

Honour God with your body

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus was our perfect example, following your words, speaking your words, and obeying your commands.! Help us now, Lord, to understand what that means for us as we seek to live lives where we honour you with our bodies. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Who has the right to tell you how to live? Who has that right to tell any of us how to live? Well, Mr. Sinatra would give us the answer, wouldn't he?

And now the end is near. I'm not going to sing it. And so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear. I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full. I travelled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way.

Who has the right to tell us how to live? Well, according to Sinatra, and according to many people today, no one has that right. We can and should live lives exactly how we choose. But there is a difference, isn't there, between the fact that we can live our life how we choose and whether we should.

We're all free to make our own choices. The Bible makes that clear. But what if exercising our freedom actually leads us to slavery?

[1 : 23] Ultimately, a tree is shown by its fruit, isn't it? And despite all their claims of wisdom and freedom, the church in Corinth showed all the signs of being anything but free. And they certainly weren't flourishing. As we've seen already in this series, the church in Corinth was obsessed with power and worldly reputation.

There were lawsuits amongst the believers where they lied and cheated one another for financial gain. One of their number was sleeping with their stepmother while most of the church cheered him on.

And if that wasn't bad enough, in our passage today, it's pretty clear that lots of them are heading off and having sex with prostitutes on a regular basis. What made them think that such things were okay for Christians to do?

Well, I think they had two arguments. The first idea appears in verse 12. I have the right to do anything, was one of their slogans. Actually, the phrase seems to be something they are quoting that Paul said and quoting it back to himself.

Because Paul had taught them himself that in Christ they were no longer under the Old Testament law, but under grace. And that is true, isn't it? Wonderfully true. We're not saved by keeping a whole list of laws or making the right sacrifices.

[2 : 40] Jesus has done that for us. The requirements of the law have been met by Christ. And since believers are now joined to him by faith, the Corinthians thought that meant that it didn't matter how you lived anymore.

They could live exactly as they liked, without guilt or fear. No moral law any longer. Total freedom. That was their first thought. The second idea is there in verse 13.

Food for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy them both. The Corinthians seem to have taken two different ideas and merged them together. The Christian doctrine that one day there will be a new creation where everything will be new.

And the Greek idea that it was the soul and not the body that matters. That the spiritual is important. That the physical will pass away. And so since the body and its functions are only temporary, surely God has no concern what we do with our bodies as long as we are trusting in him with our souls.

Freedom from the law. Freedom from restraint. With eternal life thrown in. What could be better? Well, that's what the Corinthians thought. But how did those ideas work their way out in their church community?

[3 : 57] Well, not well. They were a selfish people living unholy lives in a divided church. Their use of so-called freedom led to catastrophic mess where relationships were broken and sin was celebrated.

No wonder Paul has to write some very strong words to them in the early chapters of this letter. Now, I have to be honest here. I would be utterly shocked if you were secretly involved in petty lawsuits, incestuous relationships and weekly trips to the local prostitute.

That would shock me. That would absolutely shock me. We are not the church in Corinth. So you might say, as someone asked me at Ogwell today, so why are we looking at this passage?

What's the point? Well, I think there are some very important messages for us here, independent of Paul's main theme. Because the pull of independence from God and his commands is exactly as strong today in our own hearts as it was in the Garden of Eden, as it was in the church in Corinth.

And if we are to stand firm in our faith, in our own battle against the world, the flesh and the devil, then we need to understand what true Christian freedom means for us.

[5 : 14] Not just with our bodies, but in every area of our lives. And that's what Paul is about to explain. He starts by countering the Corinthians' arguments. And then he shows them the right way to think about these things.

So back in verse 12. I have the right to do anything, the Corinthians say. What's Paul's response? Okay. But let's just be clear. Not everything you choose is good for you.

Don't fall into that trap. So can you be a Christian and a chain smoker? Yes. Can you be a Christian and live on McDonald's, Big Mac and fries, breakfast, dinner and supper?

Yes, you can. Now, can you be a Christian and listen to heavy metal music so loud that it bursts your eardrums? Yes, you can. There is nothing in the Bible that prohibits any of those things.

But we've got to ask, why would you do them? Why would you do them? None of them are good for us. Freedom is precious. We need to be wise how we use it.

