

Homosexuality and the Wrath of God

Romans 1:26-27

March 26, 2017

Introduction:

This is not a message I would have preached twenty years ago. Were Rob Borkowitz to preach through the book of Romans back in 1997, I would have gotten to the last section of Romans 1, which we covered last week, and the topic of today's message would have been adequately covered as one of the sub-points on how the wrath of God has been revealed by giving us over to sin. I would have spent maybe ten minutes or so expositing these two verses and moved on. But this is not 1997.

I am preaching though Romans in the year 2017 and those to whom I am responsible to preach have been hit by a cultural tsunami in regards to the topic we need to address this morning. I don't need to explain to any of you who have been alive over the past twenty years how rapidly the cultural tide has turned regarding the acceptance of homosexuality. Within those twenty years we went from viewing homosexuality as a mental illness that needed to be treated to a civil right that needs to be celebrated. We went from viewing it as something to be ashamed of to something that people took pride in. We went from delegitimizing it by passing laws against it to enshrining it in law as a basis for marriage. So then, I need to preach this message today, to those of us who live in 2017 and not in 1997. I need to preach it because, while cultural norms have changed, the Word of God has not. As we stand unbalanced amid the shifting sand of public opinion and legal decree, we need to find our footing on the solid rock of God's unchanging Word.

So I would invite you to open your Bible with me to the first chapter of the book of Romans. While we briefly touched on v. 26-27 last week, this morning I want to give much closer attention to what Paul has to say here about homosexuality and its implications for us. If you are using one of the hardcover pew Bibles, you can find today's passage on pg. 939. Let me just read it first and then we'll talk about it in more detail as we go along. So please follow along as I read v. 26-27 of Romans 1. **“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”**

I need to begin this morning by going deeply against the cultural grain. If ever there was a counter-cultural passage of Scripture for America in the early 21st century, it is these two verses right here. If we're going to be Christians who believe God's Word is authoritative, then we need to hold to what the Bible teaches, even if that places us at odds with the world around us. So the first point we need to start with is what I'll call...

1. The harsh reality

Sometimes our study of the Bible is comforting, sometimes it is encouraging, other times it is challenging, and still other times it is unflinchingly bold in what it has to say

and this passage is certainly that when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. There are a couple of harsh truths brought out in v. 26-27 that we need to look square in the face. They deeply offend our new cultural sensibilities but they are God's verdict on this matter and so we need to understand it, believe it, and abide by it we're going to be followers of Jesus Christ. So the first harsh reality we need to face is this...

a. Homosexual behavior of any kind is a sin

Both the context of this passage and the description within this passage make it clear that homosexual behavior is not acceptable in the sight of God. First, the context of this passage begins in v. 18 as Paul informs us that the wrath of God is being revealed against all mankind. He then goes on to explain in v. 19-23 that the reason for God's wrath is mankind has rejected God's revelation of himself through creation and sought to worship the creation instead. As a result, Paul mentions three times in v. 24-32 that God "gave them up" to all manner of evil deeds. So contextually, these two verses are sandwiched between verses that are clearly speaking of God turning people over to wicked behavior.

But the passage itself provides plenty of reasons to look at homosexual behavior in a negative light. First, Paul says in v. 26, "**God gave them up to dishonorable passions.**" There is no honor in homosexuality. We may have our "Gay Pride" parades but God views it different. He says such things are dishonorable. They dishonor God because they reject the God-given creation mandate for a man and a woman to become one flesh through the bond of marriage and instead pervert it by uniting with someone of the same gender.

Furthermore, twice Paul mentions that homosexual behavior is a rejection of what Paul calls "**natural relations.**" He says in the middle of v. 26, "**For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women...**" Biologically, it's obvious that men and women complement each other. To use a simple analogy: keys are made to go into locks. We're designed in such a way that our parts, as it were, are only intended to function with someone of the opposite gender. Two men are unable to biologically produce a child, and the same with two women. The natural way that God designed us is for the sexual union of one man with one woman to procreate.

Paul then goes on to describe these acts as "**shameless**" saying in v. 27, "**...men committing shameless acts with men.**" There should be shame because homosexual acts violate God's law, both as revealed in nature and by special revelation. Yet instead of shame, men have cast off restraint and have been "**consumed with passion for other men.**" Again, there's nothing positive to be found in what Paul is saying here.

