

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 “Christian Liberty and Today’s Morality”

Intro. One of the prevailing values in American culture is freedom. Our founding fathers fought a revolutionary war to obtain freedom of religion, and freedom from tyranny. We love the freedoms we have. Yet sinful human nature tends to abuse freedom. We turn freedom and liberty into a license to do as we please. We tend to become like Israel in the days of the Judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Almost unlimited sexual freedom is one aspect of the perversion of liberty that we see today. The American Civil Liberties Union fights in court to grant people such so-called freedom. They persuaded the Supreme Court that freedom of speech even includes the right to produce child pornography as long as it is generated with computer technology instead of using actual children. It doesn’t seem to matter that such pornography incites lust and sexual abuse of children. In just 40 years the forces of evil won the battle in our society regarding so-called sexual freedom. Gallup’s annual *Values and Beliefs* survey for 2015 revealed that approval for having a baby outside of marriage was up to 61%. Approval for sex between unmarried couples was up to 68%. Back in 2005 I predicted that even homosexual relations would be viewed as morally acceptable, for at that time 44% of American believed it was so. Yet in that 2015 Gallup poll, that percentage increased to 63%!

Well, the Corinthian Christians were in danger of perverting the precious doctrine of Christian liberty also. In v.12 Paul twice repeats a statement concerning Christian liberty that they had probably quoted out of context, “All things are lawful for me.” Evidently some of the Corinthians had seized upon that phrase and used it even to justify gluttony and sexual sin. They justified gluttony by saying in v.13, “Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods.” Therefore, eat, drink, be merry! That’s what the stomach is for! They also used similar logic to rationalize immorality. The reasoning goes like this: It is normal and natural to satisfy our desire for food. Even so, sexual desire is normal, so why not fulfill it any way you desire? In fact, in *Eternity* magazine Hugh Hefner said that sex is just a biological activity like eating and drinking.

Now the reason even some of the Corinthian Christians sought to justify sexual freedom was due to the influence of society. Like today, there was almost complete freedom in sexual expression in Corinthian society. It was a port city known for its loose living. The main religion in Corinth actually had sexual immorality as a part of their religion. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had some 1000 temple prostitutes!¹ And Paul says in v.9 that at one time many of the Corinthian Christians were fornicators, or even homosexuals and sodomites. Some had been female or male prostitutes. But as Paul says in v.11 they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps some quit their old habits only temporarily, and they wanted to justify going back into their old lifestyle.

So this evening I am going to preach a counter-cultural message. The floodgates of immorality and perverted liberty have opened. Our land is being swept away into moral degradation. And only God can close the floodgates. And though I am only one voice, I preach the Word of God which is living and powerful to change lives.

¹ Based on a report by the Greek geographer Strabo, who wrote about this around 20 AD.

Now I am going to start off by addressing the issue of Christian liberty. While Christian liberty is a precious doctrine, affirmed especially in Galatians and Romans, the Bible does not teach unlimited freedom to do as you please. There must be limits to liberty, or you have anarchy and destruction. While we are free from Jewish *ceremonial* law and man-made rules and regulations, we are to voluntarily yield ourselves to God's moral law. Christian liberty is never the freedom to violate God's moral law. Furthermore, we are bound by the law of love, as Paul taught in Gal. 5:13-14. We are not free to harm anyone but are bound by true love to do good. And in this text of Scripture he gives 2 other limits to our freedom that we should gladly and wisely accept. So my first point this evening is this:

I. ACCEPT THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY

When it comes to issues that the Bible does not clearly address, Christian liberty says, "All such things are lawful or permitted." But even then we need to limit our liberty by the following guidelines:

A. The Practice Should Be Profitable – In v.12 Paul said, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful." The word "helpful" (*sumphero*) also means "beneficial, expedient." It is obvious that not all things are beneficial even in our earthly life, to say nothing about our spiritual life. So before you do something that may be questionable, first ask yourself, "Will this bring any benefit to me physically, socially, intellectually, or spiritually? Or could it instead bring harm to me or others?" If a questionable activity is not really beneficial, we shouldn't do it.

Have you heard the statement: "He's up to no good"? That statement recognizes that some things are not profitable or beneficial. Sin can never be worthwhile, beneficial or profitable. It always brings loss.

