

Certain Bible passages can infuriate people and bring meaningful conversation to a standstill, even among Christians. I have studiously avoided those passages. I didn't want the hassle. Now, I find that I welcome them in conversations; not because I have all the answers, but because every one of them has unexpected wisdom worth exploring. Here's an example.

The Apostle Peter once bravely spoke to Christian women in the congregations he pastored. He said: **Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight** – 1 Peter 3:3-4.

We have no way of knowing how women in those long-ago congregations responded to the apostle's foray onto turf where the angels of heaven fear to tread. I would be surprised if he didn't get pushback. Women then like women now cared about how they looked, and like women today those women did with hair, jewelry, and clothing what they needed to do to look good.

My interest today in this touchy topic is to introduce a biblical theme we bypass the way we pass by a thousand things of interest everyday and never notice. I'm talking about the human body. It is the body we pamper with clothing, hair salons, and jewelry. It is the body we pamper with pleasure, sleep and food. It is the body that stops us in our tracks with fatigue, illness, and pain. The body is very demanding.

I wonder if the unexpected wisdom that hides in Peter's perilous pastoral advice is that the body can become so demanding that people care more for their animal necessities than for their spiritual powers and possibilities. The antidote to that danger is not to despise the body, as some Christians perennially do. We find the proper antidote to this danger in the biblical revelation of God and His purpose for Man. That purpose has determined that the body has an indispensable role in godly living. That seems counterintuitive, until we remember Jesus' words to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane: **"The spirit is willing but the body is weak"** – Mark 14:38. The human body and holiness go together. Let me show you how in the biblical revelation.

Your Body a Temple

Let's begin with 1 Corinthians 6:19. **Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?** I have a small book in my library called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. I will someday, no doubt, write a companion piece to that little classic, and I will call mine *The Life of God in the Body of Man*. The body, not the soul, is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember the theme of my December sermons, the Incarnation? **The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us** – John 1:14. The breath-taking belief of the Church is that God who created the universe became one of us at a particular time and place, speaking a particular language, with a particular color of skin, and being socialized among a certain group of people with 2000 years of tribal memories.

It was God's life in a Man's body. Jesus is God in Jewish flesh. God likes bodies. God made bodies. God is pleased to announce that your body is home to the Holy Spirit, and that confers on your body with all its beauty, power, aches, and pains the status of a temple of God. Treat it like a temple; don't treat it like a tenement. This way of thinking about your body has an immediate bearing on your New Year's resolutions. What did

you say your New Year's resolutions were for 2012? Since your body is a place of honor, don't dishonor it with smoking, drinking, overwork, drugs, and being overweight.

The next piece of God's revelation talks about how to use your body in a positive way to honor your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Your Body, God's Toolbox

We find this remarkable passage about the body in Romans 6:11-13. **In the same way count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** The three words **dead to sin** don't make sense to us. We don't talk like that. But the idea behind the words is pretty straightforward.

Becoming a Christian is a change in personal status greater than leaving your native country to become a citizen of a foreign country. If you have a sudden conversion to Christ like I did, you feel the change immediately. If your conversion is more gradual, it will take longer for you to feel the change.

The change is renouncing life without God. Your old life without God is over, as if a kind of death had taken place. That's how the apostle wants all Christians to think about themselves. **Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** From now on, swiftly or gradually, you learn to think about all of your life with Christ in mind: what would please Him; what would not please Him?

Verse twelve encourages us to live like that. **Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.** In practical terms the apostle was saying, **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good** – Romans 12:21.

What catches my eye in verse 12 is the apostle's reference to **your mortal body**. He unfolded his underlying idea about our bodies in verse 13. There we see more clearly why the body has an indispensable role in human spirituality.

Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have returned from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

Verse 13 envisions your body as a tool chest. Your eyes, ears, tongue, hands, and feet are the instruments in that toolbox. The question is: How are you going to use these tools? The tools are neutral. How we use them is anything but neutral.

One use is for evil, **as instruments of wickedness**. We've used them like that. That's why we make New Year's resolutions; we are dissatisfied with what we have made of ourselves. The apostle said, "Do it differently." He went on to say, **"Offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."** Use your hands to help someone in need. Use your tongue to praise God. Use your brain to plan and execute good things. And what did you say your New Year's resolutions were for 2012? How will the parts of your body be most useful in keeping those resolutions?

If resolutions are nothing but good intentions, you'll be the same old person next year. But if you use your body to turn intentions into actions, you will be much more likely to have success. Don't underestimate the power of your body to shape your soul. You can see that in the next piece of biblical revelation.

Your Body the Untamed

I rode a horse once in my life. I'll never forget it. A group of us had gone to a place where people could ride horses on nearby trails. The ride was uneventful until we

neared the end of the ride. Somehow, I dropped the reins. The horse sensed it could run free, and did it run! Downhill all the way to the stables! There was nothing I could do to get off. I kept my feet in the stirrups, dug my knees into the side of the horse, got my bottom off the saddle, held on to the saddle horn for dear life, kept my head down, and I rode that beast until she got home. It was exhilarating. It made me appreciate bridle reins. I haven't been on a horse since.

