

“God’s Bod” (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

As of October 2006, there were three times as many professional tanning parlors in the U.S. as there were Starbucks. Each year, an estimated 2.3 million teenagers enter those parlors, which has helped indoor tanning become a \$5 billion-a-year industry. On their own, these numbers may not seem surprising or even noteworthy. But they become dangerous when placed in the light of a recent medical discovery. Since 1975, the occurrence of melanoma—the most lethal form of skin cancer—has doubled in the United States among women ages 15-29. The World Health Organization is also taking notice. It estimates that 60,000 people die each year around the world because of excessive UV exposure, and urges youths under the age of 18 to avoid indoor tanning.

But many experts fear that teenagers will not change their behavior, even in the light of such dangerous consequences. In a *Time* magazine article from last August, two 16-year-old girls were interviewed. One girl said, “All the girls who are really tanned all through the year—they’re the popular girls. Guys are always complimenting girls on their tans.” Another girl who visits a tanning parlor several times a week acknowledged that she is willing to risk her health for short-term rewards. Her rationale, “It may make my skin wrinkle a little bit earlier, but I’m going to look good while I can.”¹

Short-term pleasure leads to long-term disaster. Nowhere is this truer than in the area of sexual immorality. For a few minutes of pleasure, countless men and women will throw their lives away. Just think for a moment about the potential consequences of sexual sin: loss of fellowship with God, divorce, disease, pregnancy, guilt, estrangement from family and friends, psychological and financial loss, damage to one’s reputation, and countless others. Indeed, there is no sin in this life with such brutal consequences. This reality ought to keep us from sexual sin. Yet, if we are honest, most of us assume that we will be the exception to these consequences. Honestly, we believe that these things will never happen to us. So we go on our own merry way, sinning. Therefore, the apostle Paul uses another approach in helping us overcome sexual immorality. He uses a positive affirmation: “*Your body is God’s body.*” In 1 Cor 6:12-20, Paul provides two ways that we can honor God with our bodies.

1. Refuse to be mastered by your body (6:12). In this opening verse, Paul shares a principle that governs this entire passage. He argues that he and the Corinthians have certain freedom in Christ, but these are to be used for our good and God’s glory. Paul writes, “**All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I² will not be mastered by anything.**” In this verse, Paul seems to be adapting and qualifying (“but”) a saying for his own purposes.³ Twice Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me.”⁴ There is a sense in which this is true. God’s world is to be enjoyed. Everything created by God is good, including sex.⁵ Yet, sex outside of marriage is not profitable and can lead to being mastered. Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to feel free to enjoy God’s world. But he does not want them to press their freedom so far that they do damage to themselves. Immorality breaks marriages, shatters homes, brings agonies of guilt, and damages usefulness beyond repair. We are free, but sin still has serious consequences. We must constantly ask ourselves questions about what is expedient. Will what I am planning help my health? My emotional state? My spiritual sensitivity? My understanding of God and His Word? Will it damage someone else? Will it damage another person’s conscience? Will it affect the church’s testimony?

Freedom does not mean the absence of constraints or moral absolutes. Suppose a skydiver at 10,000 feet announces to the rest of the group, “I’m not using a parachute this time. I want freedom!” The fact is that a skydiver is constrained by a greater law—the law of gravity. But when the skydiver chooses the “constraint” of the parachute, he is free to enjoy the exhilaration. God’s moral laws act the same way: they restrain, but they are absolutely necessary to enjoy the exhilaration of real freedom.⁶

[God wants to be glorified in your body and He wants the best for you, so He urges you to refuse to be mastered by your body. For *your body is God's body*.]

