

Principles for Appropriate Sexual Behaviour: Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter, 20th August 2017.

Scripture lessons: Exodus 19:1-6; Psalm 51:1-10 ; Matthew 5:27-30.

Key text : **1 Cor 6:12-20**

Introduction

Today we come to the end of part two in our sermon series from 1 Corinthians. We have deliberately selected passages in Paul's writing that focus on different aspects of our relationships: 'Marriage', 'Singleness', 'Homosexuality' and today we conclude with "Appropriate Sexual behavior" (or 'Principles to guide our Sexual Behaviour'). Much of the material has been quite controversial in nature and can be challenging to apply to our current society some two thousand years after these words are written. The Bible doesn't often dot the I's or cross the T's but rather gives us principles to guide us in our lives. In this series, we have demonstrated the importance of following key biblical principles in our approach to the interpretation of the text - so for example we said we must start by considering the "Genre" (what kind of writing is this?). We have seen that 1 Corinthians is a corrective letter written by Paul to the first century church at Corinth wherein he writes specifically to address some of the pastoral issues that had been brought to his attention. We have seen that it is important to consider something of the historical, cultural and religious context into which he wrote. We need to ask what the message might have meant for his original audience before we can see if perhaps there is a principle being taught which can be universally applied in our context today - some two thousand years later.

So we turn to our topic for today, "Appropriate sexual behavior". If this topic was necessary and relevant to address with the first Corinthian church, it certainly is just as crucial for us today. We live in a society that is obsessed with sex, with sexuality. You just need to switch on the TV, watch movies, look at pictures in magazines or advertisements. Social media is full of it. Pornography is easily accessible. You just can't get away from it. Visual images of sexual behavior are everywhere.

Sex is sold to us as a solution for our emptiness, our loneliness and all our human needs. Teenagers and young adults spend a huge amount of emotional energy thinking about it. Those of you who are older-remember when you were young? We are sexual beings - there is chemistry, attraction, crushes, electricity. There is anxiety and stress – "Can I pluck up the courage to invite him/ her to my first date?" "What if he/she says NO?" Matric dances, social events have the girls worrying about what they will wear and who will do their hair and makeup... We wonder to ourselves 'how far can we go' in our date? Is it true when he says to me, "If you love me, you will sleep with me"? After a date evening, friends are eager to hear all the details of how it went. Then of course there are questions of contraception, unwanted pregnancy, STD's, HIV. But sexual issues are not only relevant for young people. Statistics show that married men are often the ones who seek the services of prostitutes. Unfaithfulness in marriage, having a "side chick" is far too common. Addiction to pornography is also a reality for many. The whole area of sexual ethics and sexual behavior is a minefield. I stand here in fear and trembling! What is appropriate in this regard, for those of us who are Christians – followers of Christ?

The text in context

Let's turn to our text for today (1 Cor 6:12-20). The heading in some translations is "Sexual immorality". It is interesting that the word in Greek is *porneia*. (the word from which we get, *pornography*). Reading the passage in its literary context (from the beginning of chapter five), it appears that there was a high incidence of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church.

Let me remind you of some details from the historical context. In the city of Corinth, there were many pagan cults whose worship practices included various forms of sexually promiscuous behavior. For example, worship of Aphrodite, the goddess Diana, the goddess of love and fertility. This cult was dedicated to the glorification of sex. She had a temple on top of a hill (Acrocorinth) in the centre of Corinth. She had thousands of priestesses who were 'sacred prostitutes' who worshipped the goddess of love by day on the mountain top in the temple and by night would descend into the city and engage in prostitution for religious purposes. In addition, Corinth was a prosperous center of trade with two seaports, with a well-earned reputation of being immoral.

Returning to Paul's letter, it appears that even married (male) church leaders at Corinth were seeking out the services of prostitutes. That such practices were tolerated in the church, reflects the extent to which the sexual mores of the wider society continued to provide the norm for church members and their behavior.

Reading our chosen text today in its literary context, we note that Paul is specifically dealing with the issue of sexual immorality as it relates to prostitution. However I want to suggest that Paul's teaching here has wider application than simply prostitution. 'Sexual immorality' in the bible can also refer to all forms of fornication; adultery, and any form of sexually intimate activity with someone other than one's spouse/life partner.

