

FAITH REFRACTED: 1. GLORIFY

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1 Corinthians 6:12-20

A rather odd story hit the national news right before the end of the year. It had to do with a university president—specifically he was the chancellor—who was fired from his job after it had become public that he and his wife—who was also a professor at the university—had produced and starred in several adult videos. These videos were their hobby. They made them themselves. They paid for them themselves. And they posted them to the internet. When word of these films became known, the Board of Regents of the state university system met and immediately terminated this man from his job as chancellor—a job he had held for 16 years. The man objected to being fired and argued that he had done nothing wrong, that the school was infringing upon his freedom of expression.

To be fair, this chancellor had done nothing illegal. He didn't break any laws. The videos made no mention of the school where he worked. There was no connection. But to be clear, the school did not impinge upon his freedom of expression. He is still quite free to express himself in this way or any other. But that does not mean that the school has to condone it.

The school took the right step in dismissing this man. As chancellor, he is the face of the university, and as such, he has a responsibility to represent the ideals and virtues of that institution. In their statement about the firing, the Board of Regents said, “the ex-chancellor had shown a reckless disregard for the role he was entrusted with to serve students, faculty, and staff, and the campus community.”¹ As a parent, I certainly wouldn't want my child going to a school where this man was in charge. I can't imagine that any of you would.

And so, it is at this point, that I am reminded of one my favorite sayings. This is one of life's little truisms that I keep tucked in my head. It goes like this: “Just because you can doesn't mean you should.” I say this a lot—usually to myself in my car when someone flies past me weaving in and out of traffic. Yes, you may be able to drive like that, but is it really the right thing to do? The chancellor and his wife—were they free to make and post these adult videos? Absolutely. Was it the smart thing to do? Probably not. Just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

I tell this story because it almost perfectly illustrates our reading from 1 Corinthians, and not because Paul is talking about sexual immorality, but because he is talking about freedom. The chancellor would argue that he should be

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/29/us/wisconsin-la-crosse-joe-gow-terminated/index.html>

free to do what he wants, to express himself however he wishes. But as Paul argues, freedom comes with responsibility.

CORINTH

During Paul's time, the Greek city of Corinth was a large, bustling metropolis. It was a major center of trade and commerce. In 44 BC—a century before Paul's visit—Julius Ceasar had designated Corinth as a Roman Colony. Colonization meant an influx of inhabitants as well as wealth.

Paul came to Corinth as a missionary around the year 50 A.D. Paul stayed there for eighteen months building a worshipping community of Christian believers from the diverse population of the city. Once he felt confident that the church was strong enough to stand on its own, he moved on to his next mission opportunity.

As was his custom, Paul kept in contact with his former parish, and it was not very long before he received word that there were several significant points of conflict growing within the congregation. In response to this conflict, he wrote letters back to the congregation with words of teaching, guidance, and encouragement.

SERMON SERIES

Today, I am starting a five-week series called "Faith Refracted: Confronting Corinthians in the Season of Epiphany." Epiphany is a time on the church calendar that starts on the Day of Epiphany. The Day of Epiphany is always January 6—also known as the Twelfth Day of Christmas. The word *epiphany* means manifestation, and the Bible story we associate with Epiphany is the visit of the Wise Men. These are the first non-Jews to pay homage to the Christ child. The divinity of Christ becomes manifest with them. (I'll be talking about this more in future weeks.) The Season of Epiphany starts on January 6th and ends with Lent, and during this season I will be preaching from the books of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

As I mentioned, this letter to the church in Corinth addresses a number of issues plaguing that congregation. These issues include members of the church suing one another, the practice of idolatry, chaos in worship, the role of women in the church, and more. As one scholar put it, the church in Corinth was a "hot mess."

Our reading for today centers on the word *porneia*. *Porneia* is a Greek word that means sexual immorality, or fornication, or debauchery. When Paul uses this word here, he is specifically referring to the practice of men visiting prostitutes. Now, this does not appear to be an issue with the members of the church. If it were, Paul likely would have called the offenders out by name. It is, however, an issue in Roman culture, and it was not uncommon, even accepted, for men to consort with prostitutes. (In Greek, the word for prostitute is *porna*.)