2. Refuse to dishonor God with your body (6:13-20). In these eight verses, Paul argues that sexual immorality is an offense against God the Father (6:13-14), the Lord Jesus Christ (6:15-17), and the Holy Spirit (6:18-20). In 6:13-14, Paul argues that sexual immorality is an offense against God the Father. He launches into this discussion by explaining the two ways to a man's heart: food and sex. He writes, **"Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power."** This passage is not about food; it is about sexual immorality. Nevertheless, Paul contrasts the two to emphasize how God values the human body. Unfortunately, many Corinthians did not believe in the resurrection of the physical body, so Paul devoted an entire chapter to this doctrine in 1 Corinthians 15. Here, he simply insists that food and the stomach are temporal, but the physical body is eternal. Paul states that our bodies are designed for the Lord. We can no longer talk about "my body." *Your body is God's body*. And God will one day raise your earthly body. This means what we do in our bodies in this life matters greatly to God.

In the following verses we will be especially reminded that the sexual revolution was not invented in the 21st century. Believers in this first-century church in Corinth also had to struggle with how to be faithful to God in a totally permissive society. In 6:15-20, Paul will use the rhetorical question, "Do you not know" three times. He is going to urge you and me to live out what we know. In 6:15-17, Paul will explain that sexual immorality is an offense against Jesus Christ. Paul writes, **"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!"** Three times in this one verse, Paul uses the word "members." He reminds us that the moment we believed in Jesus Christ we were grafted into His body. We are now members of Christ. Hence, it is unthinkable to Paul that we would ever be sexually immoral. Since we are members with Christ, we take Christ with us wherever we go and whatever we do.

You may be saying to yourself, "Paul is talking about paying a prostitute for sexual favors. That's disgusting. I would never do that. There's no love involved—just lust. But there's no way you can compare that to the relationship I have with my boyfriend or girlfriend." Fair observation, but I don't think it releases you. Even though there is undoubtedly a moral distinction between a one-night stand with a street-walker and a passionate interlude with a steady date, sin is still sin. I don't think anyone would want to argue that since armed robbery is worse than shoplifting, petty theft is OK. Yes, it is true that Paul is addressing the specific issue of prostitution in 6:15-16, but the theme of the whole passage is clearly broader. The Greek word for "immorality" (*porneia*) deals with all kinds of sexual immorality.⁷

In 6:16-17, Paul continues his argument and writes, **"Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.'"⁸ But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him."** The word "joins" or "unites" (NIV) is used in each of these verses. The Greek word was used for gluing. An immoral man glues himself to an immoral woman. A believer, on the other hand, should glue himself to the Lord. Why do you think the word "glue" is used of sexual relationships? After all, aren't many sex acts purely physical, without any real personal involvement? No. Paul says it is *impossible* to have a physical-only sexual relationship. There is no such thing as casual sex, inconsequential sex, or recreational sex. The sexual act is such an intimate act that it involves and affects the whole person. And he quotes the Old Testament to prove his point. In Gen 2:24, God says of the sexual act, "the two will become one flesh or one personality." We dare not dismiss sex as inconsequential. *Your body is God's body*. When you have a sexual relationship with someone who is not your spouse, you glue yourself to another instead of God.

The last three verses bring tremendous encouragement about the resources God has given us to live a life of sexual purity. It starts with two warnings in 6:18: **“Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.”**¹⁰ Verse 18 offers the first command of our passage: “Flee immorality.” It is a present imperative and should be translated, “Keep on fleeing” or “Make it your habit to flee!” The Bible’s advice for avoiding sexual immorality is simple: stay as far away as possible from the persons and places and things likely to get you in trouble. Real men and women run! They don’t stand in and fight.

How can we go about guarding ourselves from temptation? The following commitments will definitely help keep us pure.