That memorable moment has a bearing on the indispensability of the body for our spiritual lives, because it has a bearing on another passage about the human body. The Apostle Paul wrote this one too. You'll find it back in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. This verse introduces an uncomfortable dimension into our discussion about the body, exertion. Running is exertion. Treating your body like a temple and not a tenement will require exertion. Offering the members of your body as instruments of righteousness will require exertion.

The apostle continued in verse 25: **Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown of laurel that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.** Exertion pays off for an athlete. Exertion pays off for believers, whether it is keeping your New Year's resolutions or something else. Keep the payoff in mind, when you think you can't keep going.

And then the apostle got personal in verse 26. **Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man shadow boxing.** He was purposeful. He meant his exertion to count for something good. And how, exactly, did he exert himself? He did not tell us exactly, but in the next verse he told us enough for us to act. **No, I beat my body and make it my slave.** To change the word picture: "I put a bridle on this horse and keep the reins in my hand, so that the horse does what I want it to do and not what the horse wants to do."

The word **beat** is strong. The word **slave** is strong. We would choose different words. We would say, "I push my body and make it do what I want." The word *push* is strong. How I push my body, and how you push your body might look very different, but the outcomes might be exactly the same for both of us; we would be in control of our bodies; our bodies would not be in control of our choices.

The apostle wasn't through in verse 27. He went on to say the most important thing of all. **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.** In the language of sports we would say, "If I'm going to talk the talk, I've got to walk the walk."

I'd like to get personal about that. I want the gap between the kind of person you know me to be in public and the kind of person my wife knows me to be in private to grow less and less with every passing year. More than that, I want the gap between the kind of person my wife knows me to be in private and the kind of person God knows me to be to grow less and less with every passing year.

It is the work of a lifetime. It is the prize I press on to win. One of the large obstacles in my quest is the regrettable habits I have used my body to form over the years. And so, I carry on the slow discipline of pushing my body and making it do what I want it to do so that the gap between my words and my walk will lessen with each passing year.

Anything in my life can become the target of this discipline: preaching, loving my wife, how I spend money, New Year's resolutions, what I daydream about – the list goes on and on. Does any of this resonate with you? Are there not others here who refuse to be defined by “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things” (Mark 4:19), and who hunger and thirst for righteousness? What we do with our bodies is indispensable to satisfying our hunger and thirst for God. With that we come to the crowning use of the body.

Living Sacrifices

Back to Romans 12:1: **Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer you bodies as living sacrifices.** No pious sounding words like: “Offer your heart and soul to God.” It's bodies, those demanding miracles that define so much of our lives. **Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.**

The decision to offer your body to God as a living sacrifice ranks right up there with the decision to get married or move across the country or start a new business. You don't enter into it lightly or unadvisedly. Neither do you refuse to enter into it lightly or unadvisedly. The decision, words, and emotions will be as unique as you are, but they will capture this idea: “Lord, here it is: hands, feet, tongue, brains eyes, ears. It's all yours. I want to use my body to honor you and not to dishonor you.” You can make that offering before you leave your seat this morning. I'll give you a chance to do that shortly.

Back to teaching your body to do what you want it do and not dictating what you do. Bodies are like small children. You will be in control, or they will be in control. Bodies need to learn restraint. They need from time to time to be denied what they clamor for, including sometimes good things, like food.

You can fast. You can fast from things other than food. During Lent, which begins on February 29, you could fast three or four days a week from Facebook or surfing the web on your smart phone. You don't do it just to show you can do it; you do it as a way to say to God, “My body is yours. I can renounce even my body's rightful needs for a while to teach it to serve your purposes.” Don't try this alone. You need a companion on the journey. Next Sunday, Pastor Mark Smith talks about the importance of having someone walk with you on your journey of keeping New Year's resolutions. You don't want to miss that.

David Novak is the CEO of Yum Foods, the parent company of Taco Bell and KFC. Once a year he has lunch with billionaire, Warren Buffet, at a KFC in Omaha, the home of Buffet's company, Berkshire Hathaway. He once asked Mr. Buffet what he looks for when he acquires a company. Buffet said this:

“I'm looking to buy companies that are run by painters who are working on a painting that isn't finished yet. They know what the painting can be, and they are passionate about making it as great as it can be” (*Taking Them with You*, 44).

That's what you are: God's painting, and you too are painting it, and the painting isn't finished yet. If you think you are finished, all the New Year's resolutions in the world are useless. You have given up.

God hasn't given up. He has begun a good work in you, a little masterpiece. But in a miracle and a mystery, He won't finish it without your exertion. So what will you be satisfied with: self-imposed mediocrity or a divine masterpiece that you have had a hand in shaping?