

Impacting our Culture, or Impacted by our Culture?

1 Cor. 6:9-11

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If you're visiting us this morning, we are working our way through the book of 1 Corinthians which is really a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church that he had planted in the Greek city of Corinth, addressing a number of problems that came to surface after he had left them.

In verses 9-11 he reminds them that following Christ is about inheriting a kingdom, the kingdom of God. I first caught a glimpse of that kingdom when I was in my teens, a new Christian, and there would be times when I would read Bible verses about the kingdom of God or on a glorious day I would look at the sky and the clouds and maybe there would be a shaft of sunlight streaming down or backlighting the clouds in such a way that I felt I could envision Jesus' kingdom, and I felt this desire to live for that kingdom. Since those days, far too often I find the cares and pursuits of this world clouding my vision of Jesus' kingdom, but every now a shaft of light will cut through the busyness and cares and desires of this world and once again I catch a glimpse of that kingdom and there is this deep desire to live for that kingdom.

But there's a problem: the gates of that kingdom are shut to the unrighteous. *Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (vs. 9-10).* That's just the short list. Paul could have extended it and included those who practice laziness, cowardice, lying, selfishness, unbelief, jealousy, envy, coveting what others have, unrighteous anger, and on and on. The gates of heaven are closed to all that practice these things because the gates of heaven are closed to those who *are* those things. Thieves steal because they *are* thieves. Sexually immoral people practice immorality *because they are* immoral. Their character is immoral so their actions are immoral. People do unrighteous things because they are unrighteous. They *do* what they *are*. We do what we are. And the Bible tells us the news is pretty bleak: *There is none righteous, not even one. Rom. 3:10*

This is why verse 11 is such good news. *And such were some of you.* The only reason Paul says *some* instead of *all* is because the list isn't exhaustive. List every sin that closes the gates of heaven and it could say *such were all of you.* We all sinned because we were all sinners and *the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).* Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians you were these things but you aren't anymore. You have been washed by the blood of Jesus Christ. You have been sanctified – set apart by God for God, and you were justified, that is, made righteous in the eyes of God, by Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit in you.

Paul's exhortation to them, and us, is *be what you are!* You might have impulses to go back to the old lifestyle, be it stealing or immorality or getting drunk, but that's not really who you are anymore, Jesus has cleansed you and the Spirit has transformed you. Now be what you are!

Let's let that sink in. Maybe before you came to Christ you were extremely lazy. Or selfish. Some may have been sexually promiscuous, others dishonest cheats. Whatever you were before you came to Christ, God has changed your identity, you're not what you once were. You may struggle with those old sinful impulses still – we all do – but that is not your identity anymore and God has cleansed you of all that sin so you're not dragging that sin behind you like a ball and chain. That's not your name tag anymore. Christ has cleansed you of that sin, and He has given you the power of the Holy Spirit to stop

practicing that old way of life. We don't have to drag that old identity around like a ball and chain, dragging condemnation, hopelessness, and discouragement behind us. God has set us free from all that so that we can be what we already are in Christ! And we can dream of, and live for, the glorious kingdom of Jesus Christ!

Impacting the culture or impacted by the culture? (vv. 12-20)

In verses 12-20 Paul begins to focus on the issue of immorality in the church, specifically men hiring prostitutes. This may seem like a random subject change, but there's a connection here to all the chapters preceding. All the problems that we read about in the first 6 chapters are really signs that the Corinthian culture is impacting the church more than the church is impacting the culture.

The Corinthian culture prized philosophy and the pursuit of worldly, sophisticated wisdom and the church is trying to import that same worldly wisdom into the church which is jeopardizing their grip on the gospel and creating attitudes of elitism and divisions within the church. The Corinthian culture was a very litigious culture, where people settled their disputes by dragging each other into court, and the Corinthian church is doing exactly the same thing! Christians were taking other Christians into court and airing their dirty laundry before unbelieving judges and juries and hurting their witness to the community in the process. So in two significant ways the church is being impacted by the Corinthian culture.

But nothing said "Corinth" more than sexual immorality. In the same way that when you think of Paris you think of the Eiffel Tower, or when you think of Orlando you think of Disney World, when you thought of Corinth, you thought of sexual immorality. It was so bad they coined the phrase "to Corinthianize" to describe someone living a sexually immoral lifestyle. In chapter 5 we saw that the church had embraced immorality to the degree that it was welcoming and celebrating an incestual relationship within the church, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. Christian men are soliciting prostitutes – because that was an accepted thing to do in that culture. The church is being impacted by the culture far more than the culture is being impacted by the church!

