

I met with him in a coffee shop. We'd known each other for a number of months, he had been coming along to Christianity Explored, he was interested in Jesus – very interested. He was starting to show signs that he grasped what Jesus had done by dying for him, he was beginning to show an indication that he was willing to follow Jesus as his Lord. And as we sat there he said to me. "I don't think I can be a Christian, because of..., well because..." and he leant in and said quietly "because I'm gay." In his mind, being gay would immediately and necessarily rule him out of receiving the love and forgiveness that Jesus offered.

He is not alone in his thinking. For many years some Christians and some churches have painted homosexuality as the pinnacle of all sins – the worst sin. Some Christians and some churches have treated homosexuals terribly. They have been the victims of ridicule and mocking and exclusion. That's happened in the world, and sadly it has happened in the church.

This morning we're going to be speaking about the subject of homosexuality. And if you are here as someone who is attracted to people of the same gender as you, whether that attraction is wanted or unwanted, I want you to know how welcome you are. You are not going to be attacked or mocked, the things you struggle with are not going to be downplayed or made light of.

But while Christians and the church and indeed the world at large has at times treated homosexuals badly, things seem to be changing. Homosexuality is now seen by nearly all of society as a valid lifestyle choice. In 1985 homosexuality was decriminalized in this country, in 2005 provision was made for same sex relationships to be legally recognized through civil unions, and in 2013 the marriage act was changed to allow two people, of whatever gender, to marry each other.

But it's more than just the law, think about popular TV shows – many of them now have a gay or lesbian couple as normal, mainstay characters – in fact often they are the funniest, the least dysfunctional, the best looking people on the show. The media, in general, promote homosexuality as normal.

And so Bible believing Christians find it difficult to know how to respond. For we have a terrible track record of engaging on this issue, and we're faced with a world which promotes and even idealizes gay relationships. Add into that the fact that there are sections of the church calling for Christians to accept and bless same sex unions, and to accept people in gay relationships as ordained ministers, and you can see how Bible believing Christians find it hard to know how to respond. And yet respond we must.

So what we're going to do this morning is look consider what the Bible has to say about homosexuality, thinking carefully about why this issue is significant, and why, I hope, that we will work hard at being a church that does all we can to exclude no one from the kingdom of heaven.

But before we do that we must draw note three preliminary points. The first is a vitally important distinction. We are speaking this morning about gay sex, about homosexual activity, be it in a committed, monogamous relationship or not. And what we want to do is draw a very clear distinction between behaviour, and orientation. Let me be very very clear. As people we have all sorts of desires and attractions and wants. Some of them are good, some are not. Some are wanted, some unwanted. Attraction, in and of itself is not condemned in Scripture. As we

will see, the Bible does speak quite clearly about gay activity. But it is quite possible to be a Christian and to be attracted to people of the same gender as you. I have all sorts of desires that I don't particularly want to have – some of them are very nice desires – and therefore I want to give in to them. But as a Christian I am called to curb my desires, and restrict what I do in light of God's word. I have a natural propensity to get angry – to rage. It feels good to fly off the handle and give vent to the anger. But I am called to not give expression to that desire that I have.

You may hear this morning, happily married for many years, and have sexual feelings towards people of the same gender. You might have had them as a younger person, you might have them at certain times. That is not unusual. What we are speaking about this morning is about homosexual activity – giving expression to the attraction. That is what the Scriptures speak of. And the call to Christians, is to choose to live, to act, in a way that is consistent with the Scriptures, which will mean not giving expression to all your desires.

The second thing to say is that Bible spends less time speaking about homosexuality than it does speaking about greed or idolatry or injustice. God does not hate gays with a special kind of hatred, homosexual sex is, as we'll see in a minute, sinful and wrong in God's eyes, but it is not of a different order of sin. We need to be careful that as we speak about this that we don't segregate out homosexuality as the worst of all sins. The Bible doesn't do that – neither should we. It may not be a sin that we understand, or a sin that we are tempted to commit, but that does not make it any worse than the sins that we do know all too well, and the ones we commit so frequently.

At the same time, and thirdly, we need to see that God's word is overwhelmingly negative towards homosexual sex. The key texts in the Old Testament are in Leviticus 18 and 20. Leviticus 18:22 says "Do not have sexual relationships with a man as one lies with a woman: that is detestable." The instruction comes within a list of sexual purity – you don't sleep with a close relative, you don't sleep with your neighbour's wife, you don't sleep with someone of the same gender. And the reason given in verse 24 says: 'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled'. Such behavior might be part of the world, but it has no place within God's people. Leviticus 20 and verse 13 repeats the prohibition and gives the punishment – death. Again, it's because of the people's relationship with their God. Verses 7 says 'Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the LORD, who makes you holy. God's people live God's way – he says no to gay sex, that's that.

