

1 CORINTHIANS 6:18

September 11, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6. We're almost at 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 physical 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?" Here we can see that Paul was focused on a specific type of sexual sin in this passage. He was talking about someone who engages in sexual relations for hire. Prostitution is a severe violation of God's instructions about sex being limited to marriage. It's impossible for a prostitute to have an exclusive long-term commitment in the area of sexual intimacy. You can't hold the occupation of prostitution and be a Christian, because it involves living in continual sin.

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. And in verse 16 Paul talked more about what it means to make your body part of a prostitute. He said, "Don't you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her?" So Paul asked another question here, and he was 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. They are joined together and become united.

And Paul defended his observation here by giving us a quotation from Genesis 2:24. He wrote, "For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh." Now the word "flesh" there isn't just talking about a sexual relationship. It's talking about a family relationship and the creation of a new family unit. That's why the beginning of Genesis 2:24 says that a man leaves his father and mother when he bonds with his wife. Marriage involves much more than sexual intimacy. It also includes a deep mental, emotional, and spiritual connection. But of course Paul was thinking primarily of sexual intimacy when he quoted this verse in 1 Corinthians 6:16. And I think his point was that sex with a prostitute is a perversion of God's good plan for sex. We shouldn't settle for casual sex with a prostitute or anyone else. God designed sexual intimacy to be more enjoyable if it's part of a deeper bond in marriage.

Then in verse 17 Paul said that "anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him." We shouldn't join ourselves to a prostitute because we've already joined ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a special connection to Jesus because of his death and resurrection to pay for our sins. And I think the word "spirit" here is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit. The way that we're joined to Jesus is through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We're part of the body of Christ because the Spirit put us there when God saved us. Because of our unity with Jesus through the Spirit, we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing. But this privilege comes with the responsibility of submitting to Jesus as Lord in every area of our lives, including our sexuality.

And that point leads us to 1 Corinthians 6:18. We're ready to cover some new material now. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 18: "Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body." Paul started this verse with a short but powerful command: "Flee sexual immorality!" I like how the Christian Standard Bible has an exclamation point here to emphasize the urgency of this command. There are no punctuation marks in the ancient copies of the New Testament, but I think it's pretty obvious that an exclamation point conveys Paul's intent. As he reached the end of the section on moral purity, he wanted to readers to understand the danger of sexual immorality and the need to flee from it.

The Greek word for flee is used 29 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote four of them. It literally refers to running away from danger to reach safety. This word is used in Matthew 2:13 where an angel told Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus because Herod was going to try to kill Jesus. But whenever Paul used this word, he was always talking about escaping from spiritual danger. In 1 Corinthians 10:14 Paul told us to "flee from idolatry." In 1 Timothy 6:10 he warned us about the love of money, and then in verse 11 he told us to "flee from these things, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness." Then in 2 Timothy 2:22 Paul told us to "flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

So in all four places where Paul used this word, it's a command. And he always used this verb in the present tense, which stresses that we don't need to obey these commands just once or a few times. We need to obey them continually and habitually. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 Paul was stressing that we always need to be on the lookout for sexual immorality so that we can flee from it. The Greek word for sexual immorality is used 25 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 10 of them. It appears five times in this letter, and we've already seen three of them. The first two were in chapter 5 and verse 1, and the third one was in chapter 6 and verse 13. This term can refer to any kind of sexual sin, including incest and prostitution. Those are the two types of sexual immorality that Paul was focused on in this section. But it can also refer to any other kind of sexual sin, like adultery and homosexuality.

And Paul stressed the danger of this sin in a variety of passages outside this letter. In Galatians 5 right before he talked about the fruit of the Spirit, he gave a list of the works of the flesh. And the first one that he mentioned in verse 19 was sexual immorality. In Ephesians 5:3 he said that "sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you." In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 he said that "this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God." So if we're going to keep away from sexual immorality, we need self-control. We must control our bodies and be holy instead of giving into lustful passions.

But in 1 Corinthians 6:18 Paul didn't just say that we need to keep away from sexual immorality. He used an even stronger word. He said that we need to flee sexual immorality. And sometimes running away is exactly what we need to do. Perhaps you remember the story of Joseph in Genesis 39. He had just been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and he was taken to Egypt and sold to man named Potiphar. With God's help Joseph did so well that according to verse 4, Potiphar "put him in charge of his house-

hold and placed all that he owned under his authority.” But verse 7 says that “after some time his master’s wife looked longingly at Joseph and said, ‘Sleep with me.’” Joseph refused, even though she persisted day after day. Finally, one day they were alone, and verse 12 says that “she grabbed him by his garment and said, ‘Sleep with me.’ But leaving his garment in her hand, he escaped and ran outside.” In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this verse has the same Greek word for flee that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

So there are times when the danger of sexual immorality is so close that we need to run away from it. You may end up being falsely accused like Joseph was, but it’s far better to escape spiritual danger and remain pure. Sexual immorality is a very dangerous sin, and in the rest of verse 18 Paul talked about why we need to run away from it. He said that “every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body.” Now before we talked about what this statement means, let’s look briefly at some of the key terms here. The first Greek word for sin is used only four times in the New Testament. But this noun comes from the same root as the most common word for sin, which is used almost 200 times in the New Testament.