- **Watch television and movies selectively.** It is nearly impossible to watch anything on network or cable TV without being bombarded by sexual content or images. Last year (2006), *Time* magazine reported a 96 percent increase in TV scenes with sexual content from 1998 to 2005, according to a survey of programming from a broad sampling of shows. When you go back and see the reruns of “Cheers,” “Seinfeld,” and “Friends,” you can see the steady increase in overt and covert sexual material. Now zero in on “Desperate Housewives,” and you wonder how much more gratuitous can it get. And we tend to anesthetize ourselves to it.¹¹ Thus, if you are going to watch TV, do so with a purpose. Do not just aimlessly channel surf. When you go to a theater, make sure you’ve read the reviews on the movie you are going to see. When you go out of town on business trips, it is wise to watch TV blocking out the adult movies in the hotel room.
- **Monitor your Internet use.** Internet pornography is the most insidious sin of our day. Every man, woman, and child is vulnerable to Internet pornography. The Justice Department estimates that 9 of 10 children between the ages of 8 and 16 have been exposed to pornography online. Software Company Symantec found that 47 percent of school-age children receive pornographic spam on a daily basis. And representatives from the pornography industry told Congress’ COPA (Child Online Protection Act) Commission that as much as 20 to 30 percent of the traffic to some pornographic websites is children.¹² We must always be on guard! Wise parents do not allow their children to have their own computer in their room. It is also appropriate to have your computer in a visible part of your house. Additionally, it is wise to put a moral filter on all computers through www.xxx.church and www.covenanteyes.com.
- **Find an accountability partner.** It is nearly impossible to stay pure without having an accountability partner. Every Christian needs a godly person of the same sex to ask the hard questions. One such question is, “Are you feeling attracted to anyone at work, church, or anywhere else?” The goal must be to answer this question honestly. It is better to feel a twinge of embarrassment than to find yourself in an emotional or physical affair. If your accountability partner knows who you are attracted to, he or she can help keep you away from that person at church. Your accountability partner may also help by encouraging you to change jobs or change offices to flee a person who has a grip on you. Note: In accountability relationships, it is wise to occasionally ask, “Have you just lied to me?” It is so easy to justify immoral behavior in our own minds or just flat-out lie to save face.

In 6:18, Paul is putting sexual sin in a category all its own. All the sins in the world are put in one column and sexual sin is put in another. All sins are outside the body except sexual infidelity, which alone is a sin against one’s own body. While immorality is not necessarily the worst sin,¹³ sexual sin is unique in its character. Like a malignant cancer to the body, immorality internally destroys the soul like no other sin. Therefore, we must flee from it. If we allow ourselves to succumb to immorality, we will be guilty of destroying our own body and the bodies of other partners. We must purge ourselves from the sins that do bodily damage.

Paul closes our passage in 6:19-20 with the crux of his argument: **“Or do you not know¹⁴ that your body is a temple¹⁵ of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought¹⁶ with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”** There are three important points in these last two verses. First, we are a temple of God. In 1 Cor 3:16-17, the local church is called the “temple.” Here, the same Greek word (*naos*) is used of the individual Christian. The term used in both passages for “temple” is not the word for a pagan temple, or even for the Jewish temple structure and grounds; rather, it refers to the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place for the people of God in the Old Testament. Paul is saying that God Himself is resident within us. Your body is His mailing address and P.O. Box. He dwells in YOU!

You would probably never consider committing an act of sexual immorality in a church sanctuary, right? But the fact is, as disgusting as that would be, it would be no worse for a Christian than committing the same sin anywhere else. A church building is never called a Holy of Holies, but the believer’s body is. What a difference it would make if we lived with this realization. If the body is a house for the Holy Spirit it should only be used for the very best purposes. We should not allow anything or anyone to spoil it or misuse it. We should keep it in good condition. The Christian is to have a certain “pride” in his or her body. It is a sacred house, a dwelling place for God. To glorify God is to acknowledge God, to bring Him honor, to get others to see how glorious He is.¹⁷

The best place for sex education is the home. The second best place for sex education is the church. Sex education in the church might begin by seeking to cultivate a deep awareness of the indwelling presence of God.¹⁸ This is a far greater motivator than the scare tactics that Christians have used down throughout time. The best motivation is to encourage Christians to seek a greater good—God’s glory.

