



Lesson Three

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 5–6

MAIN IDEA

The purpose of the freedom we have in Christ is for our lives to be a sign of God's victory over death. Through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, we are set free to make choices that benefit each other.

OPENING PRAYER

*Lord Jesus Christ,
your mother Mary offered her body as your first shelter.
In your body, divinity found an earthly home.
Help us to remember how much you love our bodies
and to treat them as temples of the Holy Spirit,
as we delight in your company together.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

In chapters 5 and 6, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for misunderstanding, and therefore abusing, the freedom they have in Jesus Christ. Their baptism has indeed made them free, but they have forgotten freedom's purpose: to live as a sign of God's victory over death. Paul reminds them that Christian freedom has boundaries.

The moral standards Paul elaborates are for church members. He does not say Christians should separate from the world, nor that non-Christians should be held to the church's standards. But those of us who bear the name of Christ, who are siblings in faith, must behave accordingly. Our actions affect each other. When we act contrary to the gospel, we damage the body of which we are all members, whatever people outside the church might think.

Within the limitations Paul advocates sits a passage that has long been used to forbid same-sex partnerships. As many scholars have noted, however, Paul's frame of reference was completely different from the consensual, loving relationships many Christians now experience. You and I are left to contemplate what those verses' message might be for us today.

Paul's warnings might make us wonder: what limits to our behavior can Christians agree on? Which practices tolerated or embraced by the larger culture might we share or reject, based on our belief that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and that we are members of each other and of Christ's body?

LESSON

Paul learned of the conflicts within the Corinthian church because someone reported them. One of these conflicts was a sexual scandal. The man whose behavior was reported to Paul was immortalized in this letter. We know nothing about him other than what we read here, and for his sake, it's probably a mercy that his name was not recorded.

"It is actually reported," Paul writes, that among the cases of "sexual immorality among you" is the egregious example that "a man is living with his father's wife" (5:1). The man's father is presumably dead. The sin Paul condemns in their relationship is not adultery, but incest, according to the definition of the time. For Paul, the teaching, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife" found in Leviticus 18:8 remains in effect.¹ We know virtually nothing about this couple, including what drew them together. They may have professed to love each other, or, given the class influence Paul condemns elsewhere in this letter, the woman may have held some social status her former stepson did not want to lose upon his father's death.

It is possible that when Paul wrote that immorality of this kind was "not found even among Gentiles," he was thinking of Sophocles's play, *Oedipus Rex*. Written about five centuries before this letter, the play expresses a literally deadly horror of incest, although in Oedipus's case, the incest occurs between the title character and his biological mother. Paul and his friends in Corinth would have been familiar with the

¹ The same prohibition is also in Leviticus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 27:20.

play, not least because Oedipus grew up in the palace of King Polybus of Corinth. In this case, Paul was able to draw on both explicit biblical prohibitions and an implicit warning from pagan culture to rebuke a church member.

Settling Disputes Among the Close Community

Although Paul claims apostolic authority over the church, he never claims the church should assert authority over nonbelievers. He states that “God will judge those outside” (5:13). Although he later states “the saints will judge the world” (6:2), he refers there to the time after Jesus returns. In this life, in this moment, Christians should focus on their own actions, not those of their pagan neighbors.

Paul does believe Christians need to handle their conflicts within the community, however. Having received reports that some of the Corinthians are taking other church members to court, Paul’s response glows with anger: “I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one person wise enough to decide between brothers and sisters? Instead, brothers and sisters go to court against one another, and this before the unbelievers” (6:5–6). The word rendered in some Bible translations as “believer” is “brother” in the Greek. Again, Paul uses familial metaphors to remind the congregation of their obligations to one another. Can’t a family settle its own disputes, he implicitly asks? What vision of the church are these litigants presenting to nonbelievers? How can they claim to have the spirit of the resurrected Jesus Christ if they don’t have the wisdom, anywhere in their congregation, to settle their disputes?

When you are experiencing conflict with one or more fellow Christians, how easy or challenging is it for you to remember that you are connected to them in Jesus Christ? Where do you turn for help? Does your church have resources available or procedures in place to work through conflict?

Concerns About Courts

Biblical scholar J. Paul Sampley points out the class dimension that would have been obvious to this debate’s original participants. Sampley asks, “In the Greco-Roman world, who initiated civil court cases? The answer is simple and unmistakable: only the wealthy, only the very powerful few who sat atop the steep social pyramid.”² There are very few such people in the Corinthian fellowship, but their willingness to take other believers to court shows the gospel has not transformed them. They continue to seek vindication in the courts, “whose verdicts,” Sampley states, “followed wealth.”³

The corruption of first-century judges accounts for Paul referring to them as “the unrighteous” (6:1). They use their power to wrong others. But as with Paul’s horror at the man living with his father’s widow, even pagans would be appalled if one sibling sued another.⁴ Many of us might feel similarly today. If some church members are taking others to court, Paul implies, they cannot possibly believe they have become family in Jesus Christ. Their actions betray their lack of belief.

2 J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 853–854.

3 Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” 854.

4 Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 1 Cor 6:6 note.

Since only wealthy Corinthian Christians had the means to take conflicts to court, part of Paul's concern is that the congregation should look out for its most vulnerable members. They need to find resolutions to conflicts that don't risk depriving poorer Christians of the little they have, or drive them into debt to pay a judgment against them. This concern for poorer congregants will come back up later in the letter.

