

Homosexuality

Lord, give us the physical strength, the spiritual wisdom, and the moral courage to do what You are calling us to do. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

We started last time the biblical testimony on homosexuality, and I began with the creation ordinances. I think that is the way we must always begin, to show that the framework from Genesis to Revelation assumes that human sexuality finds its true and proper expression within the committed lifelong relationship of marriage between a man and a woman. That is reinforced by the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:22: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence.” It is *towebah*.

There are three passages in the Pauline epistles that are relevant. In Romans 1:24-27 the emphasis in these verses is on the fallen human condition. This is Paul’s diagnosis of the fallen human condition. And the root problem of the fallen human condition is the refusal to honor God as Creator. You have to begin earlier in chapter 1, in which it talks about creatures not giving God the thanks He deserves as Creator, but rebelling against Him. And as the penal consequence of rebellion against the Creator, God gave them up so that human idolatry is allowed to run its self-destructive course. But the problem is the rebellion of the creature against the Creator. Homosexual behavior, and Paul mentions both male and female homosexual acts, is adduced as particularly graphic evidence that human beings are in rebellion against their Creator. I think that accounts for the place of homosexuality in this passage. It is graphic evidence, the most graphic evidence, but not the only evidence that humanity is in rebellion against the Creator. Paul does say here that it is “contrary to nature,” which is standard terminology for homoerotic acts. We should not stop reading at the end of chapter 1, but read on to Romans chapter 2 where Paul says, “You who condemn others, do you not know that you are involved in the same sin?” Richard Hayes calls that a sting operation of God to present these in particular, homosexuality, and then to bring it in that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are in rebellion against the Creator. I think that that is an appropriate emphasis. At the end of the last session we were talking about the other things that are an abomination to the Lord that we must not forget so that we do not single this out as the only thing that we refer to as an abomination. But it is homosexual acts as such that Paul finds in rebellion against the Creator. It is contrary to the way God has made us, male and female. His purpose for human sexuality is known through the Scriptures, but it is also known through the creation itself. There is a double argument for heterosexual marriage as the way in which God has designed us for erotic fulfillment and for the bringing of children into the world and their nurture.

The second passage from Paul that is relevant is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and I will read this just to get it before us. “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you were, 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.” The emphasis in these verses is redemption. In Romans 1, it was on the Fall. Here the emphasis is on redemption. And included in the list of things from which we have been redeemed are the two words that Paul uses. *Malakos* is pejorative slang for the passive male partner; colloquially it would be rendered “softies.” The NIV translates that “male prostitutes.” The other term, *arsenokoitai*, is simply the term for a male homosexual, the first extant use of this term. Apparently it is coined by Paul. It is also used in 1 Timothy 1:10, and it is very likely coined on the basis of the Septuagint of Leviticus 20:13, so that there is a linguistic connection between the Law of Moses and the sexual sin of homosexuality. The thing that Paul emphasizes here is

you have been redeemed from that. Such were some of you so that, whereas there were those who practiced these acts beforehand, they no longer practice these acts. They have been redeemed from that bondage of acting contrary to God's created order in this area.

The third passage from Paul is 1 Corinthians 6:18 where Paul says, "Shun fornication," *pornea*, the general word for sexual sin. "Every sin a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins against the body itself." That is the New Revised Standard Version, which is an accurate translation. The emphasis of 1 Corinthians 6:18 is the special character of sexual sin. Every other sin, he says, is outside the body. But the fornicator, the one who commits fornication, either in adultery or homosexual acts, sins against the body itself. So sexual sin is in a class by itself in some sense, and I think the best explanation I have seen of this is that Paul's understanding of body here is the physical body under the aspect of personal self-communication. The body is the way in which we communicate ourselves uniquely in sexual intercourse, so that the immoral person perverts that faculty within himself that is meant to be an instrument of bodily communication between persons. Paul assumes marriage as the normative context for sexual intercourse, outside of which all genital relations, heterosexual as well as homosexual, are sins against the body itself as designed by God, and therefore intrinsically wrong. So it is not the motive that is in view. You know, the argument is that as long as you have a loving motive and it is not exploitative, sex is not wrong. Paul is saying the fornicator sins against the body itself. Relatively speaking, every other sin is outside the body, but this is the special character of sexual sin, that it intrinsically violates God's purpose for sexual communication.

