



Sexuality

Part 4 – Same Sex Relationships

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Current Cultural Moment

B. Pastoral Burdens

Ephesians 4:11-16 – **11** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 – I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

My responsibilities as a pastor are to:

1. The faith
2. The whole church
3. Christians who are same-sex attracted and/or LGBTQ-identifying
4. Non-Christians

II. THE BIBLICAL TEACHING

A. Jesus' hermeneutic on marriage and sexuality

Jesus had a consistent hermeneutic (pattern of interpretation) for understanding and applying the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) on marriage and sexuality. When you see this pattern, all New Testament teaching on marriage and sex starts to make sense, as the Apostles and NT writers follow the pattern they learned from Jesus.

The pattern: God's original, pre-fall creation shows us His will for sexuality and marriage. The Law, given after the fall, restated this pattern. The Gospel restores us back to God's original design. When Jesus teaches kingdom ethics for marriage and sex, he always references the original creation. He also makes one notable addition: celibate singleness also becomes a noble pattern of discipleship in the kingdom of God.

MATTHEW 19: And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" ⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

B. Jesus' hermeneutic for applying OT Law

How do Christians apply the Old Testament to following Jesus? Why do we follow some of the Law's commands but not others? For example, Leviticus commands not to eat shellfish (11:9-12) nor to wear clothes made from two kinds of cloth (19:19). It also prohibits sex between two men (18:22). Is it inconsistent for Christians to teach that the prohibition on homosexual sex is still binding but the prohibition on shrimp and oysters is not?

Once again, Jesus modeled a hermeneutic for applying the OT Law to New Covenant believers. We see this hermeneutic starting with him and maintained by the Apostles in the early church (sometimes through great debate and controversy).

Biblical scholars have often observed that Jesus and his Apostles treated different parts of the Law with different authority for New Covenant believers, but these differences were not random. They followed a consistent pattern based on whether the law in question was moral/ethical, ceremonial, or civil:

1. MORAL: Jesus did not relax the moral, ethical laws but repeated them in a way that emphasized their original intent. The moral laws from the Old Testament are repeated in substance throughout the New Testament as instructions for New Covenant believers.

MATTHEW 5: ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

2. CEREMONIAL: Jesus claimed to supersede the ceremonial laws – including the dietary laws, sacrifices and temple. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross fulfills and replaces the Old Covenant ceremonies and sacrifices.

Mark 7: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

John 2: ¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Luke 22: ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

3. CIVIL: Jesus creates a new, multi-ethnic people who are not citizens of one particular state. Therefore, he does not include the civil laws that governed Israel's politics in any of his teaching to his disciples.

Matthew 28: ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus also claimed to author the "new covenant" that Israel's prophets foretold. One of the new covenant promises was that God would write the Law on our hearts. For example:

Jeremiah 31: ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

In light of the pattern above, this "law within them" must be referring to the moral law, not the civil or ceremonial. Sinclair Ferguson explains:

Indeed we are entitled to ask: What is it in Torah (law) that has been written on our minds and in our hearts in the new covenant? Can it be other than the Decalogue we are now empowered to love and keep? It cannot be the ceremonial and civil applications of it. We love the law because it is "spiritual" (Rom 7:14), that is, it is in harmony with the Spirit. And in the Spirit we delight in the law of God after our "inner being" (Rom 7:22). After all, the Lord Jesus, the man of the Spirit par excellence, loved and fulfilled the law...because in our humanity he genuinely loved what God's Word told him God himself loved. – Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 167

Why is all of this important? We will see that the New Testament's sexual ethic mirrors the Old Testament's – including, but not limited to, its teaching on homosexuality. This is exactly what we should expect given the way of interpreting and applying the Old Testament that Jesus himself taught and modeled.

C. Genesis 1 – 2

The creation stories of Genesis 1-2 and the fall of Genesis 3 do not discuss homosexuality. But they have to be included in any study of the issue because they provide the framework for the rest of Scripture's sexual ethic. Both creation accounts depict the complementary nature of male and female:

Genesis 1:26-27 – ²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over

the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 2:21-25 – ²¹ So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

What the text means

For our discussion below, it’s important to notice that male and female were created to complement each other. In Genesis 1, the words “male” and “female” are precise words that emphasize the distinct genders (there are also more generic words for “man” and “woman” that are not used here). There is also a sense in which the mutuality of the genders reflects God’s image – both male and female are necessary to *image* God.