[6 : 15] Not everything we choose is good for us. Paul continues. I have the right to do anything you say. Okay. But make sure that what you choose doesn't master you.

Paul's words here might be translated slightly differently. I have liberty to do anything, but I will not let anything take liberties with me. An example here might be our freedom to do various things that leads to an addiction.

Maybe to drink or drugs. But actually, all kinds of things can exert a power and influence over us. Jobs can be all-consuming.

Hobbies can start to dominate our time and our energies. Food can become an obsession. Even our family can become such a powerful influence in our lives that following Christ gets relegated down the list.

Now, job, hobbies, food, family, these are all good things, aren't they? But when good things become God things, things that dominate our time and our thinking and pull us away from Jesus, those good things, having become God things, become very bad things.

[7 : 28] It's all too easy if we use our liberty in Christ in the wrong way. So what are the dominating influences in our lives?

What are the things that we choose freely which are actually not good for us? See, if our love for God isn't at the top of our list, if he doesn't take precedence, then those things, things that we have the liberty to do, will take liberties with us.

And we will need God's help to break those bonds. Here's Paul's third response. Food for the stomach, the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.

Okay, says Paul. Fair enough. The new creation will be different to this world now. Some aspects of our lives will pass away. But that doesn't give us the right to use our physical bodies in any way we choose.

The two don't match up. Freedom in Christ means that we are freed indeed. We're freed, firstly, from the crushing weight of the law's demands, which we cannot meet.

[8 : 32] We're freed from the penalty of sin over us because of Jesus' death on the cross in our place. And because the Holy Spirit is in us, we are freed from the power of sin in our lives.

But, and this is a key thing to what Paul is saying here, we are not freed to sin. Christian freedom does not do away with the commands to live lives of love, of peace, of generosity and service.

It doesn't mean that we can mistreat our fellow believers or lie and cheat our way to wealth and power. And just as Christian freedom doesn't mean we can now kill or steal whatever we like, so neither does freedom in Christ mean we can ignore God's commands about sexual immorality and sleep with whoever we like.

How we use our bodies matters to God. His views on this matter have been made clear in the scriptures and his commands do not change. Now, Paul's focus in this passage is very much on the sexual sin in the Corinthian church, because that's the problem there, just as sadly it's been a problem in the wider church across the ages.

But I think, and I hope I'll be able to show you, that his teaching in that area has a wider implication as well. So four things that Paul wants the Corinthians to understand, so that they can start to use their bodies in a way that does honour God.

[9 : 56] Firstly, verse 13, the body is meant for God and God for the body. Now, this takes us right back to creation. Adam and Eve, we're told, were created by God to know and enjoy him forever.

Their bodies, therefore our bodies too, have been designed by God in a way that we should use them to serve and worship him, to be used for his glory, to call to obedience.

The body is meant for God. Perhaps you'll know the saying that today Christ has no hands or feet but ours. Have you come across that idea?

Of course, that's not totally true. God can still act on his own in this world without us. But by and large, he chooses to work his purposes out through people, through his people, serving and loving one another, visiting and caring, through people using their bodily gifts, their time, their physical presence, in a way that blesses others and is used for God's glory.

And involves us, doesn't it? Serving him. That's God's intention. And of course, when Jesus became a man, taking upon himself human flesh, human body was given a greater dignity, a divine dignity.

[11 : 15] That dignity was raised higher still after Jesus' resurrection because Jesus' resurrection body is a pattern for ours. It is still physical. He was still able to be touched.

The body is meant for God and God for the body. That gives it a dignity. Secondly, Paul says, Christians are members of Christ's body.

So it matters who we are united with. The unity we have with Jesus is deep and profound. And it's not just a spiritual reality, but something that has a physical element to it.

We are joined to his body. His body, us, body, soul, mind and spirit. And as we are joined to his body, it's as if we were the limbs and organs of Christ.

Given that, says Paul, can you see how appalling it would be to unite our physical bodies, which is part of the body of Jesus, to that of a prostitute? Because when two people are united in sexual intimacy, the Bible says that the two become one flesh.

[12 : 19] But the believer is already one with Christ. So how then could a Christian contemplate such an illicit union or any of those unions that God forbids?

