

1 CORINTHIANS 6:16–17

September 4, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. We're approaching the end of the second major section of this letter, which covers chapters 5–6. The main focus in these chapters is on the theme of church purity and more specifically sexual purity. That's what we saw in chapter 5, where Paul rebuked the Corinthian believers for tolerating a man who was committing incest with his stepmother. They needed to excommunicate this man to maintain the purity of the church. Now at the beginning of chapter 6 Paul dealt with the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. But then at the end of the chapter he returned to the topic of sexual immorality. The Corinthian believers were struggling with the sin of prostitution, and in verses 12–20 he addressed this issue head on.

But Paul started this passage by taking an interesting approach. In verse 12 he gave two quotations from the Corinthian believers that are exactly the same. Some of these people thought that everything was permissible for them. They thought that they could live however they wanted. But this view is a misunderstanding of Christian freedom. And Paul responded by saying that not everything is beneficial. We need to humble ourselves and do what's best for others according to God's Word. But Paul also responded by saying that he would not be mastered by anything. When God saved us, he set us free from slavery to sin and made us slaves of righteousness and ultimately God. So we shouldn't let sin gain any kind of foothold in our lives.

Then in verse 13 Paul quoted the Corinthian believers once again. Some of them liked to say that food was for the stomach and the stomach was for food. And most likely the next statement should be included in the quotation as well. They also said that God would do away with food and the stomach. But Scripture teaches clearly that we're going to be eating and drinking during the future reign of Jesus on earth. And so the Corinthian believers were incorrect here. But the bigger problem is that they didn't just think that our stomachs are going to disappear. Apparently they thought that our entire body will be gone for good one day. So they concluded that what we do with our bodies doesn't matter, especially in matters of sexuality. That's why Paul responded to the quotation by saying that "the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord." God made our bodies for his glory, and so we need to follow his instructions about sexual intimacy.

But Paul ended verse 13 by turning his statement around; he said that the Lord is for the body. His authority over our lives is for our benefit. And I think verse 14 reveals the primary benefit that Paul was thinking about. He said that "God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power." Our bodies are not going to disappear completely after we die. Instead God is going to raise our bodies from the

dead, just like he raised Jesus from the dead. And the reason we can believe this promise is that God is all-powerful. He can do anything as long as it's consistent with his character. So we don't need to be afraid of death or grieve excessively when our fellow Christians die. Instead we should look forward to the return of Christ when our bodies will be transformed.

Then in verse 15 Paul asked the Corinthian believers two questions. First he asked them, "Don't you know that your bodies are a part of Christ's body?" Our physical bodies are not irrelevant; they're part of who we are. And since we belong to Christ's body, the church, so do our bodies. He's the head of the church, and so our bodies are under his authority. Then in the second question Paul asked, "So should I take a part of Christ's body and make it part of a prostitute?" The Greek word for prostitute is used 12 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote only two of them. The first one is found in this verse, and the second one is found in the very next verse. But this word comes from the same root as two other words that we've already seen in chapters 5 and 6. The Greek word *porneia* refers to the act of sexual immorality, and the Greek word *pornos* refers to a sexually immoral person. Both of these words are just referring to sexual sin in general.

But now we're seeing the Greek word *porne*, and it refers to someone who engages in sexual relations for hire. So this word is focused on a specific type of sexual sin. In verse 13 Paul referred to sexual immorality in general, but here in verse 15 we can see that he was thinking about prostitution in particular. And prostitution is a severe violation of God's instructions regarding sexual activity. The only situation in which God authorizes us to have sexual intimacy is when we've committed ourselves to a long-term relationship in marriage with someone of the opposite gender. And so prostitution by definition is out of bounds. A prostitute has sex with lots of people and even makes money doing so. It's impossible for a prostitute to have an exclusive long-term commitment in the area of sexual intimacy.

