

You arrive at church and are met at the door by Greg and Jill – Jill was a witch who made a living telling fortunes and contacting the dead. She and Greg had three children out of wed-lock until they were married just a year ago. You stop and say hello to Bekka – she was once nick-named Bekka the home-wrecker. There is a trail of three adulterous affairs behind her. She introduces you to Jack – Jack used to be a rent-boy, a homosexual prostitute. But he's not the only member of church to have lived a homosexual life. Terry, who mans the book store, was caught up in the gay scene for 20 years, you can read all about it in his book. Well you drop off the kids with Gary and Belinda who run the Sunday school. You might have read about Gary and Belinda in the papers, he was convicted of massive corporate fraud some years back. While in prison, Belinda took to the bottle to cope. Her alcoholism had been almost as famous as his crimes. So you leave the kids with Gary and Belinda, and take a seat next to Carl, a former pornographer and Satanist. Just as you start chatting to him the service leader gets up, and the service begins. The sermon series you're in has been running ever since the church began, and the preacher says he's never going to change it. The series is called 'Christ and Him Crucified' – the sermon this week is called 'Christ the friend of sinners and His sin-bearing death.' The preacher steps up into the pulpit and you recognize him as the church's fiercest enemy, a blasphemer, a persecutor, a killer of Christians. His name is Paul and the church is called All Souls, Corinth.

Look down half way through verse 9:

The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders (that is those engaged in homosexual sex), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers. Verse 11: that is what some of you were.

The Corinthian church would have been full of the kind racey testimonies that we all secretly love. But Paul does not glorify their past at all – his vision is for the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God (v10) is not a place for sexual immorality, idolatry and greed. The Kingdom of God is the realm in which God is God, where Christ rules as King by the power of His Holy Spirit.

While *church* ought to be FULL of people who once lived these lives, the Kingdom is NOT for those who persist in those lives. Those who do not embrace the new life of Christ, those who continue in those sins will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

As you read the list of sins in verse 9 and 10 that might sound shocking to our ears. But I assure you it sounded shocking to Corinthian ears too. Our day is really no different to theirs. Have a look at the received wisdom in Corinth's day in v12:

"Everything is permissible for me." Then v13. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"

Here's what Corinth was saying: Sexual appetite is like any other appetite. I need food so I eat, and it doesn't matter what. I need sex, so I get it, and it doesn't matter who. 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food.' I've got needs and I'll satisfy them. That's Corinth, and that's our culture too. It's a culture where you give away your body but hold on tight to your money. Do you see in verses 9 and 10 – they wanted to give away their bodies – sexually immoral, homosexual sex, adultery. But they wanted to get money – thieves, greedy, swindlers. And Paul tells them the opposite – you have to be promiscuous with your money and protective of your body. Paul's message was the opposite of the culture then and it's the opposite of the culture now.

You see nobody naturally agrees with the Bible. It always confronts us as a Word from beyond.

But what's sad is when modern people say: "I refuse to believe in a God who would say 'this'?" Which is an extraordinary thing to say. It's saying 'I can't believe in any God who is not exactly like a modern, western, liberal living in the 21st century.' It is refusing to deal with a God who is bigger than you. If you have a god who only tells you what you already agree with, then it's clear – Your god is you. If you have a god who only tells you what our contemporary culture thinks is right, then Your god is the contemporary culture. Only if you allow the Word of God to confront even your most cherished beliefs, only then will you know you're dealing with the real God, the living God.

I hope we will allow Him to challenge us this morning, because the wonderful thing is, if we allow God to be God and to contradict us, then we'll see how God will embrace us and change us.

Do you see in v11, the Corinthians WERE all these things mentioned in verse 9 and 10. Their church was just like what I described at the start of the sermon. But now these Corinthians were washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Here we have what theologians for millenia have called the 'two hands of God.' Jesus and the Spirit at work to draw us to the Father. The Holy Spirit works to unite us to Jesus and (v11) in Jesus' Name we are presented to the Father as holy. Jesus' Name is His pure, spotless character. We may have earned *ourselves* a terrible name in our former lives, but Jesus' Name is impeccable. And His Name – His character – is wrapped around us and God looks on us as though we had been as flawless as His Son.

God had embraced the Corinthians. Hear me very clearly here: God embraced the homosexual offender, He embraced the adulterer, He embraced the thief, the drunkard, the greedy, the swindler. He even embraced the idolater, who had worshipped other gods. He embraced them – and there is a challenge for our churches. God embraced them (and we must find ways of embracing them too. My description of All Souls, Corinth should not shock us. That's what church ought to be – a place where all people from all backgrounds find Jesus

Christ. God embraced the people of verses 9 and 10. BUT in that embrace God changes them. (and we must find ways also of pointing people to that change).

