

## PREFACE

I initially approached this next extended passage—vv12-20—with fear and trepidation; considering the general makeup of our local, Sunday Morning class, just how much practical application could be drawn from a text about going to prostitutes? But, as usual, I was consoled and encouraged by digging into the text and discovering the over-arching theme and purpose of this passage. For, at its root, the text is not about how wrong it is to visit prostitutes—I think we can all agree on that point up front—or even how wrong and detrimental to our walk with Christ is *any* sexual immorality (*porneia*).

So whether you have been happily and faithfully married for one hundred years or a young upstart with all cylinders surging in overdrive; whether you are a young woman rejoicing in her first child or have been a widow for many years; no matter your age, sex, or marital status, this passage has relevance, because no matter how old and decrepit your body may be, you still have one. We *all* have a body, and this passage is about how we are to think of it. Precisely, it is about the proper balance between our physical self (*soma*) and our S/spiritual self (*because of the indwelling pneuma*)—and even more specifically, to whom that body belongs.

Paul is, of course, preaching against sexual immorality in the individual believer and the church—in this context, specifically visiting prostitutes. But there is more here than just that.

**Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.**

Before we dig into vv12 I need to point something out that is not apparent in some of our translations. It is no secret that I prefer the NASB translation for my study, and it may seem like I far too often take issue with the NIV or ESV. But in this instance those two are the ones that help us understand what is being said—and, more importantly, by whom—in these two verses. If you are using the NASB, KJV or NKJV you will not see this on the page.

ESV v12: “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.

ESV v13: “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (emphasis added)

In fact the updated NIV takes this one step further—and rightly so, in my opinion—by including in the clause of v13 “...and God will destroy them both.”

NIV (updated): You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

The reason why this makes sense we will see later.

The consensus is that the three clauses inside quotation marks (punctuation that has not been inserted in the more literal other three translations) were considered theological "slogans" common and easily recognizable to the church in Corinth. The source of these slogans is debatable; it is possible they have their beginning in a stated Pauline position, but then the church (or individuals therein) removed or forgot Paul's clarifying "in Christ" perspective, and adopted the slogans—through the influence, once again of the secular culture—as absolutes employed far beyond Paul's original application.

This is how they are presented here: Paul is not repeating these to back up his present arguments, but repeating philosophies that have become spurious doctrine to the Corinthians so as to *refute* them.

Something else that sets this passage apart from what has transpired up till now is that Paul is not explicitly tying his remarks to a known or reported situation in the church.

- In Chapter Five he directly took issue with a member of the church committing incest with his father's wife (5:1-5).
- Earlier in this chapter he addressed the situation where two brothers were taking their dispute to civil courts instead of dealing with it within the church (6:1-8).

Here, as Gordon Fee puts it, "He does not begin by attacking their illicit behavior directly; rather, he confronts the theology on which that behavior is predicated."

v12

*All things are lawful for me...*

In an earlier passage from this same letter we can find an instance where Paul states something similar—but states also the qualifier that has now been left out of the slogan adopted by the church.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.**

The more the Corinthians believe they are "spiritual," the more they slide away from the gospel of Christ. Whatever we have, whatever we are, whatever lies before us for eternity is because of Christ—because we belong to Him.

**lawful, permissible**<sup>niv</sup> = *exestin* = third person singular presumed indicative of a compound of <G1537> (ek) and <G1510> (eimi); so also exon, ex-on'; neuter presumed participle of the same (with or without some form of <G1510> (eimi) expressed); impersonal **it is right** (through the figurative idea of being out in public) :- **be lawful, let**, × may (-est). Fee: "right to determine, hence authority")

When the Corinthians (and believers today) subscribe to the slogan, "All things are lawful for me," they are saying that they claim the right to act as they please, without restraint. What this self-imposed "right" is based on, at least for the Corinthians, we will see in our next session.

**Sidebar:** As is so often the case, there are scholars and interpreters that disagree with the notion that Paul is quoting spurious slogans so as to refute them. But this verse offers an easy basis for refuting *their* position: It is simply not true that "All things are lawful" for the follower of Christ—at least not in an absolute sense.

*but not all things are profitable.*

**profitable**<sup>nasb</sup>, **helpful**<sup>esv,nkjv</sup>, **beneficial**<sup>niv</sup>, **expedient**<sup>kjv</sup> = *symphero* = from <G4862> (sun) and <G5342> (phero) (including its alternate); to bear together (contribute), i.e. (literal) to collect, or (figurative) to conduce; especially (neuter participle as noun) **advantage** :- **be better for, bring together**, be expedient (for), be good, (be) profit (-able for).

