Body Building

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 5:1-14

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Today, I will be talking about sex. First, a word to parents. This is not the kind of sermon where you need to usher your kids out of the sanctuary. I would give this sermon a G-Rating, maybe PG-13 in a few places.

Preaching on sex is difficult, more so than other subjects. How can I preach truthfully and compassionately on a subject where there is so much confusion and so much pain?

I am talking about sex today because Paul addresses it directly in Ephesians 5. There is simply no avoiding it. It is a major theme in this fifth chapter of Ephesians.

Whenever I preach about sex from this pulpit, this sanctuary becomes strangely quiet. The only subject that has a similar silencing effect on people is money. I suspect it is because money and sex are intensely personal to us.

There is no other topic where I am as likely to be misrepresented and misquoted as sex. People listen for certain catch phrases and trigger words to determine if I am a conservative or a liberal on the defining social issues of our day; i.e., same gender marriage and transgender rights. Your primary task is not to pin a label on me. Your goal is ask the Holy Spirit through this passage to speak into your life.

I have three objectives this morning. First, I will walk through the text, which is our customary pattern. Before we can address how Ephesians 5 addresses us in the here and how, we must determine what it meant to its original recipients back there and then. Second objective: I intend to use this passage and others like it to arrive at a Christian understanding of the body. How can we love God with our
body, soul and strength? Third, I will conclude as we always do, by asking the “so-what difference does it make” question.

Before we dive into the text, let me acquaint you with the prevailing attitude toward the body in first century common culture. The Greco-Roman culture saw nothing wrong with casual sex. It was a given that husbands would have mistresses. In urban centers such as Ephesus and Corinth, temples built to a pantheon of gods and goddesses were staffed by prostitutes. What Jesus and his early followers advocated with regard to the body was unparalleled in the first century.

Let me cite one extra-biblical reference in the letter of Diognetus to illustrate the point. An unknown writer writes to an earnest seeker named Diognetus. Most biblical scholars date it to be a hundred years or later after the time of Jesus. Here is the way this Christian describes the followers of Jesus: “They marry, as do all men. They beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They share a common table but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but do not live after the flesh. They pass their day on earth as they are citizens of heaven.” What a stark contrast to the Greco-Roman world who left unwanted children to die and slept around.

Now, for the text. Paul lists a trio of vices in verse 3: “There must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity or greed.” Sexual immorality functions as the operative word of the three. The
Greek term, *porneia*, is where we derive our English word pornography. The New Testament uses this word in a general sense to describe all sorts of sexual misconduct as well as in a more resisted sense to refer to infidelity outside of marriage. The other two words in the sentence, *impurity* and *greed*, serve to amplify the meaning of porneia. The third word, *greed* gets to the heart of the problem. Sexual greed exploits other people for self-serving pleasure. Paul begins this fifth chapter by talking about Christ’s self-sacrificing mission. In a span of a single verse, he shifts the focus from Christ’s self-sacrificing love to our self-indulging nature.

Greed that remains unchecked becomes an obsession. When Paul repeats these same three vices in verse 5, he describes such people as idolaters. We can make an idol out of sensual pleasure.

Paul adds a second list of vices to the mix in verse 4: “Nor should there be any obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place.” Paul is concerned that even flippant or sarcastic speech will foster a more accepting attitude.

Paul bolts a counterbalancing word at the end of this second vice list: *thanksgiving*. Giving thanks serves as the epitome of unselfish love. How appropriate as we approach the Thanksgiving holiday.
In the second half of our passage, Paul utilizes the metaphor of darkness and light to drive his point home. While darkness conceals these sins of the flesh, light exposes them. Paul identifies three fruits of the light in verse 9: “The fruits of the light consist in all goodness, righteousness and truth.” Goodness is a word that closely aligns with generosity. In a season when we are asking you to consider a pledge to our 2018 budget, Paul brings us back to the impetus for giving which is generosity.

Paul contrasts these fruits of light with the fruits of darkness that he references at the outset of the chapter. He mentions, almost as an aside, that these fruits of darkness are done in secret (5:11). Evil thrives in secret. Evil loves to be alone with us. Take Internet porn. We need to talk more openly about this growing, secret addiction that is killing our youth and destroying families.

Paul closes out our passage by writing, “This is why it is said, ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you’” (5:14). Biblical scholars are unsure about the origin of this verse. Most likely, it is an early church hymn. The verse depicts someone who awakens from the darkness of sleep into the light of Christ.

That is my overview of the passage. Now, I want to take a step back to arrive at a Christian ethic of the body. The most persistent heresy plaguing the early church (it serves as the backdrop to nearly every New Testament letter) is a move-
ment called Gnosticism. Gnostics believed the soul or spirit of a person had enduring value while the body had only temporal benefit. Gnostics concluded since the body will not survive into the next life, it does not really matter what you do with it. This gnostic heresy persists in our day. Many people claim it does not matter who you sleep with or what you do with your body.

There is no Biblical justification for elevating the soul to the neglect of the body. Christianity is the most material religion in the world. God takes human flesh in the person of Jesus (John 1:14). Jesus was born in a body, lived in a body, died in a body and raised in a body.

The whole material world matters to God. God created the material world good in Genesis, sex included. The sexual union of Adam and Eve consummated their life-uniting covenant in marriage.

God created us with bodies. We do not become disembodied souls after we die. We become resurrected bodies. We affirm in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

Your body matters to God. The human body is not an amusement park to do with as we please. If Jesus Christ is Lord, he is Lord over our bodies also. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Later, in the same passage, he declares our bodies to be temples of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, glorify God in your body” (6:19-20).
Sex is one of God’s good gifts to people. God created sex for pleasure and procreation in marriage. The problem in today’s culture is that we have separated the sexual act from God’s intended purpose.

So what difference does this sermon on the body have to do with my life? I wish everyone could drink a truth serum that would allow us to become honest and truthful about sexual sins. As I prepared this sermon, I kept imagining us separating into the four corners of this sanctuary. Everyone who struggled with sexual temptation and lust would assemble in the corner to my right. Everyone who wrestled with body image, eating disorders or any exaggerated focus on appearance would gather in the left corner. Everyone who over-indulged or tried to self-medicate with food would meet in the back right corner. We would reserve the far back left corner for people thinking to themselves, “I’m good. I’ve got it covered.” We have a saying in the Great Banquet about people who have the tremendous problem of thinking they do not have any problems at all.

We won’t make you drink the truth serum and divide into corners. Yet, I suspect all of us, if we are brutally honest with ourselves, struggle with some aspect of body life.

Bodily appetites exert enormous power over us. We will never know the mastery these physical appetites wield over us until we try to resist them. As long as we are always giving in to temptation, we never know its power. Leave it to C.S. Lewis to write, “Only those who try to resist
temptation know how strong it is….We never find out the strength of an evil impulse until we fight it.” We will never defeat tenacious sins of the body by sheer will power. It is only as we harness Christ’s presence and power that we will be able to root out deeply ingrained sins. We need Christ’s power to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Paul writes in Romans, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters in view of God’s mercy to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice” (12:1). The language of sacrifice conjures up the Old Testament practice of sacrificing an animal to atone for our sins. Here, Paul instructs us to offer a living sacrifice, meaning we offer ourselves, body and soul, to God. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Answer: “That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” This living sacrifice is not a once and done offering. We offer ourselves repeatedly to God.

A living sacrifice is our way of saying, “I’m yours, Lord. Everything I have. Everything I’ve got. I’m completely yours.”