Sex, the Body and the Gospel
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

From today we're restarting our look at Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. And we're going to see him dealing with an issue that you might think has little to do with you - because it's about men in the church using prostitutes. Except, in addressing it, Paul gets beneath that surface issue, to the two issues underlying it, and those two issues have masses to do with you, because they're to do with your personal freedom and your physical body.

Free but Not Free

Now, in first century Corinth, it was totally acceptable for a man to visit prostitutes. In fact, if you were a young guy, it was almost expected of you. But then, as we've seen before Christianity, came along and it called people to a very different sexual ethic. But it appears that some men in the church in Corinth hadn't got that message.

Look at v12: '"All things are lawful for me"'. And Paul's almost certainly quoting one of the Corinthian Christians' own sayings back at them. 'We're Christians, we're under grace, not law, we're free, *and* we're Corinthians, so there's no problem going to prostitutes. We're free to do that.'

And if you think about it, that approach to personal freedom sounds remarkably similar to today, doesn't it? Provided it makes you happy, provided you're not hurting anyone else, you're free to live as you like: 'all things are lawful for me.'

But look how Paul addresses that. Because, he doesn't address it by imposing a law. He doesn't say 'No, you can't live however you want to live because this law says you can't.' Instead, he begins by saying, v12, 'But not all things are helpful.'

So when considering how you live, Paul is saying, it's not enough just to ask 'Is it permissable? Am I allowed to do it? Can I get away with it?' You've got to ask a follow up: is it helpful?

But what do you need to know to answer that question? Helpful for what? Helpful for whom? To know whether something is helpful or not, you've got to have some goal, some outcome in mind, haven't you?

Now, both Corinth and our current culture would agree with the question, and both would answer: if something increases my personal happiness, or gives me pleasure, then it's ok. Because that's the goal of life, what makes me feel good. And so, in Corinth, if sex with a prostitute helps me experience that, then it's helpful.

But Paul's aiming much higher, isn't he? Because what if sex is about more than your pleasure? What if sex is about giving yourself to someone, not taking from them? What if rather than being about shallow consumerism, it's about deep commitment? What if it's about knowing someone at a far deeper level? And what if that relationship itself is pointing you still higher? What if it's saying something profound about where you'll find true freedom and true joy? That the happiness and pleasure you're looking for in sex ultimately can't be found in sex? Then paying someone for sex, and using them like any other consumer good, suddenly doesn't look quite so helpful.

Ok, but then Paul repeats their slogan again, v12, '"All things are lawful for me,"' but this time he adds, 'but I will not be dominated by anything.' Now what does it mean to be dominated by something? It means to be ruled over, to be controlled, to be a slave to someone or something, doesn't it. It means to be owned. And Paul's saying, if you make personal freedom your guiding principle, then that rapidly becomes a slavery all of its own. You'll be controlled by wanting to stay free. And when it comes to relationships, you'll resist commitment. You'll view commitment like a free man views chains - to be avoided at all costs - because commitment limits you.

But the problem is that all deep friendships, all meaningful relationships, all the things that make life truly rich, don't just *require* commitment, they *depend* on it. And so, wanting to stay free, you imprison yourself in a life of stunted and superficial relationships. A life that ultimately robs you, because you're dominated, controlled by the very thing you think gives you freedom.

But they don't just excuse their behaviour by appealing to freedom.

Your Body Matters

Look at v13, '"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food."' And that's another of their sayings: 'hey, sex is only natural. And if you eat when you're hungry, then you have sex when you want it, and a prostitute lets you do that. They're the McDonalds, the fast-food outlets, of sex.'

Now remember, these Corinthians Christians thought they were spiritual people. And in Greek and Roman culture, your physical body was seen as an *un*spiritual burden, something that death finally got rid of. So, if these guys think they're deeply spiritual, and they've grown up in a culture that says the body is unspiritual and counts for very little, well, then obviously, it doesn't matter what you do with your body.

And today, in the West, we're experiencing something similar, except that when it comes to our bodies, we're also experiencing an intellectual and emotional dissonance. Because on the one hand, you're told your body matters hugely. There's a gym on every street corner. There are endless options for exercise, and even more Youtube videos telling you how to do it. The beauty industry is huge, and advertising and social media remind you at every billboard and every click just how much your physical appearance matters. And it's the beautiful people, and the ultra-athletes who are the influencers and heroes of the day.

