

A Biblical Response to Homosexuality

This weekend conference on homosexuality is important for multiple reasons. Primary among them: in a church our size, inevitably some of us experience same-sex attraction. God calls us as a community to care for and support one another in our pursuit of virtue. The human need for personal connection and intimacy runs so deep, and the biblical opposition to homosexual practice is so resolute, that we dishonor both God and one another if we simply ignore this issue. So we face it squarely and ask: How can we encourage and support one another as we follow God, whatever challenges we face, including same-sex attraction? The issue is important also because sexuality, sexual purity, and same-sex attraction are common issues where our culture – not least in Massachusetts – takes exception to Christian ethic. We need to consider how to present and explain biblical teaching even where it is culturally unpalatable. So this week's devotional reflects on the Bible's teaching on homosexuality, setting it within the wider context of faith, sin, and salvation.

Day 1: Romans 6:1-14 Faith, holiness and salvation

The contemporary American church has abdicated biblical teaching on the necessity of post-conversion holiness. In the pursuit of numerical growth and cultural acceptance, the church has soft-pedaled God's hostility toward sin. Statistics on the (im)moral behavior of professing Christians indicate that a great many presume they are headed for heaven, when Scripture warns that they may instead be living toward hell.

We have become fixated with Christ's death for our sin, bringing salvation to those who believe in him. This is indeed a precious and biblical truth. But it does not stand alone. Christ did not merely die for us, any more than he merely died. He also rose from the dead, and he raised us with him: "If we have been united with him ... in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection... The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God." And so must we both die to sin, and live to God. Paul also warns: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." We use the latter verse in evangelism, but Paul was actually speaking to – and about – Christians!

This is the dual foundation for any discussion of sin: (1) sin brings eternal condemnation, for professing Christian no less than for atheist or agnostic; (2) salvation is not some free pass to sin with impunity. Rather, Christ died for our sin so that we can be forgiven *and* the risen Christ now indwells us so that we now lead holy lives. Anyone who offers you salvation without transformation, and eternal life without holiness, is a liar (1 John 2:3-6).

Day 2: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Sexual immorality is not the only kind of sin

Virtually every New Testament epistle includes a 'sin list', that is, a list of certain behaviors which result in exclusion from heaven. We draw three lessons from these sin lists. First, reinforcing yesterday's lesson, the biblical text appears to mean what it says. None of these lists says, for instance, "those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God, unless they have received Christ as savior." While conversion brings forgiveness, converts do not escape judgment if they continue in these sins. In fact, Paul here appears amazed that the Corinthians – like a great many contemporary Christians – fail to grasp such an obvious point: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived..."

Secondly, again reinforcing yesterday's lesson, forgiveness is possible, but not *just* forgiveness. Justification (freedom from the guilt of sin) is a Siamese twin, forever conjoined with sanctification (freedom from the power of sin): "Some of you were [unrighteous]. 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." Jesus does not just die for us; the Spirit also transforms us.

Thirdly, and today's new contribution, sin is a far wider category than just sexual immorality. Four of the first five items on this list are sexual (the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, non-celibate homosexuals), but then the list broadens considerably (thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers). The strongest statement of this kind actually comes in the prophet Ezekiel. Describing the city of Sodom, infamous for homosexuality (Gen 19:5), Ezekiel focuses instead on the heinousness of their disregard for the poor: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49).

Day 3: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Homosexual activity is not the only kind of sexual sin.

Once we narrow our focus from sin in general to sexual sin, we still do not end up with homosexual practice as a distinctive sin. Because it is not.

As we noted yesterday, Paul ends the preceding passage by referencing four types of sexual sin: "Neither the sexually immoral ... nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor non-celibate homosexuals ... will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10). Then, he goes on immediately in this subsequent passage to condemn the sin of heterosexual immorality, in particular, sex with prostitutes. His argument culminates in a command: "Flee from sexual immorality."

Paul's prohibition is not directed particularly at homosexual practice, but at any form of sexual congress outside of marriage: "All other sins a man commits [have no direct impact on] his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body." Sexual immorality is not only sin against one's own body, it is also

sacrilege: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit... You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” This warning is not just for those tempted by same-sex attraction. It is equally for dating or engaged couples tempted by premarital sex. And for married people tempted to adultery. And even for those tempted by pornography.

Day 4: Romans 1:18-32: Not even Romans 1 portrays homosexual activity as a uniquely sinful sin. Romans 1 provides the most extended statements against homosexuality in all of Scripture. Even here, however, homosexual activity is not portrayed as the worst sin. Paul focuses here on homosexuality not because he is homophobic, nor because homosexual practice is particularly heinous. Rather, it simply provides the most germane illustration of his point.

In 1:18-32, Paul argues that all people know something about God through the created order (even without access to the fuller revelation contained in Scripture). Yet that knowledge about God does not lead people to seek him. Instead, human beings turn away from God, even as he reveals himself.

Paul substantiates this charge by appealing to two classic sins against the creator God. One is the worship of idols. Idol worship is doubly sinful: it fails to worship the God who created us, and instead worships something we ourselves create. The other classic sin against the creator God is homosexual activity. This too is doubly sinful: it disregards our anatomical design as well as the biology of conception (Gen 1:27). So idol worship and homosexual activity are not uniquely sinful; the two are simply germane illustrations of rejecting the Creator.

Two other features in this text substantiate the conclusion that homosexual activity is not worse than other sins. For one, Paul condemns a great many other sins here: wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, etc. For the other, this entire line argument is a strategy designed to encourage moral indignation, in order to spring a trap on the self-righteousness: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else ...” (Rom 2:1). Anyone who condemns homosexuality as particularly sinful falls unwittingly into Paul’s trap.

Day 5: Matthew 16:21-27 Carrying our cross

None of the preceding softens the biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity. While some authors have employed various strategies in the effort to squeeze out room in Scripture for loving, monogamous, same-sex marital relationships, the Bible clearly and consistently opposes them.

As a result, those with same-sex attraction often find themselves between a

hard place and a rock. While some do enter satisfying heterosexual marriage, a great many others face a choice between perpetual singleness or egregious sin.

Faced with these options, what is a follower of Christ to do?

The answer is obvious, though it may also be painful. The answer is written on the cross, in the blood of the Son. On his way to the cross, Jesus called his followers to ... well, to follow (Matt 16:24-27).

The thing is, though, Jesus never restricted this cross-carrying to those who experience same-sex attraction. The heterosexual Christian may legitimately find (at least a measure of) fulfillment in marriage and family. Yet if the heterosexual never sacrifices in other ways for Christ, but constantly pursues only self-fulfillment, then he or she cannot claim to be following Jesus. He called us all to self-denial. The particular form of cross may differ from one of us to the next. But Christ intends each of us to carry a cross. What cross do you carry for Christ?

Day 6: Galatians 6:1-10 Carrying each other's burdens

We cannot rightly end the week with yesterday's reading. While the point is true, it does not stand alone. Jesus does indeed call us to carry our cross, but he calls us to more: he calls us also to help each other bear life's burdens. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). Paul later adds, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (6:10).

In this particular case, any single – whether heterosexual or homosexual in orientation – should find a welcome and permanent place in the hearts, homes, and families of others in our community. Those of us with homes and family have a responsibility to ensure that neither singleness nor same-sex attraction excludes anyone from long-term, caring, committed family relationships. It is not just an empty slogan when Scripture describes us as brothers and sisters in the family of God.