The best brief article that I know of on the biblical material on homosexuality is an article by Richard Hayes. He was at Yale when he wrote this. He is now a professor of New Testament at Duke. The title of the article is "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," and he goes over the biblical material, but he goes over it in the context of his ministry to a friend who is dying of AIDS. And knowing that he was dying, they experienced their friendship in a number of ways that they enjoyed together, but it always came back to the question of what the Bible teaches about homosexuality. Richard Hayes would not give up the biblical truth for the sake of his friend, and eventually his friend was persuaded. And as he came near death, he no longer identified himself as a homosexual. It is a very moving account of someone who holds the Scripture faithfully, but also holds on to his friends faithfully. It is a wonderful account, and I urge you to take a look at it and to maybe put it in your files. It is useful to refer people to in connection with this issue. But those are the specific passages in the biblical testimony that refer to homosexual acts as wrong, intrinsically wrong against the background of God's creative will for human sexuality: that it be fulfilled in the unique one flesh relationship of a man and woman in marriage.

Now, we need to see how the churches are responding to homosexuality, and I have an analysis of where the churches are. The question of homosexuality in contemporary Christian ethics comes down to this: does the Scripture universally prohibit same sex genital expression, or does it permit same sex genital expression within a loving and committed gay or lesbian relationship? No one defends promiscuity, but the idea is that sexuality is for intimacy. It is an expression of love in a committed relationship, the argument goes. The non-exploitive loving relationship is different. That is the question. Does the Scripture universally prohibit same sex genital expression, or does it permit it within a loving and committed gay or lesbian relationship? Now, it is only in the present generation that the church has begun to differ on that issue. It is really only since the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960s that you have churches taking a position of affirmation.

I am going to distinguish three positions that currently are in the churches. The first is affirmation. The earliest statement I can find on this is in a pamphlet, "Toward a Quaker View of Sex," published in 1963 by a group of British friends. "Surely it is the nature and quality of a relationship that matters. One must

not judge it by its outward appearance but by its inner worth. Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection and therefore we cannot see that it is in some way wrong.” So it is the motive or consequences that determine the morality of the act. Now, that is the official position of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Churches, which was founded in 1968. Reading from their statement, “Neither heterosexual love nor homosexual love is sinful in itself. Sex acts only become sinful when we act in lust or in abuse of another person.” So if it is loving, then it is right, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual.

Now, so far among mainline denominations, only the United Church of Christ has a position of full affirmation of homosexuality parallel to heterosexuality. The United Church of Christ took that position in 1993. The problem with this approach is that in granting homosexual relationship equal status with heterosexual relationship, it effectively annuls the will of God in creating humankind as male and female. That is the complementarity of man and woman, which is anatomically self-evident, and the procreative benediction upon the sexual partnership of marriage for procreation and for nurture. Adoptive children come within the purvey of the marriage-based two parent family. A couple may not be able to have children of their own, so they adopt children. The child relates to male and female. The child who is procreated by male and female, by others, now comes under the nurturing relationship of father and mother in the two parent committed relationship of marriage. But neither of those, neither sexual complementarity nor the relationship of a man and a woman to children, either procreation or adoption, count for anything in making moral judgment with respect to sexual intercourse. Sex is purely instrumental, deriving its entire value from the intimacy to which it leads.

It is clear from the biblical testimony that God’s sexual preference for human beings is a loving, committed, permanent, and exclusive heterosexual relationship. That is God’s design for human beings: a loving, committed, permanent, and exclusive heterosexual relationship. Uniform teaching of Scriptures is that human beings flourish and find true sexual fulfillment only in the companionship and partnership established by the marriage covenant. I would emphasize companionship and partnership. It is both of those together. The proposal that homosexual partners are an equal alternative to heterosexual marriage ignores the original and abiding will of God and discounts the effect of the Fall, and this is why so far denominations have not gone that way, apart from the United Church of Christ. Now, there are congregations within larger churches that take an affirmation view, and it is an issue in three churches at the present time of whether discipline will be applied. It is an issue in the Methodist Church right now, in the Presbyterian Church, and in the Episcopal Church. All of these denominations do not equally affirm homosexual relations, but they all have congregations where those relationships are receiving blessing, and now the issue becomes whether the church will maintain that position by discipline. It is straining to do that. This has become an issue; it is the most divisive issue at present in the churches. And that is internally in churches. And the question is how to live together; are we now going to have sections of the church that allow it, other sections that do not, and so forth?

