

We've been talking for months now about getting a biblical worldview. Either the Bible is right and God is who He says He is and His Word can be trusted ... or not. Every issue we've examined during this series has challenged us to make that choice. But maybe more than any other, today's issue *really* challenges us to decide what we believe about the Bible. Because there is an obvious bottom line to this issue. For the most part, even scholars who disagree with the Bible agree that it says what it seems to say on the issue of homosexual practice. So our issue this morning is not a matter of biblical interpretation. It is more a matter of biblical application. Do you see the difference? We're having to ask a really tough question. We're having to ask, "Do I believe this? Do I believe the Bible still applies today? Do I take the Bible as *the* moral authority for life?"

If you have your Bible, turn to Romans chapter one. We're going to use this chapter as home base for our discussion ... because in Romans chapter one, Paul sets us up with the three issues within this issue: creation, distortion of our created purpose, and judgment.

We'll start with Romans 1:20, where Paul says that - *since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.* Paul is saying here that if you want to know what God thinks about things, look at what he has made. And that takes us back one more time to the creation story (have you noticed just how often we've been in Genesis as we've talked about these controversial issues? Almost every week!).

Genesis 1:27 tells us that - *God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* Genesis 2:18 expands on that story. *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."*

... (Genesis 2:21-24) *So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs (some scholars say a better translation here is "side") and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." 24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* This is a beautiful image of mutual servanthood: the woman comes out of the man to give him companionship ... the man comes out of his home to give her companionship. There's this very deep sense of interrelatedness. Robert Gagnon says, "Marriage is not just about more intimacy. It is about merging with one's sexual other half or counterpart, a complementary sexual other." There is a clear sense from the creation story of God's intentions for men and women: to populate the earth and to give us to each other for companionship.

Now ... go back to Romans, chapter one. Paul tells us our human relationships depend on our relationship to God. Paul says we were created to worship God. But when stop seeing that as our primary purpose in life ... we take our eyes off God and put them on ourselves ... then Paul says all our other relationships are distorted. It turns out that being a little selfish makes a huge difference. It's like being one letter off on your facebook password. It makes a difference. Paul says (Romans 1:22-27) - *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator (he's talking about the effect on us of serving human things over spiritual things) ...*

26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. In other words, when we take our eyes off God and His design and start trying to freelance ... well, it just doesn't work. We move from truth to lie.

This passage in Romans I've just read is one of five in the Bible that speaks directly to the issue of homosexual practice in the Bible. There are two passages in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament. There are other passages that deal with related issues, but these speak directly about homosexual practice. Leviticus 18:22 says - *Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.* Leviticus 20:13 says - *If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.* Now, it's worth noting that there are lots of instructions in the book of Leviticus we don't follow any more, but these two statements are both part of a set of instructions *most* folks would probably say are still relevant. They deal with healthy relationships. We're told in these passages, for instance, not to have sex with our father's siblings (our aunts and uncles) or our neighbor's spouse ... or with animals. Most of us would agree those prohibitions still hold. These relationship passages are about not allowing lust in any form to get the best of you. And the bigger issue is holiness.

That's the Old Testament. The New Testament hits the issue in very much the same way. We just heard what Paul said to the Romans. He also tells the people of Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:9b-10) - *Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor **practicing homosexuals** (remember that) ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor*

drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Paul tells Timothy (1 Timothy 1:9-10) - *We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, for those **practicing homosexuality**, for slave traders and liars and perjurers. And it is for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.* In these passages, homosexual practice is listed among lots of things that go against God's best for us.

You know those pictures that change when you shift them back and forth? If you look at the picture from one direction, you see one thing, but shift it a little and you see something else? To me, these passages are sort of like that. From one direction we see that practicing homosexuality is sinful, because it's right there in these lists. But shift the perspective a little and suddenly we see that practicing homosexuality is no more of an issue than a whole bunch of other things we are *all* guilty of. From one perspective, *they* have a problem. But shift the perspective just a little and suddenly we're all in the same boat. If you've ever stolen something or have been greedy or drunk or a gossip ... well, then ... you're just another sinner singing the same verse. The very, very difficult reality is that people are sexually motivated to do all kinds of things that are obviously immoral but that feel natural. There are people in this room who struggle with pornography, who have had affairs, who deny they've had affairs, who drink to excess and struggle with homosexuality and lust. There are people here who are slaves to their emotions ... who say hateful things and explode in anger. Paul's *real* point here is that none of us is above the sin line. That should be cause for a deep sense of humility as we talk about those who struggle with homosexual tendencies.