The traditional teaching of the church and pastoral realities

As I am sure you know, the traditional teaching of the church has been that sexual intercourse is reserved for two people in the faithful, committed, life-long context of marriage. Increasingly, this position has come under fire in recent times. "No sex outside marriage". Young people accuse such a stance as being 'old fashioned'/'out of date'. 'We need to change with the times'. The reality of our modern society (and within our church membership) is that:

- We live at a time when the age that people get married is rising. Couples may delay marriage for financial or career reasons.
- Some choose to have a child but not get married.
- Others decide to remain as partners while rejecting the institution of marriage.
- The term 'girlfriend' and 'boyfriend', seems to imply that it is okay to sleep together. "It's normal. Everyone does it."
- Couples live together before marriage, calling it a 'trial marriage' (yet without commitment!)

- When people are in a steady relationship, often promises are made, expectations are raised about 'our bright future together' until the girl or women falls pregnant. The boy dumps her, leaves her literally carrying the baby.
- Sometimes sexual behavior is a result of an abuse of power (rape is the extreme example)
- Sexual activity can be as a result of poverty and other socio economic factors. For example, I think of a girl in my confirmation class from a previous parish who told me that she had to sell her body to older men because that was the only way the family could get money to buy her school uniform, to pay for her text books and cover her school fees. I also think of another confirmation candidate who told me that she fell pregnant because she wanted a baby so that the family could get the social grant.
- Where does the traditional teaching of the church leave those who identify themselves as part of the LGBTI++ community for whom heterosexual marriage is not an option? What are they to do? Be celibate their whole lives long? Or is it not more helpful to affirm the life long, faithful commitment of a civil union?

So friends whereas I would want to uphold the traditional teaching of the church, believing that marriage is the ideal context for our sexual relationships, I am well aware that the pastoral reality is often very different, and that relationships can be complex. It is not always as simple and clear cut as we might like it to be. We as a church need to be careful in taking the moral high ground and passing judgment or being too quick to point fingers and criticize others when we don't even know their circumstances or their story. (I remember in one of the congregations I have served in, being horrified to discover that there was a "straf bankie" at the back church where pregnant teenagers and unmarried mothers had to sit until the baptism of their child. In getting alongside girls I often hear stories of how they felt trapped in relationships, or powerless to say "No" for fear of the consequences.)

Many people have been deeply wounded and scarred through sexual encounters with others. I think so much of our many single parents (usually mothers) in the life of our church. I am aware that many are raising their children to the best of their ability often in less than ideal circumstances - we applaud them for that. Some speak of their experiences of rejection and criticism by their family and long for understanding and compassion and support. They turn to us as their church family. Many are in need of God's grace, God's forgiveness and healing and God's hope. Let us never forget that. Relationships can be complex.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we are given license to 'throw out the baby with the bath water'- that we can throw the bible and all the biblical principles and values concerning sexual ethics and behavior aside. If we do so, we are treading on very dangerous ground. So even though the text before us today speaks into the context of sexual immorality in the form of prostitution, I do believe that Paul gives us principles here that have broader implications and application to guide us in terms of appropriate sexual behavior – whether as married or single people. This will not be a sermon of specific "do's and don'ts" - instead I want to highlight two helpful principles that Paul underlines. It will be up to us to apply them to our own life situations.

PRINCIPLE ONE: EVERYTHING IS PERMISSIBLE, BUT...IS OUR BEHAVIOR BENEFICIAL?

(Beneficial to myself, beneficial for the other – in both the short term and in the long term).

Paul begins by quoting a slogan which has come to his attention which he then corrects and qualifies. The slogan is this, “*Everything is permissible for me*” (1 Cor 6:12). The Corinthian church boasted in a spiritual freedom which allowed them to do whatever they liked with their bodies because as far as they were concerned, it didn’t matter. Their behavior had no moral significance. “I am free”. It seems that they had misinterpreted Paul’s teaching concerning what it meant to ‘be free in Christ’ (this *also could have origins in Gnostic teaching*).

Paul had previously emphasized that salvation is not about rules and regulations (Jewish legalism). We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Not by works or by obeying the law, “lest anyone should boast”. Yet the Corinthian Church members had taken his teaching to imply “Well because I am a new creation in Christ; because I am free; anything goes! I can do whatever I like!” So Paul had to navigate his way through these two extremes – keeping a balance between too many rigid rules and regulations on the one hand and too much free license on the other hand. Clearly a corrective teaching was needed.” *Everything is permissible*”, indeed, but he qualifies this by adding “...***but not everything is beneficial***” (1 Cor 6:12).

