

Homosexuality Lev 18:20-28, Rom 1:24-27

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We're into the fifth in our series on sexuality and marriage.

And the topics just keep on getting harder.

Today's topic is homosexuality.

Why are the topics in this series so hard to speak about?

It's not because these are subjects about which the Bible is shy.

The Bible speaks clearly and unapologetically about all of them.

God has made us sexual beings

and our sexuality is often a significant part of who we are.

You know, I'm a chess player and a bush walker.

I really enjoy both activities.

But if I couldn't do one of them again,

it would be far less traumatic for me

than if I could never be sexually active again.

For many people, sexuality is a big part of who we are.

And it's a part of our beings

about which there is just so much brokenness

around us and inside of us.

So they are difficult topics.

And we need to acknowledge again today,

that there are church members for who this is a personal issue.

Some of you have close family members and friends

who are homosexuals.

And so we acknowledge that it is a stressful thing

to have the subject preached on.

But we must address the issue

because it's a burning issue in the community,

and Christian people need to know the mind of God

on the burning issues of their day.

So it's a difficult pastoral issue.

It's also a difficult issue in the community.

There are three things to say about that.

First, homosexuality is an identity issue for many homosexuals.

That is to say,

homosexuality is not just something I do,
it's something I am,
and it's something that is very close to the core of defining who I am.
I could change the football team I support,
but I can't change my sexuality.
It's something innate to who I am,
not choices I make.
I am an Australian,
but I could happily go and live in another country.
But I couldn't happily go and live without my homosexuality.
Homosexuality is a matter of identity for many homosexuals.

The Christian attitude to homosexuality is also a 'defeater belief'
for many in the community when it comes to the Christian faith.
That means that our attitudes to homosexuality
cause many in the community to write off Christianity
without even assessing its merits.

Here's how they would express it.

"If they believe that intolerant and bigoted stuff,
I wouldn't ever consider becoming a Christian."

We might think talking with them
about Jesus' death on the cross for their sins
is the most important message in the world.
But they won't give that a hearing
because of the stumbling block of what we teach about homosexuality.

Homosexuality is a matter of identity for many homosexuals.

It is a defeater belief
causing many in the community to reject Christianity.

Thirdly,

homosexuality is an issue of raised temperature in the community.

It's an issue about which if you express a different opinion,
people won't live and let live.

They will label you a hater or a bigot.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this
is the attitude towards Margaret Court.

Australians love their sporting heroes.

Let me be frank,
we have an unhealthy idolatry towards sporting success.
And Margaret Court is perhaps
the greatest female tennis player of all time.
She won the singles grand slam
of Wimbledon, US, French and Australian Opens in 1970.
She won two grand slams in mixed doubles and one in doubles.
She won 64 Major tournaments and 192 tournaments all up.
Margaret Court is definitely up there with Serena Williams
as a great tennis player.
And as we do, Australia honoured her
by naming a stadium in the National Tennis Centre after her:
the Margaret Court Arena.
But after she retired from tennis,
Margaret Court became a pentecostal pastor in Perth.
And she has publically taught a conservative view on homosexuality.
And so a campaign was started to remove her name from the arena.
It was spearheaded by Martina Navratilova,
another great tennis player who is also a homosexual.
Well that's one incident but it's symptomatic
of the raised temperature about homosexuality in community.

So this is a difficult issue.
It's difficult pastorally.
It's difficult in our community.

Before we turn to what the Bible says about it,
we need to make an important distinction.
We need to distinguish homosexual orientation and practice.
Homosexual orientation is when someone feels a sexual attraction
towards people of the same gender.
Homosexual practice is when someone engages in sexual activity
with a person of the same gender.
Now this is an important distinction
because when our community says someone is 'gay',
that means they have a homosexual orientation -
they feel attracted to people of the same gender.

But when the Bible talks about homosexuality, it talks exclusively about homosexual practice. It talks about people engaging in sexual behaviours with someone of the same gender.

Now this is important because the Bible is addressing the issue slightly differently from the way our culture talks about it.

We may need to translate the Bible's message so it can be heard by people from our culture.

And we may need to exercise caution that we aren't claiming the Bible says things it doesn't actually say.

So for example in 1 Cor 6:9,

it says that a list of various types of sinners won't inherit the kingdom of God.

Included in that list,

alongside a bunch of quite common sins including greed,

is a word that is translated in my Bible

'men who have sex with other men'.

