

# **Sermon Temple of the Spirit**

## **1 Cor 6:12-20; John 1:43-51**

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Less than a week ago, a disaster struck our Sudanese congregation. A gas bottle explosion in one of the homes left ten women and a few children severely burned. I went to one of the hospitals where the victims are treated, and saw two women with badly burned bodies. Awful. We prayed for their bodies and their souls.

St Paul writes in 1 Cor 6 that our bodies are important. God cares for them. They are a temple of God's Spirit within us. In the confidence that our bodies have value to God, we prayed that God would bless those women. He cares for them, even for their bodies. They are his temple. God lives in them.

What does this mean, that the Spirit of God lives in us?

#### **1 Temple of Spirit**

Paul says emphatically that our bodies are a temple of God's Spirit within us. He wants us to really think about the Holy Spirit indwelling our physical body. God has come this close to us after our baptism. When we were baptized we became part of the body of Christ - part of Christ himself, and the Spirit of God came to be part of our existence.

The Holy Spirit is so much part of our existence - around us, above us, under us, yes, in us, that with confidence we can say that God is with us.

Paul writes this letter to Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in Corinth. If these Christians looked around them in the city, they saw temples everywhere for the pagan gods, like Apollo, Zeus, Jupiter. And the Jewish believers knew of their Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

Most people in those days envisioned their god as housed in a particular building, and if you needed something from that god, the best thing to do was to go to his or her temple. Especially for the Jews in Corinth, that was quite a trip.

But God our Father is not far from us. He is so close to you. You are a temple in which God dwells. This gives a dignity to the whole of life, such as nothing else can do. Wherever we go we are the bearers of the Holy Spirit, the temple in which God is pleased to dwell.

The Holy Spirit is in our life - even in our bodies. This does not mean that the Father and the Son are not present in our life. The Holy Trinity does not exist in three parts. The three can be distinguished, but never separated from each other. We believe in one God.

The Bible presents the Holy Spirit to us as God who moves in our being; who speaks to us; who guides us; who leads us here and there; who makes us sensitive to sin; who applies God's forgiveness to us; who creates in us the desire for love and peace and joy.

It is the Holy Spirit who actually makes us love, who makes us experience peace, who makes us joyful.

This Spirit of God lives in you - in His temple.

It is possible to extinguish the work of the Spirit in our lives. By consistently refusing to do what He tells us to do; by consistently desecrating his temple; by disobeying him.

And we can enliven the work of the Spirit in us as well. By prayer; by obedience; by listening to the Word of God, by participating in the life of the Christian community, by taking holy communion.

The Spirit's presence in your life, even in your body, is a fact. God does not come and go whenever we do good or bad. He is with those who are baptized and who continue in the faith of Jesus Christ.

But it is possible to push him to the sideline. That is our free choice. But then, do not be surprised that the most desirable fruits of the Holy Spirit - love, peace, joy, are also somehow not available for you.

## **2 Body vs Spirit**

In Corinth, many Christians had a rather distorted view of God and of his work in us. If you are not steeped in a Jewish-Christian worldview, it is not easy to unlearn unhelpful views and attitudes.

In Greek culture, influenced by Platonic thinking, the body was seen a prison. It was seen as something bad. There was a proverb, "The body is a tomb - a grave." The philosopher-poet Epictetus said, "I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse."

In the view of the apostle Paul, the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. That is a radical difference. We do not disregard our bodies, we honor our body.

Those Christians in Corinth were so used to the Greek view, that they never questioned this negative view of their bodies. They believed that only intangible things were important, the soul, the spirit, the Holy Spirit.

But the fact that God is a Spirit does not mean that the physical is less important for God.

These Corinthian Christians were so convinced that their physical bodies were unimportant, that they followed the common pagan view that therefore with your physical body, you could do whatever you wanted. It did not impact your relationship with God.

“Food is for the stomach, and stomach is for the food”, was a common saying in the city. If you want to eat you eat, so what. And if you desire sex, why not. It is just a physical matter.

Since the body was of no importance, you could do what you like with it; you could let it follow all of its appetites.

And then there was the doctrine of Christian freedom which Paul preached. If the Christian man is the freest of all men, then is he not free to do what he likes, especially with this completely unimportant body of his?

So, the Corinthians argued, ‘let the body have its way. It is made for the sexual act and the sexual act is made for it; therefore let the desires of the body have their way. We are free, are we not?’

