

## “MATTER MATTERS”

1 Peter 4:1-11 (p. 1178)

In 1 Peter 4:3 the apostle wrote, “*You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.*” There came a point in my younger days when I suppose I could have claimed that as my “life verse.” It was certainly descriptive of the kind of life I had been leading. Along with my pagan friends I was busily engaged in a decidedly dissolute lifestyle – and then it happened. Through a series of marvelous “coincidences” God laid hold of my heart and quite literally turned my life around.

I suppose I should have seen it coming. I didn’t. But when I made that break with my past and identified myself as belonging to Christ, two things occurred almost simultaneously. First, I announced my decision to a small group of students at University Presbyterian Church. They immediately embraced me in a caring fellowship the likes of which I had never known. About the same time, I told my pagan friends that, since I had given my life to Christ, I would no longer be available to carouse with them. Once they recovered from the initial shock, they ridiculed me for my hypocrisy, making it quite clear that I was no longer welcome in their company.

They had been my close friends for a long time; and the truth is that their rejection hurt deeply. But it did bring into sharp focus for the first time a fact that has proven true throughout my life. There are things that mark Christians as fundamentally different from our pagan friends. So let me put it to you this way. If someone were to ask you to identify those things that make you distinctively Christian, what would you say? Where would you start? Let’s consider what Peter has to teach us.

Let’s begin where Peter began our lesson today – with the physical suffering of Jesus. Peter wrote, “*Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.*” According to Peter, a primary distinctive of the Christian life is a readiness to physically suffer for your faith. Of course it wasn’t only physical suffering that Jesus went through. He endured unutterable emotional and spiritual pain as well, so that, ultimately and eternally, you and I would not have to go through the same thing. You and I need never experience being abandoned by God the way Jesus was. Unlike Jesus, even when we die, we will do so embraced by God our Father, not left alone by him. That is what you and I can look forward to because Jesus went through that pain for us.

But we're not dead yet. And meanwhile, we are called to imitate Christ in our bodies. Jesus said that if we would get behind him, we need to be ready to take up our crosses in this life, deny ourselves, and if necessary suffer for our faith. And that is essentially what Peter says in verses 1-2. The fact that our salvation has something to do with the attitude that Jesus took toward his own body is a huge clue that living as Christ's men and women involves our attitude about our physical bodies.

Whenever we talk about taking up our crosses or the possibility of Christians physically suffering, I think we need to make it very clear that neither Jesus nor Peter nor Christian tradition generally encourages any kind of ascetic loathing of the body. The Gospel does not teach a Greek-like despising of the body as the "prison house of the soul." After he was crucified, dead and buried, Jesus did not return on Easter morning as a ghost. He came back with a physical resurrection body. Easter reminds us that the goal of the Christian life is not to be rid of all that is physical, but to enjoy the physical in a marvelous new way.

Christianity is incarnational. That means that matter matters – our physical bodies matter. We were saved through what happened to one particular body; and that should have a profound impact on how we treat our own bodies. That's why Peter teaches us in verse 1 that if we arm ourselves with the attitude Jesus had about his body, we will stop using our bodies for sinful things. What makes us distinctively Christian is not that we try to transcend our bodies or pretend we have no interest in physical things. The Christian distinctive lies precisely in how we treat our bodies and engage the physical world.

And it is at this point that Peter rightly says the pagans around us will think us strange. I suspect a lot of pagans assume that Christians are supposed to live lives devoid of sex, eating bland food, refusing ever to touch a drop of alcohol, and generally living exceedingly boring lives. But as a matter of fact, Christians do not disparage the body. Instead we say that God gave us bodies for the express purpose of experiencing pleasure and enjoying creation's bounty. What is the Genesis picture of the Garden of Eden if not a picture of deliciousness, of sensuousness, of beauty, and of active sexuality? Christians say that our bodies are good; so good, in fact that in the long run that they will endure even death. We worship a Savior who is now, and always will be, an embodied Lord.

But that doesn't square with the common pagan view of Christians. So this is a point at which pagans are likely to consider us strange. They would say that if we Christians are not ascetics who deny ourselves bodily pleasures, then why don't we shed our inhibitions and join them when it comes to such things? If sex is a fun thing for one man and one woman to experience together, then why not a threesome? Why not mix it up? If one martini makes you feel loose, why not

slam down a whole pitcher of them? People who are addicted to pleasure are baffled by those who can affirm the goodness of pleasure and yet practice restraint.

