tithe during that time. I was spending more time with a Beckett Card Collectors Magazine than I was with the Bible. The result was that I could tell you the price of just about any card but I could not tell you where to look in Scripture for texts relating to justification, sanctification, or glorification.

Do you see how something innocent can become harmful? Do you perhaps have an area like that in your life? Something that is not helpful, not profitable? We must constantly be on

guard against these subtle ploys of the evil one. We must not let liberty cross the boundary of edification. “Because I can” is not a free ticket to live as you please. Is it profitable for all involved?

2. Enslavement

The second boundary we see Paul establish is that of enslavement. He continued, “**All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.**” Roger Ellsworth wrote that the first question a Christian must ask about anything he is legitimately free to do is whether he is in control of it, or is it in control of him [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 107-108]. He then elaborates:

If any innocent diversion controls and dominates my life, it is no longer a freedom but a slavery, and I must say ‘No’ to it. Freedoms are only freedoms as long as we are free to say ‘No’ to them. [108]

This can happen in a number of ways. Those innocent things that have no inherent evil in them, such as card collecting, can enslave us. But further, we can take the good things of God and misuse them to fulfill our own desires and become enslaved to our passions and abuse the freedom and goodness that God has granted. This was happening at Corinth. Their sexual appetites had consumed them. They were enslaved by sexual passions and consequently they corrupted a perfectly good gift from God. I want to be clear here: sex is a perfectly good gift from God – He created it. Sexual appetites are good and wholesome *in the context of marriage*. We must be careful in dealing with this issue today that we do not send the wrong message. Sex is good and right when used as God meant it to be used. Sex is sinful only when it is misused and fueled by the flesh, when sex consumes. The same could be said about our finances. It is not the money that is evil, but the love of it. We could say the same about our status in society. It is not the status that is evil, it is how we achieve it and how others are affected that is often the sinful act. Any passion that consumes us other than a passion for the things of God enslaves us and is an idol.

We must keep our guard up in this area. The deepest of passions in man are of a sexual nature. That is why Paul repeatedly in his writings sends forth the warnings against sexual sins. We must remember as believers that we are engaged in spiritual warfare. The Spirit and the flesh are in constant battle. And Satan uses the things of the flesh, our ungodly passions, to sink his claws into. Folks, listen, you can excuse it if you want. You can justify it as a “pet sin.” You can use the excuse that everybody else is doing it. But if you have abused the freedom you have in Christ to satisfy the ungodly desires of your heart, then you are enslaved. This thing, whatever it is, has become your master. And what did Jesus say? “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and *mamona* (Gr. Word for, in this case, wealth personified as an object of worship) (Matt. 6:24).

So Paul shows how a Christian is to rightly exercise their Christian liberty. It is important for the believer to understand that he has been set free from the bondage of the law. By God’s grace he has been delivered from the performance treadmill of good works that only leads to misery and frustration. However, we must be careful that we do not abuse those liberties. We must ask whether exercising this freedom edifies. We must take care that we do not turn a freedom into bondage. This is how one uses these freedoms wisely.

II. Christian Liberty Foolishly Abused (6:13-20)

In the remainder of our text, Paul addresses the notion of the second slogan, **“Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.”** In taking up this slogan the Corinthians showed their belief that sexual pleasure was to be enjoyed just as food was to be eaten. Their sexual appetites were to be fulfilled on demand just like their physical appetites. The Corinthians wanted their cake and eat it too. They wanted the forgiveness of sins while still hanging onto their sexual immorality.

However, Paul would have none of it. He refutes their thinking by focusing on the importance of the body as created by God. He does this by design. One of the other frequent uses of the first slogan, **“All things are lawful,”** was by those who had been influenced by Gnosticism at Corinth. One of the main teachings of the Gnostics was their belief that all matter, all things material, is evil. The physical body, therefore, being of a material nature, is evil. This led to the belief of some at Corinth that they could do whatever they pleased to and with the body. So Paul sets out to show them the importance of the body as created by God.

1. Purpose of the body (v. 13)

In using this slogan, the Corinthians had a wrong starting point that led to a bad analogy. Paul would not disagree with the proverb, **“Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.”** The stomach was created for food. It serves as a storehouse for food and is one of the body’s main digestive organs. Food passes into the stomach, the stomach processes it, and it is released from the stomach. However, the Corinthians were not comparing apples with apples. So Paul turns it around on them. Notice Paul’s conclusion, **“but God will do away with them.”** There would come a day when food is no longer needed to sustain a purpose and the stomach’s value will be lost.