First, Paul underlines that our bodies are very important for God. He raised Jesus from the dead, and he will also raise us by his power. The idea that our bodies will one day be revived was ludicrous for those Greeks. They wanted to get rid of their bodies! For us it is great comfort. The women who passed away after the fire last week, they will be renewed one day, with a perfectly beautiful new body.

So to God, your body counts.

Secondly, it is Paul's insistence that, though he is free to do anything, he will let nothing master him. Because as soon as you let something master you, you are no longer free. He is very logical here. So, he says, do not let your appetite for sexuality master you.

The great fact of the Christian faith is, not that it makes a man free to sin, but that it makes a man free not to sin. It is so easy to allow habits to master us; but the Holy Spirit in us enables us to master those habits. Then we are truly free.

When a man really experiences the Christian power of the Spirit, he becomes, not the slave of his body, but its master.

We can never just do what we like, because we do not belong to ourselves. We must always do what Christ likes, because He bought us at the cost of his life. Jesus Christ is our master, so if we allow any appetites to master us, we effectively push Jesus Christ aside.

That is why Paul says, "I will not let anything have control over me."

And he underlines, our bodies are a temple of the Spirit. Keep the temple clean. "Glorify God in your body", because it is the house of God himself. Do not allow pigs in the Holy of Holies - because that is where our Lord, the one who owns us, made his abode.

### **3 How to treat the temple - do not be dominated by anything**

The temple is the place where people find God. You as the temple of the Spirit are the place where your friends and family and anyone you meet, should have a meeting with God. That makes it so important to consider whether your temple - your whole being, body and soul, is actually presentable, for God and for other people.

Does your presence mean the presence of God for the people around you? That is the question Paul is holding before us. The temple does not exist for itself - it exists for other people.

What do others see when they meet with you?

Now Paul focuses mostly on the issue of sexuality. We must not abuse our body, we must not allow just any impulse to become our master. Our body belongs to the Lord and it is his temple, so He can tell us what to do. And he makes very clear, sexuality belongs within marriage.

Paul focused here on sexuality because that was a prevalent problem in Corinth where people, even Christians, felt free to visit the temple prostitutes in the temple of Venus and elsewhere.

By doing so, Paul says, you offend Christ who is your owner and the Holy Spirit who lives in you. Keep the temple in good order and use it for the glory of God.

But this actually goes much further than being on our guard for wrong sexuality. A surprising number of believers fail to take care of their bodies, so that they become overweight, rundown, drug dependent, alcohol dependent, out of shape, or otherwise insufficiently healthy to carry out the work of the Lord.

The strong argument Paul uses is, that we should not let anything be the master of our body, because Jesus is our master.

This is really the ABC's of discipleship. In the Gospel-reading this morning we read that when 'Jesus decided to go to Galilee, He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." and "Philip found

Nathanael and said to him, "We have found [...] Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. [...] Come and see."

Phillip obeyed Jesus, and followed him as his Master, and he immediately invited his friend Nathanael to also follow Jesus as his Master. Philip became a temple where Nathanael could find God.

This following of our Lord, this obedience to Him, should be total. Nothing else should be a master over our body and soul.

"If it feels good, do it", is a maxim that describes well the general climate of our day and age. But as Christians we have Jesus who tells us what to do. Not what feels good.

What additional masters have we allowed in our life? In my life, the refrigerator is an important master and I have to whip that animal back into its corner again and again. And my 10 kilos overweight show that I am not too successful. But the struggle is on.

## **Conclusion**

It is really important for us to say to our Lord, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated unto Thee." That is related to our sexuality, but we need just as much a commitment to health and good food and moving and exercise. Oufff....

And avoiding what hurts our bodies, like too much stress, too much drinking or too much smoking. Flee from all those temptations, Paul says.

Jesus is Lord; he owns us; we should not allow anyone or anything else to master us and to make us do things that are not in accordance with living, body and soul, for our Lord.

God loves your body. He will one day raise it from the dead. And if this is your hope, then you better treat your body with the respect it deserves. Respect, because God created you, Jesus redeemed you, and the Holy Spirit lives in you.

The Spirit, through the Word of God, teaches us how to live. And he prods us to live for our Lord and Master alone, with body, soul and spirit.

Amen.