Then finally, Paul says this at the end of v. 27. He says they were "**receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.**" To engage in homosexual behavior is a grave error. It's an example of what Paul said back in v. 22, saying "Claiming to be wise, they became fools..." They have foolishly chosen to engage in sin and

as a result, there will be a **“penalty”** for their error. You don’t penalize people for doing something that is right. Clearly, regardless of how much our culture will applaud and celebrate homosexuality, God categorically regards it as sin.

Now there are some who try to evade this by claiming that Paul isn’t speaking out against all homosexual behavior but only particular kinds. For example, some will claim Paul is speaking against those who are heterosexual by orientation yet are acting against their nature by committing homosexual acts. They would say then that those who are acting in accordance with their nature - that is, those who have true homosexual desires - are not being denounced here. But that is to impose on the text psychological distinctions Paul would never have made. Furthermore, Paul describes these people as acting in accordance with their passions: they are doing what they want to do, not working against them.

Other will try to limit this to a prohibition to a form of homosexuality commonly practiced in Roman culture between men and boys. But Paul is explicit in stating this was **“men committing shameless acts with men”** (not boys) and plus his mention of women strongly speaks against this because there’s no record of any kind sexual intimacy taking place between women and girls in the ancient world.

Another objection attempts to limit this to non-consensual sex, such as that which would could possibly be forced upon a slave by his master. Thus, they would claim Paul’s speaking against homosexual rape but not consensual homosexual relations. But once again, Paul’s wording speaks otherwise. He says in v. 27 that they **“were consumed with passion for one another.”** Clearly Paul envisions both parties to be willing participants.

As a result, this passage, along with consistent testimony of the rest of Scripture whenever homosexuality is brought up, states clearly and unambiguously that any kind of homosexual behavior is a violation of God’s design for human sexuality and is thus sinful. Such an understanding will not win you any brownie points in our culture but it is the unanimous teaching of Scripture and has been the unanimous position of the people of God, from the time of the OT, throughout the NT, and over the past two thousand years of the church. Homosexual behavior is a sin.

Now if I stop here, I’ll will have provided plenty of fuel to stoke the raging fires of cultural backlash against me. There is perhaps no greater cultural sin than to speak of homosexuality in a negative manner, much less call it a sin. But I need to turn up the heat in the cultural fiery furnace against me by daring to make the next sub-point that is perhaps an even harsher truth that we need to face from this passage and that is this...

b. Homosexuality is both the cause and result of God’s wrath

The words that begin this section saying, **“For this reason,”** are important because they help us understand the reason God gave people up to homosexuality. In the

verses preceding this, Paul told us God's wrath had come because people had rejected God's revelation of himself through nature. Since they didn't honor and give thanks to God as they should have, God's wrath has come upon them and **"for this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions."** In other words, God's wrath against us for rejecting him resulted in people being given over to indulge in homosexual passions.

Usually when we think about homosexuality, we think of God's wrath as something that will come as a result of it but not as its cause. We look out at our country and say God is going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah if he doesn't punish us for our sin. We warn that God will punish us as a nation for our acceptance of sexual immorality, and in particular how we have so whole-heartedly embraced homosexuality as a cultural norm. But all of that is future-language: God *will* punish us in his wrath in the near-future unless we repent.

Now that's true in that there awaits the future wrath of God against all unrepented sin upon Christ's return, but that's not what Paul is talking about here where he connects this passage to God's wrath in the here and now. Paul is saying that being given over to homosexual passion is itself God's wrath. God's wrath is not merely a future threat, it is a present reality manifesting itself right now, in this moment, in those who engage in homosexual relations.

This is a harsh truth because it is so at odds with our cultural understanding of how I'm supposed to be true to myself and how I should embrace myself just the way God made me, so if he made me with homosexual desires then that's what I should be. Those are lies, lies from the pit of hell that are enslaving people into embracing unrighteous desires that come from God's wrath for our rejection of him in the past and will result in the future wrath of God when we face him in judgment. It is deeply disturbing to me that we as a culture are celebrating the very thing that ought to strike terror in our hearts because it is a sign of God's wrath currently, right now, being poured out upon us. People are boasting in the very thing which is the result of God's wrath and will result in his final wrath for all eternity. We think we are wise and enlightened in our tolerance and acceptance of sin but we are fools, fools to embrace what God calls sin and then to dare take pride in it, to make it the central focus of our identity, and celebrate it in our movies and television shows.