Genesis 2 is the foundational text about marriage. The “one flesh” union of the man and woman was understood in Jewish culture to be consummated through sexual intercourse. So in Genesis 1 and 2, we have image of God, sexuality, and complementary nature of male and female all tied together.

How it applies to Christians

As we’ve seen above (Section A), these passages form the basis for Jesus’ view of marriage. As we will see below, the Apostles pick up the same hermeneutic first taught by Jesus. For example, Paul often refers back to the original creation when teaching on marriage and sexuality. Sometimes he quotes directly from Genesis. Other times, he echoes Genesis’ language, often using the same precise terminology (see Ephesians 5:22-33). We will see this principle in play when we study Paul’s difficult teaching on homosexual practice in Romans 1.

D. Leviticus 18 & 20

18:22 – You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination

20:13 – If a man lies with male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

What the text means

- The phrase “lies with” was the typical Hebrew way of referring to sexual intercourse

- Both mentions of homosexual sex are embedded in sections that mention other sexual practices such as adultery, bestiality, and incest. All of these are seen as out-of-step with God's creation design for male-female sexual intercourse in marriage. This is captured by the phrase "as with a woman," which contrasts male-male sex with the original created intention.
- The general term "male" is used, and in 20:13 both partners are implicated for having "committed abomination." This is important because there was a practice called *pederasty*, where older men had sex with young boys. Some interpreters want to say Scripture does not condemn homosexual relations between consenting adults, only pederasty. However, if pederasty was in view, the general term "male" would not have been used, as there was a more specific term for "boy, youth." Furthermore, the young boy in a pederastic relationship was considered taken advantage of and would not have been implicated. The reasonable conclusion is that Leviticus is describing consensual sexual intercourse between two adult men.

How it applies to Christians

The hermeneutic principles above are important for applying OT Law to New Covenant believers:

- We should always look for direction and consistency in the New Testament before applying OT Law to Christians. If the prohibition on homosexual sex is part of the moral teaching of the OT law, we would expect to find it repeated in some form in the NT. As we will see below, that is indeed the case.
- The "death penalty" in 20:13 has sometimes been abused to justify harsh treatment of homosexuals in the Church and in societies. Again, the hermeneutic principles modeled by Jesus teach us what to do with this. The punishment is a civil penalty, applicable to Israel's theocracy. These laws are not given to the Church, nor are they given to any other state.

Questions & Counter-Arguments

Leviticus is often used to charge the historic Christian teaching with inconsistency. For example in his book *God and The Gay Christian*, Matthew Vines writes:, "If you read Leviticus, you'll likely be surprised at the scope of its regulations and prohibitions. Christ's death on the cross liberated Christians from all that...Which leads to the obvious question: Are Christians also released from the prohibitions of male same-sex intercourse?" Vines goes on to argue that the distinction between moral and ceremonial laws should not factor in:

So Christians have long tried to distinguish between laws we should still seek to follow, calling them "moral" laws, and law that pertained only to ancient Israel, which we often call "ceremonial" or "ritual" laws. There is something to be said for this approach, but the Old Testament itself never makes those distinctions...we need to bear in mind that distinctions such as "moral" and "ceremonial" are of our own making, not derived from the Old Testament.
(82)

Of course, Vines is right that this distinction is not named in the Old Testament. But he's wrong that this distinction is "of our own making." Rather, this distinction describes what we see in the New Testament's use of the Law. The Bible itself tells

us how to interpret the Bible. The distinction is not something Christians simply made-up. It was first modeled by Jesus and then by the Apostles. By departing from this distinction, Vines is departing from the way Jesus and the Apostles read the Bible.

E. Romans 1

Romans 1 contains Scripture's most exhaustive commentary on homosexual practice, including male-male and female-female sex:

Romans 1:18-32 – ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

What the text means

In order to grasp this text, it's important to see what it says about homosexual practice within its larger argument. So first we should look at the whole argument of Romans 1:18-32, then at the specific way in which Paul describes gay and lesbian sexuality.