But in the older version in the pews

it's translated 'homosexual offenders'.

It's good that the newer translation makes it clear

that it is the behaviour not the orientation that the verse refers to.

Otherwise many people from our culture would presume

that everyone who identifies as a homosexual would be included.

Well let's turn to the Scriptures

and see what they say about homosexuality.

A key text in the Old Testament is Leviticus 18.

Many people would turn to Genesis 19,

which is the story of the destruction of Sodom.

It's understandable,

especially given that in English the behaviour of the men in that chapter gave rise to an old fashioned word for homosexuals.

In days gone by, homosexuals were called Sodomites.

But when we read Gen 19,

we find that it actually is not a good passage

to guide our thinking on homosexuality.

The reason is that the behaviour that is condemned in that chapter is homosexual rape.

And so you actually can't draw any conclusion about what God thinks of a loving homosexual relationship from a condemnation of homosexual rape.

So we turn to Lev 18.

The key verse is verse 22,

"Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, that is detestable."

That's pretty clear.

Not much room for divergent opinions about what that means.

But what is the context?

The context is that the Israelites are coming out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land.

And God speaks to Moses,

warning him that certain behaviours of the people in Egypt

and of the Canaanite people

who they were displacing from the promised land

are not to be followed.

So this is verses 3-4.

"You must not do as they do in Egypt where you used to live,

and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan

where I am bringing you.

Do not follow their practices.

You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees.

I am the Lord your God."

And then there is a list of the behaviours

that the Israelites are not to follow.

It includes incest, adultery, child sacrifice,

bestiality and homosexual practice.

And then God tells Moses that such practices defiled the land.

Verse 28 says,

"If you defile the land,

it will vomit you out

as it vomited out the nations that were before you."

What does this tell us?

Well it's a graphic description right?

The land vomited out its inhabitants.

God has a visceral 'yuck I want to chuck up' reaction to these behaviours.

We also learn that God's reaction to those behaviours was not only when they were practiced by the people of Israel.

There were some things that God told his people to do simply as markers of holiness.

For example:

They were not make clothing from two separate materials.

They were not to eat pork and a range of other foods deemed unclean.

But for those kind of markers of holiness, there's no expectation

that people from other nations would observe them.

Nor are people from other nations judged for not observing them.

Don't think for a moment

that what we read about in Leviticus 18 is like these holiness markers.

Don't think for a moment that Leviticus 18

was just for that time and place.

This is what God expects of everyone.

For these behaviours,

God's expectation is that Israel will not behave in these ways,

and he judges pagan nations by evicting them from their land

when they behave in these ways.

God says,

Incest, adultery, child sacrifice, bestiality and homosexual practice

These are wrong for all people, all the time.

It's yuck.

It makes me want to chuck.

Don't do it.

OK moving along to the New Testament.

The key passage is in Romans 1.

There are three passages in the New Testament that mention homosexual practice.

I've already mentioned 1 Cor 6 and there's also a reference in 1 Tim 1.

But these two are both single verses

containing lists of behaviours to avoid.

Romans 1 gives us a few more verses to work with.

The basic message of Romans 1 from verse 18 is this, God's judgement on people failing to worship him is to let them serve their idols.

The story of Sodom is actually a rarity in our world.

Burning sulphur raining down from heaven

is not God's usual way of responding to sin.

Most often God's judgement is to give people what they want.

And so if you make an idol of sex,

sex will enslave you.

It will destroy your relationships and make your life a misery.

Now that could happen through promiscuity or through pornography, but in the verses we read, it happens through homosexual practice.

Homosexual practice comes

as a result of God giving people over to their idolatry of sex.

'Inflamed with lust for one another' is the description in verse 27.

Now of course many people in our culture

would balk at that assessment.

The dominant cultural narrative is

that homosexual people are just like heterosexual people,

except they are attracted to people of the same gender

rather than the opposite gender.

But the evidence actually fits the Bible not the cultural narrative.

There are studies done on the sexual behaviour of people in the US.

Satinover reports on the major study 'Sex in America' in his book 'Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth'.

Here's one statistic.

On average heterosexual Americans have 4 lifetime sexual partners.

Now from a Christian perspective,

you might say that this is three too many.

But this is just reporting the behaviour of the nation.

That's what people do.

But homosexuals on average have 50 lifetime sexual partners.

4 versus 50.

That's not just a little bit different,

it's a lot different.

