

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. Up until this point, he has confronted the Corinthian church because of the sinful pride he sees in them, letting them know that they are not as spiritually mature and wise as they think they are. They lack of maturity is causing them to become arrogant, to divide, and as we saw last week, to fail to confront sinful behavior in their church.

**In today's passage**, Paul turns his attention mainly to sexual issues that he sees in the church. Corinth was in many ways like the Las Vegas of its time, and as a result Paul has a lot to correct. He is particularly interested in exposing their beliefs and behaviors that are not in line with God's truth and to call them to change their ways.

**Before we dive in, I feel it's important to highlight how we talk about sensitive issues such as sex, homosexuality, singleness, marriage and divorce.** Our culture has become increasingly unable to have respectful conversations and disagreements on not only these but many other issues. Many people see things as black and white – you are either for us or against us. We've lost nuance, discussion, and seeking understanding together. I will be doing my best this morning and the next week or two to share my best understanding of what the Bible has to say about some very sensitive subjects that you may feel strongly about. **If you find points of disagreement, or points that you hadn't thought about before, I want you to consider this sermon an invitation to a conversation.** I fully recognize that each individual story is unique. There is no "gay people" or "divorced people" or even "Christians." There are individual people with unique names and stories. My preference would be to have one-to-one conversations with each person, but that's not possible. The bottom line is that you are welcome to reach out and discuss further. It is possible to see things differently and still have respectful conversations, seeking understanding together.

With that in mind, let's read the passage:

***1 Corinthians 6:9-20*** - Do you not know that ***the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?*** Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of

God. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> *"Everything is permissible for me"*-- but not everything is beneficial. *"Everything is permissible for me"*-- but I will not be mastered by anything. <sup>13</sup> *"Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"*-- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. <sup>14</sup> By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. <sup>15</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." <sup>17</sup> But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. <sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. <sup>19</sup> Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? *You are not your own*; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

There are some false beliefs in this passage about sexuality that the Corinthians hold and which Paul confronts. I think they are all very relevant even today. I want to highlight three main points from this passage:

### 1) Sex is not purely a physical act

<sup>13</sup> *"Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"*-- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Paul quotes a saying that was common in Corinth that essentially compared the sex drive to the hunger drive: when you are hungry, you eat, and when you feel the need for sex, you meet that need. For a man in Corinth, this meant having sex not just with one's wife but with prostitutes, slaves, and even boys. In Corinth, sex was an appetite to be satisfied, and there was no shame in satisfying one's lusts outside of marriage with either men or women or boys. The shame was in suppressing your desire for sex. And Paul speaks against this cultural norm.

I believe there are similarities today. Hookup culture. Casual sex with no strings attached. Apps designed to help you find available singles. Pornography at the click of a button. It is a view of sex as a physical act, an appetite to be fed.

Paul confronts this idea.

*The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.* <sup>14</sup> *By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.* <sup>15</sup> *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!* <sup>16</sup> *Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."* <sup>17</sup> *But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.* <sup>18</sup> *Flee from sexual immorality.*

Paul quotes from Genesis to make a point about God's design for sex. According to Paul and to Genesis, sex joins two people together. The two become one flesh. Sexual union creates an enduring bond. Neither is free from the other when they part company. **Sex was designed by God to be part of a whole life covenant commitment to another person, where you surrender your whole self to each other.** It is both powerful and very important to God. You can try to turn it into something purely physical, but you will still end up connected to others in a real way that does not just go away. There is no such thing as casual sex without enduring consequences. Even using pornography connects you to another person in a way that does not easily go away, if ever. **If you have any sexual past, you know that is true.**

Furthermore, Paul says that our bodies are part of the body of Christ, so it is wrong for a Christian to unite it with a prostitute, with someone outside the marriage covenant, because this violate our spiritual union with Christ. Paul writes in v. 19 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit – we are not our own; we exist to glorify God. Hiring a prostitute for sex takes Lordship away from Jesus and gives it to Satan, essentially.

Sex is not just a physical act. Nor is it an appetite like hunger to be satisfied whenever there is a need. **Holy sexuality is chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman** (Christopher Yuan). If you have a desire for any kind of sex outside of heterosexual marriage, the Biblical response is **self-control**. Unlike what the world says, suppressing your desire will not harm you; it will refine you to make you like Christ. And it will make the desire less powerful as you refuse to feed it. Every Christian is called to self-restraint in the realm of sexuality.

## 2) True freedom is not the absence of restriction

<sup>12</sup> *"Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.*

This may have been a saying in Corinth, or it may have been the attitude they were taking. I can do whatever I want. This is the definition of freedom as the absence of restriction. I am free to choose to be or do whatever I want, and nobody can tell me what I should or should not do.

