

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENESSE THAT GLORIFIES GOD  
*Devoting Your Body to the Lord*

**Introduction**

The theme of our study this summer has been taken from 1 Corinthians 7:34, where Paul describes the calling of the single Christian as being “devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit.” Over the last two weeks, Brooks has shown us that, to devote our spirits to the Lord, we need to identify and destroy the idols of our hearts. Tonight, I want us to consider the meaning of the other half of that verse – what it means to devote our *bodies* to the Lord.

There is a story that we are sometimes told about our bodies; maybe you’ve heard it. It goes something like this:

*You only live one life and so you have to do what’s right for you. Everybody’s different, and so you need to find out who you are and what makes you happy. Your body belongs to you and so, as long as you aren’t hurting anyone, what you choose to do with it is your business, and nobody else’s. There are certain people, controlling, conservative, religious types, who will try to tell you what to do with your body, and make you feel bad about your sexual preferences or practices. But most of them are sexually repressed, anyway.*

Perhaps you have heard some version of a story like this. The purpose of stories like these is to give you some context for understanding the meaning and purpose of your body. While the story is sometimes embellished with biological, psychological, philosophical or historical argumentation to add nuance and intrigue, its main characteristics remain relatively the same.<sup>1</sup> Its message is essentially that since your body belongs to you, you exercise exclusive rights to assign its meaning and purpose, and therefore also its use. If it is not explicitly stated, the implication is that those who attempt to assign a meaning and purpose to your body are depriving you of something good – namely, your *right* to determine the meaning and purpose of your own body.

I remember a conversation I had almost two years ago about this very topic. Working at Starbucks one night, a co-worker and I began to discuss her personal religious history. Her parents went to church occasionally and she had gone as a child but she stopped attending in High School. When I asked her if she would ever consider going to church again, she explained that she wasn’t against religion – she could see a great deal of good from it: people can gain peace of mind in their suffering, a sense of purpose for life, and an understanding of right and wrong. But she was skeptical. She expressed many of the typical concerns about religion – the judgmental attitudes and the hypocrisy of the people, the time it would take from her busy week, and suspicion about the right-wing political agenda – but one reason she gave was remarkable to me. She said, “Mostly, I could never be a Christian because I love sex, and I never want to get married.”

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<sup>1</sup>See “We ‘Other Victorians’” in Michel Foucault’s, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, for a fuller description.

Here was a person who could see the benefit of devoting her spirit to the Lord, but who was unwilling to devote her *body* to Him. She saw in Christianity a definition of her body that she regarded as undesirable. She believed that faith in Christ would deprive her of something she regarded as very precious – the right to assign meaning to and use her body in any way she wished. But it occurs to me that this sentiment is not *strictly* un-Christian. Many Christians struggle to accept and to rejoice in the meaning of their bodies. Christians struggle with the meaning and fulfillment of their sex drives; they obsess over their body image; some struggle to make sense of same-sex attractions; and many thoroughly despise their virginity. Christians struggle to accept and to rejoice in the meaning of their bodies.

The church at Corinth also struggled to understand and accept the meaning of their bodies. They had misunderstood what it meant to be born of the Spirit and concluded that their bodies didn't really matter, so they had the right to do whatever they wanted with them, including sex with prostitutes. After all, Paul had taught them that they were free in Christ with regard to spiritually indifferent things – “Everything is permissible for me!” , they claimed (1 Cor 6:12). The Corinthians reasoned that sex was one of those indifferent things – just as food was made for the stomach and both will be destroyed by God, so the body was made for sex and one day God will destroy them both, too (1 Cor 6:13). In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul corrects some of their misunderstanding about the meaning of the body by refuting their statements about it, pointing to the body's true purpose and future, and the significance of its sexuality. Tonight, I want to elevate your understanding of your body. I want you to see its dignity by seeing its purpose, future, and significance. And understanding these things, I want to encourage you to present your bodies as “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to the Lord” (Romans 12:1).

### **Your Body has a Purpose – “The Body is for the Lord” (6:13)**

Have you ever wondered why God gave you your body? If God is primarily interested in saving your soul, what difference does your body make? Christians throughout the centuries have struggled with this very question, many of them concluding that the body is evil and something that the dutiful Christian seeks to ignore, abuse or escape. Some early Christians were even driven to self-mutilation under this belief.<sup>2</sup> But Paul's opinion is much different. He tells us here that God gave you your body for a reason. Paul says that, “the body is . . . for the Lord” (v. 13). In other words, God gave you your body as a means of knowing *him*.