And what it tells you is that the assessment of Romans 1 is on the money.

The practice of homosexuality is God giving people over to serve their idols.

Very often the practice of homosexuality is connected to enslavement to sexual idolatry.

That's not the only thing that you could say.

In some cases things will be different.

But taken across a society,

the generalisation has plenty of explanatory power.

To summarise,

the witness of the Bible

is that it is clearly and consistently opposed to homosexual practice.

The Romans passage includes female homosexuality

just in case we thought God only had male homosexuality in view.

We've looked at the main passages in the Bible that speak of homosexuality.

They seem very clear.

So here's the question.

Why is there confusion in the church about this issue?

Here are four reasons.

1. Sometimes people argue from slogans instead of what the Bible actually says.

So for example, 'God is love'.

It's true, the Bible tells us that God is love.

God is love and that is an absolutely central characteristic of his being.

But are the passages that tell us that God is love telling us anything about homosexuality?

No they are not.

We are told that God is love in 1 John 4.

It is telling us about the self sacrificial love of God giving his Son for the sins of the world,

and the consequence of this that we must love each other sacrificially.

It's nothing at all to do with homosexuality.
It's easy to argue from slogans.
At the same sex marriage plebiscite,
we saw the secular equivalent of the 'God is love' slogan.
'Love is love'.
But it's just a slogan.
I was talking to a friend of mine at SUTS.
Her husband left her one year ago.
He was trying to justify his decision to leave her and he said to her,
'love is love'.
In other words, I've found this new woman and I love her.
Love is love - I just have to go where the love leads me.
And my friend said to me,
"He justifies it on the basis of love.
But how is it loving to abandon the person
who you've made promises to?
How is it loving to abandon your three school age children?
How is it loving to go behind someone's back and have an affair?
I studied with this guy at Ridley.
He got better marks in his essays than I did.
And now he's reduced to trying to justify himself with cheap slogans.
When we avoid what the text says and use slogans
we are not respecting the God who revealed himself to us in his word.
We respect God by making a serious effort
to read and understand what he's telling us.

2. Reason number 2 there is confusion in the church.
Some Christians are unwilling to say something clear about this issue.
So the typical expression of this might be,
"I know good Christians who believe homosexual practice is wrong
and I know good Christians
who believe that homosexual practice is right.
I'm a humble person.
I don't want to pretend that I have more wisdom than anyone else.
So I don't want to come down on one side or the other."
Now let's give this reason it's due.
There are questions about which this is an entirely appropriate attitude.

For example if someone asks you
about what is going to happen at the end of the world.
Are you a premillennialist or an amillennialist?
You know what,
there are good Christians who go either way.
Each can marshal Biblical support for their belief.
I would have no issue
if someone didn't want to express an opinion on this subject.
The problem is when you try to run the humility line
on a subject about which the Bible speaks very clearly,
what you are actually saying is this.
"I don't want to humble myself under God's Word.
I know exactly what it says,
but it's very inconvenient for me to say it out loud.
I don't like people disagreeing with me."
In the end, that's not humility, it's cowardice.
And it's a failure to be humble
before the revealed will of Almighty God.

3. The third reason there is confusion in the church.

This is a pastoral confusion.

Basically the problem goes like this.

'I can't deal with certain relationships with people I love
if I continue to believe what the Bible teaches about homosexuality.'
I get it.

It's a very difficult issue.

As I mentioned earlier in the sermon,
for many homosexuals it is an identity issue.

They just won't buy a message like,

'I love you but I disagree with what you are doing.'

They say, 'This is my identity.'

If you disagree with what I am doing,
you are rejecting me.'

What's the way forward?

We have to realise that we aren't loving people
if we affirm in them what are destructive behaviours.

Satinova in his book that I mentioned earlier,

lists a bunch of objective measures:

decrease in life expectancy,

increase in fatal diseases,

increase in relationship breakdown.

On every measure,

homosexual practice is worse for people than alcohol abuse.

We would never affirm someone we loved in alcohol abuse.

We would take the risk that they might reject us,

and gently and lovingly encourage them to seek help.

4. The fourth reason there is confusion in the church.

Some people say,

"When they Bible writers wrote about homosexuality,

they were unaware that some people are born with same sex attraction.

If they had known that,

they would have said different things about it."

Unfortunately,

this fails to acknowledge that the Bible is the Word of God.

Did God know 3000 years ago

that some people are born with same sex attraction?