So it's no surprise that Paul answered his second question in verse 15 with a very strong negative response: "Absolutely not!" Paul was showing us just how terrible it is for people who are part of Christ's body to make their own body part of a prostitute. After all, prostitutes are not part of Christ's body. You can't hold the occupation of prostitution and be a Christian, because it involves living in continual sin. So why in the world would a Christian want to go to an unbeliever and pay to have sex with someone who's opposed to Christ? It's a pretty crazy idea when you think about it. But that's what can happen when we start to move away from the Lord. If we steer off course just a little, eventually we will end up far from our destination. So we must guard our hearts carefully and make sure that we stay on the straight and narrow path of holiness.

Now let's move on to verse 16. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Don't you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh." So Paul in verse 15 we saw two questions from Paul, and now we're seeing another one here in verse 16. He was continuing to challenge his readers to examine themselves and think about what they were doing. And notice that this verse starts with the same phrase that we saw at the beginning of the previous verse. As I said last week, Paul used the phrase "don't you know that" 10 times in this letter but only once in his other letters. I think he was trying to teach the Corinthian believ-

ers a lesson and confront them about their pride. They thought too highly of themselves and boasted about their knowledge and wisdom.

But this doesn't mean that the Corinthian believers didn't have any knowledge about spiritual things. After all, we know from Acts 18:11 that Paul taught the word of God in Corinth for a year and a half. But the problem was that these people often didn't live in accordance with the knowledge that they had. So I think that the obvious answer to Paul's first question here in 1 Corinthians 6:15 is yes. The Corinthian believers didn't have as much knowledge as they thought, but they almost certainly knew what Paul was talking about in this question. The problem was that they weren't applying this knowledge to their lives. And so Paul had to pause and remind them that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her.

Now if you have a different translation than the Christian Standard Bible, you might see a small word at the very beginning of the verse right before the phrase "don't you know." It's the word "or," and it appears in a variety of translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. But there is some uncertainty about whether the original letter written by Paul had a Greek word that means "or" here. Some of the ancient copies of this letter have this word, while others do not. The oldest copy of 1 Corinthians was made around the year 200, and it does not have the word. But the next two oldest copies were made in the fourth century, and they do have the word. So it's very difficult to know if Paul included this word or not.

But let's play it safe and assume that Paul wrote the Greek word for or. In this case he's doing the same thing that we saw back in verse 2. In that verse he also started with the phrase "or don't you know that." Now normally the word "or" introduces an alternative. For example, if you go out to eat for breakfast, you might be given the choice to have either bacon or sausage with your meal. But this doesn't mean that Paul was giving an alternative approach in verse 16 compared to verse 15. Instead he was giving us a question in verse 16 that supplements the two questions in verse 15. He was just showing us the situation from a different angle. But he was continuing to confront the sin of going to a prostitute.

The Greek word for prostitute here in verse 16 is the same one that we just saw in verse 15. There Paul talked about the possibility of making our body part of a prostitute. And in verse 16 he explained what he meant by that statement. He said that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her. The Greek verb for joined is used 12 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote only three of them. We're going to see this word again in the next verse. But the other place where Paul used it is Romans 12:9. There he said that we need to "cling to what is good." And that word "cling" is another good way to translate our Greek verb. It's just referring to a close relationship. Our relationship with goodness needs to be so close that we're doing good things all the time. But of course in 1 Corinthians 6:16 it's not a good thing to be joined to a prostitute.

Now the Greek verb for joined can be interpreted in two different ways, and we see them in various translations. The Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the NET Bible understand the verb to be in the passive voice. That's not very clear in the Christian Standard Bible, but the English Standard Version is more clear when it refers to "he who is joined to a prostitute." So if the passive voice

is correct here, Paul was not commenting on who was doing the action of the verb. But the implication would seem to be that the man didn't initiate the action. Instead someone else joined him to a prostitute, and in this case most likely the prostitute did the action. She's the one who joined him to herself.

