

“Don’t You Know?”

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It’s hard to balance holiness and grace, but that’s my goal.

1 Corinthians 6:9-20

August 11, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Potential pitfalls

I was raised in a family and a generation where the standard was high for sexual purity – meaning that sex (not only actions but words and thoughts) should be exclusively reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. My wife and I were virgins when we married and I have worked hard to keep and teach those boundaries. Not only that, but I have tried to live in such a way that there would never even be a credible accusation otherwise. I can honestly say that it has been my goal in life to do what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, “Flee sexual immorality.”

This raises the first of many reasons why preaching on this text is challenging: pride and condescension. I can easily come across as anything from holier-than-thou to out-of-touch, neither of which lends itself to effective preaching – except to those who are similarly prone to pride and condescension.

There are many other potential pitfalls to a sermon on sex. There are people in this room today who will never darken the door of this church again if I say the wrong thing, and the wrong thing has a wide range. In today’s world sex outside marriage is widely accepted – and practiced – and we’re not just talking about teenagers and college students. Those of us who may still confine sexual behavior to our marriages have family members and friends who are gay or cohabiting or openly hooking up or addicted to pornography. So much has changed since my youth.

Here’s what hasn’t changed – not in forty years and not in 5,000: human beings are wired to desire sex and think about it, a LOT! If you Google how often we think about sex, you’ll find answers ranging from once every 7 seconds to once or twice an

hour, but does that really matter? It varies for men and women, as you probably know, but does that really matter? Sex is one of our most common urges and desires, and that's my answer to why we need to bring the subject into church.

Lest at any time during this sermon you should think otherwise, you need to know that I still believe God created the gift of sex for marriage between a man and a woman. But four decades of marriage and ministry, parenting and grand-parenting, reading of Scripture and a wide body of other literature, and actual conversations with hundreds if not thousands of people about sexuality have also given me some new perspectives about how to talk about it. What I don't want to do today is misuse the privilege of the pulpit. As I wrote this sermon, I imagined not so much a pulpit but a conversation with a wide range of people: monogamous married couples, single and divorced individuals, cohabiting couples, young people still navigating their sexual awakening, gay and lesbian persons, transgender persons, people with both progressive and conservative viewpoints, and some who really agonize over these issues.

It's hard to balance holiness and grace, but that's my goal. Let's get to the text.

Don't you know

1 Corinthians is a situational letter. It's a stark contrast to Romans, for example, where Paul starts at the beginning of the story and lays out his gospel. We can assume the Christians at Corinth had already heard something like Romans in person from Paul. Now Paul is responding to what he had heard from and about the Corinthians.

In chapters 5-6 of this letter, Paul is addressing the situation that at least some of the Corinthians have not made a sufficient break from the non-Christian world around them. Some of the Corinthians believe if they have a dispute with another person, they should take the matter to court – even if the other party is a brother or sister in Christ. Some of the Corinthians embrace sex outside of monogamous marriage as morally neutral if not God-given and deeply fulfilling.

In response, Paul is direct and forceful. Four times he asks, "Do you not know....?" While this is only one way to outline this text, it's certainly a good way.

First, "do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God" (9)? It sounds like Paul is saying, "The following people cannot go to heaven." Tim Keller joins multiple commentators who insist this is not Paul's point. The idea of dividing humanity into those who commit the worst sins and those who don't is actually antithetical to the Gospel. The "kingdom of God" is the community Christ calls and leads. In other words, the kingdom of God is made up of relationships.

The word "inherit" doesn't mean "earn." You don't get an inheritance by merit; it's given to you. Paul is saying that when God is in charge of a community, those who

do the following things will destroy community for themselves and others. They replace the love of others with the love of self and therefore forfeit the inheritance.

Paul then gives the list: “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (9-10).

Notice that ten¹ sins are listed, four have to do with sex. Let’s come back to them. Otherwise, we have “idolaters” (“I have my own god, thank you very much”), “drunkards” (Paul might add any mood- or mind-altering drugs because the essence of the problem is escaping reality), “slanderers” (this is not just saying unkind things, but destroying someone with words) and three vices having to do with covetousness and economic exploitation – thieves, greedy, and swindlers (Keller: not just “illegal business practices” but “ruthless business practices”).