1. The argument of Romans 1:18-32

In 1:18-23, Paul depicts the root human condition as “ungodliness and unrighteousness,” which he defines as not honoring God as God (v21) and exchanging the glory of God for images in the creation (v23). This idea is repeated for emphasis throughout 1:18-32 and includes exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (v25), and not seeing fit to acknowledge God (v28).

Most commentators note that there is close parallel between Paul’s depiction of humanity here and the “fall” of Genesis 3. In both cases, the root issue is the same: Adam and Eve valued their own wisdom above God’s and desired something He created over God himself. When this happens, we make an exchange: (1) We *under-value* God, his word, and fellowship with him. (2) We *over-value* things he created. (3) Given these appraisals, we make what seems like a good deal by exchanging God for images. This is the root human problem, sometimes called “sin.” It’s not just bad behavior. It’s a heart-level distortion of what’s most important.

Paul then gives many examples in 1:24-32, one of which is homosexual practice. As you read this list, it’s important to keep several things in mind: (1) Everyone is implicated as sinful. Even as we look at how Paul describes homosexual practice, we are reading it as fellow sinners. This should cause us to read with empathy and humanity, not with condemnation and self-righteousness. (2) All of these are expressions of a *deeper* problem, what we’ve done with the glory of God. (3) Therefore, we should ask how all of these practices picture and depict the deeper problem.

Finally, it’s important to notice the phrase repeated three times: “God gave them up to...” (v24, 26, 28). It means that God lets these distorted desires run free. Here’s the flow: Humanity under-valued God, which led to distorted desires, which God gave them over to. Paul is pointing to all of these things as *evidence* that humanity is under the power of sin. To say it another way, his point in Romans 1 is not, “If you do these things, you are automatically condemned and without hope.” Rather, “When you see this, you should know there’s a deep problem, for which you need a real solution.”

Paul will go on to present the gospel as the “power of God for salvation,” the power that frees us from our deep problem. So if you sense yourself described anywhere in Romans 1, the response Paul wants to elicit is *not*, “I guess that means there’s no hope for me.” Rather, “I badly need the gospel of Christ.”

With this in mind, let’s look at the meaning of key terms in v24-27:

2. Women & Men

Paul uses very specific Greek words for the people involved: *theleias* (*women*) and *arsenes* (*men*). These are not the terms he normally uses to refer to men and women; he only uses them here and in Galatians 3:28. The more common terms were *aner* (*men*) and *gune* (*women*).

Why use these words? These are the same words used in the creation account of Genesis 1:27 – “In the image of God he created them, male (*arsenes*) and female

(*theleias*) he created them.” So Paul is intentionally evoking the pre-fall creation and God’s original design for men and women.

3. Natural; Contrary to nature

Paul describes sexual relations as either “natural” (literally “the natural use”) or “contrary to nature.” Classifying something as natural or unnatural was common in the ethical language of his era. By using the Genesis 1:27 words for “women” and “men,” Paul ties the concept of “natural” to God’s pre-fall creation (following the hermeneutic of Jesus). So “natural” doesn’t just mean, “Whatever comes naturally.” Rather, “What God intended in his original creation design.”

Paul’s word choice has this effect: What God intended in his original creation was for men to have sexual intercourse with women and for women to have sexual relations with men. Instead, they’ve exchanged this natural order for what is contrary to God’s original design.

4. Dishonoring of their bodies among themselves

To dishonor something is to not give it the respect or glory that fits it, so we have to ask: how do our bodies have honor? What is the glory for which they were created?

According to Genesis 1:27 (where Paul derives his definition of “natural”), the image of God is contained in the union of male and female. In other words, God is not fully imaged in male alone or female alone but in the union of these two different genders. Elsewhere, he says this parallels the union of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:25-32). Our bodies fully image God when male is joined to female in sexual, marital union. That is the honor for which they were created.

Having established this, Paul then cites same-sex sex as an example of dishonoring our bodies (in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 he describes all sexual immorality – i.e. sex outside of marriage – in the same way). The line of reasoning seems to be something like this: Female-female sex and male-male sex do not image God in the same way male-female do. When we use our bodies in this way, we’ve exchanged the image of God (male-female) for an image of the creature (male-male, female-female).