Paul's use of this word translated "profitable," or "beneficial" in the NIV already broaches a larger topic beyond going to prostitutes. His use of it here probably means "to one's own benefit"—i.e., "not everything is for my good." Later in this letter Paul will use the same word to refer to that which benefits someone else (10:23). And his larger theme is that the Christian's life is not to be focused on whether or not I have the *right* to anything, or the right to *do* anything, but whether it benefits my life in Christ and, by extension, whether my conduct is ultimately helpful to those around me.

I have the right to eat anything I want—but is it good for me?

I have the right to speak my mind on any subject I choose, but will that be edifying for my brother or sister in Christ?

*All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.*

In the second sentence of the verse Paul adds another perspective to the same slogan.

**mastered**<sup>nasb, niv</sup>, **brought under the power**<sup>kjvs</sup>, **dominated**<sup>esv</sup> = *exousiazō* = from <G1849> (*exousia*); **to control :- exercise authority upon, bring under the (have) power of.**

In the Greek there is a play on words going on here with the word translated “lawful” that is not easy to translate into English. M. R. Vincent’s attempt is “all things are in my power, but I shall not be brought under the power of any.”

The alcoholic can accurately say, “I have the right to drink this scotch.” But who in that situation is really the master? The alcoholic may think he is the master, in charge of his life, but in truth he is the one being mastered by the drink.

This is a helpful if simple application of this statement, but I believe there is more going on here than that. It is hard to know precisely what Paul is getting at here; what is he referring to when he uses this verb *exousiazō*—and more to the point, what is on his mind?

To state it succinctly, I think Paul has sex on his mind. Even though the next verse seems to go off on a different topic—namely, food—he is still just laying the groundwork for what will come later in this paragraph regarding being with a prostitute, and what will come in Chapter Seven regarding marriage. And the verb *exousiazō* helps us make this connection.

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 7:3-4.**

This is the only other place where Paul uses this same verb; here in the NASB it is translated “have authority over.” From its use in our passage in Chapter Six we might say that “The wife does not have *power* over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have *power* over his own body, but the wife does.” In fact that’s just how the KJV translates the verse (it just says “hath not” instead of “does not have.”)

But what does this have to do with visiting a prostitute?

#### **Read Genesis 2:22-25.**

[Now back to v12 in Chapter Six.](#)

*All things are lawful for me,*

Paul's treatment of the body in our extended passage is primarily on a spiritual, supernatural level, regarding the believer's relationship to Christ his Lord. That is his ultimate point. But the paragraph opens with these more temporal references regarding limitations to what is lawful for me to do in the here and now, and referencing food and the stomach.

At the time of this letter, Corinth was a Roman city, but its background was Greek, and the two cultures were blended in the cosmopolitan city. One of the "lawful things" in the Corinthian society was visiting a prostitute. For the pagans in that city, especially in its Grecian past, it was actually *part of* the worship of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth—by both sexes ([there were both female and male temple prostitutes](#)). But religion aside, it was simply a culturally accepted practice for men, married or not, to go to prostitutes. It was "lawful."

*but I will not be mastered by anything.*

We will address the mystical relationship between our bodies and Christ later in this passage, but on a temporal level, [in a marriage who holds power over the husband's body? Answer: the wife. Over the wife's body? Answer: the husband.](#)

From Genesis, later repeated not just in the epistles but by Jesus Himself, we understand that man and woman come together to become one. This union of man and woman forms a mystical bond—a bond that pictures the bond between Christ and His church, Christ and every believer. When Israel rebelled against Yahweh and worshiped other gods, God referred to it as "adultery" ([e.g., Jeremiah 13:27](#)).

To paraphrase the slogan, the Corinthians were saying, "Hey, I'm now a 'spiritual' being. The body is nothing—it's just sex. For the physical body, everything is lawful for me." But in the economy of God for man, sex is more than that; it is reserved for the marital state, and there it becomes something deep and profound.

Sex *outside* marriage perverts God's eloquent and sublime plan for man and woman. In v16 Paul nails it with,

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."

The one who visits a prostitute has just handed over to a harlot, power and authority over his own body. He has been "mastered" by a whore.