Here's the kind of change God brings, verse 11: He washes them of their sin, guilt and shame. He sanctifies them, that means He sets them apart from the old practices and puts them to work in His service. And He justifies them – He stamps them with His own seal of approval: Righteous.

So the church is a community of people who used to be defined by the world and its sins. Now we are a community of washed sinners who are given a new identity in the embrace of God.

And the biggest problem the Corinthians had – and the biggest problem you will have in your Christian life is – you just don't know what you've got.

In chapter 6, Paul uses the phrase 'Do you not know?' 6 times. 6 times Paul says 'Don't you know these wonderful Gospel truths?' Don't you know the privileges of being in the embrace of God? Things like verse 2 and 3 – don't you know that one day you will rule heaven and earth with Christ?' Things like v15 – 'don't you know you are united to Christ at the most intimate level?' Or verse 19 'Don't you know you are the dwelling place of God the Holy Spirit?' And Paul keeps saying effectively: Don't you know these things? You ought to know but I see you've forgotten, let me remind you.'

The way to fight sin is to be reminded of the Gospel, reminded of the embrace of God.

You see the Corinthians were forever torn between the embrace of God and the embrace of the world.

In chapters 1-4 – they kept looking to the world to approve of their wisdom. They wanted to appear wise to the world, they wanted its embrace.

In chapter 5 – they look to the world to approve of their ethics. They wanted to appear morally progressive to the world, they wanted its embrace.

In chapter 6 we see two more problems. In verses 1-8 they look to the world to adjudicate their squabbles. V1: They take their family business out of God's family and into the non-Christian small claims courts. Again they embrace the world's judgement when they have everything they need in God's family.

Now in verses 12-20 we see them very literally seeking the embrace of those in the world. They seek to meet their relational needs outside God's family and outside of God's intentions.

And over and over Paul says 'Don't you know?' Don't you know the love you already have?

Emma has been reading a biography of Dawn French this week. She showed me a very interesting quote that illustrates this point beautifully.

The context is, Dawn French is 14 years old and she's just about to go out to her first ever disco when her father sits her down for a chat. Dawn writes "I was ready to get into a huff because I thought I was going to hear the usual litany about not drinking too much and what time I had to be in, and not getting too involved with boys, but instead I was the recipient of the most extraordinary emotional eulogy.

"He told me that I was uncommonly beautiful, that I was the most precious thing in his life, that he prized me above all else [and] that he was proud to be my father... He went into this great overture of praise for me... He succeeded in making me so proud of myself, and making my self-esteem so high, that I wasn't going to let any boy kiss me at all that night – I was just too good."

Do you see how that works? The embrace of her father, meant more to her than the embrace of any pimply 14 year old. She kept her sexual integrity because she knew just how special she was to her father.

The biographer comments: "Dawn was secure in the knowledge that she was loved for who she was, not what she looked like. She believed her father when he told her that she was something special, and that knowledge gave her an inner confidence that made her positively shine. [Dawn writes] "It was my father who taught me to value myself... How wise of my father to say those words to me. It affected my whole life. How could you not come out of it well equipped to deal with life, when you felt so loved and supported."

Do you not know, says Paul. Don't you know the embrace of your Father?

Because, v12 the embrace of the world is not worth it – it's a slave master.

¹² "Everything is permissible for me" [says the world] --but [says Paul] not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me" [says the world] --but [says Paul] I will not be mastered by anything.

You're being mastered says Paul. All the time the Corinthians think they're sexually liberated, Paul says they're slaves. Sin is always enslaving. When you go to be embraced by the world, the world does not let you go without a fight.

The world says, v13:

¹³ "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" --but God will destroy them both.

The world treats sex like any other hunger – an instinct that needs satisfying. But Paul says, No. (second half of verse 13):

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

People often say 'But we're meant for each other' when their relationship is forbidden by God. Paul says, If it's not your spouse then your body is not meant for that man or for that woman or for that sin, much more deeply your body is meant for Jesus. And, what a wonderful thought, Jesus is meant for you. Jesus has purposes for your body. And this taps into a profound theology of the resurrection which Paul will spell out in chapter 15.

But here in v14 he simply says:

¹⁴ By His power God raised the Lord (Jesus) from the dead, and He will raise us also.

Our bodies have an eternal future in the company of Jesus. Our bodies are not disposable, mortal shells that simply contain the real, inner you. That was the Greek thinking that pervaded Corinthian culture, but it also pervades our own.