How it applies to Christians

- We should notice that Romans 1:26-27 is not command or instruction. It’s a description of homosexual practice as an example of the deeper problem. The purpose of this description is to show us the depth of sin so that we’ll be ready for and look to the gospel. So this is the primary way Paul intended to “apply” Romans 1 – look for a righteousness outside yourself in Christ.
- Beyond that, it will become apparent that if this is an example of a life that rejects God’s will, then same-sex sex will not be consistent with following Jesus, and Christians who have homosexual desires will need to think carefully about how to handle them.

Questions & Counter-Arguments

Romans 1 is helpful for thinking through several questions that are often raised about Scripture’s teaching on homosexual practice:

1. What about orientation or a fixed pattern of attraction?

A common argument against applying Romans 1 to modern homosexual relationships is that Paul had no concept of innate homosexual orientation, expressed in a mutual and loving relationship.

However, historical scholarship since the 1980's has demonstrated that people in antiquity did know about those who were inherently attracted to the same sex.¹ Paul would have certainly been familiar with this concept. It is also important to note that he describes the sexual union as an exchange of "natural relations" for those that are "contrary to nature."

Still, it's true that many who are attracted to the same sex attest that they did not consciously choose this orientation. Some have been aware of it from an early age. The question then follows, "If I was born this way, how could living out my sexual desires be wrong?" Christians have sometimes responded to this by insisting that sexual orientation is a choice, not something you're born with. This is not a good line of argument, nor is it necessary for honoring the biblical teaching. Scripture does not always root sinful desire in conscious choice; its understanding of the fall is more sophisticated.

A better line of reasoning goes like this: Because the post-fall creation is "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:28), many things that "occur naturally" are not God's original design or intention. This means that all of us are born with distorted desires and inclinations. This is sometimes referred to as our sinful nature, where the fall has touched all aspects of our humanity.

Therefore, many things are natural in the sense that they happen instinctively and seem to "just be true." But they are simultaneously "contrary to nature" as Paul uses the term in Romans 1 because they are not God's original pre-fall design. This is Paul's point about all of the sinful practices he lists in Romans 1: They arise from a contrary-to-original-design desire, but they feel normal to us because of the fall.

This means two things: (1) Christians who wish to preserve Scripture's view of sexuality do not need to insist that sexual desire or orientation is a conscious, moment-in-time decision. (2) God's love for us through Jesus does not mean that he affirms everything about us as-is. There are some aspects of "me" that are God's original design for me and must be affirmed and cultivated. And there are other aspects that belong to the "old self" and must be put off (Eph. 4:17-24).

2. What about committed same-sex relationships?

Those who want to square homosexual practice with Christianity will sometimes claim that committed, monogamous same-sex relationships can be consistent with following Christ. Often it is claimed that in Romans 1, Paul was describing promiscuity, exploitive relationships, and prostitution that was part of pagan idol worship. He did not have a category for committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Therefore, we can't apply something that he wrote for a first

¹ See research by William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament* and *The New Testament on Sexuality*, cited in "The Bible and Same Sex Relationships" by Tim Keller, June 2015 - <https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the-bible-and-same-sex-relationships-a-review-article>

century Greco-Roman context to today. Several things should be noted in considering this argument:

- There were many forms of homosexual practice in Greco-Roman society, including longer-term stable relationships. These were referred to throughout classical literature, often using the same Greek phrase that Paul used, *kata physin* (“contrary to nature”).² It is very likely that Paul knew about these and is adopting the same language, though his “contrary to nature” gets colored by the OT background.
- First century Greek also had language to describe exploitive forms of sex, but Paul chose to describe it as a mutual relationship of two consenting partners (“passion for one another”).
- Idolatry in Romans 1 is defined as exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (v25). This has a much broader range than simply what was done in pagan idol temples. Combined with the fact that Greco-Roman culture knew many forms of homosexual practice, it is unlikely that Paul only had pagan temple worship in mind. His readers would have certainly understood this as a general description of homosexual practice per se. In fact, Paul seems to be holding up homosexual practice as an example of worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. The line of reasoning is not, “Some idol worship includes homosexual sex.” Rather, “Homosexual practice is itself a form of idolatry.”
- In Romans 1 Paul is not emphasizing promiscuity. He is emphasizing the character of the sexual union as contrary to God’s original design. Recall that Paul is intentionally adopting language from Genesis’ creation account, where marriage and sexual union are intertwined. Therefore his depiction in Romans 1 is more than capable of being applied to a monogamous relationship akin to marriage. Such a relationship would still be an exchange of God’s original design for committed, monogamous, sexual marriage between a man and a woman.

