

INTRODUCTION

I knew a non-Christian many years ago who had two serious problems – alcohol and filthy language. He was an alcoholic and swore like a miner. But then a friend of his shared the gospel with him and he decided to follow Jesus. He was immediately delivered from alcohol. He no longer desired it and hasn't had a drink since. But he wasn't delivered from the filthy language, which was why he came to see me. He didn't want to use bad words, he said. But when he got frustrated or mad, they just came out. That's how he said it, *"they just come out."* It was defeating him and he asked me two questions because it was. Why do I still have this problem and what can I do about it?

Those are critical questions that most of us have asked about one behavior or another. Let's answer them by examining the passage I read today, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

SLAVES OF OUR BODY

Let's start with verse 27 and the word "body." This passage is about our body, excuse the English.

Our body is the focal point of our presence in the physical and social world. It is the power pack that God has assigned to us and that comprises the field of our freedom and development. Consequently, how poorly or well our lives go will depend on how we direct and manage it.

Which brings us back to verse 27. Notice what Paul did and what we should do. We should make our body our slave. That statement clearly implies that in our natural state it isn't our slave but our master and that's true. In our natural state, we're slaves of our body. That is in fact the current condition of most people, Christians and non-Christians alike. They are slaves of their body.

Paul explains why they are in Romans 7:23. He writes: *"But I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law*

of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my body parts." That verse teaches a critical fact about us. We can have the law of something in our body parts.

Here's what that means. Our body is pliable. It's capable of being slowly shaped and formed by repeated action. Doing something over and over again eventually programs that something into the body parts that it involves. It then becomes what Paul calls a "law" or what we call a "habit" in those parts. At that point, our body is poised to do it only awaiting the occasion. And when the occasion comes, it does it. It does it without us even thinking about it or often even willing it.

That is usually a good thing. I can type forty words a minute, for example, instead of four because of it. But it's also often a bad thing. That's because evil things can be as programmed into our body parts just as surely as good things. And the fact is, they are.

What happens is this. We are born and grow up in surroundings that make us think, feel, and act like those around us do. As we grow and participate in those around us, their sinful patterns of behavior and response begin to seize us. We begin to do the evils that they do and eventually, over time, those evils become laws in our body parts. At that point, our body is poised to do them only awaiting the occasion. And when the occasion comes, we automatically do them, without even thinking about them or often without even willing them.

I told you about the woman who passed me in her BMW, honked her horn at me, and gave me the bad finger. She almost certainly didn't do that in cold blood. She didn't go through a whole mental process before she did it: *"Yes, the speed limit here is 15 M.P.H. and he is going that. But I'm late for my party at the restaurant and he can tell by my tailgating him that I wish that he'd go faster. So, I'll beep at him and give him the bad finger so that in the future he will be more considerate and speed up when someone tailgates him."* No, that isn't what happened. She is a slave of her body. Her bad finger is poised to do what it did only awaiting the occasion. And when the

occasion came, it acted automatically, on its own without her even thinking about it.

That is why people do most of the evils that they do. Their body is poised to do them and does without them even thinking about it or often even willing it. They're slaves of their body in other words.

MASTERS OF OUR BODY

But according to Paul in verse 27, you and I don't have to be. We don't have to be the slave of our body. We can be its master instead.

To be its master means that it no longer does the evils that it wants to do. On the contrary, it does the goods that we want it to do. It's poised to do good and not evil in other words only awaiting the occasion.

I was in a small group of Christians in Akron. We were talking about growing spiritually and one of the men gave this testimony in that regard. At one time, when he saw an attractive woman, he'd automatically continue to look at her or to look again - for the purpose of sexually desiring her, which Jesus prohibits in Matthew 5:28. But when he sees an attractive woman now, he said, he automatically looks away from and not at her. Do you get what happened here? At one time, the law of lust was in his eyes but now the law of sexual purity is. At one time, he was the slave of his eyes. But now, he is their master.

That illustrates what it means to be the master of our body. It means that it no longer does the evils that it wants to do. It does the goods that we want it to do instead. New bodily forces that are directed to the good have pushed old bodily forces that are directed to the bad into the background. The result is that our body is poised to do good not evil. Doing good is the natural thing for it and doing evil the unnatural.

You can see what a wonderful thing that it is to be the master of our body. But the question is, "how do we become that?"

The answer is "by the grace of God." When you and I make Jesus the Savior and Lord of our life, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in us. As He dwells, He also works and one of the things that He does is

transform our body parts. He empowers us to take control over them. That means that only those who follow Jesus can become the master of their body. Those who don't will be the slave of theirs until the day that they die.

WHAT MASTERING OUR BODY REQUIRES

But becoming the master of our body isn't just the Holy Spirit's work. It's ours as well. Paul makes that perfectly clear in verses 24-27.

Paul uses an analogy in these verses and that analogy is sports. What he's referring to here is the Isthmian Games that were held every three years in Corinth. The Isthmian Games were like the Olympic Games but on a smaller scale. Paul witnessed these games and alludes to them in these verses.

Look at 24. He mentions a specific sport here – running. He's referring to both the marathon and shorter races. Notice what his point is. A race yields only one winner. So runners put forth every effort to win. I had an attorney friend, for instance, who was going to race in a marathon. Doing that required running 17 miles a day for two months. Only one person wins a race. So runners put forth every effort to win.

