

"The Gourmet God" 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Introduction

- When I was a kid my grandmother had a balance board. Balance boards, I think, first became popular in the 50's and have been around in some form or another ever since. My sister and I spent hours on this thing. Basically it was a plywood board with a wooden roller mechanism underneath; it's like a mini teeter-totter on a wheel. The object was to step onto the board and then swing your weight back and forth from foot to foot to keep the board balanced and rolling. When you lost your balance, which was inevitable, you ended up rolling too far to one side and the board would tip. Half the time you'd end up on your rear as the board flew out from underneath you.
- When I read the words of 1 Corinthians 7:1-7 I'm reminded of my grandmother's balance board. It's like Paul is trying to keep the Corinthians balanced so that their feet don't fly out from underneath them. He's trying to keep them from swinging to the extremes.
- If you'll remember from last week the Corinthians had become too permissive in what they allowed their bodily appetites to feed on—especially in the area of sex. They even had a slogan that championed their outlook on life. Look at [verse 12](#). *"Everything is permissible for me."* That's one extreme. Some Christians mistakenly believe that their freedom in Christ allows them to do whatever they want with their bodies; that everything is permissible. Paul's answer is no—fat chance. Again [verse 12](#). *Not everything is beneficial.* There are some things that should never be paired together; Christianity and sexual immorality being one.
- The opposite extreme is played out in 7:1-7. Think swing of the pendulum. The thinking goes, okay, if not all things are beneficial, 6:12-20; then nothing is beneficial, 7:1-7. Nothing is to be celebrated. Nothing is to be enjoyed. Do you know what that's called? Asceticism. Asceticism is a harsh treatment of the body for the sake of appearing more spiritual. Asceticism is as [Michael Smith](#) says, "a more rigorous practice of the faith than normal for the average Christian. It can involve a variety of practices: abstaining from certain things normally considered good and adding further requirements or routines. Asceticism encourages the idea of a double standard, with a spiritual elite set about the general level of the Christian."¹
- Christians from time immemorial have struggled to find the balance between the extremes of excessive liberty and permissiveness on one end and extreme self-denial for the sake of holiness on the other end. For example. Some early Christian groups, we're talking first and second centuries, rejected marriage, wine and meat.² In the 3rd and 4th centuries the monastic movement began as some tried to "achieve a pure Christianity and a deep communion with God which they considered unattainable in the existing churches."³ So they withdrew. [Athanasius](#), the 4th century bishop of Alexandria said of [Antony](#), one of the first ascetics, that

¹ Tim Dowley, ed. *The History of Christianity*, p. 212.

² Ibid, p. 213.

³ Ibid, p. 213.

he "would eat only once a day after sunset, and sometimes he did not taste food for two or frequently four days. His food was bread and salt; he drank only water."⁴ You even find ridiculous stories of hermits living in complete isolation on the top of rock pillars out in the desert or walling themselves in caves in order to deny themselves and become more spiritual.⁵

- Paul says in Colossians 3:23 that yeah, these things *have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.* Asceticism appears wise. It appears to be spiritual. But it's not. The way of the cross demands a middle ground between liberal permissiveness and asceticism. Balance.

Transition

I think the Corinthians were struggling to find balance. I think they're swinging wildly from one side of the balance board to the other all because they didn't understand how the cross was supposed to change their lives. Some slipped into this extreme permissiveness where anything goes, 6:12-20. And others slipped into asceticism; this extreme self-denial, 7:1-7.

- Look at [verse 1](#) of chapter 7. Apparently the Corinthians had written Paul a letter which hasn't survived for us. He says. *Now for the matters you wrote about.* In this letter to Paul something the Corinthians said caught his attention. Red lights. Buzzers. Bells. Whistles. Another sign of cross-deficiency. And so Paul, as he's done several times already, he quotes their letter before making his point. And I like the ESV translation of verse 1 because it actually puts the words of verse 1 in quotation marks. I think this is another one of the Corinthian slogans. *"It is not good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* Just imagine these super-spiritual Corinthians flaunting their spirituality with this phrase.
- Traditionally this passage is taken as Paul's preference of celibacy over and against marriage. In other words, as the NIV puts it, *it is good for a man not to marry* or as the NLT says, *Yes, it is good to live a celibate life.* If you can, the traditional interpretation goes, stay single—it's the preferred life. But because of the rampant sexual immorality around you, go ahead and get married. I want to take a different approach. I think the grammar, context, and Paul's theology elsewhere in the New Testament all suggest another interpretation.
- I think this passage is about asceticism. This is not a new idea. Origen argued for this in the 3rd century. The issue, I believe, was a false spirituality that expressed itself among the married couples in Corinth. I think some married Christians in the church were overreacting to the immorality in their culture and maybe even in their own church and they went to the opposite extreme of abstaining from sex within marriage. Husbands and wives were denying each other sex in order to be more spiritual—less like the world. When you take the cross out of the Christian life you're left with extremes. Everything is permissible, 6:12-20. Even sex with prostitutes, 6:12-20. And the opposite extreme. No sex. At all. Period. Not even in marriage. "That'll make us super-spiritual for sure" I think the Corinthians probably thought. Paul brings both camps back to the middle.
- Instead, Paul says, sex must have a proper place in the context of marriage. Sex is good. Marriage is good. That fits what the rest of what the Bible says about sex and marriage.