As Keller points out, Paul’s list of vices addresses what we would call progressive values (inequality and injustice) and conservative values (sexual immorality). The list of sexual sins draws more attention from us. “Sexually immoral” translates *porneia*, which is the broadest term – sex outside marriage. “Adultery” is the most obvious.

Then we have the two words translated by the NIV “men who have sex with men.” Because this is one of a handful of texts in the entire Bible that deal explicitly with sex between two persons of the same sex, this passage is at the center of the debate among Christians over homosexuality.

One view is that these two words clearly refer to any intentional sexual contact between two men. There are two words involved, one that could be translated “effeminate,” meaning a man who is woman-like in appearance or sexual contact, and the second which literally translates to “intercourse with a man.” Thus the NIV footnote says these two words refer to “the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.” Robert Gagnon says when you put the two words together, they address “every conceivable type of same-sex intercourse.”²

The other view is that what Paul is not talking about is a loving, committed, mutual relationship between two partners of the same sex. Ken Wilson writes in a book I read just this week, “we know of at least four common settings in which men had sex with other men in the Greco-Roman world: orgies, temple prostitution, pederasty, and slave-sex.”³ He goes on to describe them in more detail, which may not be necessary or helpful here. He believes those are the sins Paul has in mind. And he may have a point in this text, because the whole list has to do with exploiting others for selfish purposes.

¹ It looks like nine in the NIV, but the footnote acknowledges that there are two Greek words combined in the translation “men who have sex with men.”

² *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 230.

³ *A Letter to My Congregation*, 64.

If you get stuck on this one point – no matter your view – you may miss the main point of this text and of the entire sermon. You may even miss what Paul says next: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (11).

As in the beginning of this letter, he’s still giving the benefit of the doubt that he’s writing to true believers. What matters to him is that they know their identity and how God sees them. He’s not saying if you’ve ever done any of these things, you’ll never go to heaven. He is saying you should never, ever, ever say that since you belong to the kingdom it doesn’t matter how you treat others or yourself. The more God is in charge of you and of the community the less you focus on self at the expense of others.

Second, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself (15a)? This “do you not know” comes at the end of a section that begins with a phrase in quotes in most Bibles. In the NIV: “I have the right to do anything” (12), or in the older version of the NIV, “Everything is permissible for me.” Paul is likely quoting a saying common among the Corinthians and maybe even among Corinthian Christians.

It’s about freedom, right? Humans long to be free, and freedom is actually one of Paul’s favorite ideas, that Christ sets us free. As with most proverbs, there’s truth in saying, “Everything is permissible,” but as with most proverbs it’s not the whole truth. Everything might be permissible, “*but* not everything is beneficial (12). Everything might be permissible, “*but* I will not be mastered by anything” (12). In other words, sometimes freedom is slavery. That’s so true of sexual sin. It’s not like you ever get enough of the pleasure, right? Pornography is just one example. You may think of yourself as “free” to look, but you will soon find that porn is your crack cocaine. You’re a slave. Relationships that become sexual without commitment can enslave as well.

Paul then quotes another proverb: “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both” (13). Their argument is that both food and the body are temporal, so no biggie – and apparently some at Corinth had this same approach to sex: Don’t make a big deal of it! In response Paul previews chapter 15 where he will insist our bodies will be raised (14). Bodies matter! So his conclusion to this section is, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself” (15a)?

Third, “Do you not know that the man who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her” (16)? Now Paul gets to a specific sexual sin: prostitution. Paul has heard some of the Corinthian believers have a cavalier attitude toward prostitution. Perhaps it seems like a victim-less sin, or maybe even beneficial to the prostitute who has no other way to feed her family. Paul is appalled. Once again, his argument is that “bodies matter.” He quotes Genesis 2:24, “The two will become one flesh,” meaning that what happens in a sexual encounter is far more than the mingling of bodily parts and fluids. God designed sex to deepen, protect, and seal a bond between husband and wife. Sex is to marriage what the Lord’s Supper is to our faith – it reminds and renews the covenant. If we misuse as physical release or exploitation, we diminish or destroy it.

Finally, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit” (19)? This is Paul’s conclusion, his finale. There are two commands in this section: “Flee from sexual immorality” (18) and “Honor God with your bodies” (20).

Why? A temple is where God lives, and that’s how we need to see our bodies – “temples of the Holy Spirit” (19), which have been “bought with a price” (20).

