

Making Sense of #7: Sexuality - Acts 11:1-18

I have this belief that the most important thing you can do in life is to **Love Well**. I believe its more important than our political persuasions, our religious ideologies, the color of our skin, & our sexual orientation. But, lately, I don't feel this belief is widely shared. On some real level, we just don't see each other as Beloved & we don't hear one another when we speak. We're just missing each other & also hurting each other. And I just think...what are we doing? When are we going to wake up & get it? That the single most important thing each of us can do is to love well?

What I am about to teach you today is & has been incredibly divisive & polarizing in our culture/churches today. But I am going to do it anyway b/c I'm your pastor & I love you. But, before I read from Acts 11, I want to do a brief review. Last week we were in Acts 10 looking at Peter's crisis of faith (**Elaborate**). Today, I want us to look at what happens when he shares his new revelation with his Jewish brethren in Jerusalem.

READ Acts 11:1-18

At first, Peter's revelation to his friends draws sharp criticism b/c it flies in the face of all his friends feel the Scriptures have taught them about gentiles.

But as he gives them more detail, they come to believe that God really is doing something new & they changed their mind. Their crisis of faith became a catalyst for breakthrough. Anything like that ever happen in your life?

Last week we looked at the issues of slavery, misogyny, and traditional family values as given us in the Bible. Today, we finish our series: **Making Sense of** by addressing what the Bible says a/b homosexuality, one of the most divisive issues in the church today. Churches & entire denominations have split over this issue & even in our church we're divided as well. On both sides, faithful Christians have sincere beliefs & are very passionate about them.

As I do my best to address what the Bible says about homosexuality, you need to know that there is no other book that has shaped my life like this one has. I read & study the scriptures daily. I know and hear Jesus through it & I seek to live my life according to the words I find in it. This book has authority in my life. And so, when you hear what I have to say, understand that the question isn't about the authority of the Scriptures in my life. The question is about interpretation. How do we interpret the 6 passages in the Bible (b/c that's all there are) & form beliefs about what they say regarding this issue?

Before we take a brief look at each of the 6 passages, I want to address the objection that some have to homosexuality not being an acceptable lifestyle b/c there are no examples of same sex marriage anywhere in the Bible, which is true. There are no same-sex marriages in the Bible. But we should expect that b/c same-sex marriages were simply not a part of the cultures in which the Bible was written. In ancient Israel, marriage was as much about inheritance rights as anything, which resulted in some bizarre practices like levirate marriage, where men were required to take a dead brother's wife and produce heirs for him. Even more shocking, a master could buy wives for his male slaves and then keep the wife and kids for himself after setting the slave free, & on certain occasions, women were even forced to marry their rapists. I'm not kidding! My point is this: Biblical examples of marriage reflect the culture both in what they include and in what they don't include.

Many things aren't mentioned in the Bible, either because they weren't part of the culture at the time or because they weren't especially important issues to the Biblical authors. In cases like these, we use general Biblical principles to address the issue, relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance. So, that's that.

Now, the 1st time you run into the concept where homosexuality is mentioned is in **Genesis 19**, which is the story of Sodom & Gomorrah. But, if you read the story, you will see that it has nothing to do with homosexuality. The story is about the gang rape of a stranger. You will sometimes hear that S&G was destroyed b/c of their homosexuality. But Ezekiel 16:49-50 clearly tells us that the primary reason S&G was destroyed was b/c they wouldn't share what they had with those who were in need. They were notoriously inhospitable, which was a problem because ancient Israel was uniquely called by God to be His reflection back into the world. They were to be different from the nations around them, including but not limited to the hospitality they offered to the stranger, the alien, the foreigner, and the immigrant. They were to be a people who embodied hospitality, sought justice for the oppressed, cared for the outcast, & used their abundance to provide for others. This story in Genesis 19 was to remind Israel of the dangers of forgetting their calling. Abraham and Lot were held up as exemplars of hospitality in contrast to the debased power mongers of S&G who viewed outsiders as objects to control and exploit. The entire point of Genesis 19 is that people of God are called to be those who receive the outcast and the outsiders, not create them.