Now I should say that every text in the Bible that deals with homosexuality has been studied and analyzed and broken apart and put back together in nearly every possible way to try and show that the Bible isn't negative towards homosexual activity. For instance there are those who argue that what is on view here is simply prescriptions of appropriate worship – local pagan tribes involved sexual activity in their worship of their gods, and Yahweh is saying, you don't do that. And yet that isn't what the text is saying. God is saying that obedience to him, faithfulness to him, will require his people to obey him and be distinctly different to the world around them, and while that will include how we worship God, it will also have implications about how general behavior.

Others want to try and argue, and there's more weight here I think, that these are Old Testament commands and we live after the New Testament. Indeed, people will often point to other commands in the Old Testament. Do not mix two types of cloth. No pork or bacon or shellfish.

We eat bacon, we wear poly-cotton blends, both of which are prohibited by the Old Testament, so what's wrong with gay sex – to put it simply.

Well the answer is that Jesus fulfills the law. He is the one who kept the law perfectly, and he is the one who completes the law. And he is the one who, as God himself, has the right to reapply the law in light of himself. So he declares all foods clean, hence we eat bacon. But he doesn't rescind any of the laws of sexual purity. Indeed, he maintains the Old Testament commands around marriage. Now he's happy to show how some laws have a different application because of him, and he's happy to say that some laws have the same application. However, the important thing to see is that He's the arbiter – not us.

And as we move to the New Testament we see that the ongoing view of God's word towards homosexual sex is still resoundingly negative. There are two primary places in the New Testament where homosexual activity is dealt with we'll look at each in turn and at how each speak to two particular challenges facing Christians and facing the church today.

First of all, please turn to Romans 1 and verse 18. Romans is, I think, the greatest articulation of the gospel we have. It declares more deeply, more deliberately the grace and justice of God than any other sustained statement of the gospel. And Paul starts by spelling out the nature of sin – Paul starts with the problem facing humanity. Verse 18 of chapter 1 – 'the wrath of God is being revealed against humanity' – why? Verse 21 – '...for although they', that is people knew God – they knew he existed – he's made himself known through his creation verses 19 and 20, 'although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him'. There's the heart of sin – refusing to let God be God. Refusing to acknowledge and accept his rule – that He has the right to decide what is good, and the right to demand obedience of those who are his.

Now the heart of Paul's argument here is not to show that there are specific human behaviors that are the cause of God's anger and wrath. Paul's not saying, you've done the wrong thing, therefore God is angry. What he's doing is showing that the list of sins here – homosexuality in verse 26 and 27, look at verse 29 – wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, and so on – it's not that these behaviors and attitudes are bringing God's anger, it's that these behaviors and attitudes, the presence of this mess, is the result of our rebellion against God. These things are the symptoms of a heart-deep problem. They are the result of our rebellion against God. And the reason that Paul starts with homosexuality is because it most graphically and visually describes the nature of what we have done.

The key is described by the use of the word *exchange*. Have a look at verses 23 – what is the human problem – we've become fools by exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images. Or again in verse 25 – humanity has exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator. We've rejected God, and put something else in his place. We exchanged the one we should naturally, appropriately worship and serve, with something else. And so the consequence of exchanging the worship of God for the worship of his creation is shown in another exchange – verse 26 – even their women exchanged natural relationships for unnatural.

And this idea of natural and unnatural runs throughout as well. The exchange that takes place exchanges natural for unnatural. We should naturally worship God, we unnaturally worship what he has made. We should naturally, as God has created us, in his image, be partnered male

and female. In our sinfulness that naturalness is exchanged for the unnaturalness of male and male and female and female.

Again, Paul's not saying that homosexuality is the cause of sin, he's saying it's a helpful picture of the heart of sin for it demonstrates both the idea of exchange and the idea of disordering of creation – the unnaturalness that accompanies the rejection of God as God.