So we need to face this terrible truth: God's wrath has come in the present by God allowing people to be given over to homosexual desires. We are experiencing the wrath of God right now, today, in this regard. This is more than a future threat: it is a present reality. God in his wrath is giving people over to homosexual desires and we're witnessing this with increasing regularity across our culture. This view is not the way to win friends and influence people around the cooler at work, and it will certainly bring about the raging indignation of those who have been swept up into the cultural tsunami, but it is the truth of God as we who claim Christ as Lord need to believe it even if people hate us for it. This is a place when Scriptural truth butts heads with the world's lies and we must choose which one we're going to believe.

Now these are hard truths, and not easy to hear, especially if you or a loved one is wrestling with homosexual desires. But there is more to be said about this than merely that homosexual behavior is a sin and that God's wrath is lies before and behind it. I want to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction for the second half of the sermon and move from away from our discussion of the harsh reality to our second point, which I'm calling...

2. The gentle hope

In discussing the biblical teaching on homosexuality, while we must state that it's a sin, we must also emphasize the role of the gospel lest we come across as judgmental and self-righteous, speaking only of the disease and not the cure. I know how easy it is to get angry and combative with people who disagree with you over this issue. Rare is the Facebook discussion on such matters that is kind and civil; we've all seen how rapidly any kind of discussion about this or other heated cultural issues can descend into ugly words and hurtful accusations. So there's a flip side to the coin we need to talk about today that I hope helps to temper the harsh truth with gentle words of hope. So the first thing we need to keep in mind is this...

a. We are all sexual sinners

While homosexuality is a type of sexual sin, it is not the only kind. Heterosexuals have no shortage of sexual sin to call their own. Remember that right before Paul mentions homosexuality in v. 26-27, he starts off by mentioning that God gave them over to heterosexual sin in v. 24. Not one of us has the right to look down our self-righteous nose at those who are gay and act as if they have engaged in something categorically worse than we have. We have no moral high ground. All sexual sin is a violation of God's law and our indulgence in it is no less a consequence of God's wrath against us.

When it comes to sexual sin, there's no "us" vs. "them:" there is only "we." The only difference between us is in the kind of sexual sin we choose to indulge in, but not the consequence. Do not think God is somehow less angry with you because the person you're sleeping around with happens to be of a different gender. Do not for a moment imagine that God looks more favorably on you because instead of visiting a gay nightclub you surf for porn in the privacy of your own home. We are all in this together. We all share in the guilt for the misuse of sex.

Furthermore, might I remind us that Paul gives a huge vice list in v. 29-31 which is also part of what God has given us up to in his wrath, a list I'm certain you and I both can find items that would be apt descriptions of ourselves. So let's not get too hung up on scapegoating gay people for all of our country's ills. We have plenty of sin of all varieties that have sufficiently worked to corrode our culture and bring about the wrath of God upon us. Let's be certain to not dismiss the humongous log of sin sticking out of our own eyes before we get overly worked up about the speck of sin in the eyes of others.

So that's the first thing we need to remember: we're all sinners equally at the foot of the cross. But that then reminds us of the cross and why Jesus died on it, so the second gentle hope we need to be reminded of is that...

b. The gospel is for sinners

Paul isn't talking about the wrath of God against our sins because he wants to leave us feeling condemned and hopeless. The whole point of talking about how God's wrath has come against us for our rejection of him is to get to the good news of the gospel. The wrath of God against our sins is not the end of the story. No matter what your sin, be sexually or otherwise, there is hope for the sinner. Christ died as our sinless substitute on the cross. He became sin for us so that the wrath of God could be justly satisfied against our sin and so Christ's perfect obedience could in exchange be counted as if it were our own. While we exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones, God has graciously and mercifully responded by exchanging our sin for Christ's righteousness.