We need to distinguish affirmation and accommodation. They are very close in one sense, but I think that they are distinct, and it is worth considering their distinctiveness. This second position that I am calling accommodation recognizes the permanent norm of heterosexual marriage. That is God’s ideal. But it also recognizes the fallenness of human nature. And the argument goes that because the Fall renders the ideal unattainable for persons with a permanent homosexual orientation, the norm should be accommodated to their situation. So it is not God’s ideal will, but it is allowing people to make the best of their circumstances, given the fallen relationship. The Church of England has officially endorsed that position. In the statement issued in 1991, they upheld the biblical norm and said that we will not ordain homosexuals. But for homosexuals or persons in homophile orientation (the British term), if their conscience is clear and they are in a committed relationship, then we will welcome them to the church.

We cannot affirm that, but we will allow that. We believe that that is within the bounds, allowing the individuals to make the decision in that respect.

The most recent thing that I have seen on the argument for accommodation is an article by Lewis Smedes. The title of it is "Like the Wideness of the Sea." This is in the periodical *Perspective*, May of 1999. His argument is that "Homosexuality is a burden that some of God's children are called on to bear, an anomaly, nature gone awry. But I do believe that homosexuality is only the raw material that they have for living as good a life of sexual love as they can in a world where so much is bent out of shape." He is writing out of the Christian Reformed tradition. For a while, the Christian Reformed Church had the policy that persons who are remarried after divorce are living in adultery, and they ought not to have sexual intercourse. And gradually, they changed that policy and recognized that persons remarried after divorce now have a valid marriage and allowed them to fulfill that in sexual intercourse. Smedes is arguing by analogy, "Both divorced and remarried partners and homosexual partners are seeking to fulfill a fundamental, God-implanted human need for a shared life of intimate, committed, and exclusive love with one other human being." So that is the idea that sexuality is for intimacy; we all have a human desire for intimacy expressed sexually. "Granted that it is abnormal, that it is fallen, that it is a burden to be borne; nevertheless, the law can be accommodated to that in light of that." Now, if you acknowledge that you are not saying that it is equally valid as heterosexuality, but that God's will is accommodating in a fallen situation, why not give these unions your blessing? It follows naturally, and I think that part of this is part of the church's argument here for the blessing of these. It does not necessarily mean their equal affirmation, but rather to find ways in which to encourage the stability of relationship and to avoid promiscuity and the worst forms of homosexual behavior. Why not bless these unions even though they are an accommodation to sin?

I think a couple of things about the accommodation position. I think that it is initially attractive because of its compassion and empathy. You seem to be on the one hand upholding to the biblical idea; you are saying, yes, heterosexuality is the norm, but here are folks who cannot live up to the norm, and let us help them to do the best they can, given their situation. And it accepts stable homosexual relationships in the interest of promoting a fuller, more humanly rich life for them. I think that this is an unstable position. I think within the church you cannot have both a negative view of homosexual relations as not being God's will and yet approve them. I would put it this way. If the church has good scriptural reasons for believing that homosexual acts are sin, then it must lead the faithful in their new obedience, not shift the responsibility to the conscience of the individual. We would like to do that. "Well, if your conscience is clear, blessings on you." You might go a further step and say, "We will bless you in that union, but the call to the Christian discipleship is superior to what we may feel is necessary for a fulfilled and satisfying life as a human being." Here I think you are faced with the question of discipleship versus this idea of a need fulfillment as a sexual human being. If God says that is not the right way to do it, then I think however painful that may be, we have to be called to discipleship. The church is bound by the will of Christ and Scripture—not our own best judgment—in seeking the good of the members under her care. So although this initially seems compassionate, it is not compassionate. It moves people away from discipleship. Discipleship is sometimes painful. You should give folks who are in that position a welcoming response and all of our support and recognize their struggle.

And, you might point out, there is an assumption about homosexuality, that it is irreversible, and that is not necessarily so. That is an assumption, as the article by Mary Stewart van Leeuwen points out, which most of these churches assume as a starting point.