Now to Paul’s point of emphasis, **“Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.”** The Corinthians were correct - **“Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.”** But this is not the case with the body and immorality. While the things you eat might fall into the category of indifference and you therefore have the liberty to choose to eat what you like, the same cannot be said of sexual immorality. The body is not made for such, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. And both of these, the body and the Lord, will exist forever.

The first question of the Baptist Shorter Catechism is, “What is the chief end of man?” In other words, what is the main purpose for which God was created? The answer, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” In the nutshell, man was created to worship God. Man was created in the image of God with perfect knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. However, these things are severely marred as a result of the Fall, marred but not entirely lost or eradicated. Natural man, because of this nature of sin, has a void in his life, a longing that needs to be fulfilled. So he seeks to fill the void however he can because he still has the inbred longing to worship. He just looks in all the wrong places and fills it with all the wrong things. He ends up worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, seeks to satisfy self rather than glorify God.

What Paul shows here is that just as the body was created to worship God, **“for the Lord,”** the Lord is necessary for the body to function in this way, to worship God has He demands to be worshiped. It is only as God enables us that we are able to live according to the purpose for which we were created. With this in mind, Charles Hodge drew this conclusion, “With this design of the body the sin in question (sexual immorality) is absolutely incompatible, and destructive to the relation which the body sustains to the Lord” [*1&2 Corinthians*, 103]. The

Corinthians analogy failed because they misunderstood the purpose of the body - to worship God.

2. Destiny of the body (v. 14)

Paul continues by showing the destiny of the body. After showing that both food and the stomach would be done away with by God, he writes, **“Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.”** Paul will deal more at length with the doctrine of the resurrection in chapter 15. For the present, he simply affirms that the body, unlike its perishable members, has a glorious destiny. It will not perish, but will share in the same resurrection power of our Lord. Whereas food and the stomach might deal with things indifferent, the relation of the body to the Lord concerns the nature for which we were created. Food and stomach will be destroyed; the Lord has been and the body will be resurrected.

This again touches on the philosophic influence in the church at Corinth. As we have already noted, the Greek philosophers of the day looked at the physical body as insignificant while regarding the soul as all-important. But Paul’s teaching on a bodily resurrection flies in the face of such thought. While it is true that the soul goes immediately to be with the Lord at death and the body remains, Paul teaches that the two will one day be reunited. If God sees the importance of the physical body, should not these at Corinth as well? Paul uses the bodily resurrection, the destiny of the body of the believer, to argue against the Corinthians’ justification of sexual immorality.

3. Corporateness of the body (vv. 15-18)

Paul continues by showing the corporate aspect of the body of Christ, **“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?”** In this third argument, notice how Paul shifts from the singular “body” to the plural “bodies.” Now he is talking of the church as a whole. We will look more intently at the body of Christ in chapter 12. His point here is that they remember that they are in Christ, united to Christ, with Christ as the Head of the body and they are its members. Paul asks, **“Shall I take away the members of Christ and make them a member of a prostitute?”** For Paul it was absolutely unthinkable that a member would be taken away from its proper use in the body of Christ (service for Christ) and made to serve a prostitute, especially if said prostitute was a temple prostitute, which was probably the case. Do you see how perverted these people were?

Paul reinforces his argument in vv. 16-18 by showing how reprehensible this sin is to the body. The Scripture teaches that when two people come together sexually, they are united as one; they become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Paul quotes this verse to demonstrate what they are doing by this action. As Hodge said, “The parties to it become partakers of a common life. Whether we can understand this or not, it is the doctrine of the Bible” [105]. Warren Wiersbe further expressed this unity,

“When a man and woman join their bodies, the entire personality is involved. There is a much deeper experience, a ‘oneness’ that brings with it deep and lasting consequences... Sex is not just a part of the body. Being ‘male’ and ‘female’ involves the total person. Therefore, sexual experience affects the total personality” [*Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2, 589].

Though we may not understand all that this means (Hodge), we certainly understand from Wiersbe that there is no such thing as “casual” or “recreational” sex. There is a deep intimate attachment to one another that results from a sexual union.