Then we have another Greek word for sin in this verse, and it’s a verb that’s used 42 times in the New Testament. This word also comes from the same root as the most common Greek word for sin. This root is pronounced “hamart,” and we get our word “hamartiology” from it, which is a reference to the doctrine of sin. And Paul’s focus here is on the sin of sexual immorality in relation to the body. There are two uses of the word “body” in this verse, and both of them come from the same Greek word for body that we’ve already seen several times in this chapter. Sometimes this word refers to the body of Christ or the church, but normally it refers literally to our human bodies. And I think that’s how Paul was using both occurrences of the word in this verse.

Now we have another reference to sexual immorality near the end of this verse. Paul mentioned “the person who is sexually immoral.” The Greek word here for sexually immoral is actually a verb that comes from the same root as the noun for sexual immorality that we saw earlier in the verse. The verb is used eight times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote three of them. The other two occurrences are also in 1 Corinthians, and both of them are found in chapter 10 and verse 8. But here in chapter 6 this verb is a substantival participle, which just means that it’s functioning like a noun. It’s referring to a person who commits the sin of sexual immorality. And so the Christian Standard Bible is giving us a pretty good translation here.

But at the beginning of this statement in verse 18, the Christian Standard Bible is missing a word, and so is every other translation that I looked at. The Greek text here has a word that usually means “if.” But when it’s used with the Greek relative pronoun, together these two words can be translated with the word “whatever.” You can actually see a relative pronoun in more literal translations like the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. The New American Standard Bible says, “Every other sin that a person commits is outside the body.” The word “that” is a relative pronoun because it introduces a phrase that points back to the word “sin” and adds some clarification. But a more literal translation here would be the phrase “every other sin, whatever a person commits, is outside the body.” The word “what-

ever” accurately communicates the emphasis that Paul intended here. He wanted to stress that he was indeed talking about any other sin besides sexual immorality.

But actually an even more literal translation here would be the phrase “every sin” instead of “every other sin.” The Christian Standard Bible has a footnote here that alerts us to this fact. So there’s actually no Greek word for other in this verse. But most translations add the word “other” because it seems to be implied by the context. However, there are a few translations that don’t add this word, like the NET Bible and the old Holman Christian Standard Bible, which is the predecessor to the Christian Standard Bible. And the reason that they don’t add this word is that they’re interpreting this verse differently. Both of these versions put quotation marks around the statement in the middle of the verse. In other words, they’re treating this statement as a quotation from the Corinthian believers.

Now this interpretation is a possibility, because we’ve already seen that Paul quoted the Corinthian believers several times in verses 12–13. But in those verses we reached this conclusion because of the context, not because there are quotation marks in the original Greek text. In fact, there were no quotation marks in ancient Greek. So why do some people think that Paul was quoting the Corinthian believers in verse 18? Well, if we stick with a more literal translation instead of adding the word “other” to this statement, then we have a contradiction. First Paul would have been saying that every sin we can commit is outside the body, including sexual immorality. But then he made a contrast and said that sexual immorality is a sin against the body.

So one way to solve this contradiction is to say that Paul didn’t make the first statement. He was just quoting the Christians in Corinth. And we can see why they would have made a statement like this one. Some of them clearly believed that we can do whatever we want with our bodies because they’re just going to die some day. These people didn’t believe that our bodies are going to be raised from the dead. So they basically thought that there was really no way to sin with our bodies. But the problem with this view is that Paul’s response to this supposed quotation doesn’t make much sense. He’s talking about how sexual immorality is a sin against our body. That’s different from saying that it’s a sin we commit with our body. So when Paul referred to sins that we commit outside the body, I think he’s talking about how these sins don’t impact our body the way sexual immorality does.

Now certainly there are other sins that are directed primarily against our body. A good example is drunkenness. When we get drunk, there’s a powerful effect on our body. We lose control of our faculties and can’t think clearly. We have trouble with fine motor skills and reaction time. That’s why it’s illegal to drive a motor vehicle when you’re drunk! And so it’s no surprise that God condemns it as sin. Another example of a sin that’s directed against our body is gluttony. This sin involves making a god out of our stomach. It has to do with overeating, and so it’s clearly a sin that impacts our body. When most people overeat, they gain weight and begin to experience health problems. And as Christians this sin restricts our ability to serve the Lord effectively and offer our bodies to him as a living sacrifice.