This is the attitude that says: To thine own self be true. I can do whatever I want. The most important thing is to look inward, find out who you truly are and what you truly desire, and live that out. Don't let anyone else tell you what you can and can not do.

Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

*I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority (475)*

Can you see how true this is in our world today? This seems self-evident to us in America. We believe that we are basically good people with good desires who should have the right and the freedom to live as we please, without anyone telling us what to do.

Our culture has bought into the belief that freedom is the absence of restriction. But I want to submit to you that this is wrong. **Freedom is not the absence of rules or restrictions.** Consider the bird: freedom for the **bird** is not swimming. Freedom for the **fish** is not going on dry land. Freedom for the **pianist** is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the **basketball player** is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the **car owner** is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. Freedom as the absence of restrictions leads to breakdown, to chaos, to death. Freedom as submission to its intended laws brings true freedom. True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but living as God intended you to live. And God intends you

to live in relationship with Him, in righteousness, in holiness, in love. **That means that my authentic self is not found by searching my heart and emotions and living according to them, but is found in living according to the will of the one who designed me, submitting to His plan.**

Paul says that everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial, and he will not be mastered by anything. The unexpected twist is that living with the absence of restriction will end up in slavery to sin. This is particularly true in the sexual realm.

*John 8:34 - Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a **slave to sin**.*

The more you exercise the freedom to drink, the more you become a slave to that. The more you indulge your sex drive, the more you become a slave to that. The more you do any number of things contrary to God's will, the more you become enslaved by that. The more our culture becomes one where people seek out freedom as the absence of restriction, the more our nation will devolve into chaos. But the more we find the true freedom that comes from knowing Christ, the more we will reach our fullest potential.

**When Paul wrote "everything is permissible," Paul could also have been not just confronting the culture but also addressing the freedom that believers have in Christ.** From a Christian perspective, this is the attitude that because I am saved, then I am forgiven, and therefore I can continue living however I want, because God has forgiven me. The theological term for this is **antinomianism**. **The person who tends towards antinomianism** believes he is free from keeping the rules because Jesus has already forgiven him – **"Because God has forgiven me, I'm free to disobey."** This person sees holiness as negotiable, and does not feel the need to fight his sin. But Paul counters that yes, they have freedom in Christ, but it is not a freedom to sin, but to overcome sin and live for Christ and to serve others.

*Galatians 5:13 - You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your **freedom** to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*

*1 Peter 2:16 - Live as free men, but do not use your **freedom** as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

We have a newfound freedom, but that should orient us towards doing things that are beneficial and away from things that can ensnare and dominate our lives

### 3) Everyone needs to be saved – and everyone can be transformed

*Do you not know that **the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God**? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

This list is people who live in a pattern of life, not a one-time or occasional screw-up. It's the difference between someone catching your life on a **video camera vs. a point-and-click camera**. But Paul writes that because of Jesus' salvation, they have been changed – regarding their attitude towards material possessions, towards relationships, and towards sex.

Go back to a previous question: are we naturally good, and is it therefore good to follow our desires? The Bible tells us that we are created in the image of God. Everyone is of inestimable worth. However, the Bible also tells us that we have fallen into sin. We are curved in ourselves, broken. We are not naturally good, and our desires are not naturally good. For this reason, "I was born this way" is not a legitimate reason for behaving.

**Ephesians 2:1-5** - *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

**Romans 3:9-12** - *What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup> there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is **no one** who does **good**, not even **one**."*

**Jeremiah 17:9** - **The heart is deceitful** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

We are not naturally good. We are naturally rebels in need of salvation.

*John 3:2-3 - He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." <sup>3</sup> In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

By Jesus' death, when we turn in faith to Jesus, all of our sins – including all the ones mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6 – are nailed to the cross. He takes the penalty we deserved for our sin and gives us His righteousness. **He breaks the power of sin over us so that we can resist in and live for Christ.** Everyone needs to be born again. Everyone needs to be saved. Everyone needs God's transformation.

**In this passage, Paul mentions "men having sex with men."** This is just one of many sins listed, but it is listed, and since this is a very relevant and touchy subject, I want to talk about it. What does Paul mean here?

The two Greek words here are Malakoi and arsenokoitai. Malakos – soft, effeminate. The passive partners in homosexual sex.

