

“Can Homosexuals Go to Heaven?”

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

November 3, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on New Testament morality, we are looking for a second week at the topic of homosexuality. We are devoting two weeks to this not because the Bible devotes significant attention to it, but because it is such a large part of our culture. Homosexuality is given surprisingly little attention in the New Testament. The lengthiest treatment of it is found in the passage we considered last week, Romans 1. The only other times it is addressed are in two lists of sins in Paul's letters, one of them in our passage this morning and the other in 1 Timothy 1. Undoubtedly, one of the big reasons it is mentioned so infrequently in the New Testament is simply that this was not a controversial issue in the early church. Remember that the New Testament church was very Jewish in its character, especially in its early years. All the first converts to Christianity were Jewish, and when Gentiles started converting to Christianity they entered into churches that were still very Jewish in their flavor and feel. The sexual ethics of Judaism was uncomplicated, seeing only two possibilities with regard to our sexual lives—heterosexual marriage or abstinence. Until the last few decades, this has been the same position universally held by the church.

As we said last week, even though homosexuality gets scant attention in the New Testament, there is no lack of clarity. Our passage this morning is an example of this clarity. Homosexuality is included in a list of sins whose practitioners do not inherit the kingdom of God. That prompts the question that is asked in the title of this sermon. Can homosexuals go to heaven? Like many questions, this one can be answered with a definite, “It depends.” The Bible is a little more nuanced than we often prefer, and its answer to this question is an example of this nuanced issue. But since Paul is addressing the question of who will not be able to inherit the kingdom of God, it is an appropriate question to ask. So let's delve into it a little more carefully here by answering our question with a clear “Yes” and “No.”

I. No, the Unrighteous Will Not Inherit the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps you know individuals who live in stable, loving homosexual relationships and claim to experience the love and grace of God in their lives. To all outward appearances, their claim seems to be true. Aside from the fact that the core relationship is same sex, this couple looks like any other married couple in a Christian church. In light of Paul's words here, how should we evaluate this claim?

Paul's warning is about as clear as human language can make it. **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?”** If we converted that question to a statement, Paul would be saying, “It should be obvious to you that the unrighteous don't inherit the kingdom of God.” And then to be even more explicit, he defines what he means by the unrighteous by giving a list of the types of sins that exclude someone from heaven. The particular sins he lists are the ones that were especially prevalent in the city of Corinth. In his book, *After Paul Left Corinth*, Bruce Winter describes at length the culture of the city of Corinth. Among the elite class of Corinth, banquets were often held that were orgies of food, drink and sex. The Greeks believed that the sexual experience was heightened by food and drink. So they had these banquets that would begin with generous amounts of food and drink and be followed by bringing in prostitutes for sexual orgies. Several sins in this list would have been particularly relevant to these banquets, including sexual immorality, drunkenness, adultery and greed. But other sins on the list seem aimed at those who are not of the elite, including thievery, reviling (which refers to angry, abusive behavior) and swindling.

Two of the sins in Paul's list are related to homosexuality, though in our ESV translations it is not evident that there are two sins listed. The translators weren't quite sure how best to translate this, so they offered a footnote to explain the original wording. It says, “The two Greek terms translated by this phrase refer to the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts.” Bruce Winter agrees and says that Paul used two terms because this was a common distinction in the Roman culture prevalent in Corinth. According to Winter, the Romans made this distinction because they permitted the active role and forbade the passive. Paul is clear in saying that Christians are forbidden from both roles.

So what do we say to a homosexual couple who claims to experience an intimate relationship with God while living openly in a homosexual relationship? We warn them, as Paul did, of the susceptibility of the human heart to self-deception. Paul says, **“Do not be deceived,”** and then proceeds to lay out this list of sins that preclude someone from inheriting the kingdom of God. When you are deceived, you are convinced that reality is one thing while in fact it is something different. Such self-deception often has negative consequences. If you are walking down some stairs in the dark and think that you have come to the last step when in fact there is still one more, such a mistake can cause you to stumble or perhaps even fall. More seriously, if you think your blood pressure is fine when in fact it is dangerously high, this self-deception will prevent you from seeking the treatment that may save you from a crippling stroke. Most dangerous of all, someone thinks they have a relationship with God when in fact they don't. They are self-deceived. One of the effects of sin in our lives is that we are all prone to such self-deception, and that is one reason for the merciful warnings of the Bible like this one.

So can homosexuals go to heaven? It seems that the first thing Paul says in answer to this question is, “No, and to think otherwise is to deceive yourself.” Yet, we need to make several qualifications of this answer if we are to understand what Paul is really saying here. The first qualification is this. No, homosexuals can’t go to heaven, but homosexuality is not unique. It stands among a list of other sins here. The view of the Bible is that when we don’t honor God in our lives, all kinds of sins grow in the soil of the human heart. But each of us is prone to a different set of sins—some to greed, others to gluttony and others to heterosexual or homosexual sin. What we tend to do is to attempt to feel better about our own sin by finding a sin that doesn’t tempt us and then condemning those who are guilty of this sin by comparing ourselves to them. While Jesus never spoke about homosexuality, he said a great deal about that sin, which was the sin of the Pharisees. According to the Bible, the issue is whether or not we are going to take our sin to Jesus for cleansing. If we trust him, we experience both his cleansing and his power to live holy lives. If we don’t trust him, it doesn’t much matter which sin gets you, because you will end up in the same place—not inheriting the kingdom of God.