F. 1 Corinthians 6

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 – ⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

² For examples of this pattern in ancient literature, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 387 and 405 (fn. 22)

What the text means

Paul had founded the church in Corinth and wrote this letter years later in response to problems that had arisen. Many of the Corinthian Christians were living in ways that were not consistent with the gospel, and the church as a whole was not trying to encourage people toward repentance. In chapters 5-6, Paul gives several examples, including sexual immorality “of a kind that is not even tolerated among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife” (5:1-2). The Corinthians were also infested with greed and infighting, some of them suing each other in public court rather than seeking reconciliation (6:1-8). Paul’s consistent exhortation is that the Corinthians should not allow these kinds of things to go unchecked in the church.

1. “Men who practice homosexuality”

This phrase is constructed with two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. *Malakoi* was often used in Greek for the passive partner who was penetrated in homosexual intercourse. The word *arsenokoitai* is not nearly as common. In fact, the first time this word ever appears in extant Greek literature is here in 6:9. It is quite possible that Paul coined the word himself. How did he come up with the word?

He likely got it from Leviticus 20:13, which uses the phrase “if a man lies with a male as with a woman.” The Greek translation that Paul would have learned reads *meta arsenos koiten gynaios*, where *arsenos koiten* means “lies with a male” or “takes a male to bed” and refers to sexual intercourse with another man. When Paul uses the word *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor. 6:9, he puts together the two Greek words used in Leviticus 20:13. In other words, he is intentionally reaching back to Leviticus’ description of homosexual sex. When combined with the *malakoi* (the passive partner), it is evident that Paul is describing the two men involved, the active partner and the passive partner.

2. Important Clarification

Some older translations refer to “the effeminate and homosexuals” as not inheriting the kingdom of God. For example, The New American Standard (NASB) uses the word “homosexuals” and the King James Version (KJV) reads “effeminate.” This has caused a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding.

The emphasis in 1 Corinthians 6 is on the action not the state of being. So *malakoi* is not referring to men who have effeminate characteristics; it’s referring to men who are penetrated in consensual sexual intercourse. In the same way, *arsenokoitai* is not referring to men who have homosexual orientation or desire. It’s referring to the active partner in intercourse.

Because of these older translations being imprecise, some have mistaken the message of 1 Corinthians 6 to be that “any man who is effeminate or homosexual will not inherit the kingdom.” This has caused some to think that they are automatically condemned simply for being effeminate or homosexual in orientation. But Paul’s writing is much more precise; he is referring to sex not to an orientation. This is why most newer translations are careful to emphasize, “Men who *practice* homosexuality.”

3. “Will not inherit the kingdom of God”

How do we make sense of this stark warning? Is it at odds with the gospel of

justification by faith alone? Here Paul is echoing a common theme in the New Testament: same gospel that justifies *always* sanctifies (See Part 1, “Sanctification and The Gospel”). The kind of faith that relies on Jesus for justification and sanctification is the faith that will inherit the kingdom of God.

In 6:9-11, Paul describes those “who will not inherit the kingdom of God.” The point is not “anybody who has ever done this is doomed.” Rather, “anyone who lives this way without repentance.” The list is curated to contain the very things that the Corinthians were allowing to run free in their lives and church (greed, idolatry, adultery). This is why it a serious error for a church to affirm that same-sex sex (or any kind of sexual immorality) can be consistent with following Jesus: it is explicitly named as a lifestyle of unrepentance that won’t inherit the kingdom of God.

4. “And such were some of you...”

In v11 Paul says, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” This should serve as proof that sexual orientation and lifestyle disqualifies no one from faith in Jesus. The essence of faith in Jesus is repentant faith that trusts him for justification, sanctification, cleansing. Furthermore, we receive the Spirit of God, which brings new power for a new kind of life.

Questions & Counter-Arguments

1. It’s not possible to know what Paul means by *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

This objection holds that the meaning of the two key Greek words is so vague and elastic as to be untranslatable. Indeed, there has been much academic debate around the meaning of these two words (especially *arsenokoitai*), but the existence of debate does not mean that we can’t arrive at reasonable conclusions.