Who helps people with different points of view, either within your congregation or in your denomination, hear each other in a spirit of mutual love and respect? What practices offer the most meaningful and faithful help?

Turning to Courts Today

Today, the church can be in a different position regarding secular courts. In cases where the church has covered up, or refused to address, abuse or misconduct; in cases where spouses cannot reconcile; in cases where a church employee defrauds a congregation, taking the conflict to court (civil, criminal, or family, depending on the situation) could be the course of action that best holds offenders accountable, protects vulnerable people in the future, or allows formerly married people to rebuild faithful lives apart from each other. Christians can still consider it a defeat for the church when the courts have to address injustices we have not been able to resolve among ourselves. When the power dynamics within our family of faith make it impossible for vulnerable people to be

protected or vindicated, however, the courts might be the best path to some degree of justice.

How does your church respond when a member harms another, or a staff member harms the church? How is discipline enforced in these cases? Have you seen changes over time in how the church responds to offenses, or seeks to prevent them in the first place?

Sexual Relationships in Paul's Time

First Corinthians 6:9–10 is one of a few snippets of the New Testament that have historically been used to forbid or condemn same-sex romantic or sexual relationships among Christians. These verses are in the form of what is called a “vice list,” common across ancient literature, of behaviors to avoid. The two words that have been given the most weight with regard to same-sex relations are “malakoi” and “arsenokoitai,” variously translated as “male prostitutes,” “sodomites,” “homosexual offenders,” or “men who have sex with men.” These are lumped in with other “wrongdoers,” like fornicators, thieves, idolaters, drunkards, revilers, and robbers, who “will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

We don't know exactly whom Paul had in mind when he wrote these words, but it seems clear that on this topic, as on others, he's concerned about idolatry and lack of self-control. “Malakoi,” often translated as “male prostitutes,” literally means “soft,” likely “referring to moral and physical weakness, and perhaps also to being

sexually submissive or coerced.”⁵ “Arsenokoitai” is an even more mysterious word, combining “man” and “bed.” Together, they might mean “man-bedders” or “bed-men,” but the term is not common, and Paul’s exact meaning is not clear. The words for “man” and “bed” also appear together in Leviticus 20:13, which may well be Paul’s source for this teaching.

Another important influence on Paul’s thinking would have been the pagan culture all around him, in which boys were often exploited by older men, and pagan worship practices could include ritual sexual relations. Those sexual rituals involved various gender combinations, a fact that also leads us to question the meaning of “fornication” here. Although Paul definitely sees marriage as the appropriate context for Christian sexual relations, “fornication” may more likely refer to exploitative sex, or sexual relations in a pagan ritual context, than to all intimate relations outside marriage.⁶

Considering Sexual Relationships Now

Interpreting and using this passage today, Christians are challenged to consider what kinds of sexual relationships the gospel calls us to forgo. Many of us have concluded that Paul would not have been able to conceive of the committed same-sex relationships and marriages within which large numbers of Christians currently live, which help them grow in faithfulness and discipleship. Christians today can affirm that sexual exploitation, whether it occurs outside marriage or within it, is contrary to our faith and practice.⁷ And it can be helpful

to reflect on Paul’s conviction that what we do with our bodies is not purely private and does not only affect us. How we keep the commitments we have made to others affects not only us and those persons, but the church too.

We might also take the opportunity to reflect upon how we might steer clear of the other vices Paul decries. Is there something—our sports team, our college, our political party—we might love so much that our enthusiasm borders on idolatry? Are all our financial dealings—our tax filings, our business negotiations—as honest and fair as we can make them? In contexts very different from first-century Corinth, these questions are still worth considering.

What questions related to gender and sexuality has your church discussed and discerned about in the past? What is everyone talking about or asking now? What resources do you turn to for help with your questions?

Focus on Glorifying God

“All things are permitted for me,” the Corinthians had written to Paul. Quoting them, he offers his own reminder, which he will repeat in the tenth chapter: “All things are permitted for me,’ but not all things are beneficial” (6:12). When we’re talking about life in Christian community, what one is or is not technically allowed to do, or what one might

5 Levine and Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 1 Cor 6:9–11 note.

6 Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 98–99.

7 Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*, 99–100.

hope to get away with, is not the correct focus for our attention. Being free in Jesus Christ means learning to choose actions that will glorify God. Our bodies belong to God; they are members of Christ; and they will be raised because of God's action in Jesus Christ. Repeating his teaching from the third chapter that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19, 3:16), Paul calls his siblings, then, to "glorify God in your body" (6:20). Although Paul uses vice lists to get his point across, simply avoiding certain behaviors is not really the point. The point is to glorify God, and to live conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence within us.

TAKEAWAY

Christian freedom has boundaries. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can help each other make decisions about how to behave, using Jesus' way of love as our guide. We are always called to protect the vulnerable among us, and to be on guard against letting anything we love become an idol, even our love for our own church.

Do you seek the advice of siblings in Christ when you are unsure of the most faithful course of action in a challenging situation? How do you and fellow Christians help each other find ways to live more fully as temples of the Holy Spirit? How does your church care for each other's spiritual and physical well-being, and those of your neighbors?

ON THE WEB . . .



United Through Christ, Bound To Each Other: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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