Christians should too, Paul says in the last line in verse 24. This debunks what I call "the myth of passivity." So many Christians think that we are passive in spiritual growth in general and the mastery of our body in particular. Since it's by grace, the Holy Spirit does everything and we do nothing. But that's just not true. Grace is opposed to earning not effort. The fact is that mastering our body requires effort on our part and as Paul teaches us in verse 24, that effort must be vigorous.

But it must be thoughtful as well. You can see that in verse 26. Paul mentions two sports that were part of the Isthmian Games – running and boxing. Runners run with aim he says and boxers swing with purpose. They have a strategy in other words for winning. I mentioned the attorney who races in marathons. Talk to him and you'll see that he has a carefully planned strategy for both preparing for and running the

race. His effort isn't just vigorous. It's thoughtful as well.

And so should ours be as follower of Jesus. The effort that we put forth in mastering our body must be thoughtful. We must not only do things. We must also do the right things. It's what Dallas Willard calls "*the purposeful, strategic use of our bodies.*" It's what I would call the intentional and intelligent use of our body. We must intentionally and intelligently do certain things with our body.

So that's what mastering our body requires. It requires vigorous and thoughtful effort on our part.

DISCIPLINING OUR BODY

Now, Paul tells us in verse 27 what our effort must be directed to. He observes about himself, "*But I discipline my body.*" What he did, he commands us to do in 1 Timothy 4:7, "*discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.*" Those verses reveal our call this morning and it's urgent one. We must discipline our body.

To discipline our body means to relocate and reorient it in our world. We make new uses of it. We do certain things with it that train it to do what we want it to do. We call those certain things spiritual disciplines and that's exactly what Paul has in mind in those two verses – spiritual disciplines. A spiritual discipline is essentially a bodily behavior. It's something we can do now that eventually enables us to do something we can't do now.

Let's go back to the attorney again who runs marathons. At one point, he couldn't run 26.2 miles no matter how hard he tried. So, he did certain things with his body that he could do – rested it, fed it a certain way, and kept running as many miles as he could. Those things were bodily disciplines. Doing them consistently and long enough eventually enabled him to do what he wanted to but couldn't – run 26.2 miles.

It's the same way in our spiritual lives. There are goods that we want to do now but can't. It isn't in our body to do them. So we practice certain spiritual disciplines that eventually enable us to do them.

There are many such disciplines. Some are classic disciplines that Christians have practiced for 2000 years. Those include solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, study, prayer, worship, celebration, service, fellowship, confession, and submission. But others are those that we ourselves create and that are tailored to our own needs and aims. Periodically visiting a cemetery, for instance, is one that I've created for me.

With that in mind, disciplining our body requires three things. First, we must learn about spiritual disciplines. We can do that by reading Richard Foster's book Celebration of Discipline. Or we can attend our next Wednesday night class, beginning in April, which will teach us all about that. Second, we must examine ourselves and identify the goods that we can't do and the evils that we can't not do. And third, we must identify and practice the right disciplines, the ones that will enable us to do those goods and not do those evils.

That's exactly what the Christian who was struggled with filthy language did. I taught him about the disciplines. He then identified the ones that addressed the issue of filthy language – solitude, silence, fasting, and submission. After that, he began practicing those vigorously and thoughtfully. The Holy Spirit honored his efforts and within a year, his tongue was no longer his master but his slave.

CONCLUSION

I close this morning with a question. What is your body? Is it your master or your slave? Can you receive criticism with joy, love your enemy, care only about God's praise not people's, not lust, not worry, absorb insults and injuries without anger or offense, and so on. If you can't your body is your master not your slave.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Make Jesus the Savior and Lord of your person and life. Then vigorously and thoughtfully discipline your body. The Holy Spirit will transform you if you do. At that point, your body will be exactly what God created it to be – your slave.

On Saturday, March 3, we're going to have a day of fasting and praying Scripture here at Bethel. We'll give you further details about that next week. But as you can see, the two activities it involves are fasting and praying Scripture. So, I'm going to explain fasting today. And Laurie Brammer will explain praying Scripture next week.

I'm going to be preaching about spiritual disciplines today. Fasting is one of those. It illustrates for us what disciplines are intended to do and how transforming they really are.

To fast means to abstain from food and/or drink for a specified period of time. That can be any length of time but a common fast is 24 hours and three meals. Few Christians fast but they should. That's because it's utterly transforms the serious follower of Jesus in so many ways.

First, it teaches us humility because it reveals how much our peace depends on the pleasures of eating. Our person and life are disturbed - especially the first few times that we fast. That experience makes us realize how creaturely we are and contributes to Biblical humility.

Second, it enables us to feast on God. If we stay at it, we will eventually find in Him a source of sustenance beyond food. Jesus said that man does not live by bread alone and we will eventually experience that. We will find ourselves fasting but the hunger not bothering us much.

Third, it teaches us how to suffer happily as we feast on God. That is a lesson well learned because, make no mistake about it, we will suffer in this life. Fasting is one of the best ways of preparing for suffering.

And fourth, it teaches us temperance and self-control, moderation and restraint. Hunger is one of our strongest physical urges. As we fast therefore and overcome it, we find ourselves being able to overcome other physical urges as well including lust.

Fasting is representative of all the disciplines. They are spiritually dynamic, spiritually powerful things. What they do is this. They place us before the Holy Spirit in such a way that He can transform our body and He does. As Paul says it in verse 27, He makes it our slave.

Some of you may not be able to fast because of health problems. But for those of you who can, if you have never fasted, you need to start. Fasting has been a staple in the spiritual lives of God's best friends down through the centuries and it needs to be of ours as well. So start fasting. March 3 is as good a day as any to do that.