Now let's apply this principle to food. God, with the new covenant, has declared that food does not defile us spiritually. It is lawful to eat any food that God has created for our consumption. We can eat pork, catfish, and other such foods. One time at a conference in Jacksonville, Florida I tried alligator and other such food. I did not view that as a sin because we are not under Jewish dietary laws. But on the other hand, we now know that certain foods lead to heart disease and cancer. While they provide the benefit of calories and protein, they may contribute to poor health. So if the regular consumption of a certain food will harm to you physically, you would be foolish to go ahead and eat it just because you have a right to do so. We also know that eating too much is harmful, rather than beneficial. So it doesn't pass the test of, "Is it beneficial?"

Another limit of Christian freedom is this:

B. The Practice Must Not Be Enslaving – In the last of v.12 Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." A Christian is one who has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We have one Lord, Jesus Christ. We are not to become enslaved to anything or anyone else. In Rom. 6:14 Paul said that sin is not to be our master. Any activity that is controlling or addictive is contrary to this principle. We all know that some things we do can become very habit forming, and such things can control us. Peter said in 2 Peter 2:19, "They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption, since people are enslaved to whatever defeats them" (HCSB).

For example, many kinds of drugs are very addictive. For some people alcohol can be very addictive. Today many Christian young adults argue that drinking alcohol is morally acceptable as long as you don't get drunk. Guess who defines what drunkenness is? Still, who is to say you won't develop an alcohol addiction and violate this principle of Scripture? Cigarettes contain nicotine, and that drug is very addictive. Some people crave certain foods, such as chocolate, sugar, caffeine, etc. Their appetite for such food absolutely controls them. In fact, Paul mentions foods in the very next verse. Overspending violates this principle, for it leads to financial bondage. In 7:23 Paul said, "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men." Yet Prov. 22:7 says, "...the borrower is servant to the lender." Some TV shows are very habit forming. Such shows demand your attention, and you schedule your life around that program. Some are hooked on soap operas. Others are hooked on sports! Today, social media has been shown to be addictive, and it is especially so when your access to it is as close as the phone you carry with you at all times. And one of the most enslaving sins is sexual sin, including pornography. The more it is indulged, the more it controls the indulger. Here again, this is probably why Paul goes on to deal with the subject of immorality in the very next verse.

I've only picked up a hitchhiker one or two times in my life. Back when I was going to school in Dallas, TX I decided to give a young man a ride just as I was about to get on to the freeway. While we traveled south from downtown, I started talking to him about the Lord. He said, "You know, I would like to become a Christian, but I love immorality too much. I just can't give it up." The devil knows that as long as he can keep you enslaved to some sinful habit, he will drag you to hell with him. So these two principles should be enough to rule out a lot of things people get involved in.

When Christians plead Christian liberty to justify some action of theirs, they usually imagine that they can remain the masters. But it is not as easy to be in control of ourselves as we sometimes think. The real test is whether you can completely stop a certain activity for several weeks.

So I ask you, "Is the Holy Spirit in control of your life, or is your sin nature in control?" Are you willing to say, "Lord Jesus, you are my Master. I will not allow myself to be enslaved to anyone else, or to anything habit. I will keep myself free as your servant."

So I appeal to you to limit your liberty by these 2 tests: Is it beneficial, or is it enslaving. Next, Paul applies the issue of liberty to one specific moral area. And based on vv.13-20 I appeal to you next of all to:

II. REJECT SEXUAL LICENSE

One kind of activity in which people like to assert "liberty" is in sexual expression. Television, movies, Internet media and popular music give open or tacit approval to sexual immorality, especially if it is consensual between adults. And recent studies have shown that teenagers who regularly expose themselves to such media are more than twice as likely to experiment in premarital sex. Many in secular society want to remove all laws relating to sexuality. Laws against fornication have been removed or ignored for years. Homosexuality was decriminalized by the Supreme Court, and then they mandated that States permit homosexual marriage. Sex between minors is acceptable to many, and if your minor daughter gets pregnant, many government agencies will help her get an abortion without your knowledge or approval.

But regardless of what society does, Christians are to follow the Biblical teaching that we are to limit sexual expression only between a man and a woman who are in a committed married

relationship. And because human nature is so resistant to restrictions on sexual freedom, Paul gives a series of strong arguments in favor of sexual purity. It will never do to simply tell young people or young adults to not have premarital sex. They need solid reasons, and Paul supplies them.

