

“Homosexual Errors”

Romans 1:24-2:1

October 27, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

In our sermon series on New Testament morality, we want to take two weeks to consider the topic of homosexuality. I am giving more time to this topic than to some others not because the Bible does so, but because it is such a major issue in today’s culture. The biblical material on homosexuality is not abundant. In his chapter on homosexuality in his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays comments on this. “The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen brief references to it in all of Scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern—in contrast, for example, to economic injustice” (p. 381).

There are only three discussions of homosexuality in the New Testament. It is addressed here in Romans 1 and two lists of vices in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1. It is only here in Romans 1 that it is addressed in any significant way. What the Bible lacks in frequency, it makes up for in clarity. Despite the attempts of some to redefine the biblical words for homosexuality in such a way that gives permission for homosexual behavior, the overwhelming consensus of interpretation regarding this topic is unambiguous. Again, Richard Hays speaks clearly about this. “Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval... The biblical witness against homosexual practices is univocal” (p. 389).

We want to look today at this passage from Romans 1. Paul’s words here expose four common errors regarding contemporary views of homosexuality. Two of these errors are outside the church and two of them inside.

I. Suppression of Desires Is Unhealthy

The dominant view of our society is that sexual desires should be expressed, as long as the expression happens between consenting adults. This view goes even further and claims that it is harmful to suppress sexual desires. This goes hand in hand with our modern view of freedom, which says that a person should be allowed to do anything they want to do, short of bringing harm to others. In this view, the biblical option of celibacy is not given any serious consideration. Instead, the counsel given to those with homosexual desires is to “come out of the closet” and express their desires.

Paul’s teaching in this first chapter of Romans is completely opposite of this. Paul’s argument here is that the freedom to do whatever you want is part

of God's judgment. His reasoning works like this. Men and women see something of the nature of God in the natural order, in creation. But they suppress that truth because they don't want to worship God and submit themselves to him. So they worship the creation rather than the creature. God's judgment for this is stated in verse 24. **"Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves."** The word for lusts is the word for a strong desire. He makes the same point again in verse 26. **"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions."** What reason? It was because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped the creature instead of the Creator. God's judgment comes in the form of giving people what they want. Because they don't love God, they want the wrong things.

We often think that sexual sin like homosexuality brings the judgment of God, while it is more true to the Bible to say that sexual sin is the judgment of God. The Bible says that God disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:6). This passage says that he allows those under his judgment to do whatever they want to do. When my children were growing up, I was much harder on them than I was on their friends who would come to the house. I disciplined my children because I loved them. The insistence that one must act on one's sexual impulses in order to be emotionally healthy could not be further from the truth. The freedom to act on these impulses is an indication that one is under the judgment of God. The restraint of one's impulses is the mark of God's children.

Does this mean that the Bible is against sexual expression? Not at all. As a matter of fact, the Bible is very much in favor of human sexuality. It is God's idea and his gift. But in order for it to flourish properly, he has designed it to be limited to a committed marriage between a man and a woman.

II. Homosexuality Is a Worse Sin than Others

If the previous error is one that commonly exists outside the church, this one is often made inside the church. Those guilty of this error read Paul here as if he is teaching that homosexuality is the last stop on the road to hell. Apart from God, people slide into increasing levels of sin, and the lowest level is the sin of homosexuality.

There are several problems with this interpretation. One of the most obvious is that it doesn't take into account the final paragraph of this chapter in which we find the third and final appearance of the language of God judging people by giving them up. It represents a further descent into sin by those who worship the creature instead of the Creator. **"God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done"** (v. 28). And what are some of these debased things that ought not to be done? **"They were filled with all manner**

of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.” An advanced state of sin is to be filled with covetousness. You covet when you want something that God has not chosen to give to you.

If homosexuality is not mentioned because it is worse than all other sins, why does Paul give more attention to this sin here than to other sins? Let me quote again from Richard Hays as he answers that question.

When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator’s design. Thus, Paul’s choice of homosexuality as an illustration of human depravity is not merely random: it serves his rhetorical purposes by providing a vivid image of humanity’s primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the Creator.

In other words, the sin of homosexuality comes up here not because it was viewed by Paul as worse than other sins, but because it was an especially apt illustration of his point. In its ungodliness, humanity has exchanged the natural order of worshiping God for the unnatural order of worshiping the creature. Homosexuality does the same thing in the area of sexuality.

Tim Keller was asked once if he believed that homosexuals go to hell. He responded that homosexuals don’t go to hell any more than heterosexuals go to heaven. What he meant is that this question presents things in the wrong categories. The biblical category for entrance into heaven has nothing to do with sexual orientation and everything to do with faith in Jesus. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals are tempted to sin and both fall into sin. But for all who repent and believe, whether homosexual or heterosexual, in Christ there is forgiveness and power to live a new life.