The next 2 times you find the issue addressed are in the Book of Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

22 You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.

13 If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death.

In order to understand what a verse is actually saying, you have to know the context in which it was written. So, what is the context here in Leviticus? The Book of Leviticus is a collection of commandments and laws compiled for the priestly tribe (Levites) who were responsible for maintaining the religious aspects of the community. The book can be broken down into 3 sections. The first 2 sections outline how the Hebrews ought to function religiously towards God, while the 3rd section (CH 18-27) is about how they are to function towards one another. This section is called The Holiness Code.

The people of Israel were to be pure & separate from the polytheistic cultures surrounding them. Each prohibition was intentionally designed to showcase a new way of being in the world – a new way to understand humanity, God, and the relationship between them. Israel's calling was to be set apart. So, when you get to the practice of homosexual acts in Leviticus. The author is speaking specifically about same sex acts that take place within the context of idolatry practiced by male prostitutes as ritual acts. These acts were placed beside other acts such as child sacrifice & sex rites of fertility cults. These were all primary expressions of pagan religion. So, they are linking these acts with idolatry and telling them they are not to be like those around them.

In the very same section, the Israelites are also forbidden to shave (Lev. 19:27), get tattoos (Lev. 19:28), wear clothing made of mixed fabrics (Lev. 19:19), eat pork or shellfish or touch the skin of pigs, which rules out football. All of these things were considered abominations b/c they would confuse who they were with the other pagans around them. So, when the word (Toevah) or Abomination is used, it's not intended to be synonymous with "sinful." It might be, but it wasn't a given b/c in Leviticus 11 it also says that eagles, owls, storks, & various types of water creatures, along with every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth are also abominations.

Now no reasonable person would look at the list and say that all those things are inherently and eternally a sin against God b/c **Toevah was not about morality. It was about identity.** The Jews as a part of the family of God were given the Law as a way to live out their calling. You see, Leviticus doesn't try to answer whether or not a person is sinful by engaging in a same sex, loving, committed relationship. And it certainly doesn't provide cause for a belief that our gay brothers & sisters are vile or subhuman. But even if you disagree & you want to live your life according to the Holiness Codes found in Leviticus (which Jesus would later come & reject), then you have to apply them all the way across the board. So, in this case, the Death penalty is commanded for these acts. Do you really believe that this is God's timeless and eternal will? That we're still meant to put gay and lesbian people to death? And if we agree that we shouldn't do that, then aren't we admitting that at least part of that verse in Leviticus 20 is time bound? So, that's 3 of 6.

The final 3 are found in the NT, all of which are addressed by Paul. The 1st of which is in Romans. Now, the context for Paul's letter to the Romans is that he is writing to a community that is fractured along ethnic lines. And he's urging them towards reconciliation & unity. In chapter 1 he addresses the long standing prejudices the Jews have against the gentiles & in chapter 2, he tells the Jewish believers that their judgments make them no better than the ones they judge. Now, what were their judgments about? The gentile Christians had grown up in a world where there were numerous temples dedicated to countless gods/goddesses. In any given temple, you would find both male and female prostitutes engaged in cultic rituals involving orgies and idol worship. These acts would have been shameless & culturally offensive to the Jews, but the gentiles wouldn't have given it much thought. So, when Paul is addressing this issue of immorality and subsequent prejudice against the gentiles in Romans 1, he describes 3 exchanges that take place that are cause for correction. Listen for what they are ok?

Romans 1:21-27

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became ools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

They exchanged: the glory of God for idol worship; The truth of God for lies; The natural function for the unnatural. And so, when they made these exchanges, Paul says that God gave them up to their lusts. But what were these shameless acts rooted in? **Idolatry.** They were not acting out of a place of love and mutuality, but out of their uncontrolled passion & desire for excess.

Let me ask you: Does Paul's description here match any friends or family members you know who might identify as gay & Christian? That they have turned their backs on God, begun worshipping idols, and given in to their lusts?