With freedom comes responsibility. This applies to all areas of our life but here in particular to our sexual behavior. Friends, make no mistake. Sex is good. It is created by God. It is a gift from God to be celebrated and enjoyed - but that doesn’t mean that it is helpful or advisable or right to engage in sexually intimate behavior in any situation. We don’t have a carte blanche. Our behavior - what we do with our bodies - affects other people. We need to ask, “Is it loving? (the ultimate question, see 1 Cor 13). Is it beneficial ? Is it wise? Is it for the other’s well-being or just for my pleasure?”

Paul then continues. “*Everything is permissible but I will not be mastered or controlled by anything*” (1 Cor 6:12). Yes, our sexual desire is God given – but freedom does not mean that we can appease our sexual appetites in the most convenient and selfish way available. Eating food when we have worked up an appetite is a totally different issue (1 Cor 6: 13). When we feel sexually aroused we don’t have to feed it instantly to satisfy it. We are not animals. We are not ruled by our instincts. We can control our sexual drives and control our behavior. Too often people excuse their behavior by saying, “Oh I just got carried away. I couldn’t help it.” We can help it.

Paul confronts the issue of ‘my rights’. The Corinthian Christians were very conscious of and insistent on their individual rights. I think we see a lot of this in our country today in all sorts of different ways. Claiming ‘My rights ’; what feels right for me and good for me’ without consideration for the rights of others - is not loving. Being so self-absorbed with ‘My rights’ and wanting to meet ‘my sexual needs’, can lead to selfish behavior where my actions are for my personal benefit but at the expense of others. There is a danger we might use or abuse others for my advantage. It can be a selfish way of exercising my freedom. I need to ask, “Will my action be beneficial /for the good of the other? Am I being respectful and loving towards the other? Am I taking their needs and wishes into consideration? Am I being responsible in the short and long term?”

As Christian people we know that we are under the lordship of Christ. We belong to Jesus. He is the one who has ultimate rights over us - so think before you act! Is this behavior what my Lord Jesus would want me to do right now?

Let's take this principle a step further. "Is *this behaviour beneficial even for me?*" In verse 16 Paul continues, "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body for it is said the two will **become one flesh**" (Quoting Genesis 2:24). Paul wants the Corinthian church to understand that sex is not just a physical act. It involves the whole of our beings. Sex was given by God for pleasure, for delight, for tenderness. It is given as a sign of our love and commitment to the other and of course it is given for procreation, for children. That is why in our marriage vows we say, "All I am, I give to you. All I have, I share with you." We give ourselves - Body, mind and soul- to one another in a permanent commitment of marriage. When two people express their love and commitment to one another through the act of sexual intercourse, they become united. They become 'one flesh'.

Now it is interesting to note that Paul clearly suggests that **all sexual unions** (even with a prostitute) result in 'becoming one flesh' (in other words, not just in marriage). Now think of the implications of this:

Illustration: Now here we have two people (hold up 2 paper people). If these two people decide to come together through sexual intercourse or intimate sexual behavior, they become united as one flesh. They are literally joined together (show these 2 paper people now stuck together with glue). If I drop this piece of glued together paper both of these paper people will fall as one. Now think: what happens if that sexual encounter was just a one night stand? Or the sexual encounter happened in the context of a boyfriend/ girlfriend relationship which lasted just for a short while before breaking up and moving on? Or between a couple on a 'trial marriage' that was only temporary? What happens if the sexual intimacy behavior took place in a context of a relationship where there was no commitment, no genuine love or faithfulness or trust and the relationship dissolved? Worst still what happens if two people have come together through the violence of rape?

In other words, what happens when these two people for whatever reason part company. The relationship breaks up. It comes to an end. Look what happens if I try and separate these two pieces of paper... (tear the paper people apart. Some of each remains stuck to the other). When you have been sexually united and then separate, it is if you leave a part of yourself behind with the other person. You become torn. You are left wounded and scarred. Too often I have heard girls telling me how they have been left feeling used and abused. They felt betrayed and deceived (empty promises of love). They felt like dirty rags, covered in guilt and shame. It can be so very painful. I know there are many people here today who have themselves experienced the pain of a break up in a relationship - including the pain of divorce, or when married partners were unfaithful by having affairs, or involved in so-called "open-relationships". Whereas hopefully they can pick up the pieces of their lives and move on, many have to come to terms with the resulting psychological and emotional scars, breakdown of trust, even unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STDs, HIV and so on.

Sometime ago I searched on Facebook “Rhodes confessions” and I came across a post written by a young male student who was boasting in social media that he had just slept with his “one hundredth chick”. He was proud of it. He was bragging. He was a macho man. I wonder how many of those ‘one hundred’ girls or young women had been led to believe that they were special and that he loved them? That she was the only one for him and they would have a bright future together? The myth: “If you love me you will sleep with me”. Maybe he told each one that she was gorgeous and lovely only to dump her afterwards. I can’t even begin to imagine the trail of heartache and devastation that this macho student must have left behind.