Or did God only discover it when people did?

Of course God knows everything about his creation.

And he caused to be written in Scripture

those things that we need to know to love him and serve him.

God knows what makes humans flourish,

and we try to edit or correct his Word at our peril.

So what is the way forward for Christians

who are sexually attracted to people of the same gender as them?

Well I want to give you two case studies

of how prominent Christian leaders have dealt with it in their own lives.

The first is Vaughan Roberts.

Vaughan is the vicar of St Ebbe's in Oxford.

Oxford is a University town and St Ebbe's is a university church.

It's a bit like the St Jude's in Carlton of Oxford.

It has 21 paid staff and 9 apprentices.

So Vaughan is serious heavy weight as a Christian leader.

He is also one of the best preachers in the world.

I heard him at SUTS a couple of years back,
and it was fantastic.

And Vaughan is same sex attracted.

He's has written a chapter on it in his book,
"Battles Christian Face."

How does he deal with it?

He's decided that to be faithful to God,
he needs to live a celibate life.

He chooses not to call himself 'gay' or a homosexual.

Instead he says he faces 'unwanted same sex attraction'.

He doesn't want to be defined by the sin he struggles against.

Anymore that you or I would want to be defined
as someone who has committed adultery in their heart.

It might be true.

But you wouldn't want to let it define who you are as a person.

Vaughan, has a small group of close friends
who he can be completely open with about his struggles,
who will pray with him and hold him accountable.

Vaughan finds that is how God ministers his grace to Vaughan
to overcome temptation.

The second Christian leader who is same sex attracted is Wes Hill.

Wes is assistant professor of biblical studies
at Trinity School for Ministry in Pennsylvania, USA.

We took the youth group to listen to Wes speak
at St Hilary's Kew last year.

Again, he's an acknowledged Christian leader
who speaks all around the world on this subject.

He's written two books,

"Washed and waiting"

and "Spiritual Friendship"

How does he deal with it?

Again, Wes has chosen to live a celibate life.

And for Wes, that has brought significant struggles
with loneliness and the need for companionship.

So what he has done has been to develop deep friendships.

One friendship is with a married couple where Wes has lived together with them for a number of years. It's not in any sense a sexual relationship. But neither are they simply housemates. They are friends who have promised to be there for one another come what may. Wes is godfather to the couple's children. If Wes moves jobs to teach at another seminary, then the family will move with him. And he won't accept another job without talking with them about how it would impact on them first. Wes holds out a challenge to the church. If we teach that what the Bible says is true, and people who are same sex attracted need to live celibate lives, then we need to be able to offer these kind of friendships, that make the celibate life a liveable option. His book 'Spiritual Friendship' explores how this might work. Unlike Vaughan, Wes does call himself a 'gay' Christian. Yes a celibate gay Christian, but a gay Christian none the less. Whereas Vaughan was concerned about defining himself by his temptations, Wes is concerned that the homosexual community hears him saying, "I am one of you. If you approach the church to help deal with your struggle, then I am here for you, I identify with you."

Well Wes and Vaughan have different approaches to living out their lives faithfully in the sight of a loving God. And that's OK. We are all different. We don't want to fall into the trap of saying, Vaughan Roberts is right and Wes Hill is wrong or vice versa. The point is that they are both committed to doing what the Bible tells them they must do: which is to stay celibate. They both experience this as a joy

and a channel for God's grace in their lives.
And they both have biblical reasons
for the other decisions they have taken.
Decisions that are made on subjects
that are not commanded in Scripture.
Scripture doesn't tell the same sex attracted Christian
whether to use the term gay or not.
It's a matter of wisdom
about which we can come to different conclusions.
I think there is plenty we can learn from both of Wes and Vaughan.
And if you would like to do that,
you are welcome to borrow their books and read them.

There may be folk here today
for whom sexual temptation, including homosexual temptation,
is a battle.
And we want to welcome you and love you and help you.
We all struggle with sin.
We're all in the same boat.
We're all beautifully made.
We're all tragically broken.
We're all rescued by Jesus and His cross.
And we're all called to die to self and live for Him.
And for each one of that that will look a little different.
But for those brothers and sisters here today
for whom sexual temptation, particularly homosexual temptation,
is a battle or a struggle,
we want you to know we love you and want to help you.
And for those with family members identifying or struggling
with these temptations and behaviours,
we also want to love and support you.

Let's spend some time in prayer about this subject.