

When Freedom Becomes Bondage: A Biblical Perspective on Substance Use

Hard Questions, Honest Answers: What the Bible Really Says

By Douglas Humphrey

I read a headline the other day that said, "More Americans are addicted to something than ever before—but fewer think they have a problem." And they weren't just talking about drugs or alcohol—they were talking about screens, sugar, shopping, caffeine, approval, even exercise. It's the strange paradox of our age—slaves who call themselves free.

For me that thing is food—specifically, overeating and junk food. I've wrestled with my weight for most of my adult life. At my heaviest during COVID, I was 250 pounds. When I see the words "all you can eat," it's like a personal challenge. And Sheila—God bless her—has never been shy about calling me out, but she does it in a way that's both respectful and convicting.

Here's what I've learned through my own struggle: you don't have to touch a drop of alcohol, pop a pill, or vape to be addicted. All of us have freedoms that aren't "necessarily sinful," but somewhere between "I'm free to do this" and "I can't go without this," the line gets crossed. And when it does, freedom turns to bondage.

Your Perceived Liberty Can Trap You in Sin—Choose Wisely

1 Corinthians 6:12-13

The Apostle Paul writes: "Everything is permissible for me," but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me," but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will do away with both of them. However, the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

There was a popular catchphrase floating around Corinth: "I am allowed to do anything." That was their mantra. Their reasoning went like this: "Since Christ erased my guilt... since His life was substituted for mine... since my past, present, and future sins are covered—I'm free to live however I want."

In other words: "Jesus has me covered, so why not?"

It's like a spoiled kid racking up charge after charge on Mom and Dad's credit card. Swipe it for anything, because they know they'll never see the bill. No ownership. No responsibility. Just indulgence.

That was Corinth. And if we're honest, that's us. We pull the same stunts with our so-called freedom. We justify what we want to indulge in by saying:

- "A little won't hurt."
- "Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission."
- "It's not technically forbidden in the Bible."
- Or the classic—"I'm grown, I can do what I want."

But God cuts through all of that with one piercing statement: "Not everything is beneficial."

That means yes—you might be free to do it. But no—it doesn't mean you should. Why? Because freedom in Christ was never about how far you can go, but about how much you love Him and how your choices impact others.

The Greek word Paul uses for "beneficial" means profitable, advantageous. That's the question: does it profit your walk with Christ? Does it build others up? Does it make you stronger or weaker in the Spirit?

Paul's telling us: real freedom isn't just about what you're allowed to do. Real freedom is about having the wisdom and courage to say no when it doesn't benefit your soul.

Let's be practical: in our culture, adults have the legal right to drink, to smoke, to use certain substances. But here's the filter Paul gives us:

- Does it strengthen your spirit?
- Does it improve your witness?
- Does it build your health?
- Does it deepen your relationships?

If it fails that test, it's not worth doing.

Don't Be Mastered By Your Freedoms

There was a day when I prided myself on drinking the old heads under the table. Seeing how many blunts I could smoke until I passed out. I lived convinced I was "free to do as I please." My motto was... I'm a grown man.

But all that "freedom" left me empty. Withdrawn. Broke. Hard to be around. And needing more and more just to cope. At my lowest I remember sifting through ashtrays for roaches and hustling people for cash so I could get another drink.

I thought I was free—but I was enslaved to the bottle. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "I was mastered by it." That's his second response to those of the "I am allowed to do anything" camp. Yes you are free to indulge, but your indulgences should not master you.

That's the Surgeon General's warning label written in invisible ink on the back of all our so-called freedoms: "The freedoms you indulge in, the substances you enjoy, come with hidden dangers of addiction and dependency."

What starts as freedom—"I can have a drink whenever I want"—can quickly slide into bondage—"I need a drink just to relax."

- "Let me smoke one to take the edge off."
- "Let me pop a few more pills because my anxiety's up today."

That's not freedom anymore—that's slavery.

Paul refuses to be mastered by anything except Christ. That's the difference between true freedom and fake freedom. True freedom means you can say "no"... and actually mean it. If you can't say no, if you're hiding it, making excuses for it, or panicking without it—it's not freedom anymore. It's your master.

Christian freedom was never freedom from moral responsibility. It was freedom for honoring God with your whole self. And when indulgence shifts from occasional enjoyment to regular need—you've crossed from liberty into bondage.

What You Do With and To Your Body Matters More Than You Realize

1 Corinthians 6:14-17

Corinth had this mindset: "The body doesn't really matter. It's temporary. It's just a shell. What I do with it isn't that important."