But there’s still a significant difference between sexual immorality and the sins of drunkenness and gluttony. And all we have to do is look at the context to see what that difference is. In verse 16 Paul stated that

prostitution involves being joined to someone who's an unbeliever. But in verse 17 he stressed that we're joined to Christ through the Holy Spirit. So these two unions are in direct competition with each other. If we have sex with a prostitute, then we're giving ourselves to that person in a unique way. Our body is under that person's authority, even though we claim that our body belongs to Jesus. So going to a prostitute and being a Christian are completely incompatible. If we're truly united to Jesus and under his lordship, then having sex with a prostitute would be a direct violation of our relationship with him.

Now of course this doesn't mean that God forbids every kind of sexual relationship. There is one kind of sexual union that glorifies God because it points to his relationship with us. If we make a long-term commitment to a Christian of the opposite gender in marriage, then we become a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. Think about the similarities. Jesus saves us before he marries us, and he puts us into one group. He's never going to leave or forsake us. And we're different from him; he's God, and we're not. So human marriage was never meant to be eternal. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 22:30 that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven." Our earthly marriages are temporary because they're just pointing forward to our future marriage to Christ. Once that marriage takes place, then there's no more need for human marriage. And if you think human marriage is great, just wait until you see how wonderful it will be to be married to Jesus! You're not going to miss human marriage at all.

So I don't think Paul was quoting the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 6:18. He was the one who said that every sin, whatever a person commits, is outside the body. What he meant by this statement is that no sin involves a special unity that competes with our unity with Jesus. And the context obviously shows that there's only one exception: sexual immorality. Paul didn't need to say "every other sin" because the word "other" is obvious from the context. He just literally said "every sin" because he wanted to emphasize that there are no other exceptions. Sexual immorality is in a class all by itself. There's a sense in which sexual immorality is worse than any other sin.

Now some Christians struggle with this concept. They're inclined to think that all sins are the same. And it's certainly true that committing any sin is enough to get us sentenced to eternal punishment in hell. That's the point of James 2:10, which says that "whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all." But Scripture is clear in several places that not all sins are equal. In Ezekiel 8 God showed Ezekiel some of the different sins that the Israelites were committing. And after Ezekiel saw one set of sins, God showed him another set of sins that was even worse. Then God did the same thing again. He said that same thing to Ezekiel in verses 6, 13, and 15: "You will see even more detestable acts." The Christian Standard Bible makes it sound like Ezekiel just saw additional sins. But the New American Standard Bible is more literal here. Here's what it says in each verse: "You will see still greater abominations." So each time Ezekiel saw another set of sins, they were worse than before.

We see this concept in the New Testament as well. In John 19 Jesus was on trial before Pilate because the Jewish religious leaders had brought Jesus to him. And after he questioned Jesus, he was inclined to release him. But the Jewish religious leaders shouted that they wanted Pilate to crucify Jesus. Now when Pilate went back to question Jesus some more, he told Jesus in verse 10 that he had the authority to re-

lease him or to crucify him. But listen to what Jesus said in verse 11: “You would have no authority over me at all, unless it was given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of greater sin.” Jesus probably wasn’t talking about Judas Iscariot here. After all, Judas just handed Jesus over to the Jewish religious leaders. Instead Jesus was probably talking the high priest, Caiaphas. He was the one who handed Jesus over to Pilate.

So Pilate certainly sinned when he eventually gave the order for Jesus to be crucified. But Jesus clearly said that Pilate’s level of guilt was less than the guilt of the high priest and by extension the other Jewish religious leaders. That’s because Pilate didn’t act out of deliberate malice like they did. They had been plotting to kill Jesus for some time because they were jealous and hated him. And so it’s no surprise that Scripture doesn’t just talk about different levels of guilt. It also refers to different levels of punishment. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 11:21–22: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago. But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.” So the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida are going to suffer more than the people of Tyre and Sidon. After all, they saw Jesus perform miracles and still rejected him!

Now as Christians we don’t need to fear this kind of punishment. But we do need to understand that if we’re committing any sins habitually and not repenting, then we’re probably not true believers. Instead we’re on our way to hell where we’ll be punished for all eternity. And if we’re living in any of these extreme sins like sexual immorality, then our punishment will be very severe! So we need to be on guard against sexual sin. Our culture is treating sexual deviations as normal, but we must stand strong against the pressure and influence of the world. We shouldn’t compromise even one inch on this issue. But we should also reach out to unbelievers and warn them about the judgment that’s coming. We need to love our enemies and show them God’s grace and mercy. We should plead with them to repent and trust in Jesus to save them so that they can avoid the wrath to come. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to do that.