But this interpretation doesn't really make any sense. Prostitutes certainly make themselves available for sexual relations, but they usually wait for someone to come to them and pay for their services. In other words, the action of joining to a prostitute is not normally initiated by the prostitute but by the other person. And so there's another interpretation that makes more sense here, and it's found in the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the new International Version. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both refer to "the one who joins himself to a prostitute." This translation reflects the Greek middle voice, which indicates that the subject of the verb does the action and emphasizes the subject's participation.

Now most of the time we can tell the difference between the middle voice and the passive voice in Greek. All we have to do is look at the form of the verb and see what letters have been added to the root. Normally there are certain letters that indicate the middle voice and other letters that indicate the passive voice. But when the verb is in the present tense like we have here, there is no difference between the middle voice and the passive voice. They look exactly the same. So we have to rely on the context to help us decide which voice the author intended. And in this case I think it's pretty obvious that Paul intended the middle voice, not the passive voice. He was saying that someone who goes to a prostitute is making himself one body with her. This action is not happening to him; he's initiating it. He's personally responsible for what is happening.

Now when Paul said that a person who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her, he's clearly talking about the physical unity that takes place during sexual intercourse. There's a sense in which two separate bodies become one body at that time because of their close connection. And Paul defended his statement here by quoting Scripture. He wrote, "For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh." The word "for" just introduces an explanation for what Paul said earlier. The reason he could say that sexual intercourse involves becoming one body is that this fact is taught in Scripture.

Now in the Greek text there's actually no word for Scripture here. We just have a third person singular verb that means "to say." There is no separate subject for the verb. The subject is just implied here. So we could use the word "he" as a reference to God. That's what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Or we could put the word "it" here as a reference to Scripture. That's what the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, and the New International Version do. And perhaps we should combine these ideas. After all, God is the one who is the ultimate author of Scripture. But first we should make sure that this quotation actually comes from Scripture. And thankfully most Bible translations give us some help here. You should have a footnote in your Bible that indicates the source of the quotation. Paul was giving us a quote from Genesis 2:24.

In Genesis 2 we learn some important details about how creation took place. Chapter 1 records the six days of creation, culminating with the creation of human beings on the sixth day. Verse 27 says that "God

created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female.” But chapter 1 doesn’t give us any details about how that happened. That’s where chapter 2 comes into play. Verse 7 tells us how God created the first man. It says that “the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.” But then in verse 18 “the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.’” So in verse 21–22 we see that “the LORD God caused a deep sleep to come over the man, and he slept. God took one of his ribs and closed the flesh at that place. Then the LORD God made the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man.”

So God didn’t create the first man and the first woman at exactly the same time or in exactly the same way. First he made the man from dust, and then he made the woman from part of the man’s body. And the man clearly understood this fact. Look at what he said in verse 23 when God brought the woman to him: “This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken from man.” Now we come to verse 24 and the statement that Paul quoted in 1 Corinthians 6:16. Genesis 2:24 says that “this is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh.” The statement that Paul quoted comes from the end of the verse. It’s not an exact quotation because Paul added the word “two” when he said that “the two will become one flesh.” But that change gives us an appropriate clarification.

Now it’s interesting that Genesis 2:24 has the word “flesh” instead of the word “body.” Those terms are certainly similar because they both refer to our physical beings. But they can also have different nuances based on the context. And the word “flesh” in this context is not just talking about a sexual relationship. It’s talking about a family relationship. The word “flesh” is pointing back to verse 23, where the man said that the woman was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. The terms “bone” and “flesh” are used together again later in this book. In chapter 29 and verse 14 Laban said to Jacob, “You are my own flesh and blood.” That’s what the Christian Standard Bible says, but the New American Standard Bible is more literal here. In this translation Laban says, “You certainly are my bone and my flesh.”