In the film "Indecent Proposal", Demi Moore commits adultery with Robert Redford for the sake of a million dollars. And she justifies it to her husband saying "It's just my body. It's not my mind. It's not my heart. It's not my soul." "It's just my body." As though the body is this shell to be cast off and you can keep the real, inner you separate. The Bible says, No, you're not getting rid of your body. Your body is not external to you, it's not something you escape – it IS you, every bit as much as your heart, mind or soul. So it matters what you do with your body. Not least because of verse 15:

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit.

Our bodies are members of Christ. We are united to Him, and that doesn't exclude my body, it includes my body. My physical body is already united to Christ. If that's true then any union that takes me away from Jesus will be horribly damaging. If someone is united to Christ and then unites himself to a prostitute he pulls himself apart – he damages all three parties. Paul says just don't do it.

And while we're on these verses I hope you notice what sex actually means. Here in v16 is sex with a prostitute. And Paul says this entails a marriage-like union. V16: sex with a prostitute makes one body and then he quotes from the marriage of Adam and Eve where the two became one flesh. Sex moves you into marriage territory. Even sex with a prostitute moves

you into marriage-like territory. Isn't that amazing – sex with a prostitute you might think is the most commitment-free kind of sex a person could ever engage in. And Paul says, it's not commitment free. It can't be commitment free – it's one flesh.

Now Paul does not counsel these people to go and marry the prostitutes. There are all sorts of wisdom issues in the way of that, but he does say there's no such thing as casual sex. Sex always comes with strings. You make the deepest possible bond in sex. If you are in a sexual relationship, whether you're married to that person or not, if you are in a sexual relationship, you are making marriage vows with your body. And we must not make a promise with our body which we don't also make with the rest of our life. That will need thinking through and praying through. But if even sex with a prostitute is an act that makes marriage vows to her, how much more does sex within a relationship make a bodily, marriage-like commitment. Paul says you can't split sex from marriage, if you do, you do yourself great harm.

Well Paul concludes, v18:

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality.

Flee it. It's a slave-master. Run. Like you'd run from a charging bull, flee. The only way to be free is to flee.

Because sexual sin is incredibly damaging. V18:

All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.

We've already seen, sex does something to you that no other sin does. It unites you to another person. And according to the Bible there are a maximum of two people you are meant to be united to. Your spouse, if you have one, and Jesus. Any other union that you make will tear you apart.

There are all sorts of ways you could ill-treat your body: you could over-eat, you could become a drug addict, you could cut yourself, but nothing would be as damaging as taking a body that belongs to one person and uniting it to another. You will tear yourself apart, you will sin against your own body. How can you do that?

¹⁹ Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

Here is Paul continuing to hold up the incredible value of our bodies. For one thing we are the dwelling place of God the Spirit. Reflect on that next time you're tempted to think your body doesn't matter. My body is not unspiritual. My body is holy ground. It is a temple of the Holy

Spirit. How valuable your body is. Paul says, yes, v20, it was valued at a price. It was bought by Jesus at the cost of His own life. Your body is beyond precious, it is invaluable.

A final illustration:

[SLIDE – my car]

That's my car. A Vauxhall Astra 1.4 litre hatchback. Please, no coveting, this is church. I am the sixth owner of this car. You know what price I had to pay for it? Nothing. This car was not bought at a price. And the way I take care of it, you can probably tell. Now if you want to drive this car, here are the keys. Do you think I care? If I can put you on the insurance, you can have it, what do I care? The car costs me nothing – anyone can drive it.

On the other hand

[SLIDE – Bugatti]

This is the Bugatti Veyron. The most expensive, most powerful and fastest street-legal car in the world. Top speed 253 miles per hour. It costs £830 000. Imagine if a VERY good friend bought me this car and gave it to me. I hope I would take very good care of it. I hope I would honour my friend in the way I used his car. And friends, if I owned this car, this might sound cruel but I'm just telling you the truth. If I owned this car, and you wanted to drive it, you would have to prize the keys from my cold dead hand. To drive this car, your name would have to be Scrivener, and even then I'd be pretty protective.

The Christian sees bodily life, the Christian sees sex like the Bugatti Veyron – so precious, so powerful and therefore specially reserved for marriage. The world views sex like the Vauxhall Astra, anyone can have a go, it's really not that valuable.

So friends don't you know? Don't you know who you are? Don't you know what you have? An eternally significant body, purchased at infinite cost, given to You as a member of Jesus Christ Himself, a temple of the Holy Spirit. If you are a Christian you are One Spirit with Jesus Christ. Washed, Sanctified, Justified in the loving embrace of God Almighty.

So enjoy that embrace. And flee every embrace that would take you away from your first love.

Let's pray