So one thing we dare not forget in the midst of speaking about homosexual behavior as sin is to also proclaim that Christ offers forgiveness of sin in the gospel. Beware that in your anger and fear over the cultural tsunami that has overtaken us you don't forget to hold out the hope of forgiveness. The gospel is for all sinners, regardless of your sexual orientation. It's too easy to fall into merely words of condemnation and not offer words of hope. That's the grave error of the notorious folks over at Westboro Baptist Church who protest at funerals and other events with their "God hates fags" signs. Don't be like that. Don't even be remotely similar to that. While we must call sin a sin, we must also then make a beeline to the gospel, to the cross and the mercy and grace to be found there.

Reflect on the conversations you've had with people about homosexuality over the past year, whether they be on Facebook or in person. Did those who listened to you hear only words of condemnation, of judgment, of disdain and revulsion? What did they hear of Christ's love? Did they leave hearing the good news that in spite of our sin, God has shown us mercy by sending his Son to suffer and die in our place on the cross? Paul says in Ephesians that we are to "speak the truth in love." When it comes to homosexuality, that means lovingly telling them the truth that what they are celebrating is in fact sin, but it must also include the truth of the gospel, of speaking of God's love that has truly loved sinners by atoning for their sins. We cannot have one without the other.

Finally, there is one more word of gentle hope that needs to be central in our thinking and speaking about homosexuality, and that brings us to our third and final sub-point:

c. What we are is not what we must be

Go to 1 Corinthians 6 in your Bibles for a moment. It's the very next book after Romans. It's important you see what Paul says here. Look at 1 Corinthians 6:9 and follow along as I read. Paul says,

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Let's stop there for a moment. This is a lot like Romans 1, isn't it? Paul makes a list of all kind of sins, including homosexuality, and says that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. They are under God's wrath. But what is essential for us to see is what Paul then says in v. 11. Look there with me.

“And such were some of you. 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.”

How absolutely essential it is for us to believe it when Paul says, *“And such were some of you.”* Not *“are some of you.”* Were. Past tense. When you are justified by faith in Christ, when the Holy Spirit transforms your heart, you don't remain what you once were. God empowers you so you no longer are a slave to sin but can live in manner pleasing to him.

The beautiful hope of the gospel is that it has the power to change you. In Christ, you are a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come! So if someone is living a homosexual lifestyle, the gospel promises to change you. Now that doesn't necessarily mean God will remove those desires from your heart. When I became a Christian, I didn't suddenly find myself free from the temptation of lust. Those passions were still there, but I now have the power to truly resist them, to say no to sin and yes to righteousness.

So when it comes to homosexual desires, we shouldn't act as if all those feelings and attractions will suddenly disappear. A man who was attracted to other men before Christ will likely still have those attractions, but now the Holy Spirit dwells within him to strengthen him to resist acting out on those desires, just as much as the Holy Spirit helps me resist the heterosexual desires of my own heart. In Christ, we all join in the liberating power of God to kill our flesh and grow in righteousness.

As a result, there's no such thing as a gay Christian, any more than there is a person who is an adulterer Christian or a thief Christian or an alcoholic Christian. You no longer need to define yourself by your sin. You may be a Christian who fights against homosexual desires or heterosexual desires, or you may be a Christian who struggles not to steal or not to drink excessively, but you are not what you once were. You must no longer define yourself by the sin that once controlled you. As a Christian, you have a new identity in Christ and have been set free from sin's grip.

So we need to hold out that hope to all people, but perhaps especially to those in the gay community who have made their sexual orientation the central defining aspect of themselves. The gospel gives us the good news that the power of sin

over us is broken so those old identities no longer apply. That is what you *were*, but in Christ you have become someone new.

Conclusion

So then, as we wrap this up, we need to stand on God's Word when it comes to the question of homosexuality. What the Bible teaches isn't popular - not by a long shot - but it is the truth and so we need to affirm it and proclaim it. But in so doing, we dare not only speak of the wrath of God without also speaking of the grace of God. Yes, homosexual behavior is sin, but it is a sin Christ died for, along with our own heterosexual sins and everything else that we've ever thought, said, or done in the rebellion of our hearts. We need to proclaim both, not out of fear or anger, but in the joyful hope that though we're all sinners, Christ is enough to save and set free all who look to him in faith. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.