

# Body and Soul

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

**Sermon Series:  
Best Spiritual  
Practices**

*Since our bodies will not survive into the next life, it doesn't much matter what we do with them.*

A woman entered a Democratic primary as a delegate for the state of Texas. When she read the list of people running in the primary, she noticed that her name was printed last. Then she read in her Bible that the first will go last and the last will go first (Matthew 19:30). She was convinced this verse addressed her nomination. She interpreted it as a sign from God that she would win. But she lost.

Every Biblical text has a context. Without a context, a text loses meaning. Let me return to something I said two Sundays ago: "A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text." Whenever we isolate a text from its context, we can make a passage say anything we want it to say.

The passage read a few moments ago will make a whole lot more sense if you know something about its context. You won't likely understand the slogan Paul uses to introduce this passage, "all things are lawful for me," unless you know something of its context.

What stands behind this and virtually every other New Testament letter is a religious movement called Gnosticism. Gnosticism originates from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis). Gnostics pride themselves as being people "in the know."

Gnostics believe people's immortal souls are good while their temporal bodies are evil or, at best, immaterial. Gnostics regard the body and soul as two separate entities. One is good, the other is evil.

This body-soul dualism leads Gnostics into two opposite and equally disastrous conclusions about the body. First, it leads to a rigid asceticism of the body. Since our body is sinful, it ought to be treated harshly. Second, it can result in a libertine spirit toward the body. Since our bodies will not survive into the next life, it doesn't much matter what we do with them.

It's precisely this latter view—the body doesn't matter much—that predominates in this passage. This attitude is expressed in the two slogans that introduce our passage. They are marked off in your Bibles by quotation marks, since they were already in circulation by the Corinthians.

The first slogan, in verse 12, "All things are lawful for me," is a total misuse of the freedom Paul writes about elsewhere in his letter. Christians are free in Christ, but Gnostics use it to justify an "anything goes" attitude toward the body.

The second slogan, in verse 13, "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," is a

## ***Our bodies matter to God.***

colloquial way of saying that physical appetites, whether to do with food or sex, can be indulged without regard for the soul. Go ahead and indulge your physical appetites. It's just sex.

Paul counters this "anything goes" attitude with a slogan of his own in verse 13: "The body is meant...for the Lord and the Lord for the body." Our bodies do not only indulge our physical appetites. Our bodies matter to God.

Paul appeals to Christ's resurrection in verse 14 to underscore the importance of the body. God's choice to be born in a body, die in a body and be raised in a body underscores the importance of the body. Jesus' humanity is a central affirmation of the Apostles Creed. You will notice the emphatic use of verbs expressing Jesus' humanity: "He was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontus Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried....On the third day he rose again from the dead."

"I believe in the resurrection of the body." The Apostles' Creed says nothing about the immortality of the soul. Instead, we will be raised with resurrection bodies. We will be embodied souls into eternity.

The Bible affirms the essential goodness of the body. Genesis declares that God creates us with bodies and pronounces them good. Our bodies are not bad, they are good. That's what led the early church to declare Gnosticism to be heretical.

This body-soul dualism justifies the Gnostics visiting the temple of Aphrodite, located in Corinth. Hundreds of temple prostitutes served this goddess of love. What Paul argues for in verses 15-17 is a psychosomatic union of body and soul. We cannot separate body from soul. We are integrally related.

The Gnostics regarded the human body as a prison. We are divine souls imprisoned in mortal bodies. Paul regards our bodies in verse 19 as temples of the Holy Spirit. A temple is a place where God dwells. God dwells in our bodies through the Holy Spirit.

Flannery O'Connor, in her short story *The Temple of the Holy Ghost*, tells the story of two 14-year-old cousins, who attend a Catholic girls' boarding school. Their teacher, Sister Perpetua, suggests a formula to use in fending off fresh young men in the back seats of cars. "Stop sir! I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." The cousins think such advice to be hilarious. But a 12-year-old sister overhears them laughing about being a temple of the Holy Spirit and is deeply moved. The news that she is the dwelling place of God makes her feel as if somebody has given her a present.

Our bodies are not prisons, they are temples where God dwells through His Spirit. That's why Paul concludes, "Therefore, glorify God in your bodies."

