

Text: 1 Cor 6.18

We are resuming our “Ask the Pastor” series this afternoon. I have one question today that can be answered with one message, then another question starting next week that requires more than one message.

The question this week is on 1 Cor 6.18:

1 Cor 6.18 Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

The question centers around sins “outside the body” and “against his own body” — don’t all sins affect the sinner? Aren’t all sins equally bad? And surely sins like drunkenness, gluttony, and suicide affect the body? What makes immorality different?

Unsurprisingly, Christian writers have wrestled long and hard with this problem. The interpretation is difficult, although the message is clear: *flee immorality!* (That’s the easy part.)

I plan to survey a few possible answers, lay out a conclusion, and then make a strong exhortation at the end.

I. Possible interpretations (suggested by others)**A. First a simple solution: denying a Corinthian slogan**

1. In 1 Corinthians, Paul seems to quote slogans the Corinthians had, then refute them
 - a. All things are lawful to me (6.12)
 - b. Food for the stomach and the stomach for food (6.13)
 - c. All sins are outside the body (6.18)

2. Paul is simply contradicting the slogan: the immoral man is actually sinning against his body (contrary to the quoted slogan)

There may be some merit, but this seems too simple to me

B. The comparative solution: compared to other sins, this is worse

1. The idea is that immorality is such a grave moral offense that by comparison all other sins are “outside the body” — less inherent effect

2. Held by Calvin, Barrett, Conzelmann, Edwards, Lenski and others
3. Problem: what makes this sin more gravely immoral than others?
4. What makes this sin affect the body in such a comparatively worse way?

In the end, this leaves us with the same questions and no answers.

II. An interpretation based on context

This is only a summary, it took me three messages in 1997 to cover this passage!

- A. The whole passage is dealing with immorality (vv. 12-20)
 1. The argument from creation (12-13)
 2. The argument from spiritual union (14-20)
- B. The argument from creation
 1. Here, it does seem the Corinthians are offering slogans
 - a. "All things are lawful for me."
 - b. "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food"
 2. The second slogan is especially directed towards immorality
 - a. It seems to say, "when I'm hungry, I eat; when I feel the sex urge, I satisfy it"
 - b. It is countered by God's purpose in creating us:
 - 1) Not for immorality
 - 2) But for the Lord

We should note here that God is not saying sex is evil, but as Paul will say later, it is only legitimate in the bounds of marriage. Anything outside of marriage makes it immoral.

- C. The argument from spiritual union (14-20)
 1. Believers are united spiritually with Christ (14-15a)
 - a. This is taught in many passages

b. It is as if the believer is a limb of Christ's body

"The members of Christians are called members of Christ because the body is the abode of the Spirit of Christ and is consecrated to Christ's service."¹

2. In immorality, a Christian would make someone who is spiritually united with Christ enter an illegitimate spiritual union (15b-16)

a. The Lord demands exclusive loyalty in our relationship to him

b. In the same way, God demands exclusive loyalty in the relationship between husbands and wives

c. There is something of a mystery here, but it seems that there is a spiritual component to sexual union

"Sexual union with a prostitute violates one's body by bringing it into a wrongful 'one flesh' union, and by flaunting the mystical union with Christ (6:15)."²

"This does not teach that fornication is greater than any other sin; but it does teach that it is altogether peculiar in its effects upon the body; not so much in its physical as in its moral and spiritual effects. The idea runs through the Bible that there is something mysterious in the commerce of the sexes, and in the effects which flow from it. Every other sin, however degrading and ruinous to the health, even drunkenness, is external to the body, that is, external to its life. But fornication, involving as it does a community of life, is a sin against the body itself, because incompatible, as the Apostle had just taught, with the design of its creation, and with its immortal destiny."³

¹ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1889), 397.

² Richard L. Pratt, *I & II Corinthians*, ed. Max Anders, vol. 7, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 101.

³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 105–6.

3. In our spiritual life, we are one spirit with the Lord (17)
4. Therefore, Flee immorality (18)

III. The attitude of the Christian

A. Now the obvious application means an absolute moral commitment

1. The Christian should keep his body only for his or her marriage relationship if God provides it
2. The most important relationship we have is the one we have with the Lord; we should cultivate it above all things

B. The less obvious applications

1. Keep your mind pure
 - a. Avoid movies that use sex as entertainment
 - b. Avoid books, magazines, etc, for the same reason
 - c. Avoid music that objectifies sex (rock music, yes, but other 'innocent' popular music also)
2. Keep your reputation pure
 - a. No flirtation!
 - b. Dress modestly
 - c. Set boundaries in relationships: "hands off" — almost an absolute standard for young people

Conclusion:

Well, you see, we could say more, but I believe the context says that immorality in particular violates our relationship with God in ways that no other sin does.

Therefore, I teach that we should do everything we can to avoid any taint of this sin. It isn't enough to simply avoid "the act of immorality," — we need to flee the spiritually debilitating effects in many areas of life.

The world might think us mad! God says,

1 Cor 6.20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.