

When Christians get to these types of passages in the Bible that deal with inappropriate behavior, it is easy to get all preachy. It is easy for Christians to stand within the safe confines of the church walls and shout out judgment against the world. It is easy for pastors to stand in tall pulpits and shout out judgments against those who sit in the pews and beyond.

How many times have we seen pastors or preachers or politicians wail against sexual sins? Lots of voices which stand in judgment against anyone who falls short of their version of what is appropriate expression of sexuality. As a result, many folks outside the church see us as judgmental and disconnected to them. And it doesn't help the church cause when many of these same people of prominence are found to be engaging in the very same behaviors that they condemn others for.

Or, as many folks do, it is easy to just ignore passages such as this text. We don't like what it says, it makes us uneasy, and so we ignore them entirely. Sexuality makes many of us squeamish so we leave any explanations to the interpretations posed by our society in print, television, and social media. But as part of our 8 week series on Paul's letters to the Corinthians, I hope to take neither of these tracks.

We have learned in the previous few weeks that Paul founded the Christian church in Corinth. After starting the church, Paul has gone off to other places but then he gets word that they are having all sorts of problems. The letters which come to us as First and Second Corinthians are Paul's attempts to address the problems that they are encountering.

From the portion that we have read, it is clear that Paul does not like the sexual ethics which are being practiced in the community. The folks in the community are saying that it is their body and they can do anything with their body that they want. It is lawful and it is permissible to do anything.

Prostitution is the norm. So if someone wants to hire a prostitute, they can hire a prostitute. If they want to engage in frivolous sexual encounters, they can engage in frivolous sexual encounters. It is, after all, lawful. It is their right.

But Paul challenges the view that sexual expression is a right. Instead, Paul sees sexual expression in a whole different light. Paul says that to be in the church means seeing sexual expression by a higher standard. According to Paul, sexual expression is a spiritual union between two people and with God.

Paul tells the Corinthians that their body is not their own, it is instead, God's own. Our bodies are to be temples of God. A place where God dwells deeply. And Paul says inappropriate expression of our sexuality is an offense against God. The word which we translate sexual immorality in the English is actually the Greek word porneia, where we get our word pornography.

Our culture has an ambivalent relationship to the body. On the one hand, we glorify the body and we spend a lot of energy into tending to it and beautifying it. How much time and attention have you spent on your body lately? Some of us, obviously, more than others. Advertisers prey on us because they know that we are ashamed of our body in many ways. We see ourselves as too fat or too skinny. We are too old or too young. We are too big or too small.

But our bodies are beautiful things. And our physical relationships with others are beautiful things. Physical relationships and physical expression is not something to be trashed. But we lose sight of that beauty. We lose sight of seeing the body as a beautiful creation. We become down on ourselves and we abuse our bodies with the food and drink that we put into it. We become down on ourselves and become discouraged.

We then, can, engage in abusive behaviors toward our bodies and engage in inappropriate relationships with others when we become disconnected with the people that are important to us. We engage in abusive behaviors and inappropriate relationships when we become disconnected from God. Basically we become lonely and act out our loneliness in destructive ways.

Noted author Henri Nouwen says this about why he wrote this long letter to his father. "This letter was written six months after the death of my mother. I wrote it to my father as a letter of consolation. When I wrote it I did not think of making it public, but now, three years later, I feel a certain urge to do so. Because now I have a real desire to offer this letter to all those who suffer the pain that death can bring and who search for new life. During the last few years I have come to realize in a new way what it means to live and die for each other. As this awareness grew in me, I began to wonder if the fruits of our grief are to be tasted only by ourselves.

Like other letters, this letter has its own history and I would like to introduce its publication by offering some explanation of why I decided to write it.

Very shortly after my mother's funeral in October 1978, I returned from Holland to the United States. A few days later I was busy again, as always, teaching, counseling students, attending faculty meetings, answering mail, and doing the many things that fill the daily life of a university teacher. There had been little or no opportunity to let mother's suffering and death enter deeply into my innermost self.

During the days that my mother was dying and during the days immediately after her death, I tried to pay as much attention as I could to my family and to anyone who offered friendship and love. And then, back in the US, far away from home, the busy school life certainly did not encourage me to listen to my own inner cries. But one day, when I paused for a while in my office between appointments, I suddenly realized that I had not shed a single tear before or after mother's death. At that moment I saw that the world had such a grasp on me that it did not allow me to fully experience even the most personal, the most intimate, and the most mysterious event of my life.

It seemed as if the voices around me were saying, 'You have to keep going. Life goes on; people die, but you must continue to live, to work, and to struggle. The past cannot be recreated. Look at what is ahead.' I was obedient to these voices."

As I have listened to the voices of people who struggle with viewing pornography, as I listened to the voices of people who have engaged in extramarital affairs, as I have listened to the voices of people who have hired prostitutes, as I have listened to the voices of people who have engaged in numerous sexual encounters with multiple partners, it becomes clear to me that there is a loneliness out there that permeates our society. And while this loneliness has permeated our society, we in the church have either closed our eyes to this pain or we have shouted from a distance voices of condemnation.

But Paul says that we in the church have a responsibility to help one another have healthy physical expression in our relationships. Paul says that to be a member of a church is to help hold one another accountable for appropriate behavior. Not so that we can shout judgment upon others but so that we can help one another have healthy and happy and fulfilling relationships.

In two weeks, we are going to look more in depth at Paul's words to single people and then in three weeks we are going to look more in depth at Paul's words to married people. But today, I invite you to hear Paul's words. "You were bought with a price; therefore, honor God with your body."

And when your friend or your family member loses sight of how their body is precious to God and that it is to be cared for and used in a way that honors God, it is appropriate to point this out to them and help them to honor God with their body.

We don't pass judgment. We as Christians are to be there to help one another have healthy and appropriate physical relationships with one another. Our bodies do not belong to us, they belong to God.

Appropriate use of our bodies and appropriate physical relationships gives glory to God. AMEN.

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-Nouwen, Henri J.M., *A Letter of Consolation*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1982

-Text: I Cor 6:12-20, 5:9-13

-Given: Feb. 13, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Creator God, you have made us in your image and called us very good. But we have lost sight of that goodness and done things to harm our bodies. We have abused our bodies with over consumption of food and alcohol. We have lost sight of seeing our bodies as a temple where you dwell.

We have become lonely and disconnected from one another and from you. This has led us into inappropriate relationships with others. We have used virtual people to satisfy our perceived needs. We have not used sexual expression in a way that brings glory to you. Forgive us and restore right relationships between us and with you.

We live in a world that sends us mixed and confusing messages about our bodies and sexual expression. Guide us through your Spirit to help our community to build stronger and more vital relationships with one another.