I think that the third point should be labeled "Abstinence." This is most fully developed in the Roman Catholic tradition. There was a letter by Pope John Paul II in 1986 that underscores that the church's

doctrine is based on Scripture. He asks, "What then are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord?" That is, persons who find themselves having these inclinations toward same sex relationships. "Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life, by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's cross. The cross is a denial of self, but in service of the will of God Himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in Him to practice virtue in the place of vice." I think that is well put. We must be prepared to suffer rather than to disobey a clear command of Christ. It is Christ's own example that encourages us to persevere, even in the face of intense trial, and no one should seek to minimize the extent of the sacrifice involved in sexual abstinence. But the book of Hebrews repeatedly refers to the suffering and temptation by which Christ was perfected that enable Him to be a merciful and faithful high priest. So I think that there are two things concerning abstinence. I do not want to minimize the possibility of reparative therapy. I think we have to take into account the testimony of two sorts of Christians. Some give testimony of having experienced therapy by which they were restored to a heterosexual orientation. They have even married and gone on from there. But that does not always happen even with reparative therapy, and I think that we should appreciate that some folks bear this burden lifelong. I do not deny that reparative therapy is an option that we should encourage folks to seek, but we should not over-promise in terms of it. A lot depends upon where they are along the spectrum in terms of exclusive homosexual orientation. Two to three percent of the population is at that end, and that is the most intractable form, as they tell me, in this area. But elsewhere along that spectrum, a person may be freed, first from the actions, and then even to the desire for same sex relationships. So consult the literature. A professor at Covenant Seminary, Dr. Winter, has a bibliography available on reparative therapy. And there are organizations, such as Harvest out of the Tenth Presbyterian Church, that have a good record of outreach to homosexuals and experience change by the grace of God.

The third major heading has to do with social policy, where we are in terms of our society, and I think there is really a spectrum of responses. At one extreme is persecution, where gay bashing is allowed. Or even as a matter of state policy, homosexuals' properties are seized and various things are done to them. That was a Nazi policy with respect to homosexuals. Nobody defends persecution. We should be opposed to that. Homosexual persons are persons created in the image of God, and they are as deserving of due process and civil protection as anyone. So we reject persecution.

At the other extreme is affirmation. We probably need an adjective to make it clear and say equal affirmation, which is affirmation of equality of homosexuality and heterosexuality. That is really where the advocates of homosexuality in our society are, that it is discriminatory unless we equally affirm their homosexuality as well as heterosexuality. So the two extremes are persecution on the one hand and equal affirmation on the other.

In between there are a couple of steps. Prosecution would be that there are laws on the books against homosexual acts, and a person should be punished for those. It is a criminalization of homosexual acts. Up until recent times, those have been common in America's state laws. They began to be taken off the books, and only about half the states now have them. People stopped taking them off the books because of the movement toward equal affirmation, and they left those laws on the books. They have been found to be constitutional. The Supreme Court by a narrow decision ruled that the sodomy laws in Georgia were constitutional. That surprised a lot of people, and one Supreme Court Justice after he left the court said he wished he had voted differently, but they are constitutional. The question is whether they are wise, whether in our pluralistic society they are the right thing to do; that is, to punish consensual acts in private between adults, or whether that is an invasive use of government authority; whether it is in effect unenforceable without invasive procedures. The case that came to the Supreme Court from Georgia was

by accident, really. There was a warrant that a police officer had, and he discovered a gay pair in the act and did his duty and arrested them. The prosecutor would probably not have pursued that case except it was thought at the time that it would be a good test case. And it did not turn out as those who wanted the test case wanted.

On the other side is what I call protection. Well, of course, homosexuals should be protected from abuse, but this is the idea of special protection. As other minorities have been historically discriminated against, homosexuals deserve special protection. This was the issue in Colorado and eventually the Supreme Court struck down the laws that were opposed to providing any special protection. The argument came from a large part of the Christian community in Colorado that you are protecting a sinful behavior, and it does not deserve protection. But it was made a civil rights case and argued parallel to protection of other minorities that homosexuals should have special protection.

American society by and large is in what can be called "tolerance," in between these extremes. Tolerance to many people now means approval, but that is not its historic meaning. I think we should try to recover its historical meaning. Tolerance is allowing things that you do not approve of. It is like arbitrary divorce in the Old Testament. God allowed it, but He did not approve it, or polygamy or slavery. Some things that are not approved are tolerated for certain reasons. And I think as a pluralistic society, there is an area that we can tolerate homosexual acts in the law, not criminalize them, but not provide them special protection, let alone equal affirmation. So I think that American society has pretty much reached a consensus on tolerance, and I think that it is a workable compromise in a pluralistic society. Where the laws are still on the books, there is no zeal to enforce them, and I think that that is appropriate. It is a question now as to whether, since they are not being enforced, there is a need to take them off the books or not. But the gay rights movement has gone far beyond seeking tolerance to special protection. And now with the call for equal affirmation, the issue right now is at the level of same sex marriage, particularly with the recent decision in the legislature in Vermont to authorize what are called civil unions between persons of the same sex. They are not marriages; they are distinct from marriages, but they are same sex civil unions to which the state grants many of the benefits that formerly were granted only to marriage.