So ... what did Jesus have to say about all this? Some want to say that ... sure ... Moses and Paul talked about homosexuality, but Jesus didn't. And if Jesus was silent on this issue, then he must not have cared. But Jesus *did* talk about healthy love. Look at Matthew, chapter 19. Jesus is being followed by crowds of people and he's healing them ... and its really bothering the religious folk. So they test him with a question about divorce. And Jesus says (Matthew 19:3-12) - *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."* (that's Jesus validating the created order ... and listen to what happens next) 7 *"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"* (see what they are doing? They are trying to get him to move on from the creation story but he doesn't bite) 8 *Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. (in other words, this isn't how you were created) 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."* 10 *The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."* 11 *Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others have been made eunuchs; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."* A eunuch in Jesus' day was someone who was either incapable of sexual activity or who had given up that right for religious reasons. So Jesus is *not* silent on issues of sexuality. He says it doesn't really matter what your situation is ... whether you were born that way or made that way. We all have the same options: either be faithful inside of marriage to the spouse God gave you ... or practice celibacy.

And that's Paul's line of thought, too. Remember? With both Timothy and the Corinthians, Paul talks about *practicing* homosexuality. He makes the distinction between an urge and an act ... and that's an important distinction. To be a person with homosexual tendencies is different than being a person who *practices* homosexuality ... in the same way that being a person with alcoholic cravings is different from being a person who drinks. One deserves our understanding, respect and support and the other deserves our concern and prayers. Why? Because we are *all* fighting against our fallen human nature. We are all battling manifestations of selfish desire. We all struggle against things that "feel natural," and we all need the grace of God to conquer those cravings of the flesh. That's why we respond with grace. Because ... as Ben Witherington says ... "Nature ... does not have the last word, especially fallen human nature. Grace does."

So how do we respond to this issue of homosexuality as people of grace? **How do we love those who struggle like Jesus loves them?**

1. Hang in there with those who struggle. Tony Campolo says, "If you want to win people to Jesus, you first have to love them." Too often, people who follow Jesus react in fear when they are faced with someone who struggles with homosexual tendencies. But the Bible teaches us that perfect love casts out all fear. Jesus is our model. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry and ate with sinners. Those who follow him will hang in there with those who struggle.

2. Pray for *anyone* who struggles with any issue that keeps them from the abundant life. Those who struggle with homosexual tendencies need our prayers. For some, prayer will bring healing. For others, prayer will bring the strength necessary to remain celibate in singleness.

One of our folks who struggles with this issue allowed me to talk through today's message with him. That was a privilege for me, because I really wanted for the things I said today to be real ... not just words. And when we got to this point of prayer, he said, "That's really important." And then he said this: "Sometimes I just feel lost. I don't know how to change things or what to change, and what I really want is for God to work his power. So pray for me ... not out of hate ... but because you love me." He said, "You know, I can't speak for everyone who struggles with homosexual tendencies, but I would invite prayer. I would welcome it."

3. Be a friend. You know the old saying? "People don't care what you know until they know that you care." It really is true.

4. Don't define anyone by their struggle. None of us wants to be labeled according to our sins or issues. Grace doesn't define people by their struggles, but by the blood of Jesus.

5. Practice humility. This brings us back one more time to that passage in Romans. After he calls out the sin, Paul reminds us (Romans 2:1) says – *You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.* Do you hear the recurring theme here? I keep hearing over and over that I really can not talk about homosexuality unless I also acknowledge all the ways I fall short. That's what humility looks like in a believer. It is a willingness to admit that *all* of us fall short of the glory of God and *all* of us are in need of his grace. Ray Pritchard gives a beautiful three-point guide to practicing humility. He says: Never pretend. Never presume. Never push. **Never pretend** you are more than you are. The best way to fight our enemy is to be transparent about our own struggles, because God won't heal what we won't confess. **Never presume** to understand why people do

what they do. We can't possibly know all the reasons someone else struggles. And **never push**. Wait for the Lord to move first ... because only the Lord can change a life.

I trust the Bible. I trust what it teaches. And so I trust what it teaches about homosexual practice. It's not God's best for us. But folks ... there is more to Christianity than just being anti-homosexual. The people who wrote the Bible were trying to help *all* of us live within our created purpose. Their goal was to get us beyond human nature to that place where the image of God is. We're like salmon. The natural thing for a fish is to relax and let the current carry it. But that's not what salmon do. They fight to get upstream because God built into them a deep desire to go home to the place they were born. That's what God wants for us. He wants us to fight back ... to fight against the current and get back to our spiritual home base.