But, on the other hand, you're also told that your body has nothing to say about who you really are. That whether you are physically male or female you can say, 'no this body is not me, it's not who I really am. In fact, what it says about me is wrong'. So, just like the Greeks wanted to escape the body, so today you're told that you can be trapped in the wrong body and to be really you, to be really free, you may need to escape it, by radical surgery if necessary.

And that attitude to the body is reflected in growing practices at death. In the Autumn Su and I spent a few days in Glarus. And one day we walked along a lakeside, and it was beautiful: the trees, the colours. and the mountains were all reflected in the lake like a mirror. And we got to this point on a rocky outcrop which had this panoramic view, and stood there taking it all in. But then we noticed that at our feet there was a jam jar with some dead roses in it. And around it a pile of ash. And we realised that someone had probably tipped the ashes of their loved one there.

And that kind of thing is becoming increasingly common, but think what doing that tells us about how people view the physical body. Because it's an approach that looks back, to favourite places enjoyed, to memories shared, to a life and a body that's now gone.

And combine that with a growing interest in Buddhism, which we're seeing, that teaches that if you live right, you can finally escape your body and enter the universal consciousness, where matter ceases to matter, then you find yourself in a confusing world, our world, where the body is everything and yet it's nothing, and no-one can tell you why.

But Paul doesn't just speak to the Corinthians' cultural situation, he speaks to ours. Because he says, far from the body being nothing, far from what you do with your body not mattering, it matters hugely. But not for the reasons the advertisers or gym owners tell you.

Look at v13. 'The body is not meant for sexual immorality.' And you could read that and think 'here we go, a repressive Christian view of the body, that sex is somehow evil.' Except look at what follows in chapter 7, which we'll look at next week: 'The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights [or as another translation puts it, her sexual needs], and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does. Do not deprive one another.'

And in Paul's time that was extraordinary. It was dynamite. Because no one would have argued with the wife owing sexual pleasure to her husband, but for the husband to owe that to his wife? That sexual pleasure is as much her right as his? That she had the same authority over his body as he over hers, that there is a mutuality to sexual pleasure? That was revolutionary. No one had ever suggested anything like it.

So, going back to what the Corinthians were arguing, is the body made for sex? 'Sure', Paul says, but it's not made for sexual immorality. Your body is not made for sexual relations outside of marriage, between one man and one woman.

Now, we've just celebrated Christmas and the Incarnation, literally the *enfleshment,* in a body, of God himself. And among all the world's religions, Christianity is unique in just how embodied it is; in the way that God honours the physical body. And to bring home just how much your physical body, and what you do with it, matters, Paul uses three arguments.

Firstly, resurrection: v13-14: 'The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.'

So, far from the idea of 1st Century Greece, or 21st Century West, that you should escape your body, and leave it behind; far from all that remains of your loved one being shared memories and a pile of ash, Paul says that at the end of time God will raise up our bodies. Not in their current broken state, but with everything made new. That as Christians we don't view death looking back but looking forward, with hope, to the new creation.

And the proof he's going to do that is that he raised Jesus from the dead. It's why we recite together in the creed, 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.'

You see, deep down you know your body matters - it's why you visit the doctor when it's not working properly. But the ancient Greeks, or Buddhism, or the dissonance of 21st century western culture cannot tell you why. But Christianity can. Your body matters now, because it matters eternally.

But secondly, Paul says, your body matters because it's part of Christ's body. Look at v15, 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!'

Now, when Paul talks about being a member, he's not thinking about golf club memberships. He's meaning arm and leg members. And when you're a Christian you, your physical body, is a limb, an arm, a leg, a hand, a foot, an eye, an ear, of Christ's body. So why would you take that and join that to a prostitute? Why would you use it for sexual immorality?

Now, just to be clear, Paul's not getting all self-righteous about prostitutes. Jesus made it clear that prostitutes who turn to him will enter the kingdom of God ahead of self-righteous people who condemn them.

Instead, Paul is arguing, v16, 'do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.' And Paul's quoting Genesis 2:24 there, which is talking about marriage: 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.'

But he's not arguing that every sexual relationship creates a marriage, but he is saying it forms a profound relationship. That there is a one-ness with the person you have sex with. But here's the thing: you can become one with someone in a way that just consumes them, and they become less, and you hollow them out, and you drain them of dignity and worth, and leave them a shell of themselves, because you're just taking from them and then discarding them.