The word *malakoi* did have wide application in Greek, often referring to men who have feminine characteristics or act like women. But there are good reasons for narrowing Paul’s usage down to a sexual context only: (a) it was often used in the broader Greco-Roman culture as slang for men who play the passive role in homosexual sex; (b) in the context of 1 Cor. 6:9 other terms referring to sexuality are used, so it is likely that Paul has the sexual emphasis in mind.

Since the term *arsenokoitai* is not widely used, the argument is that there’s not enough evidence to know what Paul intended. But as we’ve already demonstrated, the word is an obvious compound word derived from Leviticus 20:13. Those who dismiss this argument have usually pre-determined that Leviticus 20:13 can’t have any application for Christians.

2. The phrase *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* only refers to exploitative forms of sex

It is also argued that these terms are probably referring to exploitative forms of sex such as wealthy men using their privilege to coerce sex from other men. But this becomes unlikely when we realize that Paul is referring to *both partners*. In exploitative sex, one person is taking advantage of the other, and only the one

doing the exploiting would be seen as “unrighteous.” But with *malakoi* (passive) and *arsenokoitai* (active), Paul is depicting both partners as consenting and participating. In fact, he likely coined the term *arsenokoitai* precisely because Leviticus 20:13 encompassed all forms of homosexual practice.

G. 1 Timothy 1

1 Timothy 1:8-11 – ⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

What the text means

The phrase “men who practice homosexuality” is the Greek word *arsenokoitais*, the same word used in 1 Corinthians 6 for the active partner in male-male intercourse (here, Paul does not add the corresponding word for the passive partner). See the section above for a discussion of the word’s origin.

The broader context of 1 Timothy 1 sheds more light on how Gospel ethics are consistent with the Old Testament. At the beginning of the letter, Paul references “teachers of the law” who don’t understand how to properly use the Law (1:7). Here, he is apparently referring to Judaizers, teachers who often followed Paul’s ministry and taught that Christians have to practice the entire Old Testament legal code (including dietary practices and circumcision) in order to be saved.

In 1:8-9, Paul asserts that though the Judaizers were wrong, there *is* a proper use of the law: it convicts us of sin; it helps us see what is “lawless and disobedient, unholy and profane.” Then, Paul recites a list that follows the outline of the Ten Commandments (especially Exodus 20:12-17). In the place where adultery appears, he lists two practices: the sexually immoral and men who practice homosexuality.

He goes on in 1:11 to describe all of these things as contrary to the gospel. So the logic flows like this: the moral teaching of the OT is consistent with the gospel. The gospel compels us to put our whole lives under the rule and reign of God. What does it look like to live under God’s rule and reign? The Ten Commandments help us by describing the kind of life God desires of his people. So again, the OT sexual ethic is still in play for Christians living under the gospel. The gospel gives us the power to live out God’s original design for humanity.

III. LIVING BY FAITH IN JESUS

A. Facing the tension

There is clear tension between desire for a same-sex sexual relationship and the teaching of Scripture. Scripture speaks from within the framework of the gospel. According to the gospel, God sent his Son into the world to live the life he originally designed and take all of our sin to the cross. He rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. His resurrection is a visible sign and a foretaste of the new kingdom to come. He did all of this for us as a gift of grace.

The fitting response to this gospel is faith. The kind of faith that Scripture describes is a *repentant* faith – the kind that turns from living under self-rule and lives under Jesus’ rule. Repentant faith takes seriously Scripture’s teaching, especially when it challenges our natural desires. Many Christians, have faced the tension by admitting that Scripture holds out two viable options for sexuality: (1) Heterosexual marriage and (2) Celibacy.

