

II

Holiness in Body

NO, I BEAT MY BODY AND
MAKE IT MY SLAVE SO THAT
AFTER I HAVE PREACHED TO
OTHERS, I MYSELF WILL NOT
BE DISQUALIFIED FOR THE
PRIZE.

1 Corinthians 9:27

True holiness includes control over our physical bodies and appetites. If we are to pursue holiness we must recognize that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we are to glorify God with them.

Twentieth-century Christians, especially those in the Western world, have generally been found wanting in the area of holiness of body. Gluttony and laziness, for example, were regarded by earlier Christians as sin. Today we may look on these as weaknesses of the will but certainly not sin. We even joke about our overeating and other indulgences instead of crying out to God in confession and repentance.

Our physical bodies and natural appetites were

created by God and are not sinful in themselves. Nevertheless, if left uncontrolled, we will find our bodies becoming "instruments of wickedness" rather than "instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). We will be pursuing the "cravings of sinful man" (1 John 2:16) instead of holiness. If we watch ourselves closely, we can see how often we eat and drink just to gratify physical desire; how often we lie in bed in the morning simply because we don't 'feel' like getting up when we should; how often we give in to immoral looks and thoughts simply to satisfy the sin-tainted sex drive within us.

Michel Quoist in his book, *The Christian Response* says, "If your body makes all the decisions and gives all the orders, and if you obey, the physical can effectively destroy every other dimension of your personality. Your emotional life will be blunted and your spiritual life will be stifled and ultimately will become anemic."¹ Over 200 years ago Susannah Wesley wrote, "Whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind — that thing is sin to you."²

The Apostle Paul emphasized the need to keep our natural appetites and desires under control. He spoke of his body as his adversary, as the instrument through which appetites and lusts, if left unchecked, would war against his soul (1 Corinthians 9:27). He was determined that his body with these appetites would be his slave, not his master.

Paul further urged us to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, and to not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1-2). Quite possibly there is no greater conformity to the

world among evangelical Christians today than the way in which we, instead of presenting our bodies as holy sacrifices, pamper and indulge them in defiance of our better judgment and our Christian purpose in life.

I am not here singling out those who have a so-called "weight problem." Those of us who can eat what we please without gaining weight may be more guilty of gluttony and indulging the appetites of the body than the person who struggles — often with failure — to control his appetite for food. On the other hand, the overweight person should not excuse his failure. We should all examine ourselves as to whether we eat and drink to the glory of God, recognizing that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit.

The Mormon people are noted for their abstinence from tobacco, liquor, and all beverages containing caffeine. We Christians may shrug off their abstinence as legalistic and as one more group's list of prohibitions. But we should not miss the point that their actions are a practical response to their belief that their bodies are the temple of God. For the Christian, his body truly is the temple of God. How sad, then, that a false religion should be more diligent in this area than we Christians. Let me be emphatic: I am neither approving nor disapproving the Mormons' particular list of prohibitions. But we need to ask ourselves if our consumption of food and drink is controlled by an awareness that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Another reason we must closely govern our

indulgence of food and drink is that the person who overindulges his body at this point will find it more and more difficult to mortify other sinful deeds of the body. The habit of always giving in to the desire for food or drink will extend to other areas. If we cannot say no to an indulgent appetite, we will be hard pressed to say no to lustful thoughts. There must be an attitude of diligent obedience in every area if we are to succeed in mortifying any one expression of sin. Thomas Boston wrote, "They that would keep themselves pure must have their bodies in subjection, and that may require, in some cases, a holy violence."³

Along with such sins of the body as sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires, Paul also mentions greed, which he says is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). While greed often manifests itself in its basic form — the sheer love of money for money's sake — it more often is seen in what we call materialism. Not many of us want to be extremely rich; we just want all the nice things the world around us considers important.

Materialism wars against our souls in a two-fold manner. First it makes us discontent and envious of others. Second, it leads us to pamper and indulge our bodies so that we become soft and lazy. As we become soft and lazy in our bodies, we tend to become soft and lazy spiritually. When Paul talked about making his body his slave, so that after having preached to others he himself would not be disqualified, he was not thinking about physical disqualification, but spiritual. He knew well that physical softness inevitably leads to spiritual

softness. When the body is pampered and indulged, the instincts and passions of the body tend to get the upper hand and dominate our thoughts and actions. We tend to do not what we *should* do, but what we *want* to do, as we follow the craving of our sinful nature.

There is no place for laziness and indulgence of the body in a disciplined pursuit of holiness. We have to learn to say no to the body instead of continually giving in to its momentary desires. We tend to act according to our feelings. The trouble is, we seldom "feel" like doing what we should do. We don't feel like getting out of bed to have our morning time with God, or doing Bible study, or praying, or anything else we should do. That is why we have to take control of our bodies and make them our servants instead of our masters.

The place to start controlling the cravings of our physical appetites is to reduce our exposure to temptation. Our sinful cravings are strengthened by temptation. When a suitable temptation is presented to us, our cravings seem to get new vigor and power. Paul had definite words of instruction for us on this subject. He told us, "Flee the evil desires of youth" (2 Timothy 2:22). Some temptations can best be overcome by fleeing. He also said, "Do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). Do not plan ahead or make provision for ways to indulge your bodily appetites.

Several years ago I realized I had developed a craving for ice cream. Now there is nothing wrong with ice cream in itself; it was just that I had

indulged myself so much that it had become a craving. When I shared this problem with my wife, she stopped keeping ice cream in the freezer. She helped me stop making provision to fulfill that particular desire which, through overindulgence, had become sin for me. Several years ago I also cancelled my subscription to a popular magazine because I noticed many of the articles tended to stimulate impure thoughts in my mind.

We are to flee temptation and take positive steps to avoid it, and we are to avoid thinking how to gratify our sinful desires. "A prudent man sees evil and hides himself; the naive proceed and pay the penalty" (Proverbs 27:12).

We should also study our sinful desires and how they rise up against us. John Owen said, "To labor to be acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions of the success of sin, is the beginning to this warfare."⁴ Consider beforehand. It is amazing how often we walk into known areas of temptation without any plan or resolution as to how we will react. If you have a weakness for sweets as I have, and you must go to the church pie social, plan beforehand what you will do. A number of years ago, a friend who was a new Christian was invited to a roller skating party with a Christian youth group. He decided not to go because, before becoming a Christian, he had frequently made "pick-ups" at roller rinks. He felt that at that time in his growth, to return to that environment would tend to stimulate his old lustful desires. So he decided to "flee," to "make no provision for the flesh." He was able to do this

because he considered beforehand the possible consequences of going to a seemingly innocent roller skating party.

God expects us to assume our responsibilities for keeping the sinful desires of the body under control. It is true we cannot do this in our own strength. Our sinful desires, stimulated by all the temptations around us, are too strong for us. But though we cannot do it by ourselves, we can do it. As we set ourselves to the task in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, we will see Him at work in us. We will fail many times, but as we persevere, we will be able to say with Paul, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

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- NOTES: 1. Michel Quoist, *The Christian Response* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1965), page 4.
2. John Kirk, *The Mother of the Wesleys* (Cincinnati: Poe and Hitchcock, 1865), page 178.
3. This quote from Thomas Boston is taken from an old magazine article in the author's files. Unfortunately, neither the title of the magazine nor the date of publication was listed on the clipping.
4. John Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, page 31.