Think about this for a moment. If God were interested *only* in saving your soul, why would He have given a body to Adam and Eve to begin with? Why would God have placed them in a world so suffused with beauty? Why would God have given us thousands of taste buds? Why would He make music so transcendent? Why would He make sex so enjoyable? In short, why would God make himself known in creation at all? The answer is that your body is “for the Lord.” God gave you your body as a means of knowing *Him* and making him known.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like to know God *without* your body. It would be possible, of course. You could reason, like many philosophers have reasoned, that because you have the capability to think, and so do others, that there must have been a Great Being who

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<sup>2</sup>See Peter Brown's, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*.

created your minds and gave you the capability to think. But God has chosen to reveal himself to us through our bodies. *In fact, we are often most aware of God's presence and existence when our bodily senses are most completely overwhelmed.* Who does not experience the faintest sense of God's power when a clap of thunder shakes the roof during a summer lightning storm? What person looking into the heavens at night, seeing countless stars and an endless expanse can resist the sense that God must inexpressibly immense? How is it possible to resist the knowledge of God's oneness and beauty when you are taken up into the rapture of a majestic piece of music? In point of fact, God has given us our bodies for just this purpose – to increase and intensify our knowledge and experience of *Him*. Your body has a purpose: it exists “for the Lord”.

### **Your Body has a Future – “The Lord is for the Body” (6:13-15)**

Not only was your body created “for the Lord”, but Paul says that the “Lord is for the body.” The Lord Jesus Christ died to save not only the soul, but also your body.<sup>3</sup> If God were interested in saving only your *soul*, then why would our Savior take on human *flesh*? If your body doesn't really matter, then why would Jesus resurrect not only his soul, but also his *body*? Paul tells us why in vv. 14-15: “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?” The fact that Jesus had a human body and that he raised it from the dead is proof that God cares not only about our souls, but also about our bodies.

Since God gave you your body as a means of knowing *Him*, He is not content to allow it to be held captive by sin. God has plans for your body – this is something that the Corinthians and many modern Christians forget. When you die, that isn't the end of your body. Heaven is not a place where disembodied souls float like a ghosts from cloud to cloud. Scripture describes heaven in very physical language – heaven will be beautiful like a garden, filled with life and movement like a sprawling city, and overflowing with joy and fellowship like a gigantic banquet table. So that you will be fit for heaven, Jesus is going to raise your body up from the grave and make it just like his. That is why Paul says that your bodies are “members of Christ himself”. He is going to renew it, free it from death, and make it a tool fit for an eternity with Him. Your body was created by the Lord for knowing the Lord, and so your body will be renewed by the Lord's resurrection so that you can know the Lord forever. Your body has a *future* – because the Lord is *for* your body.

### **Your Sexuality has Significance – Union with Christ (vv.16-20)**

Because God gave you your body for the purpose of knowing Him, and because your body is united to Christ and will be transformed to be like *His* body, what you do with your body right now really matters. The first half of v. 18 is actually a quotation from the Corinthians which displays just how much they misunderstood the meaning of their bodies – “every sin that a person might commit is outside the body.” But since your body is united to Christ and will be resurrected with him, its sexual practices are meaningful and important. In fact, Paul says here

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<sup>3</sup>“The body belongs to the Lord because in his death and resurrection he has given himself for the body as a part of that redemptive work” (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 256).

that sexual immorality is a sin *against* the body. But why is sexual immorality a sin against our bodies?

Because of what sex *means*. When God created marriage, he said that husband and wife would become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). In Ephesians 5, Paul tells us that the unity of a Christian husband and wife in marriage is a type of our union with Christ. Marriage is not just an illustration of our union with Christ; it was actually created after the pattern of our union with Christ. Just as houses are designed after a pattern or a blue print, in the same way God designed marriage after the union that the Church would have with Jesus Christ. So wherever you see a good marriage, you see a faint image of how Christ faithfully commits himself to the Church. Now, in Scripture, sex is given as a gift for marriage. Within marriage, sex is a concrete expression of the love and unity of the husband and wife within the covenant of marriage. If marriage was intended to be an image of union with Christ, and if sex is the unique gift of marriage that gives concrete expression of that unity, then sex is also an image of union with Christ. So marriage, and sex as part of marriage, were intended as a bodily sign of union with Christ. Sexual immorality is a sin before God because it redefines the meaning of the body and corrupts the imagery of our union with Christ. *Put concisely, sex was given to reinforce our identity in Christ and sexual immorality is wrong because it lies about who you truly are.*

Your sexual practices declare who you think you are. Within a Christian marriage, sex declares that humans were *made* to be united to God in a faithful and loving covenant. But when sex is removed from this context, its meaning is all but erased and some new meaning is attached to your body.<sup>4</sup> Because a number of different meanings can be attached to your body, sexual immorality is a broad and expansive idea and includes a variety of ways that we corrupt the imagery of what sex *is* and *means*. By distorting the meaning of sex and our bodies, we adjust our understanding of God and ourselves with disastrous effects. Allow me to give you an example.

Casual sex – that is, sexual acts that are performed on or with a partner that you have not covenanted yourself to – is sexual immorality. How does casual sex corrupt the meaning and message of sex and our bodies? It does this by suggesting that there can be happiness, love, and unity apart from *faithfulness*. The practice of casual sex contradicts that we were created for living in a faithful and loving covenant with God. It thinks of sex as an end in itself and it encourages you to think of your body as nothing more than a machine for gaining or giving sexual pleasure. Rather than bringing love and faithfulness to expression, sex in this context becomes nothing more than a one-sided and selfish.