But Paul corrects that thinking. He says: "God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power" (v.14).

Translation? Your body isn't meaningless. Christ's resurrection guarantees your resurrection. That means God didn't just save your soul—He has eternal plans for your body.

What you put into your body, what you do with your body, isn't just about the here and now. That drink, that smoke, that pill—it touches the very vessel God intends to raise up and glorify. What you put into your body affects a vessel that is destined for resurrection glory.

It goes deeper still. Verse 15: "Don't you know that your bodies are a part of Christ's body? So should I take a part of Christ's body and make it part of a prostitute? Absolutely not!"

Think about that. If you're in Christ, your body isn't yours anymore. It's His. You've been grafted into Him. He's the Head—you're a member. That's not just in heaven one day—that's right now.

So let me ask you: would you take Christ's body and unite it to something destructive? To something that clouds your mind, chains your will, poisons your witness? Absolutely not. And yet—every time we use our so-called "freedom" to indulge, that's exactly what we do.

Your physical body is literally a member of Christ's body, with Him as the head over us Christians. What you allow to master you doesn't just affect you, it affects Christ's body—the church... all of us.

The Snake Bite Illustration

Picture this: a venomous snake bites your hand. The poison doesn't stay in your hand—it spreads through your bloodstream. It attacks your heart, your liver, your nervous system. The whole body suffers because of one small bite.

That's what happens with sin and addiction. When one member of Christ's body is poisoned by substance abuse, the toxin spreads:

- Compromised judgment wrecks your family.
- Hidden habits poison your marriage.
- Dull spiritual senses weaken the whole church.

The poison never stays isolated—it affects Christ's entire body.

Paul lowers the boom in verse 16. Sexual sin, he says, creates a deep union—it's more than physical. And in the same way, substances create a false union. They become false lovers. They offer relief, comfort, acceptance—but in the background, they're chaining you.

At first, you don't notice. But one day you wake up and realize you can't easily say no. Can't skip the drink. Can't handle stress without the pill. Can't relax without the smoke. What promised freedom has become your master.

The shackles were always there—you just didn't feel their weight until you tried to walk away.

And here's the terrifying part—it's not just physical, it's spiritual. What you choose to do with your body affects you on the deepest level.

Verse 17 says: "Anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him."

So every time you reach for your "freedom," you're choosing which union to strengthen: the union that destroys you, or the union that gives you life.

That's the question—are you feeding dependence on chemicals, or are you feeding your dependence on Christ?

Your body isn't just a temporary container for your soul. It's part of God's eternal plan. One day He will raise it, transform it, and glorify it. That means every choice you make with your body today echoes into eternity.

So no—this isn't just about substances. This truth applies to every addictive pattern:

- Overeating
- Screen addiction
- Social media validation
- Workaholism
- Body obsession (which include body modification: tattoos, piercings, injections, implants, to name a few)
- Approval seeking
- Gambling
- Compulsive spending
- Even caffeine dependency

If you can't go without it—it owns you. And if it owns you, it's your master.

But here's the hope: Christ came to set captives free.

Because the resurrection reminds us: your body matters to God. And your choices matter for eternity.

Pursue Purity and Honor God's Temple—Your Body, His Dwelling Place

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

Paul doesn't mince words here. Verse 18: "Flee sexual immorality."

Not walk. Not negotiate. Not flirt with the edge. Flee. That's the strongest possible language—like someone yelling "Fire!" in a crowded building. You don't stop to ask questions. You don't grab your stuff. You run. You get distance between you and danger.

Now Paul is talking about sexual sin, but the principle applies to every sin that violates the body—God's temple. Just like you run from sexual temptation, you run from substances that want to enslave you. You don't test your limits. You don't hang around in the smoke. You flee.

But isn't it strange how sin works? At first it feels awkward. Unnatural. Even painful. Like the first time someone inhales a cigarette—it makes your lungs burn. But then the pull comes. The allure whispers: try it again. And again. Until one day it doesn't just feel natural—it feels like part of who you are.

I know—I've been there. When I quit smoking, it took two years before I stopped holding my pen like I was taking a drag. Even after I kicked the habit, the mannerisms lingered. That's how sticky sin is. It doesn't just touch your body—it gets into your identity.

The bottom line is this: sins against your body are uniquely destructive.

Paul says in verse 18 that sexual sin affects the whole person in a way other sins don't. Why? Because it hijacks God's temple. It removes your body from His control and unites it with something outside of His design.