Arsenokoitai from arsen meaning "man" and koite meaning "bed" – means "man-bedders," males who take other males to bed. Doesn't appear before Paul, but is linked to Leviticus prohibition against males bedding males in Lev 18:22 & 20:13

**So the most likely translation is that Paul is referring here to the active and passive participants in homosexual sex.**

If you've studied these passages at all, you will find that there are those who argue against this translation, claiming that malakos is just referring to "effeminate" men, and that arsenokoitai is referring to men who have sex with boys, a practice known as pederasty. They would claim that Paul is really just speaking against exploitative homosexual practices, and that he actually would have no problem with a committed gay relationship. This seems to be a stretch. First of all, there was a word for pederasty - "Paiderastes" - which Paul doesn't use. Secondly, it seems clear that the consistent witness of the Bible is that God's design for humanity was that sex would be reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. From the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis – similar as humans yet compatible as male and female, to the Levitical laws against homosexual sex, to Paul's words in Romans 1 about homosexual sex being a particular form of rebellion against God's design in nature, to Paul's words in 1 Cor 6 and 1 Timothy

1, the witness is consistent. Even Jesus, when asked about divorce, reaffirmed that God's intention from the beginning was one man and one woman for life.

*Matthew 19:4-6 - "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*

As Louis Crompton (himself a gay man and pioneer of queer studies) argued in *Homosexuality and Civilization*, the exploitative nature of much gay sex in the ancient world does not open the door to reinterpreting the New Testament: *"Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstances. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian."*

Others argue that the Bible never speaks to homosexual orientation or committed gay relationships like we have today. But the reality is that there were all kinds of homosexual behavior in the ancient world. The most common was pederasty – men with teenage boys or slaves. It was very rare for two male citizens to engage in homosexual sex, because it was seen as effeminate for a man to allow himself to be penetrated. But there were men together as well. One example Crompton gives in his book is a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC the Greek army known as the Sacred Band of Thebes consisted of 150 pairs of male lovers.

The most honest interpretation of this passage and the witness of the Bible is that any male-to-male sexual intercourse is contrary to the will of God, even if the primary example of the culture was pederasty or men having sex with male slaves or prostitutes.

**What are the implications for us?**

- 1) **If we following Jesus and have a desire for sex outside of marriage, we need to fight that temptation**

Freedom is not the absence of restriction. It is submitting to God's design for our lives. If sex outside of marriage is sin, then we need to resist it. Be honest with another believer who you trust.

**James 5:16** - *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

This includes a desire for same-sex intercourse or romance. If you're not yet convinced, can I encourage you to explore this further and wrestle with the texts and the Holy Spirit.

2) If we have friends – gay or straight – not following Jesus, we are to love them and share the gospel with them

**1 Corinthians 5:12-13** - *What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? <sup>13</sup> God will judge those outside.*

This is where the church has massively failed. Love your gay friends. Listen to their story. Don't assume you know or understand them. Pray for them. Share meals with them. Invite them into your home. Go over to theirs. And as God gives you opportunity, share the gospel. No one is saved by becoming heterosexual. They are saved by coming to faith in Jesus. Once someone is a Christian, they need to wrestle with everything the Bible says.

Paul is not speaking from a pedestal. He is the one who said:

**1 Timothy 1:15** - *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.*

That should be our attitude as well. When it comes to gay people, they are made in the image of God and worthy of love and respect like anyone else. They are not worse morally. Some treat them poorly because of the “ew” factor. That is not Christlike. I hope your heart breaks for how they have been treated by others, and especially by many Christians. I hope like the good Samaritan you would stop and listen and love and care. Let us love like Christ.

3) If we have friends – gay or straight – who claim to be following Jesus but are living contrary to His commands, we are to lovingly confront them and help them wrestle with the Biblical texts

There are books and churches out there saying that homosexual sex is fine with God. I would imagine that will become more common. Read them, read reviews and arguments, listen to why your friends believe what they do, and help your friends consider what the Bible texts say.

You would be surprised at how many people who are attracted to the same sex have become believers, wrestled with the Bible, and found in the Holy Spirit the power to say no to sexual temptation and to live holy lives before the Lord or even to marry someone of the opposite sex. If you would like some book recommendations, let me know.

4) If we have same-sex attracted friends who are following Jesus and committed to sexual purity, we need to love them

As we will talk about next week when we get into marriage and singleness, many who are same-sex attracted are starved for intimacy, and deserve our love and care.

*Whatever our sexuality, we are all more prone to eat junk food when we are hungry, and we are all more prone to seek illicit relationships when our core relational needs are not being met.*

McLaughlin, Rebecca. Confronting Christianity

True freedom is not the absence of restriction but is found in submitting to God's will. If this sermon has brought up questions, let's continue the conversation.