Some describe eventually becoming attracted to the opposite sex and entering into a marriage. Many others testify that their same-sex attraction continues and has not been changed. I believe both do happen. I do not doubt the testimony of some who say their sexual desires have changed. Nor do I doubt the testimony of the many who say their same-sex desire has not changed. For the rest of this section, I want to think especially for those who have ongoing, unchanging same-sex desire:

B. Remembering the gospel

The call to deny sexual desire and live celibately will seem impossible to many. One gay Christian man, Wesley Hill, describes his initial aversion to it like this:

There are other reasons the church’s traditional no to homosexual practice doesn’t seem compelling. One is that it seems out of character with the Christian message of love, grace, and abundant life. Occasionally it strikes me again how strange it is to talk about the gospel – Christianity’s “good news” – *demanding* anything that would squelch my happiness, much less demanding abstinence from homosexual partnerships and homoerotic passions and activities. If the gospel really is full of hope and promise, surely it must endorse – or at least not oppose – people entering into loving, erotically expressive same-sex relationships. How could the gospel be opposed to love? ...

On many late, lonely nights when my desires for gay sex seem overwhelming, I remember, “There’s an easy way of this frustration. I could find a gay partner and the long struggle of resisting temptation could be over.” To say no over and over again to some of my deepest, strongest, most recurrent longings often seems, by turns, impossible and completely undesirable. If a gay Christian’s sexual orientation is so fixed and ingrained that there seems to be little hope of changing it, should he or she really be expected to resist it

for a lifetime?" (Wesley Hill, *Washed & Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, p. 56-7 Kindle)

But Hill describes being able to trust Scripture's difficult teaching when he sees it *in the framework of the gospel*:

On the surface, the Bible and the church's demand for homosexuals not to act on their desires can seem old-fashioned, life taking, oppressive. But could it be that if I place that demand into a larger story, then perhaps – just perhaps – it won't seem as irrational, harsh, and unattainable as it otherwise might? Could the Christian story of what God did for the world in Christ be the framework that makes the rules – "Don't go to bed with a partner of the same sex." "Don't seek to cultivate and nurture desires and fantasies of going to bed with a partner of the same sex" – make sense?

These questions have been the deciding factor in my choice to say no to my homosexual desires. In the end, what keeps me on the path I've chosen is not so much individual proof texts from Scripture or the sheer weight of the church's traditional teaching against homosexual practice. Instead, it is, I think, those texts and traditions and teachings *as I see them from within the true story of what God has done in Jesus Christ* – and the whole perspective on life and the world that flows from that story...I abstain from homosexual behavior because of the power of that story." (60)

C. How the gospel enables a life of faith

Let's consider how the gospel enables, empowers, and makes possible a life of faith in Jesus for those who live in tension with their sexuality. I'm going to quote extensively from Wesley Hill as he describes how he lives out his faith in Jesus as a non-practicing homosexual, since the testimony will carry more credibility coming from someone who is living it out:

Justification

A Christian returns over-and-over to this foundation: "Because of Jesus, I am loved and accepted by God" (justified). This is where you have to live – especially when temptation and sin are strongest!

Christianity's good news provides – amply so – for the forgiveness of sins and the wiping away of guilt and the removal of any and all divine wrath through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Seen in this light, the demand that we say no to our homosexual impulses need not seem impossible. If we have failed in the past, we can receive grace – a clean slate, a fresh start. If we fail today or tomorrow in our struggle to be faithful to God's commands, that too, may be forgiven. Feeling that the guilt of past homosexual sins or present homosexual failures is beyond the scope of God's grace should never be a barrier preventing anyone from embracing the demands of the gospel. God has already anticipated our objection and extravagantly answered it with the mercy of the cross." (Hill, 63-64)

The end of shame

Reflecting on the imagery from 1 Corinthians 6:11, “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God:”

I know that whatever the complex origins of my own homosexuality are, there *have* been conscious choices I’ve made to indulge – and therefore to intensify, probably – my homoerotic inclinations. As I look back over the course of my life, I regret the nights I have given in to temptations to lust...And so I cling to this image – *washed*. I am washed, sanctified, justified through the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Whenever I look back on my baptism, I can remember that God has cleansed the stains of homosexual sin from the crevasses of my mind, heart, and body and included me in his family, the church, where I can find support, comfort, and provocation toward Christian maturity” (49)

Tension with my sexuality

The gospel calls us to be transformed into the image of Jesus, which means we have to deny parts of ourselves that are not part of his original design for us. And yet, as the gospel plunges us deeper into tension with our old selves, it also sustains us in that tension until we are completely new:

The gospel *resists* the fallen inclinations of Christian believers. When we engage with God in Christ and take seriously the commands for purity that flow from the gospel, we always find our sinful dreams and desires challenged and confronted. When we homosexual Christians bring our sexuality before God, we begin or continue a long, costly process of having it transformed. From God’s perspective, our homoerotic inclinations are like “the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst” (to borrow Frederick Buechner’s fine phrase). Yet when God begins to try to change the craving and give us the living water that will ultimately quench our thirst, we scream in pain, protesting that we were *made* for salt. The change hurts. ...