The second word of good news is in the middle of 6:19: We have been given the Holy Spirit as a gift.¹⁹ We have received Him, and He lives inside of us, ready to help us in our battle against sin. One of the words for Holy Spirit in the New Testament is *parakaleo*, which means “counselor” or “helper.” We have been given a divine resource in the battle against the flesh and against sexual sin. We don’t have to be in bondage, because we have the power of the Spirit of God within us to supernaturally help us resist temptation. It is possible to live a life of sexual purity, especially as we rely on the Holy Spirit who gives us strength to abstain from our fleshly lusts.

Finally, we have been bought with a price, and we’re not our own. Paul’s image does not picture a slave being sold to a god and being set free, but being transferred by sale from one owner to another. Formerly, we were slaves of sin, now we are slaves to God (Rom 6:16-23; 7:6).²⁰ *Your body is God’s body.* So we have no right to pervert or misuse our bodies sexually, because they don’t belong to us to do with what we will. We’re not the masters of our bodies anymore. *Your body is God’s body.* Verse 20 teaches that we have been purchased by God at tremendous cost, the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross for us. And that blood has cleansed us from sin. In light of this great purchase price, Paul commands us to glorify God through sexual purity, out of gratitude for what Jesus did. This means to show God off, to make Him look good.

So we have the privilege of living lives that honor God physically, emotionally, relationally—in every possible way. Being sexually pure does affect our relationships with each other, but ultimately it’s about the Lord. He is the only one to whom we owe adoration and ultimate obedience. This is an amazing reality—God can be glorified in the choices we make in expressing our sexuality. The Lord is honored when we resist sexual temptation. And He is also glorified when we express our sexuality in beautifully appropriate ways, in the marriage relationship. The call in this passage is to renounce dishonoring God with our bodies, and to rejoice in and to embrace what we’re called to, in glorifying God with our physical bodies. And God is committed to working in us to make us sexually pure, consistent, integrated, whole people.

But you may say, “Keith, this is an impossible expectation. We live in a sexually saturated society. Lower the bar. Give me something realistic to shoot for.” My flesh might like to, but the Bible will not permit this. Instead, the Bible exhorts us to strive for perfection.

One of the greatest examples of a man of purity and conviction is former NBA player A.C. Green. At 6’9” 224 pounds, Green is the epitome of strength and stamina. He holds the NBA record for consecutive games played. He is an “iron man.” More importantly, Green was an iron man in his sexual purity. He married at the age of 38 as a virgin. In the fast and loose world of the NBA, where gorgeous young women are a constant temptation, that’s a remarkable record.

During his rookie year with the Los Angeles Lakers, A.C.’s teammates said he’d never be able to keep his vow to save sex for marriage. “We’re going to give you six weeks,” they told A.C., according to a *Sports Illustrated* article. “You’ll see this girl come into the Forum. You’ll start getting your paychecks.” A.C. has seen plenty of girls and paychecks—and remained abstinent all along. “Abstinence before marriage is something I very much believe in,” A.C. says. “Responsibility is the main issue, being responsible for the decisions that you make, realizing that every decision has a consequence.” Green said, “I made the decision as a teenager to be abstinent. I wanted to take control of my future. It wasn’t a popular decision then, just like it can be an unpopular decision now. It doesn’t always make me more friends. But the friends I have are true friends. True to themselves and true to me. We know each other’s goals and dreams and we encourage each other to achieve them. It isn’t easy. But every single day I say ‘yes’ to abstinence, it becomes that much easier. If you make a decision, and you practice it, that practice turns into a habit and the habit becomes a lifestyle.”

Today, Green has his own ministry that teaches abstinence in the public schools.²¹ If A.C. Green can be sexually pure living life as an NBA player, by God’s grace, we can remain pure.