And here's the connection—substance abuse does the same thing. It doesn't just mess with one part of your life—it hijacks the whole thing. It scrambles your memory. Warps your personality. Clouds your judgment. And worst of all, it dulls your ability to hear from God.

The sin of addiction doesn't sit quietly in the corner. It takes over. It hands the keys of God's temple to a chemical. Symbolically? Addiction walks up to God's front door, nails an eviction notice to it that says: "I live here now." And from that moment on, that substance calls the shots.

But Paul won't let us forget: our body isn't just a shell. It's God's dwelling place. Verse 19—"Don't you know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?"

Think about that. When you know company's coming over, what do you do? You clean the house. You cut the grass. Stock the fridge. Change the linens. Why? Because you want your guest to feel welcome. And you don't want them to think that you're a slob.

Well, you have a permanent house Guest—God the Holy Spirit. The third Person of the Trinity lives in you. And if anybody deserves a clutter-free, addiction-free, sin-free home—it's Him.

After all, He's the true Owner. Lest you forget, Paul says in verse 20: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price."

The price? The blood of Jesus. The cross wasn't just about saving your soul—it was about reclaiming your body. He bought it. He washed it. He made it His dwelling place.

You don't belong to you. You belong to God. That means you don't get to treat your body however you please. The temple you have is from God.

The sin of addiction doesn't just break your body—it violates God's ownership.

Think of it like this—your body is a house, and God's name is on the deed. He's the Owner, you're just living in His place. But every time you give yourself to sin, you're letting intruders trash the house and rearrange the furniture. It's not just damage to the property—it's disrespect to the Owner.

And that's why Paul ends with the only right response: "So glorify God with your body."

Because how you treat your body matters to God. When you honor it, you're shouting gratitude to the One who redeemed you. But when you abuse it, neglect it, or hand it over to sin—you're screaming, whether you realize it or not, "Your sacrifice wasn't enough."

And none of us would ever stand at the foot of the cross and say that out loud. But every time we light up, roll up, take up, get drunk, pop the pills, doom scroll, eat too much, binge entire series, mark, mar, cut their bodies purely for looks—that's exactly what our life is declaring.

And here's the ugly truth—too many pulpits and too many pews stay silent on this because we're hooked on the same junk as the world. So we excuse it away, because if we called it out we'd have to get clean just like them. And most of us just aren't willing to do that, noting the Bible doesn't explicitly forbid my addiction of choice.

But God's Word hasn't changed. The command still stands. The call is still clear. The only right response to a Savior who bled for your body... is to glorify God with your body. Your whole body.

So let me ask you: if your body is God's temple—when's the last time you cleaned it out?

When Jesus walked into the temple in Jerusalem, He didn't just shake His head at the mess. He grabbed a whip, flipped tables, and drove out anything that didn't belong. He made it clean for His Father's glory.

And that's exactly what He wants to do in you.

Cleaning the Temple: Practical Steps

Practically, how do you "clean the temple"?

1. **Remove the defilement.** If there's a habit, substance, or practice that's polluting your body—get it out. Don't negotiate with it. Don't store it "just in case." Throw it away, delete it, cancel it, cut it off.
2. **Repair what's been damaged.** If you've neglected your health—sleep, diet, exercise—start small, but start now. You wouldn't let the walls of God's temple crumble without fixing them.
3. **Guard the entrance.** Decide now what you will and will not let in—through your eyes, ears, mouth, or relationships. Post spiritual "guards" at the door.
4. **Get help and support.** Consider joining a recovery ministry or support group. We will walk with you through your addition and into freedom and support you on your journey.

Spiritually, how do you "clean the temple"?

1. **Repent and re-dedicate.** Confess the ways you've misused your body. Ask the Lord to forgive you and take back full control of His temple.
2. **Fill yourself with worship.** A clean temple isn't an empty temple. Fill your life with the Word, prayer, and praise so God's presence is unmistakable in you.

When Jesus cleansed the temple, He didn't do it halfway—He restored it to its purpose. That's the same call for us: get your temple clean, keep it clean, and use it for one reason—

"Glorify God with your body."

This message is part of the "Hard Questions, Honest Answers" series, addressing what the Bible really says about the challenges we face today. It's impossible to worship Jesus, be His witness, and live in peace when you're chained to your addiction. Here at BFC we're about breaking chains and helping people gain their freedom from sin and from addiction.