⁴ Ibid, p. 212.

⁵ Ibid, p. 214.

Basically, what I think he's saying to them is that pleasure and spirituality aren't incompatible. And so, [verse 2](#). *Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.* He doesn't mean get married because you can't control yourselves. Although he says something like that in verses 8-9. We'll talk about those verses in a couple of weeks. What he meant was, on account of the rampant sexual immorality around you husbands and wives keep having sex with each other. Stay as you are. Don't stop.

- Paul literally says in [verse 5](#) stop defrauding, stop taking what rightfully belongs to the other. *Do not deprive each other.* You can't just stop the sexual part of relationship for the sake of wanting to be spiritual. Husbands you don't own your bodies. [Verse 4](#). Wives you don't own your bodies. Fulfill your marital duties to each other. In [verse 3](#) the command actually reads "give back that which is owed."⁶ You owe it to each other to maintain the sexual part of your relationship. Why? Because the danger is that in depriving, defrauding each other in that area you open yourself up to temptation. *Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

Transition

Again, I think we're prone to extremes. In our desire to become more cross centered, to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to deny self and become more distinct, and different and salty; the danger is in giving up what God has declared good for the sake of trying to be more spiritual. It doesn't work like that. That's not Christian spirituality.

Proposition

- **If we're not careful the way of the cross, this denial of self, can lead to asceticism**

Transition

I think, in all honestly, we get the way of the cross confused with way of the ascetic—just like the Corinthians. We look so much like the rest of the world so in order to fix it—boom, we swing too far. Asceticism.

- Follow this line of thought. Our lives should look different than they look. Part of the Corinthian problem, part of our problem, is that our lives look too much like the rest of the world. Christian preaching looks too much like other kinds of popular speech patterns. Church leadership apes the business world. Christian marriage doesn't differ a whole lot from marriages without Christ. All along the way in this letter Paul's antidote to these areas of sameness with the culture is the cross. When life is filtered through the cross, a life of self-denial, a life of humble service like Philippians 2 talks about, that kind of life is different. The way of the cross, denying self and daily taking up Jesus' cross, will necessarily mean that our lives look radically different than the way the rest of the world lives.
- But there is a huge difference between denying self, the way of the cross, and denying stuff, asceticism. For example. There is a huge difference between having no material possessions because you've denied stuff—stuff is bad—which is not what the bible teaches; and having no material possessions because you've denied self and generously given all your stuff away.

⁶ Blomberg, p. 133.

Do you see the difference? There's an enormous difference. In the words of [Warren Wiersbe](#), "To deny self does not mean to deny *things*. It means to give yourself wholly to Christ and share in His shame and death...to take up the cross means to identify with Christ in His rejection, shame, suffering, and death."⁷ And that life. That life of identifying with Jesus; of identifying with him in his shame and humiliation and rejection and death. That kind of life is not the life of the ascetic. The life of the ascetic and the way of the cross are diametrically opposed. **And if we're not careful the way of the cross, this denial of self, can lead to asceticism.**

- Sometimes people think that when you follow Jesus all that's left is a bland, two-dimensional, monochrome, flavorless kind of life that's incapable of enjoyment or pleasure. You hear it all the time. If you become a Christian you have to give up stuff; whatever it might be. And sometimes I think we encourage this mentality. Sometimes I think we think that if we renounce pleasures we can rise to some new spiritual height. No. The Christian life is not anti-pleasure. The problem is not pleasure. God created pleasure. As one man put it, "The problem is not the world's pursuit of pleasure. The problem is that the world pursues pleasure outside of God. The one word that destroys pleasure is sin."⁸ We too easily fall into the trap of thinking the more you give up, the more you renounce the more spiritual you are. At its core that's a thoroughly pagan idea. That's not Christianity. That's Buddhism.
- You see, the story of the Bible is the story of the God of lavish excess. Turn with me to Genesis 2:9. Look what it says there. God doesn't put just one tree in the Garden. God *made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food*. He could have just made functional, utilitarian, trees. No. They were pleasurable for the eye and they were lusciously sweet. He's the God of lavish excess. Why is a spawning brook trout drenched in color? Why purple mountains majesty? Is not the God of the Bible the one who leads his people to lands flowing with milk and honey? Excess. Abundance. How does the language of the Bible describe heaven? Streets of gold. Cities made of gemstones. Things are excessively engineered way above and beyond what they need to be. How does Jesus describe the Kingdom of God in Luke 14? It's a lavish banquet. Excess. And God's the gourmet God who heaps on us a feast of good things to indulge in. The ascetic life is bread and water while the God of biblical Christianity sets before us a gourmet feast.

Conclusion

- Isak Dinesen's story [Babette's Feast](#), is about a strict, dour, extremely religious community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two very religious elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere ascetic employers, the two sisters, demand she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."
- One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the town is approaching,

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe in *A Time To Be Renewed*. Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 5.

⁸ John Piper, *Light and Heat*, "Undoing the Destruction of Pleasure," 2-12-01.

Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

- At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they give in, "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating the sinful meal as long as they don't enjoy it.
- Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.
- Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The people force it down without enjoyment. And although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine. The finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, ascetic, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and enjoying and delighting in and praising God for their many years together. The entire community, this pack of Pharisees, is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."⁹

⁹ Victor Pentz, from the sermon "The Gourmet God," delivered at Peachtree Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia (11-23-03).