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? One of the spiritual practices highlighted in Ruth Haley Barton's book, *Sacred Rhythms*, is honoring the body.

***I doubt the sin of gluttony would make it on anybody's list of killer sins today.***

Maybe you've never considered honoring the body as a spiritual discipline. Growing your soul, perhaps, but not honoring your bodies.

I have two applications of this text in terms of what it means to honor the body. The first has to do with food and the second with sex.

Food and sex feature prominently on the list of Seven Deadly Sins formulated by Christian leaders in the 6th century. You might expect sex to appear somewhere on a deadly sin list, but not food. I doubt the sin of gluttony would make it on anybody's list of killer sins today.

When you hear the word gluttony, you probably think of eating too much. But the ancient church did not regard gluttony as merely eating too much but rather being preoccupied with food, regardless of how much or how little we eat. When we think of gluttony this way, all sorts of things come into view: how much we weigh, what we wear, how we look. Thomas Aquinas writes "that gluttony denotes, not any desire of eating and drinking, but an inordinate desire." Evil isn't only doing bad things, it is turning good things into ultimate things.

When I think of our preoccupation with food, I'm reminded of C. S. Lewis's tale, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Edmund is introduced by the White Witch, who has Narnia under her spell, to try some Turkish Delight. Once Edmund indulges the delectable candy, he is hooked. All he can think about is Turkish Delight. He betrays his

three siblings and imperils Narnia for more Turkish Delight.

There are two epidemics involving food in this country: one has to do with eating too much—obesity; the other has to do with eating too little—eating disorders. I don't have time to address both concerns, so let me address one of them. College campuses have become incubators for eating disorders. One in five college coeds is affected by anorexia or bulimia. The press recently made a big deal of Jessica Simpson appearing on the cover of *Marie Claire* without make up (she still has the advantage of a professional photographer who knows how to take advantage of good lighting and work the angles). The story was considered newsworthy, because everyone is being digitally enhanced or air-brushed these days. Ruth Haley Barton, in *Sacred Rhythms*, describes our culture as one that idolizes perfect bodies. We place a premium on being thin, correctly shaped and youthful. Wendy Shalit writes in *A Return to Modesty*, "The real reason I hate Playboy is that the models establish a standard I cannot possibly maintain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, air brushing and a squad of make-up artists and hairdressers."

Once we've established that gluttony is a preoccupation with food, it follows that we can become gluttonous about anything: tobacco, alcohol, work, shopping, even exercise and nutrition.

I'm reminded of a story about two great preachers from the 19th century, Dwight L. Moody in

***“I eat too much. I drink too much. I want too much. Too much.”***

The Dave Matthews Band

Chicago and Charles Spurgeon in London. They not only had booming voices, but booming stomachs as well. Moody had always wanted to meet Spurgeon, so when Moody traveled to London, he went to meet the famous preacher. He was met at the door by Spurgeon himself in a bathrobe, puffing away on a cigar. Moody was taken aback that Spurgeon was smoking a cigar. “How can you, a man of God, smoke that cigar?”

Spurgeon took the cigar out of his mouth, turned it around and poked Moody in his rather large stomach and replied, “The same way that you, a man of God, can be that fat.” Like I said, gluttony comes in many forms!

The Dave Matthews Band sings the song “Too Much.” The refrain of the song says it all: “I eat too much. I drink too much. I want too much. Too much.”

The second application of honoring our bodies relates to sex. Paul directs us in verse 18 to “Shun fornication.” I prefer the NIV translation, “Flee sexual immorality.” The Greek word for sexual immorality, *porneia*, is where we derive our word pornography. “Flee immorality” is written in present imperative, indicating habitual action. When you experience sexual temptation, run!

You might call it “the Joseph Principle.” When Joseph was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery, through a remarkable series of events, he resurfaces later as a servant in the house of

Potiphar, a high-ranking officer in Pharaoh’s army. As a household servant, Joseph comes into regular contact with Potiphar’s wife. She tries repeatedly to seduce Joseph. One day, she grabs hold of Joseph’s tunic and won’t let go. Joseph has only one choice if he doesn’t want to sleep with her. He runs for it.

I commend Joseph’s approach to temptation. Whenever you encounter sexual temptation, run for it! Run as fast as your little legs will carry you. Paul writes, “The body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body” (6:13). Our bodies matter to God!