Is that kind of behavior beneficial? Most certainly not. Friends when the teaching of the church has emphasized the importance of sexual activity within a loving committed long term relationship like marriage (and let us add civil unions) it is not because God is a ‘kill joy’ or out to spoil our fun. Boundaries are put in place for our protection. Think before you act! God loves us and God wants the best for us so that is why God’s gift of sex is best expressed in a lifelong committed, loving, stable, safe and faithful relationship – where we know we are loved, accepted, safe. “The two shall become one flesh”. Sexual intercourse is intended to be a unity of body, mind and spirit, and God does not want us to be hurt or torn apart.

What if I have fallen short of this ideal?

Now some of you might be sitting here thinking, “I feel so guilty, so covered in shame, I have blown it. It is too late.” Our Psalm today, Psalm 51 gives us hope. That Psalm was written by King David who was one of the greatest kings Israel ever knew and who became the forefather of Jesus Christ himself. He wrote the psalm of repentance begging for God’s forgiveness after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. He knew he had sinned and done wrong. He discovered that God is a God of compassion and grace and mercy. God forgave him. God raised him up and continued to use him for God’s glory in spite of his sinful past. The good news is that this is what God can do for us even today. God offers us - in our woundedness and our brokenness - His healing, His grace, His forgiveness. If we come to him in true repentance and faith, He washes us clean and gives us a new start. (*Prayer ministry available during Communion*).

PRINCIPLE TWO: IS MY BEHAVIOR GLORIFYING TO GOD? (DO I HONOUR GOD WITH MY BODY?)

We have looked at principle number one, “everything is permissible, but is it beneficial?”. Principle number two, “**Is our behavior, glorifying to God?**” (Verse 13). Paul reminds us that our bodies are meant for the Lord not for sexual immorality (*Gk porneia*). In other words, what we do with our bodies is not irrelevant to our Christian commitment.

How seriously do you take your commitment to Jesus? You see when we become a Christian, when we are baptized into Christ, we become a child of God, a member of his family and part of the body of Christ. We are united to Christ. We *know* God. (It is the same word used for sexual intercourse). Christ puts his stamp of ownership on us. We come under his authority; under his Lordship. We read in verses 19 and 20, that the Holy Spirit lives within us. Our bodies are sacred; they are holy; they are God’s temple; God’s home. God

LIVES IN US (vs 19). So Paul says, “You are not your own. You were bought with a price (referring to what Jesus did on the cross), **therefore honour and glorify God with your body**” (vs 19-20).

Now young people often say to me; “Okay that is all very well but how far can I go. Kissing, holding hands...I am not going to give you graphic list of possible sexual behaviours! (Some good questions for a seminar discussion!) Without going into detail, I simply want to suggest that an increase in sexual activity always needs to be accompanied by an increase in love and an increase in commitment, culminating in sexual intercourse in the context of a lifelong commitment of marriage (civil union). Nevertheless , I think we need to help our young people shift focus from an obsession with sex and sexual activities to an investment in relationships. Young people: Start a relationship with friendship. Get to know one another. Have fun together. Share common interests. Listen to one another. Learn to communicate with one another. Share your hopes, your fears and your dreams. Let’s move away from an obsession with sex to rather investing in the quality of our relationships, which hopefully then in time might lead to finding our life partner and soul mate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we live in a world where it seems anything goes. “I can do exactly as I please. Mind your own business. What I do with my body has got nothing to do with you. It has got nothing to do with the church”. Sex has been made out to be cheap. Fun, quick thrills. Girls are toys for boys – or so it seems. Sex is sometimes used as a weapon to show power, to dominate others, to humiliate, to oppress. Sex is experimented with outside the context of faithful committed, loving, respectful relationships. It seems to be viewed as ‘a right’ instead of as a gift from God.

Friends, in exercising our freedom in Christ we need to remember that as Christians are called to be different. We are called to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16); a holy nation (Exodus 19:1-6). Our Christian commitment to God has direct bearing on how we live - and in particular, what we do with our bodies.

In our text from 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul gave the church at Corinth two principles to govern their sexual behavior. Those same principles are just as relevant for us even two thousand years later:

1) *“Everything is permissible”* but *“is it beneficial?”*

2) *“Is what we do with our bodies (which are temples of the Holy Spirit) glorifying and honoring to God?”*

AMEN