One ethicist puts it this way:

"Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallennes distorts God's created order. God the creator made man and woman for each other, to cleave together, to be fruitful and multiply. When human beings exchange these created roles for homosexual intercourse, they embody the spiritual condition of those who have exchanged the truth about God for a lie."¹

Romans 1 tells us clearly that homosexual sex is a visible manifestation of the very heart of human sinfulness. But there's one last thing we need to see from Romans before we move on. Paul has shown clearly the state of the human condition, and some of us here will have been nodding away – yes, that is the human condition, yes, homosexuality activity is such a clear demonstration of that sinful state, and aren't I thankful I'm not like that. Aren't **we** glad that we're not like **them**. You see even here there's the temptation to segregate ourselves into us – who we think are ok – and them – who aren't. But God's word doesn't let us away with that. Come with me to Chapter 2 and verse 1 – 'You therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things'. Sitting in judgment, sitting in condemnation over homosexual sex, renders you as guilty before God as participating in it. Sitting here thinking – "oh, I'm not like them – I'm actually a slightly better class of sinner" – that kind of judgmentalism makes you guilty. That's the whole point. Homosexuality sex isn't some different kind of sin, it's sin. And sin is sin is sin. Including your judgment of gay people, or you treating them as different kind of person. Or laughing at them or mocking them. Or telling them that there is no place for them in the church – that they are not welcome. That kind of behaviour has no place in our Christian lives. We must rid ourselves of it, we must repent if we have ever taken part in it. For it renders us as guilty before God as those we look down on.

The last place I want to go in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 6 and verse 9 – please turn with me to it. The church in Corinth is in a bit of a mess. There's infighting, there's disagreements. They're trying to be Christian in the midst of a community and a culture which is incredibly permissive morally and incredibly godless in nearly every way. And that permissiveness and godlessness has started to creep into the church. And so Paul writes to address that. And in the midst of addressing it, he writes these words: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10).

What is at stake here? It's the kingdom of God. It's salvation. It's a person's eternal wellbeing and Paul says do not be deceived. Our sin excludes us from the kingdom of God. Sexual immorality – which is hetero sexual immorality – sexual promiscuity before marriage - Idolatry, adultery – stealing, greed, drunkenness, slander, swindling people – these are the sorts of

¹ Richard B. Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperOne, New York, 1996), 388.

behaviors which exclude you from the kingdom of God. And included in this list is homosexual activity. Male prostitutes, homosexual offenders.

What Paul does here is take words from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and uses the word that we have seen in Leviticus 18. You see there's an argument that what Paul is talking about here is not any gay sexual activity, but something called pederasty – where an older man would take younger boy. Now what Paul is saying here certainly would include that, but would not exhaust what Paul says – he uses a word which draws on that Old Testament, Jewish background, which is far broader than simply Greco-Roman cultural practices. Paul is talking about all who who pursue gay sex and those who accept it. Gay sex keeps you out of heaven. In the same way that adultery does. In the same way that greed does.

But Paul goes on. Verse 11 “And that is what some of you were.” You Corinthian Christians – some of you were gay prostitutes, some of you cheated on your spouses. Some of you were greedy, drunken, slanderers. Some of you were middle class, respectable people, who took cash in hand for a job and dodged the tax man, you got middle-class respectably drunk, you looked at pornography on the internet and fantasized about people you were not married to. That is what some of **you** were. And because of that You were excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

But you were washed, you were sanctified –made clean and holy - you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. That is what you were, but that is not who you are now. You were washed by Jesus, you were made clean, you're sins, including your homosexual activity, were forgiven when you repented and came to him. You were declared innocent by him through his death. And because of him – because of Christ, you are now in the kingdom of heaven. You are a full and deeply loved member of God's kingdom because of the Lord Jesus.

Friends, where does this leave us? What it means is that if we are to hold out the gospel, the hope of forgiveness and eternal life, to people - we must call homosexual sex – sin. Just as we must call greed – sin. And slander and gossip and drunkenness – sin. We must call these things sin, and call on people – ourselves first of all and repeatedly to repent. To turn from our sin, to Jesus, and ask for forgiveness – and he will give it. To all who repent, Christ guarantees forgiveness.

For here is the great problem with the church saying homosexual activity – even monogamous, committed homosexual relationships are ok. It's to say that they are no longer sin. And if they are not sin – you don't need to repent of them. And Jesus says if you don't repent, you cannot be forgiven. Do you see that for us to maintain what the Scriptures teach about homosexual activity is necessary not because we hate gays – it's exactly the opposite. It's because we love people – all people – and we want them to repent and believe in Jesus and receive his love and forgiveness. And to call a sin, not a sin, to ignore it, or to bless it, is to condemn those people to exclusion from the kingdom of God. And I want no part in excluding anyone from the kingdom of God.

Friends, we will have to work hard in communicating this. We will have to work hard at welcoming and caring for people, including those already in our church family, who wrestle with feelings of attraction to people of the same gender. What we will talk about on Tuesday night will be a start in this. But as a church family, as Christian men and women, this is what God calls us to. Might we crave his help as we seek to live his way. Let's pray together.