Now I am going to start the way Paul does. The first reason you should reject sexual immorality is this:

A. Your Body Belongs to the Lord – This is the most important underlying principle. If you grasp this concept, everything else will fall into place. Five times, in one way or another, Paul says that your bodies belong to the Lord. He says in the last of v.13, “Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord....” God did not give you a body to do with as you please. You were created for God. You are not to abuse it, or use it for immorality, or any other sin. Then Paul says in v.15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” When you repented of your sin and placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you became a part of the body of Christ. And just as your body has many body parts or members, even so your body is a part of the body of Christ. We are His hands, His feet, and His voice in this world. Then he says in v.17, “But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” Not only does your body belong to Christ, but so does your whole being. A mystical union is formed. Without losing our own identity, we become one with Him, just like two people become one in marriage. We begin to share His thoughts, His righteousness, His love, and His strength.

Finally, Paul says in v.19, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God...?” When you became a Christian, the Holy Spirit of God actually took up residence in your body. God’s temple is not a building made with hands, but it is the body of a believer. And then he drives home his original point: “and you are not your own?” Your body belongs to Christ. It is His.

You may object. You say, “No, it’s *my* body, and I will do with it as I wish.” Oh, really? Who gave your body life? Only God can do that. You didn’t create your own life. Then Paul explains in v.20 why you are not your own, and why your body belongs to Christ: “For you were bought at a price.” Christ gave His life on the cross to, in a sense, buy us for Himself (Cf. Acts 20:28; I Pet. 1:18-19). So your body not only belongs to God by virtue of creation, but also by virtue of redemption. Therefore, we now belong—body, soul, and spirit—to the Lord.

Now at this point I just want share some positive applications of this principle. Since your body is a member of the body of Christ we should use our bodies to serve Him. Use your mouth, your hands, and your feet to serve Him. Since your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, your body is to be used to worship God. And in v.20 we see that since you were bought with a price, we should glorify Him. Don’t bring shame to His name with sexual sin, but use your body to bring glory to Him. Let people see the glory of Christ in you, His love, His power, His peace, and so forth.

Furthermore, since your body belongs to Christ, then you should understand that sex within marriage is a positive use of the body. Through the sexual union we join with God in bringing children into the world. We are to do so only into a home led by parents who are married and committed to each other. By the way, to have grandchildren, you first need to have children! Marital sex is beautiful and satisfying. Prov. 5:18-19 says, “Rejoice in the wife of your youth.... Be exhilarated always with her love.” God created sex as a stabilizing bond between married couples. Paul quotes the Genesis 2:24 in v.16, “For the two shall become one flesh.” It

helps to keep us together for the sake of our children, and to reflect the nature of our God, that He is a covenant-keeping God.

There is another wonderful positive application found in vv.13-14. Not only is the body for the Lord, but Paul also says in the last of v.13, “the Lord [is] for the body.” You can say to God, “Lord, my body belongs to you. Therefore, I am trusting you to take care of Your property. Protect me. Sustain my health and strength.” If you do your part in taking care of your body, then I believe God will do His part. Except for certain purposes He may have, you can trust Him to protect your body, and sustain the health of your body.

[Tell story of God’s protection of Cheryl’s cousin].

Yet in God’s timing we all shall die. Even then, God does not abandon the body. Notice what v.14 says, “And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power.” Even when death comes, God has a plan to raise up from the ashes of death a glorious new body! God’s salvation is not just for your soul, but your body as well.

Next consider the negative If our body belongs to Christ, then sexual immorality is a wrong use of the body. Again, Paul said in v.13, “Now the body is not for sexual immorality....” Here we see that your body is not made for sin. Your hands should not be used to steal. Your mouth should not be used to utter profanity, or smoke a joint. And your body should not be used to commit immorality. Across our bodies should be a “not-for-sin” sign, for we can’t soil the property that belongs to another. And remember, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. To commit sexual sin right here in the church auditorium would be no worse than committing the sin anywhere else. That’s because the real temple of God is not this church building but your body. If you are a Christian, sexual sin is committed in God’s sanctuary no matter where you are.

By the way, this relates to the abortion issue. Many defend abortion saying, “It’s my body.” Have you heard that? Such people either are not Christians, or they are ignorant of Christian teaching. Your body is the Lord’s, and any baby inside the womb belongs to the Lord as well! The Bible says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD...” (Psa. 127:3).