The church will always be affected by the culture it exists in and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Our culture is the air we breathe, it affects us in countless ways. If you have an iPhone or a Droid rather than a 8 inch Motorola flip phone with a plastic retractable antenna, you have been impacted by the culture. There are things that Christians commonly accept today that would have been considered shocking 40 or 50 years ago. We sang this morning about dancing – 50 years ago that would have scandalized most churches. But go back another 3000 years or so and you find psalms (songs) about praising God in the dance again. Cultural tolerances change. When I was a teenager and a new Christian I played some music by Phil Keaggy, one of the first Christian rock musicians, for my dad. His response, "sounds worldly to me – sounds like the music I hear played on the college campus". If I played that same song today, most would say, "sounds dated to me". The fact is, Keaggy and other early Christian rock innovators were able to reach the culture with the message of Christ precisely *because* their music sounded similar to what the culture was listening to at the time.

Some churches or movements have tried to build a wall between the church and the culture – kind of an isolationist mindset – but that wall tends to work both ways. It might keep the culture from having a major impact on the church, but it also keeps the church from having much impact on the culture. It's not good for the church when it gets an isolationist mindset or tries to divorce itself entirely from its culture. We are called to impact our culture for Christ, not avoid our culture. But following Jesus does call us to stand out

from our culture in significant ways. There are places where Jesus calls us to draw a line and look different. And one of those areas is how we conduct ourselves ethically.

Years ago I heard the story of a construction worker who became a Christian and God changed his life. One day he went to his pastor with something bothering him. There was a big trade show coming up that he was mandated to go to, but he knew that the atmosphere at these shows could get pretty wild. "Pastor, I know that at these shows the guys get drunk and do all kinds of bad stuff and I'm afraid that they're going to find out that I'm a Christian and tease me and give me a really hard time." The pastor tried to encourage him and prayed for him to have strength. After the trade show the pastor saw the guy and asked how things went at the conference. "Oh, pastor, thanks for praying! It went fantastic!" The pastor was happy to hear it. "That's great! None of the guys gave you a hard time for being a Christian?" "No, pastor, they never even *suspected!*"

It's getting to the point where anyone looking in on the Corinthian church wouldn't even *suspect* that they are Christians, because they are looking so much like the worldly culture around them. They're working hard to blend in, and to look and sound and act the same as everyone else, and to embrace the same practices and values that characterized the Corinthian culture, in such a way that they are in danger of losing their saltiness - their ability to season and preserve the culture with the culturally transcendent message of Christ. This is something the church still wrestles with: how do we enter the culture without becoming so influenced by the culture that we don't look any different than anyone else.

All things are lawful...but not all things are profitable

The way they are justifying this compromise of Christian standards is by using slogans to spiritualize their immorality as a by-product of their Christian maturity, not a contradiction to it. There are two slogans they are especially fond of, slogans that Paul repeats back to them and then adjusts. The first slogan was "*All things are lawful for me.*" The second slogan was a kind of que sera sera slogan: "*Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food.*"

A couple weeks ago we looked at how the church was turning grace into a license to do whatever they wanted, and that's basically what this phrase is meant to say: *I am saved by grace, I am not under the law, I can do whatever I want!* To a limited degree Paul would agree – the gospel frees us from the demands of the civil and ceremonial law. So now in Christ, all foods are permissible for me. If I want to observe certain holy days or not observe them, all is permissible. Today we could apply this to using drums in our worship service or getting a tattoo. We really are free to do ethically amoral things that are a part of our culture. But grace doesn't free us from the moral law. Murder isn't permissible now. Stealing isn't permissible. And sexual immorality isn't permissible.

So Paul adjusts this slogan by injecting some wisdom into it. *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful (or profitable).* That is really an understatement. Sexual immorality is not only not profitable, it is incredibly damaging. Proverbs 5 paints a bleak picture of a young man who is wooed and tempted into taking the seemingly attractive path of immorality, and in the end finds that her paths lead to death.

Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner, and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed... and the young man cries out in the end, I am at the brink of utter ruin. (vv. 8-11,14)

This is far deeper than just not being profitable. This is the kind of barrenness and regret and heartbreak that accompany a person right to the grave. Sexual sin can do devastating damage to our lives. King David experienced this depth of pain and loss and regret when in a moment of weakness he gave in to sexual temptation and the result tore his life and family apart for years to come. God loved him and forgave him, but the consequences of his sin hounded him all the days of his life. Paul is saying, all things are not good for me, or for those I love.

Paul repeats their slogan: *All things are lawful for me* and then balances it again: *but I will not be dominated by anything*. There are freedoms that lead to bondage. No one is more enslaved than the person who is free to do whatever he wants – because, given full reign, our sinful lusts and appetites are cruel masters that will imprison us in a cage of our own making. Paul says, I am free, but I will not let my freedom rule me or put me into bondage.