The effect of this practice has been a vast cultural paranoia about a person’s “sex appeal”. When casual sex is the norm and the body is viewed only as a pleasure machine, then your identity *becomes* the sexual pleasure you can give to another. A select few have been able to leverage their sex appeal as an instrument for power and manipulation. But many more in our culture today suffer from issues related to body image, regardless of their personal sexual practices, because the culture has made this the supreme criterion for evaluating one another.

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<sup>4</sup>This is not to say that all sexual acts between marriage partners properly reflect the meaning and message of sex. Sexual immorality is a real possibility within a marriage, too, for sexual immorality exists wherever the love, unity, faithfulness, and mutuality of sex is compromised, e.g. in the instance of rape.

Suddenly you are defined by your body's sexual appeal to another; what becomes most significant about you is your ability to arouse him or her. Your identity has been transformed – you are no longer a child of God for whom Christ died, loved and cherished in spite of your failings – you are your sex appeal.

Those who cherish their virginity are placed under enormous pressure to “lose it” because this value most directly confronts the idolatry of our age. If the body is only a machine for gaining pleasure, then virginity is either a sign of a person's lack of sex appeal or that they see a purpose for the body which is higher than mere sex. Consequently, virginity is despised as a property belonging to a person who is either genetically inferior *or* a religious freak. Virginity is a direct assault on the contemporary values of the hook-up culture, and since it cannot understand virginity, it attacks it.

But the truth is that casual sex spoils the meaning of sex and your body and lies about God. By trading away the virtue of *faithfulness* for the unlimited and unconditional *freedom* to come and go as one pleases, it implies that God might do the same to us. Because you can no longer fathom loving a person whose sex appeal has dwindled, you cannot fathom a marriage that won't end in divorce. And because you can't imagine a faithful marriage, you can't conceive of a God who would remain faithful to you in spite of your sin. Your sexual practices have real significance for the way that you think about God and yourself.

### Conclusion

Your body has a purpose and a future, and so your sexual practices now *really matter* – it declares who you think you are. When you engage in sexual immorality, you tell a story about yourself that just isn't true. You say, “My body is my own – I belong to myself.” And in doing so, you deprive yourself of what is most good and meaningful about you – your union with Christ. But maybe you are here tonight, and your sexual history has told a story about you and your body that is radically different than the story that God tells. Perhaps you are struggling tonight with feelings of shame and regret from things you have done and ways you have betrayed your identity in Christ. Maybe you are feeling tremendous pressure to despise and give away your virginity. I have good news for you tonight.

*First, you are not your sexual history.* Your sexual past does not define who you are. You are not what you have done with a boy or a girl. You are not your sex appeal. You are not your body image. The mistakes you have made in your sexual history do not and cannot constitute your true identity – they do not *make* you who you are, they *betray* who you are. *The sexual mistakes of your past cannot erase your union with Christ, they can only lie about it.* Notice what Paul tells the Corinthians about *their* sexual histories:

*Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. – 1 Corinthians 6:9-11*

The sexual sins of their past no longer define who they are. Adultery, prostitution, and homosexuality – this is no longer their *identity*. It is a lie about who they *truly* are – men and women in Christ. If you are here tonight struggling to experience God’s forgiveness over your sexual past, be at peace. If you trust in Christ your past does not have the power to define you; you are one with him who is unconditionally accepted before God.

*Second, by devoting your body to the Lord, you can live out your identity in Christ.* You do not need to be a slave of your past; your future can be different. God has given us his Spirit, his presence living within us, to empower us to live in the truth of our identity in Christ. This is why he calls us in Romans 12:1-2 to live out of the truth of the gospel:

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Paul calls us to continually offer our bodies in devotion to God as an act of worship. That means he is calling you to think differently. To stop thinking of Christianity as an affair only of your soul and start recognizing that your body is a temple and so is a place of worship and an instrument that is consecrated to the service of God. Begin thinking of the care and use of your body as an act of worship to God, to set your identity in Christ on full display. By defining the meaning of your body, God is not trying to deprive you of joy or companionship. He is trying to turn your eyes to what is most important about you – that you are the object of his unending love and devotion.

### **Questions:**

1. How can we care for our bodies in such a way that we can express their value as instruments for knowing God and making him known?
2. Sex and marriage are intended to be expressions of our identity in Christ. Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Why do you think Paul rejects marriage to an unbeliever as a legitimate option for a Christian?
3. If sex and marriage were intended to be expressions of our identity in Christ, how should this bear on the criteria we use to find a spouse?
4. Several weeks ago Brooks told us that while marriage expresses the faithfulness of Christ’s union with the Church, singleness embodies the single-minded devotion that the Church owes to Christ. If this is true, how should a single person view his/her virginity and/or sexual integrity? Should we describe it as “saving yourself for marriage”? How is this different from the way that the world views and evaluates virginity and/or sexual integrity?
5. Christians have often been known for shunning and shaming those with sexual sin in their past. But if our identity is not anchored to our sexual past, how should we as Christians treat those with checkered sexual histories?