I have not had time to review that legislation in detail. One of the best analyses by a homosexual is in *The New Republic* by Andrew Sullivan. Andrew Sullivan is the most important spokesman for gay marriage, has written a book on the subject, and has edited a collection of essays on the subject. He is himself a Roman Catholic, so he is consciously out of dissent with his church, but he knows the church's position from the inside. If you want to get his analysis referring to the Vermont decision, and I think it is important, it is titled *State of the Union*. His argument is that what you have created here is not to be applauded that much, because it is a separate but equal doctrine. In Sullivan's view, marriage is among the most basic civil rights. And so when you put it in the civil rights category, to have a separate category for civil unions, not marriage, appeals to the old separate but equal doctrine which was discriminated actually against African Americans. So this is not satisfying to anybody. About a third of the American public strongly supports gay marriages. About a third of the American public is equally unalterably opposed to them. And there is another third that would like to see some kind of parallel institution for them. But I think that consistently the idea of civil union really undermines our institution of marriage. Civil unions are not just for same sex couples; couples of the opposite sex may apply for these. They have done so in France and Holland. And what it does is create a situation where folks can get some of the benefits of living together but without the obligation or the responsibilities that typically go with marriage. So I think that we should not minimize the importance of this issue for the gay rights movement, which has as its goal equal affirmation. This means that we have to make a decision. We are forced to a decision if people are asking us by way of our institutions to give equal affirmation and say,

in effect, that heterosexuality and homosexuality are equally valid. We cannot do that. This is where we draw the line, but that is where the issue now is. For example, Sullivan earlier in 1996 said, "Homosexuality at its core is about its emotional connection between two adult human beings. And what public institution is more central, more definitive of that connection than marriage? The denial of marriage to gay people is therefore not a minor issue; it is the entire issue." Okay, so we should not think that this is marginal. In the minds like those of Andrew Sullivan, this is the entire issue. And it is why we get the kind of hostility that I reported on.

The person that I found most helpful in this all along is David Orgon Coolidge. He works full time in this area, and he is a Christian. He comes out of a Reformed tradition. It is in a book that has the title *Homosexuality and American Public Life*. I think you will want this, because it is a thorough treatment, and it is better than I can do with a partial lecture. But the chapter title is "The Question of Marriage," so it is a full treatment. Basically, we have a conflict between models of marriage and particularly between what he calls the commitment model and the complementarity model. The commitment model is this: "Every individual seeks intimate relationships. Sex is a way of expressing intimacy. Intimate relationships grow best within a framework of commitment. Couples, children, society, and government benefit from committed rather than promiscuous relationships. It is reasonable, therefore, for the law to encourage committed relationships. Marriage is the central legal institution of commitment in American society. Therefore, marriage or something equivalent to it should be open to any couple. Attempts to resist this are irrational and bigoted. Where it seems prudent, courts should take the initiative and push the legal system in the right direction." The complementarity model is this: "Marriage is a unique sexual community based on difference and union of the sexes. It is more than the creation of contracting individuals or the state," and he goes on to further elaborate on complementarity marriage. That is the crux of the issue. I think that many of the things that we associate with civil rights for persons can already be done. For example, in a long-term committed same sex friendship, those partners might contract to care for one another. That can be done by contractual law. There is no need for domestic legislation. Already, you can have joint ownership of a house so that if one dies, a surviving friend receives the house, or if one is hospitalized, then you can contract for the person who is designated next of kin to be the nearest person to you. All of those are things that are right and we should allow, but it does not take domestic partnership laws to have those kinds of things. As a matter of justice, I think the state should allow same sex friendships to form, not inquiring into their sexual basis, not being involved in approving their sexual basis. And these typical domestic partnerships do not promise sexual exclusive fidelity, but there is good reason for not involving the state in approving a sexual-based relationship. Whereas the state, I have argued, may have some forms of contractual relationships and just not inquire to what the intimacy of the relation is. That is for those friends themselves to self-describe.