But of course Laban and Jacob were not married. So Laban was clearly not talking about marriage but about being relatives in general. Laban was Jacob’s uncle because he was the brother of Jacob’s mother, Rebekah. That’s why he was talking about when he said that Jacob was his bone and his flesh. And the same terminology is used for Abimelech and the Shechemites in Judges 9:2 and for David and the Israelites in 2 Samuel 5:1. So when Genesis 2:24 says that a husband and his wife become one flesh, it’s referring to the creation of a new family unit. That’s why this verse says that the man leaves his father and mother when he bonds with his wife. If this verse is only talking about a sexual relationship, then it wouldn’t be necessary for there to be a new family unit. And this new family unit involves much more than sexual intimacy. It also includes a deep mental, emotional, and spiritual connection.

But when Paul quoted this verse in 1 Corinthians 6:16, he was thinking primarily of sexual intimacy. That’s why he didn’t use the phrase “one flesh” before he quoted the Genesis passage. Instead he used the phrase “one body.” Plus he was not talking about sex within marriage but sex outside of marriage. When someone goes to a prostitute, there’s no deep bond that’s created there. But there is a sexual bond that

takes place, even if it's just temporary. And this bond is inappropriate because it should take place only in marriage. Then it's part of a deeper bond between husband and wife. And that bond can only reach the ideal depth if both spouses are believers.

Now this doesn't mean that a believer should get divorced from an unbeliever. God's design is for marriage to be permanent during this life. We should try to correct a wrong choice by making another wrong choice. It's wrong for a believer to marry an unbeliever, but once they're married, the believer needs to stay in the marriage unless the unbeliever wants to leave. That's what we're going to see when we get to the next chapter. But the closeness that God designed for us to experience in marriage can only be fully realized if both spouses are Christians. Then they can have not just a physical bond but a spiritual bond as well. God has designed physical intimacy to be more enjoyable if it's part of a deeper bond. We shouldn't settle for casual sex with a prostitute or anyone else. That's a perversion of God's good plan for sexual intimacy.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 6:17. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him." Paul started this verse with the word "but," which introduces a contrast with the previous verse. There Paul said that "anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her." And this union is inappropriate because we're part of Christ's body, as Paul said in verse 15. We shouldn't give our body to someone who's wicked when we're already given our body to the Lord Jesus Christ. And in verse 17 Paul talked more about the special union that we have with the Lord. Being joined to a prostitute only involves the body, but being joined to the Lord involves the spirit. Paul used the same Greek word for joined in verses 16–17 to emphasize this contrast. So we have a special connection to Jesus with our immaterial being because of his death and resurrection.

But the Greek word for spirit here can also refer to the Holy Spirit. The phrase "one spirit" is used only seven times in Scripture, and all of them are found in Paul's letters. In fact, four of those seven occurrences are here in 1 Corinthians. The other three are all found in chapter 12. In verses 7–10 we see a list of different spiritual gifts that God gave during the foundational stage of the church's construction. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 8–9: "To one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit." So clearly the phrase "one Spirit" at the end of verse 9 refers to the Holy Spirit.

Then we see this phrase used twice in verse 13. Look at what Paul wrote here: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink." So once again Paul was clearly referring to the Holy Spirit. That's why every major Bible translation capitalizes the word "Spirit" here. So I think it's likely that Paul was referring to the Holy Spirit back in chapter 6 and verse 17 as well. Paul was stressing that the way we're joined to Jesus is through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. And the reason Paul used the phrase "one Spirit" was to emphasize our unity with Jesus through the Spirit. We're part of the body of Christ because the Spirit put us there when God saved us.

So let's rejoice in the wonderful relationship that we have with the triune God. We have access to the Fa-

ther through the work of Jesus on the cross, and we're united to Jesus because of the Spirit's presence in us. We've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ! But we shouldn't forget that these incredible blessings are also accompanied by a great responsibility. That's why Paul referred to Jesus as the Lord in verse 17. We owe him our complete allegiance because of what he's done for us. We must submit every area of our lives to his absolute authority, and that includes our sexuality. Let's close in prayer and ask for his help to live in obedience to him.