Or, you can become one with someone in a way that makes them, and you, more than you both were before. And God has created marriage for that kind of oneness, that makes you the means of the other one flourishing.

But someone who uses a prostitute uses her and consumes her. But the same can happen with a girl-friend or boy-friend, can't it, if you ask them, or allow them, to give themselves to you without you first making a life-long commitment to them.

And instead of that kind of using and consuming, Paul says that Christians have been made one with Christ. In Deuteronomy 10:20 Moses said, 'You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him *and hold fast to him*.' It's the same expression he uses in Genesis 2 for how a husband should hold fast to his wife in marriage. That just like you enter into a deep relationship with your husband or wife, where you give yourself to them, so when you become a Christian you have entered into the deepest relationship of all, as you give yourself to Christ *in response* to him giving himself for you.

And Paul says, that's who you are as a Christian, and that's what your physical body is for - for Christ; to glorify Christ in word and action; to worship him with your body as you live out your life

in every aspect of life. And when that's how you see your body, you won't want to use a prostitute, or your girlfriend or boyfriend, or some partner outside your marriage, like some consumer good. Rather, v18, you will 'Flee from sexual immorality.'

Now, what do you flee from? From tsunamis and avalanches, from anything that threatens you. You run in the other direction. And Paul is saying, sexual immorality threatens you at a profound level. Verse 18, 'Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.'

Now, a common response to that is, 'Why are Christians so obsessed by sexual sin when greed and obesity and all the health problems that go with it do just as much, if not more, damage to the body, but you never hear Christians talking about that.' Which is a fair point. Except there's a way in which sexual sin goes deeper. That it's destructive in a unique way. Because each time you have sex with someone, you give yourself, or take from them, or both. And in the absence of true, lasting commitment, as you go from one partner to another, that either hollows you out or it hollows them out. And that's destructive to your soul.

Which is why Paul makes his third and final move.

Owned By Another

Look at v19-20: 'Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.'

Now, if you've grown up in the West, especially if you've been involved in evangelical churches, you probably don't tend to think of physical, architectural spaces as especially sacred: a building's just a building. But think of the temple in Jerusalem, and how protected the Most Holy Place was. Think of the layers of security you had to go through to get there. The temple precincts were surrounded by walls and gates. Then there was the court of the gentiles, then the court of women, then the court of priests, then great doors leading into the Holy Place and then, at last, behind a thick curtain, the Most Holy Place, the dwelling place of God, and only one man could enter once a year.

And imagine the scandal of that Most Holy Place being desecrated and the image of another god being set up there.

And Paul is saying, you're a Christian, and your body is that Most Holy Place, you have become the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. And you should no more defile your body by giving it over to the worship of other gods, like the god of sex, than you would desecrate the temple.

But Paul's point is not just that God *dwells* in you, it's that he *owns* you.

And think how an owner of a house cares about his house. Only a squatter defaces or graffities a house. But when the house is yours, you look after it. It matters to you.

And Paul is saying, God owns your body. It's his home, and so he cares deeply what you do with it. It's why he says in v13, 'The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body.' Your body is for God. It's made for worship of him. But he is also for your body. So his care for what you do with your body is not that of a domineering, austere parent wanting to rob

you of joy: ‘no sex before marriage and no enjoyment of sex in marriage’. He cares about your body for your good, for your thriving. Like a home owner cares about the beauty of his property, God cares for your beauty and wants and works and pays for it to be restored.

Look again at v20: ‘You were bought with a price.’ And that’s the language of the slave market, isn’t it? And the gods of sex, and pleasure and the approval of others, are like slave masters, haggling over you, wanting to own you and control you and in the process diminish and defile your beauty. But then Jesus steps into the slave market and he says, ‘I’m buying this one’. And at the cross he pays the highest price imaginable to free you from their slavery. And if sexual sin shames you, or if others in the past have used you, Christ values you, and pays for you with his life.

So, our current culture says, ‘it’s my body and I can do with it what I want.’ And Jesus says, ‘no, you will be ruled by one master or another. And every other master will work you and break you, but I’ve come to give you life. And I will love you.’ Because he’s the master who restores your dignity. He’s the master who gives you both the desire and the power to live as you were always meant to live - in your body, for his glory.