And this means that our pain – the pain of having our deeply ingrained inclinations and desires blocked and confronted by God’s demand for purity in the gospel – far from being a sign of our *failure* to live the life God wants, may actually be the mark of our *faithfulness*. We groan in frustration *because* of our fidelity to the gospel’s call. And though we may miss out in the short run on lives of personal fulfillment and sexual satisfaction, in the long run the cruelest thing that God could do would be to leave us alone with our desire, to spare us the affliction of his refining care. (66-7)

This tension also helps us face an unconventional reality: Sex is not essential to full humanity. We can be fully-formed, fulfilled people without having sex.

“Jesus is the model of the fulfilled human being,” biblical scholar Walter Moberly writes. “The Gospels portray a compelling and attractive person, who engages seriously with people and is good company at a party. Yet all the evidence is that he lived as a sexual celibate.” It may come as a surprise in our age of personal gratification that Jesus never married and never had sex – with a woman or with a man. He never gave in to any lust. Although he

experienced every human temptation (Hebrews 4:15), he never sinned sexually. And yet he was the truest, fullest human being who has ever lived...

Does this mean that everyone who wants to share the true humanity of Jesus must be single and celibate? No. It does, however, shift the terms of our modern thinking about sexuality. It dislodges our assumption that having sex is necessary to be truly, fully alive. If Jesus abstained and if he is the measure of what counts as true humanity, then I may abstain too – and trust that, in doing so, I will not ultimately lose. (76-7)

A new family

If intimacy in sex is off the table, how does the gospel handle our need for *human* connection? Consider Jesus' teaching in Mark 10, where Peter complained that he had left many of his relationships to follow Jesus: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30) Reflecting on this teaching, Wesley Hill writes:

Jesus was referring to the community of his followers who would, after his resurrection, become known as "the church." Those who must sever their most cherished ties in order to follow Jesus – or those who must give up creating those ties in the first place – are not ultimately giving up human companionship. They are trading what seems to be the only satisfying relationships they have or could have for ones that will prove to be at once more painful (because of all the myriad effects of sin) and most life giving.

One of the most surprising discoveries I made...is that the New Testament view *the church* – rather than marriage – as the primary place where human love is best expressed and experienced. In the Old Testament, marriage was viewed as the solution to loneliness (Genesis 2:18, 24). Now, however, in the New, "the answer to loneliness is not marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ."

Perhaps one of the main challenges of living faithfully before God as a gay Christian is to believe, really believe, that God in Christ can make up for our sacrifice of homosexual partnerships not simply with his own desire and yearning for us but with his desire and yearning mediated to us through the human faces and arms of those who are our fellow believers. (111-12)

IV. FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH

A. We must repent of, not repeat, past sins and mistakes

1. Bigotry
2. Not distinguishing between orientation and sexual practice

3. Insisting that same-sex attraction is a conscious choice
4. Promising a change in orientation as a result of Christian faith (“conversion therapy”)
5. Families disowning gay children
6. Not creating a robust community that supports single, celibate life
7. Stigmatizing homosexual behavior more than other sexual sins

B. We must avoid the errors of revisionist teaching

1. Undermines the authority and intelligibility of Scripture
2. Breaks from Apostolic teaching
3. Creates disunity by departing from the historic, trans-cultural Christian faith
4. Absorbs the late-modern cultural narrative about identity and freedom
5. Affirms and encourages behavior that will not inherit the kingdom of God
6. Leads to revision of other major gospel doctrines
7. Is unfaithful to the office of pastor/elder

C. We have an opportunity to show the counter-intuitive beauty and wisdom of the gospel

1. The gospel creates new life within.
2. The gospel creates a new kind of community.
3. The gospel gives us a new kind of relationship with God and his word.
4. The gospel gives us a hope that far surpasses the “freedom” of late-modernity.