This is what many of our pagan friends simply do not understand. The thing that keeps us from going overboard in self-indulgence is the self-giving of Jesus in his body. The Christian distinctive, the secret to viewing and treating and enjoying our bodies the right way, is not in grabbing all the pleasure you can get, but in emptying yourself. It is by giving away, not by taking in, that we discover the rich goodness for which God created us as physical beings.

Try grabbing all the pleasure you can get and you'll lose it. That's what Peter was talking about in verse 4 where he had our pagan friends inviting us to "plunge with them into a flood of dissipation." That's an interesting choice of words: a "flood of dissipation." Dissipation means frittering away to nothing – like letting the air out of your tires. And yet he calls it a "flood of dissipation" – a word that suggests a whole lot of something, an overabundance.

Peter was hinting at something immensely important with that little oxymoron. When he talked about a "flood of dissipation" he was saying that when you live for your own pleasure and grab all you can get, then what may seem like a tidal wave of fullness will turn out to be really one huge draining away of everything that makes life good. It will turn out to be a whole lot of nothing. It's not a tempest in a teacup; it's a tempest in a toilet. You try grabbing things for yourself and you'll discover that you're flushing away the goodness of life, not enhancing it.

You see that tragedy replayed in so many different ways – how the more a person takes in, the emptier he feels as a result. It's the drinker's dilemma: you drink because you are depressed; and for a little while the booze seems to help. But alcohol is a depressant. So you drank because you were feeling down; but in the end the drinking makes you feel all the more down. The more you take in, the emptier you are. It's a "flood of dissipation." And it has eternal consequences.

C. S. Lewis made that point in his book *The Great Divorce*. Hell is depicted not as a vast region full of the condemned. Instead, hell turns out to be almost microscopic. Lewis suggests that if one day the entire universe will be the "new creation" (what we commonly refer to as "heaven") then within that vastness, the region of hell could fit inside a crack in the sidewalk. That was Lewis's way of saying that hell, and those who populate it, are finally reduced to almost nothing because all the substance and vibrancy of their lives will have long since dissipated.

For Peter, Jesus is the One who has restored the substance of life to us. Jesus makes it possible for us to have properly directed appetites through which we approach life in ways that really will fill us up instead of emptying us out. But the

paradox is that your filling up comes only when you first empty yourself for the sake of others.

So it's not surprising that, beginning at verse 8, Peter admonished us to love each other, to offer hospitality, to show self-control and serve one another because these are all ways of sharing life. The person who knows that salvation came when Jesus suffered in his body also knows that now the key to life is using our bodies, and all the particular gifts each of us has, in ways that will make life good for others – because that's the only way you can make life really good for yourself.

When you think about it, the common denominator of all “Seven Deadly Sins” is selfishness – they are all focused on your own pleasure. Pride, Envy, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, Anger, and Lust all have negative effects on the people around you, but only because each of these sins is fundamentally self-serving. Pride leads you to want to be Number One in the eyes of others – it's all about you. Envy enters the picture the moment someone else threatens to outshine you. Sloth focuses you so much on the interior of your own mind that you can no longer generate enthusiasm for anything outside your own dark thoughts.

Greed insists that you deserve the best of everything, even if that means taking something so that others can't have it. Gluttony says that if you want something, nobody can tell you how much of it you may consume. Sinful anger flares when your privileged place in the world is threatened or when the way you wanted things to go is frustrated. And lust isn't interested in giving pleasure, but only in you getting it.

As I said, we need to keep clear in our minds what distinguishes us as Christian from our pagan friends. Now granted, it's complicated by the fact that God clearly expects us to live very physical lives. But God also expects us to live our physical lives in the right way. Consequently, in our eating and drinking, in our being sexual and in our engaging the pleasures of God's world, we Christians will sometimes draw lines that may appear arbitrary and unnecessary to those who cannot see beyond the moment. And we may suffer for it.

But as Peter said, we Christians behave that way because we live not for ourselves, but for the will of God. And what is God's will? It is not God's will for us to be world-denying, body-hating ascetics. God's will is for us to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus, the One who took the body he had and made it a source of life.

At the center of Christian worship is that moment when the pastor holds up the bread and repeats Jesus' words, “*This is my body.*” We do not feast on Jesus' spirit or soul or mind. We don't take Communion to participate in Jesus' philosophy or get enthused over the idea of Christ. No, we take into ourselves his body, because by giving his body in the most unselfish way imaginable, Jesus became our source of life.

For nearly two thousand years there has been enough of Jesus' body to go around, to nourish all who come to him. The world has never before and will never again see such a perfect gift of love. But you and I can draw people to that one perfect gift by using our bodies not as our own little private pleasure palaces, but using them to build up and bless the lives of others. That, said Peter in conclusion, is how we praise God through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and the power for ever and ever.

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