A second qualification that needs to be made is the need to distinguish between repentant and chronic behaviors. When Paul says that those guilty of the sins in this list will not inherit the kingdom of God, he does not mean that anyone who has ever done these sins will not go to heaven. We know that because he says that some of the members of the Corinthian church used to do these sins. But they have been washed and do inherit the kingdom of God. Paul’s list of the sins that exclude someone from heaven is striking because it is so personal. What I mean by that is that he doesn’t talk about their sins, but about them. They are so given to their sins that they become identified by them. They are not those guilty of adultery, but “adulterers.” When you don’t know Jesus, you end up getting captured and enslaved by your sin. So this is not talking about a lapse into one of these sins. Nor is it talking about the person who formerly was captured by a particular sin. So this is a list of those who haven’t repented of their sin and taken it to Jesus, with the result that they are captured by these sins.

A third qualification is the need to distinguish between behaviors and temptations. Paul is addressing here the issue of behaviors, not temptations. To be tempted with homosexual desires is no more of a sin than to be tempted heterosexually to sexual expression outside of marriage. The behavior is sinful, as is the lust of the heart toward either homosexual or heterosexual sin. But the temptation itself is not sinful. But someone might ask, “Didn’t God create us for heterosexual relations, and isn’t homosexuality outside this design?” The answer to both questions is “Yes”.

This brings up the whole issue of nature versus nurture within homosexuality. Those who advocate for the acceptance of homosexuality in the

church usually do so on the assumption that homosexual orientation is both innate and unchangeable. If that is the case, then they would say that disapproval of it is a form of discrimination that is no different than racism. How do we answer this? This is where it is quite helpful to have a biblical theology of sin. As a result of the sin of Adam, the entire human race after Adam was born with a sinful nature. As a result of this sinful nature, we sin whether we choose to or not because it is our nature to do so. And we are guilty for these sins, even if we are not conscious of choosing them. As we already pointed out, sin works differently in people's lives. And for some, it feels as if it is their nature to express their sexuality in a same sex manner. They aren't aware of choosing it, but rather seem to have been chosen by it. Did God create them in that way? No, but because they have a sin nature, as do we all, sin works within them in this particular way. What are they to do then? There are only two options. A person tempted homosexually can give in to those desires and be enslaved by them, or this person can trust Jesus and follow him and experience his forgiveness and empowerment to live a sexually pure life. This brings us to our next point.

II. Yes, Jesus Washes, Sanctifies and Justifies.

Can homosexuals go to heaven? Yes, whether they have acted on those desires or not, whether they have been enslaved by them or not, they can go to heaven. The Corinthian church had in its midst those who had been enslaved by this sin and all the others Paul mentioned as excluding people from heaven. And then we read these hope-filled words. **“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”** (v. 11). The word “redemption” means to be rescued from enslavement, and that is exactly what Jesus has done for us. Jesus rescues people broken by sin, no matter which sin we struggle with.

These three words—“washed, sanctified and justified”—are three words that summarize the salvation Jesus brings. He washes us from the impurity of sin, empowers us to live a new life (which is the meaning of the word “sanctify”) and gives us a new identity as one who is declared righteous or justified. One of the questions raised by these words in this area of homosexuality is whether they should be interpreted to promise a changed sexual orientation. Should men and women who have always had same-sex desires expect Jesus to change their desires when they follow him?

In answering this question, I find helpful a distinction theologians make when they try to understand the promises of the Bible for the future. They speak of the “already-not yet” quality of God's promises. The kingdom of God means restoration for redeemed humanity, where all that is wrong is put right by King Jesus. There is a sense in which that is already here, but a sense in which it is not yet here. There will be healing from cancer in the kingdom of

God. That is already here in a way, but not yet fully here. God heals some while others die, even among his own children. I believe the same is true in this area of homosexuality. I have known men and women who were living active homosexual lifestyles who, after coming to faith in Jesus, learn to live heterosexually, get married and have children. I have known others who have not had that experience, in spite of praying for it faithfully and seeking it diligently. Henri Nouwen was one such struggler. According to his biographer, he struggled with the temptation to homosexual sin his entire life. That doesn't mean that his faith was less than others, but is simply a feature of this already-not yet character of God's kingdom.

What then is a Christian to do who comes to faith in Christ and finds his or her sexual desires still oriented in a homosexual direction? They are to remember where their identity lies. They are washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. We live in a hyper-sexualized culture in which it is tempting to identify oneself sexually. This is a grave mistake and very far from the outlook of the Bible. Sexuality is a wonderful gift from God, but it is nothing compared to knowing the Giver himself.

CONCLUSION:

The church is God's new community where we live our lives together before God. We are called to do so in sexual purity. Listen to what Richard Hays says about this.

The church should continue to teach—as it always has—that there are two possible ways for God's human sexual creatures to live well-ordered lives of faithful discipleship: heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence... Heterosexually oriented persons are also called to abstinence from sex unless they marry (1 Cor. 7:8-9). The only difference—admittedly a salient one—in the case of homosexually oriented persons is that they do not have the option of homosexual 'marriage.' So where does that leave them? It leaves them in precisely the same situation as the heterosexual who would like to marry but cannot find an appropriate partner (and there are many such): summoned to a difficult, costly obedience, while 'groaning' for the 'redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8:23). Anyone who does not recognize this as a description of authentic Christian existence has never struggled seriously with the imperatives of the gospel, which challenge and frustrate our 'natural' impulses in countless ways." (p. 402)

The church has done a good job of valuing marriage, but not such a good job of valuing celibacy. It is not without significance that both Jesus and Paul lived full lives without being able to express themselves sexually. The big issue in life is not whether or not you are married, but whether or not you have been liberated by Jesus. He is worth following anywhere, whether into the challenges of marriage or of celibacy. He alone can wash, sanctify and justify. He alone can bring sinners to the kingdom of God.