Do you accept the fact that as a Christian your body belongs to God, and therefore there are limits as to what you can do with the body that God has given you? Now having laid that foundational principle, let’s examine other arguments why we should reject sexual immorality and so-called sexual freedom:

B. Sexual Immorality Harms Us - Paul says in v.18, “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.” Scholars debate the meaning of that verse, but clearly there is something unique about sexual sin. Overeating, taking drugs or using tobacco are sins that originate from without the body. But fornication rises from within the body, affects the total personality of the individual. Because sexual intimacy is the deepest uniting of two persons, its misuse corrupts on the deepest human level. Sex outside of marriage is like a man robbing a bank: he gets something, but it is not his to have, and he will one day pay for it, often in many different ways.

Sexual sins bear a vicious character all their own. Let me share with you some of the ways that sexual sin can harm you.

1. Physical Consequences - Too many young people find out too late about venereal disease. The sexual revolution has brought a tremendous increase in sexually transmitted diseases. Today 25 percent of Americans have an incurable sexually transmitted disease. Many don’t even know they have one! AIDS is mostly the result of sexual promiscuity,

especially homosexual immorality. There would be no AIDS if people had not rebelled against God's plan of sexual morality.

2. Emotional Consequences - Multitudes of people are flooding the offices of psychiatrists and counselors because they have disobeyed God's law and guilt is eating them alive emotionally. Women in particular are harmed when they bond through sexually intimacy, break up, and repeat the cycle several times before they even get married. That is one reason why young people who are sexually promiscuous have a much greater problem with depression and suicide. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse away that guilt. Sweden has one of the most permissive attitudes toward sex outside of marriage, and they also have one of the highest suicide rates in the world. They entail shame and disgrace in a peculiar manner and fill the mind with rotteness.

3. Social Consequences – Immorality is a major factor in the breakup of families. Many families are ruined because of immorality. Many children grow up hardly knowing their father, and in some cases their mother, because it all started with immorality.

4. Spiritual Consequences – Prov. 6:32 says, “Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; He who does so destroys his own soul.” Furthermore, immorality often leads to other sins, such as lying, cheating, bitterness, hatred, gossip, and even murder, including the sin of abortion.

We see this in the story of David and Bathsheba.

Now since your body belongs to the Lord, and since immorality is so harmful, and since immorality is so pervasive in our culture, I want to close with Paul's practical appeal:

III. FLEE SEXUAL IMMORALITY

This is exactly what Paul says in v.18, “Flee sexual immorality.” Run from it. Avoid it like a plague. The Bible's advice is simple: stay as far away as possible from the persons and places likely to get you into trouble. I realize that it is tough living according to biblical sexual morality. But, it is not impossible, especially if you follow Paul's practical advice here. Some sins we must necessarily face, fight, and thus conquer. From others we must recoil from and avoid. Such is the case with fornication and adultery.

When I see a snake, I do not stay around to find out if it is poisonous or not. I just get away from it. I flee from snakes the way we ought to flee from evil! If a fire breaks out, the best thing to do is get yourself and others out! If you stay and fight one that has already begun to spread, you may lose the battle.

One main reason for Paul's advice is this: it doesn't take much to ignite the fire of sexual passion, especially for men. In Prov. 5:3 we see that sexual allurements are extremely enticing and powerful. It promises pleasure and satisfaction. But what it ends up giving “is bitter as wormwood” (v.4). That is why Solomon advised in v.8 of that chapter, “Remove your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house.”

Joseph provides a classic illustration of this principle in Gen. 39:7-13. When he realized that Potiphar's wife was interested in him, he stayed away from her. And when she pursued him and directly propositioned him, he fled from her!

So to watch sexually suggestive or explicit movies, or to view pornography on the Internet, or to “make out” with intimate petting and so forth on a date, is like playing with matches in a gasoline refinery. The Christian is to “make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lust” (Rom. 13:14).

And I tell you that Christian girls and ladies have a responsibility to dress modestly to help avoid the sin of immorality. Dressing a certain way incites sexual lust. Don't do it! To do so is contrary to the command, "Flee sexual immorality." So dress modestly, especially when we gather for worship.

Conclusion: The reason there is so little old-fashioned, Holy Spirit conviction in our world is not enough born-again people realize their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and let the glory of Jesus Christ shine through their lives (See MacArthur's closing illus.).

To the best of my understanding, I have shared with you what the Bible teaches. Now, what are you going to do with this knowledge? I hope you will say to the Lord, "My body is yours." Will you say that with me? [Repeat]. Now let us live according to that principle in regard to eating and drinking, sexuality, service, and worship.

Sources: R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); MacArthur, *Nourishment For New Life*, 85; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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