Now there’s a final issue we must touch upon. It comes in the form of a question: What should I do if I have already blown it? I’m sure many of you wish you had heard this truth earlier, or perhaps even more did hear it and wish you had obeyed it. A message like this can bring painful memories to the surface and perhaps a great deal of guilt along with it. Young man, young woman, if you’ve already lost your virginity; engaged person, if you’ve already been intimate with your future partner; married person, if you’ve already committed adultery; men, if you are in bondage to pornography; women, if you are living a fantasy sex life through soap operas or romance novels, let me suggest three important things you can do.²²

1. Confess the sin; God is able and willing to forgive you. The first and most important one to confess to is God Himself. Sin against God is so much greater than the sin against anyone else that the other victims pale into insignificance. The question of confession to others besides God is a difficult one. However, I do believe it may be wise to write a letter to those people you have been sexually immoral with and state 1) I have sinned against God. 2) I have sinned against you. 3) Will you please forgive me? After writing such a letter, sever all ties with this person. This may bring the closure that you need.

2. Purpose in your heart to quit now. Some people are tempted to say, “I’m already guilty. I’ve blown it. What difference does it make now? One more act of fornication isn’t going to make me any worse.” Don’t kid yourself. Sexual sin is cumulative in its damaging effects, much like carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide stays in a person’s system for a long time, with the result that a non-lethal dose can sometimes kill because of the accumulation of poison in the system. A second act of immorality is not a freebee—it compounds the sin of the first one, spreads the cancer a little further, and eats away at a little more of one’s personality and spirit. The only way to deal with such sin is immediately, radically, permanently, and in complete dependence upon God. Covenant with God that you will never let it happen again. Ask Him to give you strength. Become accountable to someone.

In recent years there has been a movement among Christian young adults called “secondary virginity.” It’s been a way to encourage those who have already sinned sexually at a young age to establish a new marker and commit to abstinence from now until marriage. Some in the liberal press have made fun of this effort, but I applaud the young people who have committed to starting over.

3. If not guilty yourself, be willing to forgive others who are. “But you don’t understand, Pastor, my wife’s infidelity was a breach of faith so traumatic I will never be able to forgive.” “My husband’s addiction to pornography has been so degrading I will never be able to trust him again.” I have just one question for you: “How much has God forgiven you?” Was this sin in the life of your husband, wife, child, closest friend, any worse than the cumulative sins you have committed? And has God forgiven you?²³ You may not think you can forgive, but the Lord can change your heart. Forgiveness is not just a feeling; it is a decision to do what God does for you every day!

Sexual allurements are extremely enticing and powerful. They promise nothing but pleasure and satisfaction. But they rarely deliver what they promise. They claim to be real living but are actually the way to death. I want us to take a few moments this morning and individually do business with God. No one knows your heart but you and God. If you need to confess something to God, if you need to flee, or if you need to forgive, now is the time to make a commitment to do exactly that.

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 6:12-20
2 Corinthians 12:20-21
Acts 15:19-21, 28-29
Romans 6:12-14; 8:12-13
Philippians 3:17-21
Colossians 2:20-23
Colossians 3:1-7

Study Questions

1. When have I excused my sexual immorality in the name of Christian “freedom” (6:12)? What specific justification did I use to appease my conscience? If (when) I was caught, how did I explain my actions to others? Why do I have to get caught before I confess? Is there a root issue that keeps me from being honest with others? How can I address this?
2. What is involved in the “one flesh” relationship (6:15)? Is it biblically possible to have casual sex, inconsequential sex, or recreational sex? Why or why not? In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis says, “The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured.” Do you agree with this quote? Why or why not? What are the various consequences of being sexually immoral?
3. How does my sexual sin hurt God’s heart? Do I frequently reflect on this reality? Has it made any noticeable difference in my thoughts, words, and actions? Carefully read Psalm 32 and 51 where David confesses his sin after committing both adultery and murder.
4. How can I “flee sexual immorality” in a sex-crazed society (6:18)? Do I really believe this is possible? Am I still engaging in the fight or have I given in? Read Romans 13:14; 1 Peter 2:12-13; and 1 John 2:15-17. Who will I seek out to hold me accountable? Will I tell this person the truth about my sin?
5. How do I view my body (6:19-20)? Is my view biblically accurate? How do I need to revise my view of my body? In what ways do I feel motivated to honor God with my body, knowing that I am His temple and that He owns me?