Never, says Paul. God forbid such a thing. But this has an implication outside of the bedroom. I think maybe it has implications for groups that we might belong to.

But if we're still working, companies that we might work for. I think we'd all be gravely worried about a Christian joining the Chinese Communist Party. Or perhaps a right-wing extremist organisation.

But I think we should also be concerned if a Christian decides that they're going to work for a company with very un-Christian values or practices. Because they're uniting themselves with something in which Jesus stands opposed.

Christians are members of Christ's body. It matters who we are united with, not just physically, but in our lives as well. Thirdly, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 27] Paul says this in verse 9. So they have a divine dignity which needs to be honoured. Over the last few years, in an attempt to raise lots of money, cathedrals have started to open their doors to a whole range of secular concerts, silent discos and the like.

Various people have been outraged about it. Others are going, well, they've always been used for those kind of purposes. But what if Exeter Cathedral decided to permit dogfighting to take place in the nave?

Or for a casino to operate in the sanctuary? Or a strip club to be meeting in the choir? We'd all be rightly appalled then, wouldn't we? Of course we would.

Rightly so. But whilst cathedrals are spaces, buildings dedicated to God, Paul wants to make it clear that the body of the Christian is a far holier space. Because the Holy Spirit dwells within us.

Can you see how that must, therefore, impact on how we should feel about our bodies? And what we do with them. It certainly should stop us engaging in sexual immorality. But I wonder if there's a more mundane thought on this as well.

[14 : 42] I don't know whether you remember the little children's song. Perhaps you used to sing it in Sunday school. Be careful little eyes what you see. Be careful little hands what you do. Be careful little feet where you go.

For your father up above is looking down in love. So I wonder if the truth that the Spirit dwells within us should also change what we watch on TV, what books we read, who we listen to.

Not because some of those books or films are necessarily wicked, but because our bodies, our temples are the Holy Spirit. They have a divine dignity about them which needs to be honoured.

Paul has one final reason. And I think this is the strongest one of all. It bursts the balloon of our imagined independence to live as we like and turns off Frank Sinatra's vocals once and for all.

It's there in the last couple of verses of our passage. We are not our own. We have been bought at a great price and belong to God. So it turns out that we don't have full autonomy to live as we like after all.

- [15 : 50] We cannot live as we like because we are no longer our own. We have been bought at a great price. The price of Jesus' death on the cross. We have been purchased for God.
- Our previous owner, Sin, was a harsh taskmaster. His wages were death and destruction, emptiness and heartache. And what freedoms we had under him only led us deeper down into hell and further away from God.
- But out of his mercy and kindness, Jesus came and took upon himself human flesh. He perfectly kept the perfect law of God that leads to true freedom.
- But rather than keeping that reward for himself, he willingly gave up his life as a sacrifice for us. So that those imprisoned by sin and guilt and shame might be set free and brought into the care of a new master.
- Our new master is different. He is love. He is good and kind. His compassions know no end. And whilst he gives us commands to follow, his laws are perfect freedom.
- [16 : 58] His commands bring everlasting joy and life. Of course, we can and often we still do wander off into other pathways. We have the opportunity to choose to ignore our master's commands.
- If you like to climb the hedge or jump the gate and go our own way. We're not robots. We're children. Sometimes willful children. But if we think about it, why would we want to do those things?
- We know that there is no life there. The lack of godliness in the church in Corinth shows that. We'll know that from our own experience too. It's walking the way of the Lord that brings perfect freedom.
- Because as we walk God's way, we are free to be the people that God made us to be. But I started with a question. Who has the right to tell us how we should live?
- Well, it turns out that since we belong to him, God does. He has that right. If we are truly his, we will seek to live our lives his way and not my way.
- [18 : 04] As Christians, we belong to God. Are we willing to trust him and obey him? Are we willing to look at his word, look at the way we live and think through the implications for all areas of our lives?
- Perhaps also, given some of the debates on assisted suicide at the moment, how we die as well. If we belong to God, then our bodies belong to him too.
- So are we willing to trust and obey him? Or will we go our own way? Only one of those paths leads to peace and glory. And that is the way of the Lord. With his help, let's be wise and walk in it.
- Amen.