

# Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

## FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

### I Corinthians 6:12-20

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### Analysis by Steve Albertin

12 “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. 13 “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple\* of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

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## Diagnosis: Freedom is Slavery

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *“I Just Wanna Be*

*Free!"*

Poet W. H. Auden once wrote a Christmas piece called "For The Time Being" in which he described King Herod as worried. Why? Because Herod has been told that Jesus came to forgive sins and to be gracious. This worries Herod because it reminds him of the street-wise corner newsboy who can only see this Christian "stuff" as another "good deal." "I like to commit sins; God likes to forgive them. Really, the world is admirably arranged." The Corinthian Christians similarly distort Paul's law-free Gospel of Christian freedom. They believe they are free to do whatever they want with their bodies. Libertinism has become a right. Visiting the local prostitute doesn't make any difference. After all, their bodies have needs too. They gotta eat. They gotta fulfill their sexual needs. It's all the same. Don't make too much out of sex. It's just another bodily need.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In many places today the message of Christ's forgiveness has also become just another therapy, technique, strategy, program for self help, self fulfillment and the goal of the ultimate human pursuit: personal freedom! Christian freedom has become the license to do whatever we please. After all, if Jesus accepts us the way we are, we shouldn't have to change, especially our sexual behavior.

But our sex-obsessed culture can't make up its mind. On the one hand, sex is just harmless recreation. It's just meeting our personal needs, like eating and breathing and defecating. On the other hand, our culture's obsession with sex and the corresponding clamor that "I have a right to satisfy my sexual needs!" betrays a deeper personal, existential and, yes, even religious issue here. The "sexual revolution" has become a "holy crusade" to liberate us from our puritan inhibitions. "I just wanna be free . . . and don't you dare cramp my pursuit of freedom and personal satisfaction and enslave me with your

oppressive morality!”

## **Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *“But I’m Always On the Run!”*

Our religious pursuit of personal freedom betrays a deeper problem that haunts us. We know that something is missing. We sense that all is not right. We never seem to have the peace and satisfaction that a full stomach or a liberated sex life promise. We never can get enough. We never have arrived. We resent the limits. We are always looking for the excitement we were promised. The Corinthian patronage of prostitution reflected this anxiety and uneasiness with life. Such fornication was either minimized as harmless recreation or deified as the pursuit of self-fulfillment. Ultimately it doesn’t make any difference. Both justifications reflect the emptiness that stalks every human heart. The pursuit of freedom never ends. We may think we have broken free and liberated ourselves from the outdated morals of puritan sexual morality, but we are still, always, on the run, never quite finding what we are looking for. St. Augustine was right. “The heart never rests until it rests in God.” Melanchthon was scratching the same itch in the Augsburg Confession when he described Original Sin as being “without fear and love of God and concupiscence.”

Our search for freedom is the search for God. But we can never find him. We are always on the run. The freedom that we thought we had finally grasped always slips away.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *“The Runaways Always Get Caught”*

Today’s reckless pursuit of sexual liberation has consequences. Most of them have been destructive. Recreational sex has been not as harmless as many would have us believe. People are never islands unto themselves. There are always social consequences. Even sex between consenting adults is never without consequences

that affect the lives of others. Sexual abuse, sexually transmitted diseases and the disintegration of so many marriages and families, all the in the name of the pursuit of sexual freedom and liberation, raise the troubling possibility that true freedom may be forever illusory. Freedom never comes without responsibility. Someone has got to pay. We are always “held accountable” for our actions.

And who is holding us accountable? Who is always reminding us that unfettered freedom is an illusion? Who is always yanking our chain reminding us that, just when we thought we had run away, we are still slaves? Where the rest of the world may be reluctant to come to this kind of “politically incorrect” conclusion, Paul doesn’t hesitate. He has no doubts about who in the last analysis holds us accountable. That “who” is God. God is still God. God is still in control. And uppity slaves who think they can jump ship or flee the coop are fools.

In the Roman world runaway slaves who were caught could be summarily executed by their masters who wanted to make an example out of them. Other slaves had better think twice before trying to flee to freedom. That same fate awaits every one of us who tries to thumb their nose at the authority of the Master. Unfortunately, that includes every one of us. Despite the romantic attempts of many to make God into a harmless and beneficent projection of human sentimentality, an honest examination of reality and the rubble of the sexual revolution reveals that we are in big trouble. We tried to run away and got caught. And already we have begun to pay for it. Like the Roman slave masters who could rightfully demand the life of a runaway slave, God can do the same. And He does.

## **Prognosis: Slavery Is Freedom**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *“Bought And Paid For”*

If the problem was that we just had some bad ideas about freedom and slavery, a little education would solved the problem. But since the problem is much worse than that, since the problem includes anger of a Master who has had it with our insolence and rebellion, the solution is going to have to include a lot more than just a change of our mind and heart. The ultimate solution is going to have to include the change of God's mind and heart. That change is initiated by God himself, who does not desire the death of sinners or the execution of runaway slaves. Instead, God himself, in the body of his only Son, suffers the consequences of what we deserved. Whatever losses the Master incurred are bought and paid for by the Master himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Son suffers for the runaway slaves so that they might live. The slaves are "bought with a price," bought and paid for with the blood of Jesus. Therefore, the slaves are now returned to God's "ownership." But because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the slaves are no longer under a death sentence. Now at last they are truly free. They are now sons and daughters of the Master. They are members of the body of Christ.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – "Free At Last"**

Under such new ownership, purchased by the blood of Christ, the slaves endless pursuit of freedom has finally come to an end. At last we have arrived. Finally we have the peace the world cannot give us. We don't have to flee the Master to have the hunger in our hearts filled. We at last are free, ironically under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our hearts can finally rest in God. We finally have "fear and love" of God. And instead of being enslaved to "concupiscence," instead of being condemned to that reckless pursuit of our own fulfillment and satisfaction, now we can be content to be ourselves. It is enough to be members of the Master's household, members of the body of Christ.

Our religious quest is over. It is not that we have finally, at

last, found God. On the contrary, finally, at last, God has found us. The freedom we craved finally, at last, is ours. Ironically, we receive it as slaves, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are free not to do serve ourselves but serve our Lord.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – “Free To Glorify God”**

Finally, free as slaves, everything changes. The “indicative” determines the “imperative.” Given who we “are,” we “get to” live in a new way. How we use our bodies is now important. Sex isn’t irrelevant. Sex isn’t just recreation or the satisfying of another bodily need. Neither is sex part of that religious quest for personal fulfillment and gratification. Now it is an important way to love a fellow member of the body of Christ. Fornication or visiting a prostitute is unthinkable. We don’t live in isolation, on an island unto ourselves. We are connected to other Christians. The use of our bodies reflects on them. Bought and paid for by Christ, our bodies matter. They belong to the Body of Christ. If we want to glorify the One who has rescued us from our sin and our endless enslavement to the pursuit of satisfaction, then we surely won’t want to abuse our bodies sexually or in any other way. Becoming “one flesh” is reserved for marriage. Becoming “one flesh” is an expression of love and not an expression of our quest for personal or “religious” satisfaction. In this way we are “free to glorify God” with our bodies.