But Paul is using *porneia* to differentiate his congregation from the general population. As one scholar writes, “in the first century, any respectable Jew would have condemned *porneia*. This was a sin of the Gentiles, precisely what the Jews did not do.”² *Porneia* was a dividing line between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul makes this clear when he writes, Shun *porneia*; run from *porneia*, and keep running. *Porneia* is a sin that the followers of Christ should steer clear of. Engaging in this behavior makes them look like the pagans. As Paul writes in Romans, Christians need to be in the world, without belonging to the world (Romans 12:2). Engaging in *porneia* would place them in the world of the pagans and on the wrong side of their faith.

So, if *porneia*—sexual immorality, fornication—is not a problem with the Corinth church, then why is Paul telling the people to run from it? Because he's using this subject to make a greater point about our relationship with God.

Our reading for today begins with the statement, *All things are lawful to me*. Another way to say this is, *I have the right to do anything*. These words appear to be a common catchphrase among the members of the Corinthian church. When was with them, Paul taught that in Christ they have freedom. Some, it appears, have taken this to an extreme with the belief that they are free to do anything because if they are with Christ, then the rules of the world no longer apply to them. They have also incorporated the Greek idea that the spirit is everything and that the body is nothing. The body will die, but the spirit will live forever. And if that is the case, then who cares what the body does?

This idea has evolved within the congregation that in Christ, they have the freedom to live as they wish. *All things are lawful to me*. They are new beings. The world is behind them. They exist now on a spiritual plane. Therefore, they can do anything.

Paul counters this belief by saying, yes, you may do anything, but not everything is best for you. In other words, Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. You are human beings with bodies. Your bodies are not meaningless. Your bodies are central to you and your relationship with God. God made your spirit and God made your body. Your body is a temple to God, and you should treat it as such. And by temple, Paul doesn't mean that you are to lift weights until you've carved out a physique like Adonis. No. He means that you should conduct yourself as if your body is home to God.

Treat your body as if it were a temple. Treat it like a church. Here, today, because we are a church, we are careful about who we allow to use our building.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-1-corinthians-612-20-3>

Who we let use our space sends a message to the community about who we are and what we support.

For example, a number of years ago, a person I had met through my work in this community asked if two friends of his could get married in our church. As a favor to this man, I said yes, and arranged to meet with the couple. Accompanying them to this meeting was a pastor they wanted to participate in the service with me. The young couple was lovely, but I got an odd feeling about the pastor they brought with them. When they left, I looked him up and discovered to my surprise that he was an active white nationalist and the head of an organization promoting Southern secession. I advised the Session to permit the wedding but to prohibit the involvement of this particular pastor. I did not want the community to get the impression our church in any way supported his ideals. When I informed the couple that we would not allow the pastor to participate they chose to be married somewhere else. And that was probably for the best.

In the same way that our church is a temple, we should also treat our bodies as temples of the Lord. As we walk around town, we are to be little FPC's in the flesh. As Paul writes, *The body is meant for the Lord*; it is not meant for those things that detract from the Lord. Paul writes about *porneia* to illustrate his point but he could just as well write about substance abuse, living an unhealthy lifestyle, risky behavior, and more. Our bodies are temples to the holy. Run from *porneia*, run from the things that represent an abuse of our relationship with God. Make your body a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Paul writes, These bodies of yours, they belong to God and are holy because they were created by God. And yes, in time, you will die, but in the end, there will be a bodily resurrection, just as Christ was resurrected. This bodily resurrection is not free. It comes at a cost—the price of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Jesus gave his body so that we might live. *Your body was bought with a price*. And because of that sacrifice, Paul tells of the Corinthians that their job is to glorify God in all ways, even with their bodies, even especially with their bodies.

As we read this passage, it is difficult not to get sidetracked by Paul's talk of sexual immorality. But the over-arching purpose of Paul's letter is to focus our attention on the fact that our lives begin with Christ. Our lives were bought with his sacrifice. In Christ we find freedom from sin and death; but in Christ we also find that we now belong to God—body and spirit. We live not for our sakes, but for the sake of God's holy purposes. My individual body is not mine. It is God's creation to be used for God's purposes. The body of Christ—the church—is not ours. It is God's creation to be used for God's purpose.

Let us remember this in all that we do. Let us remember that although we are free in Christ, we are bound to God to serve God's will. We serve God with our spirits and we serve God with our bodies. Our divine purpose is to glorify God with

our bodies and be walking reminders to the world of God's presence. That is what we are called to do—to love God with our heart and mind and strength, and to glorify God with our whole selves. Amen.