Notes

¹ Preaching Today citation: Sam O’Neal, St. Charles, Illinois; source: “Why Teens Are Obsessed with Tanning,” *Time Magazine* (8-7-06), 54-55.

² Dodd notes that the “I” statements occur as summary transitions in 1 Corinthians (Cf. 1 Cor 5:12; 8:13; 10:28-11:1; 12:31-13:3; 13:11-12; 14:11, 14, 18) and are applied in a hortatory sense. Paul expects his readers to apply what he says about himself to themselves. In 6:12, Paul portrays himself as an exemplary embodiment of the effects of the washing, sanctification, and justification that the Corinthians presumably had experienced in 6:11. Brian Dodd, *Paul’s Pragmatic “I”: Personal Example as Literary Strategy* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 77-90.

³ The vast majority of commentators (e.g., Fee, Hays, Collins, and Thiselton) and English versions (NET, ESV) see 6:12, 13, and 18 as Corinthian slogans. Garland convincingly argues that 1 Cor 6:12, 13, and 18 are not slogans from the Corinthians, but Paul’s very own words. I tend to think he is right. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 225-229.

⁴ Paul uses this same phrase again in 1 Cor 10:23 without “for me.”

⁵ Paul was the great champion of Christian freedom (e.g., Rom 6:14; 7:6; 8:21; Gal 5:1, and 13).

⁶ Preaching Today citation: Colin Campbell in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker).

⁷ In the Bible, the word “immorality” (*porneia*) refers to any sexual perversion—whether premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, or bestiality.

⁸ In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, expresses the thought this way: “There’s more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact.”

⁹ The word “other” is sometimes omitted in Greek and is to be understood (for example, Matt 12:31, “people will be forgiven for every [other] sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven”). The context and rhetorical tone suggest that Paul wants to draw out the distinctive character of sexual sin compared to every other sin a person could possibly commit. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 237.

¹⁰ For great insight into this verse see Bruce N. Fisk, “*Porneyein* as Body Violation: The Unique Nature of Sexual Sin in 1 Corinthians 6:18.” *New testament Studies* vol. 42 (1996): 540-58.

¹¹ Preaching Now (6-6-06): Application in Preaching Vol. 5 No. 19.

¹² Daniel Weiss, “Obscenity Enforcement, Corporate Participation, and Violence against Women and Children,” family.org (7-23-05); submitted by Aaron Goerner

¹³ It would seem that unbelief and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are the “worst” sins in terms of consequences.

¹⁴ This is the sixth time in chapter six that the apostle Paul asks the same rhetorical question, “Do you not know?” See 1 Cor 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, and 19.

¹⁵ In 1 Cor 3:16-17, Paul’s usage of the temple is a reference to the local church.

¹⁶ “You were bought” (*agorasthete*) is in the aorist tense, pointing back to Christ’s redemptive work on the cross (Matt 20:28). Interestingly, Peter reveals that God has even “bought” (*agorazo*) false teachers (2 Pet 2:1); hence, Christ’s death was sufficient for the sins of all mankind. Nevertheless, there is something very unique and significant when Christ’s death is applied to the believer.

¹⁷ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Kent, England, 1998), 82.

¹⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 108.

¹⁹ The indwelling Holy Spirit is a strong argument for eternal security.

²⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 239.

²¹ See <http://www.acgreen.com>.

²² Some of these thoughts are from Michael P. Andrus, “Six Reasons Why Sex Outside Marriage Is Wrong” (1 Cor 6:12-20), unpublished sermon notes, January 28, 2001.

²³ Jesus said, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt 6:14-15).