Then in v. 17 Paul shows the inconsistency of one who professes to be a Christian and engages in this type of act. **“But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.”** Union with Christ comes by faith. When one is truly united to Christ they surrender the personality because Christ has purchased it. Those in union with Christ have “the mind of Christ” (2:16) and therefore act and react the way the Lord would act and react.

So we see that an act such as this, even though carried out by an individual, involves and engages the entire body of Christ. His name is greatly profaned. But Paul goes on to show how this abuse affects the individual as well. In v. 18 he warns, **“Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral sins man commits against his own body.”** This brings us back to the absurdity of the food/stomach slogan. A sin of this nature violates the purpose for which the body was made. The body was made for the Lord, not for immorality. Paul is not suggesting here that sexual immorality is more sinful than any other sin. What he suggests is that it is unique. Matthew Henry wrote,

This sin is in a peculiar manner styled uncleanness, pollution, because no sin has so much external turpitude in it, especially in a Christian. He sins against his own body; he defiles it, he degrades it, making it one with the body of that vile creature with whom he sins. [*Matthew Henry's Commentary*, vol. 6, 431]

Here we see the great reversal. Man, created to worship the Creator, instead worships the creature. He has exchanged the truth for a lie. Hence Paul's clear warning, **“Flee immorality.”**

How do you flee immorality? What safeguards do you have in place to guard yourself against the things of this world that can so easily beset us in this area? We live in a society where we can have sex at the click of a button on a TV controller or blatantly displayed on our computer screen. Even worse, you don't have to look for it on the computer, they send it to you whether you want it or not. So what steps are you taking to **“flee immorality.”** Let me address you men for a moment. I fear in the church today that we have far too many men that think more highly of themselves than they ought in this area. Yet how many of us know someone that has put themselves in a position to fall and then did? Men, we are fools if we think we can have the restraint and self-control of a Joseph when the world throws itself at us. Heed Paul's warning. Know that immorality is out there, and flee it. A sin of this nature affects not only self but also the entire body of Christ. You simply do not have any liberty in this area!

4. Owner of the body (vv. 19-20)

Paul asks, **“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”** Paul's question seems to suggest that the Corinthians may have forgotten they were God's own possession. In 3:16 Paul called the entire Christian community God's temple. Here the body of the individual believer is the temple occupied by the Holy Spirit. Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit the Christian no longer has the right to use his body as he desires. It is God's body! Because the temple is God's and because the believer is that temple it follows that the believer is God's. God has taken possession of the body by His Spirit. Again we see the importance of the body to God. It is a temple. The Old Testament temple was built for worship. It was indwelt by the presence of

God. The body of a believer is no different. Our bodies are for worship. Our bodies are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which fits us and prompts us to worship.

Paul further demonstrates this ownership in v. 20. God is the rightful owner of the believer's body because of the price paid by Christ at Calvary. **"You have been bought with a price"** is language used in the slave trade. A slave would save the money necessary to set him free, deposit into the treasury of a pagan temple, and was consequently purchased by the god. Technically, he was a slave to the god, but before men he was free.

Now look where Paul is going with this. Christians are free before men, **"all things are lawful"** for them. They are God's slaves, for He has purchased them as His own. This transaction took place at Calvary; we were purchased by His blood. Because of sin, we owed a debt we could not pay. Because of His love for us, He paid a debt He did not owe. And that payment was made, full and final, at the Cross. It is finished! Redemption has been accomplished.

God owns the body of the believer because he owns the temple. God owns the body of the believer because He bought it through His Son Jesus Christ. Hence Paul's conclusion: **"glorify God in your body."** Use your body for the purpose it was designed. Flee immorality and worship God, by His grace and for His glory.

Conclusion

As a believer, do you understand the sinfulness of sin? Do you understand how it affects not only you but the entire Body? Are you taking license in some area of your life, abusing the liberty that is yours only through the shed blood of Christ? Remember, you are not your own.

For those who have not trusted Christ, do you see the sinfulness of sin, how sin separates one from a holy God? As Creator, God owns you as well. You are not your own and God will demonstrate that one day in judgment. There is only one way that the sinner can be reconciled to God. That is through the finished work of Jesus at the Cross. Look to Jesus!