There is a difference between those whose sexual inclinations are same sex and those that are heterosexual, but it is a difference that should illicit our compassion rather than condemnation. Unless the Holy Spirit grants them changed desires, a person with homosexual desires who wants to follow Christ faithfully will have to live a celibate life. The companionship and comforts of marriage will not be available to them. There is a heavy cost for their following of Jesus. There are heterosexuals who also live celibate lives because God doesn’t give them spouses. But even in that there is a difference because the homosexual knows that it will never happen.

III. Marriage Is What We Say It Is

Does this passage have anything to say to the issue of same sex marriage that is before us here in America? Though marriage is not directly addressed, the main point of this passage has important implications for marriage. The main point here is the sin of refusing to honor God, which amounts to a

reversal of the created order. This reversal honors the creature rather than the Creator. When that reversal is made, several other reversals follow in its wake, including the sexual reversal of homosexuality. That has implications on marriage, which was created by God to be between a man and a woman. But when we don't honor God first in our lives, we make marriage to be whatever we want it to be.

This is what is happening today in same sex marriage. Proponents of this have succeeded in casting it as a justice issue, arguing that it is only fair that those with homosexual desires be allowed access to the benefits of marriage that heterosexual couples have enjoyed. Robert George is the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, and he has argued in his book *What Is Marriage?* that this is a marriage issue before anything else. He says that it is erroneously believed that when the government recognizes same sex marriages, that they are moving from a non-neutral view of marriage to a neutral view. Instead of saying that only heterosexual marriages will be recognized, they are now saying that anyone who wants to consider themselves married, regardless of sexual orientation, will be considered married in the eyes of the government. But George points out that this is not a movement to a neutral position, but rather a move from one non-neutral position to a different non-neutral position. It amounts to a redefinition of marriage. Instead of the traditional view that sees marriage as a committed relationship between a man and a woman, marriage is now viewed as a romantic, sexual relationship with whomever you want. Once this gate is opened that changes the foundation of marriage from what it has been throughout human history in every culture, it will logically lead to any definition of marriage anyone wants. Why not polygamous or multiple partner or incestuous relationships? When marriage is removed from its moorings as an institution given and defined by God, anything is possible. George says that this amounts to the abolition of marriage, not merely its redefinition.

How would you answer Congressman Barney Frank? "What difference does it make to you if my partner and I get married? How does it change your life in any real way?" It's a legitimate question. I would answer him in two ways. I would say first that all of society benefits when a man and a woman commit to one another for life and raise children within that committed union. The research of social scientists is universally agreed that children do best when they are raised by both a mother and a father in the same home. A redefinition of marriage would erode such homes. I would say second that whatever answer the government gives to the definition of marriage will of necessity be forced on everyone else, for the simple reason that a unified approach is essential. You can't have someone get married in one state and have another state not recognize that marriage. Right now, the church is protected from any penalty if we insist on a traditional definition of marriage. But that could easily end, and we may be forced to either accept the government's definition of marriage or be sanctioned in some manner by the government.

IV. We Should All Move to Montana

The final error is one to which we in the church are prone, the error of retreat. Whether it comes from a motive of being tired of fighting or fearful of fighting, retreat comes when we lose confidence in the gospel. Let me point out that Paul brings up this whole matter of the sinfulness of the world not to justify a retreat, but to proclaim Jesus as the only answer. After finding that the entire world lacks the righteousness God requires, he is going to say, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested..., the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”** (3:21-22).

When you retreat, you get boxed in. I was talking with Bill Nikides this week about this, and he used the helpful analogy of a boxer in the ring. If he keeps retreating into his corner, he doesn't succeed in escaping his opponent. He only manages to get himself cornered where his opponent will find it easier to defeat him. We must engage this fight today. How do we do it? We do so by lifting up Jesus boldly, authentically and humbly. We lift him up humbly and authentically by acknowledging that we too need his grace and forgiveness. We are no better than anyone else, just forgiven and loved by Jesus. We do so boldly by not compromising no matter the cost. The church has often been called to suffer for the truth, and we must always be ready to do so if required. This may be an era when it is required.

We also engage this fight by showing kindness to all those who are harmed by the destructive effects of sin. I am afraid that as the family erodes, we are going to encounter far more severely broken people. As we do so, we need both to declare with our words and show with our deeds the love of Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

Early in our ministry, Wendy and I encountered a young man who told us eventually of his struggles with homosexuality. After a couple of years of ministering to him, God allowed us to lead him to Christ. He followed Christ into suffering, which for him meant living a celibate life as a single man his entire life. He had always been afraid that he would die sick and alone, and we spent many hours reminding him of the sufficiency of Christ. A few months ago, he did in fact die, and he did so a bit prematurely. But he didn't die alone. Several of his brothers and sisters in Christ who had poured themselves into his life were with him during his final years of sickness, and many of them were able to attend his funeral. I look forward to seeing him again. We are fellow sinners redeemed by Jesus, and there will be great satisfaction in enjoying Jesus together.