Food for the stomach and stomach for food

The second slogan *food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food* basically said, God created appetites and He created things to fulfill those appetites – so have at it! Their point here isn't food, that's just their homespun way of saying that God created sex and so it's just a natural desire to satisfy that appetite and how you do it isn't a big deal.

Paul adjusts this slogan by pointing out that there is a major difference between food and the stomach, and sex and immorality. God is going to destroy food and the stomach – so ultimately whether you eat a bacon cheeseburger or a Greek salad isn't going to matter in light of eternity. The day is coming when God will destroy both food and the stomach.

But the body is something different. God means the body to be used for something other than just giving in to our appetites and impulses. The body isn't meant to be devoted to sexual immorality, it is meant to be devoted to the Lord Jesus. There was a popular Greek teaching in that day that claimed that material things, including the body, were evil and worthless to God. The only thing that mattered to God is our spirit. One Greek proverb said, "the body is a tomb" and a Greek philosopher, Epictetus, wrote, "I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse." This either led people to an extreme lifestyle of self denial of any pleasure, or to the conclusion that what we did with our bodies didn't matter to God – they were evil and destined to be destroyed anyway. So, the teaching went, you can sin as much as you want to – none of it touches your spirit.

Next week is Easter Sunday and we'll be celebrating our Lord's resurrection, and that's Paul's point here: both food and the stomach will be destroyed, but the body won't be. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, we will also be resurrected from the dead, not as spirit beings, but as physical beings in our *bodies!* They will be changed – they will be glorified, but they will be, in some mysterious way, our bodies. We will be raised, not reborn, not recreated. Our bodies will be resurrected and glorified, but they will be physical bodies – which contradicts the idea that all that is material is evil.

So how we conduct ourselves in these bodies is very important. *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?* Our bodies are not only devoted to Christ, but we have been joined to Christ as members of his body. How can we then join our members to a prostitute? *Never!* Our freedom in Christ, rather than freeing us to pursue sexual immorality, frees us to flee sexual immorality. We are free to flee! It's a sin that we are to run away from as fast as we can and one reason is that there is a price that we pay for that sin that is deeper and more connected with our body and our soul than any other sin. It's not that sex is bad, sex was God's idea, not the devil's idea. It's that, as Proverbs 5 warns, sex is an

incredibly powerful thing that, turned in the wrong direction, can wreak devastating effects on our lives and our souls in ways that we may not see right away, but have lasting and painful consequences.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...? When we are born again, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our bodies. We become temples of God to be used for His worship, not our sinful pleasures. *You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.* Sin had made us slaves to Satan and his dark kingdom, but when Jesus purchased us back to God by paying for our sins on the cross, he bought us. He owns us, we are no longer slaves to sin and the devil, we are now bondservants of Christ. And because we belong to Christ, we should glorify God in and with our bodies.

Conclusion

This is really practical advice. We can't impact our culture if we think what we do with our bodies doesn't matter, if we think that Christianity is only about our spirits. The world has a really hard time seeing what we do with our spirit, but it can see what we do with our body. Your co-worker doesn't care much if your spirit is communing with angels if your body is stealing pens from the office. Every once in a while I've run across people who claim to be believers, claim to love Jesus, but live immoral lives or abuse drugs and alcohol as a lifestyle. What they don't know as they openly proclaim their faith in Christ, without a corresponding change in lifestyle, is that they leave an unpleasant fragrance behind them. It's a Christianity that just smells bad.

We glorify God in our bodies by living life in these bodies for God's bigger, eternal purposes. That doesn't mean that we have to be heading up international conferences for world change or some other global event— it might just mean that you conduct yourself at work or at home or with friends in a way that validates the claims of Christ rather than contradicts them. It means devoting our bodies, our hands, our feet, our minds, our hearts, our tongues, our skills, to promoting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here's the good news: we don't have to do these things *for* Christ. We get to do these things *with* Christ. The Holy Spirit lives within us, empowering us, enabling us, teaching us to say no to ungodliness, but also teaching us to say yes to godliness and holiness and obedience. We all have pasts that contain skeletons we don't want dug up. We all have sinful lifestyles that were dishonoring and displeasing to God. But we have been washed, we have been sanctified, we have been justified. God calls us now to be what we are. Be who we are. We are bondslaves and we are friends of Christ, we are sons and daughters of God. That's our identity. Now, God calls us to live our identities outwardly, through our bodies, in such a way that the world can see Christ in us. In such a way that the church impacts the world, more than the world impacts the church. Let's pray and ask God to help us to do just that.