Holiness and grace

Perhaps you, like me, want to say to Paul, “I have a ‘Don’t you know’ for you as well. Don’t you know that the Gospel of Jesus is a balance of holiness and grace?” Paul’s answer would be that to live holy lives is the goal and the joy of grace. And if grace doesn’t change the individuals in a community to live other-centered lives, well who wants a community full of people who are “in it for me”?

How do we apply grace to sex in our sex-saturated society? Where’s the grace?

First, humility. There are times when I think I’m too narrow when I talk about sex and other times when I think I’m too permissive. I need to be able to say, “I could be wrong.” I’m enough of a student of church history to know that across the years the church has been very wrong many times about many things, including many topics where there was almost unanimous consensus for generations about what the Bible teaches. I’m talking about monasticism, the Crusades, the Holy Roman Empire, slavery, the inferiority of women, indulgences, salvation through the Church, cosmology, the age of the earth, anti-Semitism, discrimination and segregation – need I continue? I wish so many people and movements in history had said, “I could be wrong” because it would have opened doors to what the Holy Spirit wanted to do.

The willingness to admit that I could be wrong about my admittedly narrow sexual boundaries, I believe, helps me do less harm. It makes me less condescending, less shame-inducing, less likely to separate myself from others, more willing to listen and care, more able to learn something. As I said frequently at this year’s UCC General Synod, if you and I disagree, there are only three possibilities: I have something to learn from you, you have something to learn from me, or we both have something to learn from each other. None of those happen when we go our separate ways.

The willingness to admit I could be wrong might not even be humble enough. I am wrong. My heart is wrong. My actions are wrong. My behavior is wrong. I’m a broken, wounded, blinded sinner. I may have done some things right in the area of human sexuality, but if that’s true on any level it’s only because of God’s restraining grace and the advantages I’ve been given. I’m no better than any sex addict or abuser, and no less in need of God’s grace.

Second, compassion. Compassion has a range of implications, and honestly when I’m pondering it I think more about the ministry of Jesus than of Paul. But remember again verse 11 when Paul says, “And that’s what some of you were” in connection with

all those ten vices. I never thought about this before, but when Paul went to Corinth he must have spent time with these individuals in their unredeemed state in order to draw them to Christ. He must have found ways to connect with idolaters and swindlers and the greedy and sexual predators and drunkards and idolaters. Just like Jesus did.

Compassion is more than just being with. It's seeking to understand. That comes from listening. Please don't make pronouncements about homosexuality or transgender persons or, for that matter, any other person who's outside of your comfort zone or moral acceptance unless and until you're willing to spend time with them and hear their stories. Regardless of whether they believe they are morally right or not, everyone has a story. They want to be heard, they want to be known.

We live in a generation whose blindness includes deep confusion about how dangerous it is to pursue short-term pleasure or even relief. We see the most obvious effects in areas like the opioid crisis and other drugs, but sex is in the same category. The greatest challenge for active addicts is when they live 24/7 in a community of active addicts, where "everyone's doing it." We want to love them and remove them from the false sense of community that affirms their path of self-destruction.

But what if our entire society is a culture of addiction to pleasure, especially sexual pleasure? Let's be honest: sex feels good, emotionally and physically, for everyone who does it – except, of course, those who are being involuntarily abused. It's understandably addictive. Sex feels like freedom, until it's slavery. Rather than bragging about my boundaries or ragging about someone else's lack thereof, compassion deeply cares. I don't want to hate on them, run from them, beat them down any further. I want to listen to them, love on them, be with them, join the rescue mission.

Finally, invitation. Whatever your "position" is on various issues related to human sexuality, I will have missed my calling and my opportunity if you leave here reaffirmed in a position, or bothered that I didn't endorse your position, or even if I helped to alter your position. None of that is my point.

For Paul, grace is an invitation to something higher and nobler. It's a call to honor God with your body. Notice it's not an invitation to glorify your body, which is another cultural blind spot. It's a very different thing to say and believe, "My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. My body is eternal. My body is connected to other bodies in a community. I want a holy body – not one consumed by whatever feels good to me in the moment, but one whose hands and mouth and eyes and feet and ears – and reproductive anatomy – lift Jesus higher and contribute to a community of grace."

I don't regret the choices I have made to honor God with my body. There's joy and freedom and fulfillment in using all of God's gifts, including sex, for him. There's also great freedom and joy in extending God's grace to others with not only the same invitation but the same patience he offers to me. Amen.