The homosexuals I know haven't given up heterosexual passions for homosexual lusts. Most every homosexual I know has always felt the way they do about their sexuality. They're not exchanging a heterosexual orientation with a homosexual one. Today, when we talk about homosexuality, we're talking about 2 people of the same sex who love each other & who choose to be in a relationship where they see each other as equals, where there is a mutual honor and respect between them. These concepts simply didn't exist in the ancient world. So, you would be hard pressed to argue that this discourse in Romans 1:18-32 applies within the context of mutuality and love or marriage between 2 people of the same sex. If we are searching for words to inform us about how God might feel about gays and lesbians, this passage is helpful only insofar as it conveys to us the beliefs of the Jewish community toward the Gentile community who engaged in idolatrous, exploitive, and culturally offensive sex acts.

The next time Paul address the issue is to the church at Corinth when he says:

I Corinthians 6:9-10 ⁹Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality (homosexual offender), ¹⁰or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.

The context here falls within a larger argument being made by Paul in chapters 5-7 dealing with sexual immorality & financial exploitation. The word uses for male prostitute (malakoi) literally means effeminate. Many scholars would say that Paul is referring to young male call boys. The 2nd word he uses (Arsenokoitai) is roughly translated to mean dirty old men. The homosexual offenders then are the dirty old men who are preying upon young effeminate males. At this time, it wasn't uncommon for married, heterosexual men to have an erotic relationship with a young boy on the side. It wasn't an expression of their orientation. It was about pleasure, power, & excess. This is what we refer to as pederasty & it was widely accepted in the ancient world. What Paul is condemning here are same sex sex acts that were exploitive and transactional. He was inviting the Corinthian believers to embody a community that was holy & set apart from the culture around them. He was calling them to a better way of living where people don't solicit for sex & don't treat their own or other's bodies as commodities; one where people are respected & honored, & one where they don't use power and privilege to take advantage of those below them.

The last passage to address homosexuality is Paul's letter to Timothy, where he is giving instruction to his young protégé about how to square right doctrine with right living.

I Timothy 1:9-11 - ⁹For the law was not intended for people who do what is right. It is for people who are lawless and rebellious, who are ungodly and sinful, who consider nothing sacred and defile what is holy, who kill their father or mother or commit other murders.

¹⁰The law is for people who are **sexually immoral**, or who **practice homosexuality**, or are **slave traders**, liars, promise breakers, or who do anything else that contradicts the wholesome teaching ¹¹ that comes from the glorious Good News entrusted to me by our blessed God.

The word he uses for sexually immoral is Pornoi (Like the word used for pornography). It means one forced into sexual servitude. The 2nd word he uses for those who practice homosexuality (Arsenokoitai) is the same word used in Corinthians for dirty old man, aka the client who uses/abuses the male prostitute. The 3rd word he uses is slave traders (Andropodistai). These are the pimps. Again, pederasty was part of a coming of age rite for younger boys to have sex with older men. This was part of the culture in Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus, but not in the church. Paul is telling Timothy about the dangers of sexual abuse, the exploitation of boys by men, and the prostitution of slaves against their will. And he tells them that these are some of the things that the Law of Moses must protect against, especially because the governmental laws don't.

So, that being said, what does this all mean?

Over the years, as I have read & wrestled with these texts, I have felt like Peter who struggled with the vision he had conflicting with what he had grown up believing that the Bible taught. But the more I understand them, the more I realize that these 6 passages have nothing to do with homosexuality as we know it today. None of them refer to monogamous, mutually consensual same gender relationships. In fact, the way we understand homosexuality now wasn't even coined until the 20th century.

At the end of the day, you may disagree with my interpretations & if so, that's ok, but I strongly urge you to do the work to solidify your own beliefs & convictions. I've put in hundreds of hours to get to where I am now. And I would say that my beliefs on this issue and other matters are still evolving. But, again, I just don't see a Biblical prohibition against homosexuality as we know it. This is where I stand and I give you permission to stand in a different place provided that you love and welcome anyone and everyone who comes our way. Because no matter how you feel about this or any issue, a faith without love at its center is not a faith worth having!