

Gay: Responding With Grace And Truth

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'm going to read some verses from Paul's first letter to Corinthians, so 1 Corinthians chapter 6. If you have a Bible and want to turn those verses up, that would be great.

And then keep that passage open if you can. So 1 Corinthians chapter 6, and I'm going to read from verse 9.

I'm reading here from the ESV, the English Standard Version, so it may be slightly different to the version that you have in front of you. This is what Paul writes.

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. 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.

[1 : 17] Well, I think it's true to say that over the last 50 years or so, there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex relationships.

So it's no longer the taboo that it used to be for someone now to come out and say, I'm gay, I'm a lesbian, I'm bi. Even at school, it's not uncommon now for boys and girls in their early teens, sometimes even pre-teens, to come out and declare themselves amongst their friends to be gay, something that would not have happened certainly a generation ago.

The media have helped to lead the way, of course, in this change of attitude. So on most popular TV soaps and dramas, same-sex couples feature now as a matter of course.

And if you notice, gone are those outdated stereotypes of the effeminate gay man or the masculine lesbian woman. Most gay characters on TV now are portrayed as being really just the ordinary man or woman next door with nothing particularly to mark out the fact that they're gay in their appearance or their mannerisms.

It's often said that the soaps merely reflect what's going on in the real world. I'm not quite sure about that. I wonder which one drives which sometimes. But certainly over recent years, it's true that people have become less and less shocked when a celebrity or a sports personality or a politician admits to being gay or bi.

[2 : 49] Most recently, you may have heard the story of a Puerto Rican boxer, Orlando Cruz, who declared himself to be gay. And when a boxer is able to publicly come out in that way and then goes on to comfortably win his next fight, by the way, well, we're left in no doubt, are we, as to the fact that attitudes have changed dramatically.

A boxer able to come out and say that he's gay. The law has changed too, of course, with various countries having introduced civil partnership legislation which gives to same-sex couples many of the rights and responsibilities which were previously reserved for heterosexual couples in marriage. And, of course, several governments now, including Canada, Argentina, Norway, Denmark, Spain, have already passed laws to allow for full same-sex marriage.

So, with this cultural shift, it's no surprise to us, I'm sure, that in this kind of culture where popular attitudes have changed so dramatically, it's no surprise to us that the church and the Bible are perceived to be, well, at best, out of date, out of touch with reality.

At worst, some would say, homophobic or anti-gay. Well, as we think about how to relate and respond to gay people with grace and truth, or indeed how to support Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction, and there are many Christians within the church often quietly and secretly struggling in this way and feeling, sadly, fearful to be able to admit that struggle to other Christians.

[4 : 24] But as we think about it, I want to focus our thoughts in a moment around this passage that I read from 1 Corinthians chapter 6. But before we dive into what Paul writes, I just think it might be

helpful right at the outset to explain that I'm not teaching on this subject in some sort of theological vacuum. This is a passage which has, in fact, intensely personal implications for my life.

As I said, I was converted to faith in Christ at age 24, and at that time, I myself was involved in a long-term committed same-sex relationship. I spoke to Johnny earlier about how I began to rebel, really, going to church and towards God when I was in my teenage years, around about the age of 11, 12, 13. And one of the big reasons for that was because I was beginning to experience attractions to some of my male friends rather than my female friends.

It was something that was very, very confusing, something that I'd never chosen, something that I tried to resist. But around about the age of 17, really, I began to identify myself inwardly as being gay. And I got involved then in this long-term relationship with another guy of my own age that went on from age 17 through to 24. Then age 24, as I said, walked into a church within a week and become a Christian. That was very much a sense of God's calling me, if you like, out of that way of life. And I'll talk a little bit more about that this evening. Now, you may be expecting me at this point to introduce my wife and five children sitting on the front row. Well, you're going to be disappointed. They're not here. The reason they're not here is because they don't exist.

And I think I need to stress that I've not been, quote, healed or cured of homosexuality. Nor do I think that's language that's particularly helpful in this context. And I have to say, too, that those well-meaning but otherwise Christians who over the years have attempted to deliver me from the demon of homosexuality, and there have been quite a few, let me tell you, they've all been unsuccessful. It always makes me smile when I hear Christians trying to demonize homosexuality in that way and suggest that people just simply need to be delivered from it. It's probably my warped sense of humor, but I just have this image in my mind of all these camp demons floating around in the heavenlies or something. You know, Graham Norton lookalikes, and they're there with their red jumpsuits waving their rainbow flags or something. As I say, that's probably just my warped sense of humor. Don't make notes about that, please. But I'm yet to find any reference in the Bible to a demon of homosexuality. Now, the reality is that my experience now is that I'm a Christian who has an ongoing struggle to one degree or another with same-sex attraction. It's not the issue that it used to be, but it's still there for me. But I want to stress that I don't now identify myself as gay. That's not a label I want to use. I don't call myself a gay Christian for lots of reasons, not least because that could be misunderstood, but mainly because actually that is not my identity.

My identity now is in Christ. That's really important to me. But if you push me for a description that I'm a Christian who has an ongoing struggle with same-sex attraction, God hasn't taken that away. And my experience really is one of seeking to live a single, celibate, and I want to stress a very fulfilled life as a single guy. So it's not a sad life, it's not a lonely life, it's not a frustrating life. Although, yeah, of course, there are times of sadness and loneliness and frustration. But then that's equally true for pretty much all of my married friends and my other friends who are in relationships. We all have those times of sadness, loneliness and frustration.

[7 : 46] But it's a very fulfilled life as a single guy. I want to be very honest with you this morning and this evening and say, look, I'm not claiming in the 20-odd years now that I've been a Christian that I've lived that life perfectly. The reality is that I've struggled and at times I've slipped up and fallen back. In fact, there have been several seasons of my Christian life where I've genuinely feared that I could slip right back into a same-sex relationship. But really, my testimony to you this morning is of God, a God of incredible grace and mercy, much as we've been singing about and reading about this morning, a God who is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. And every time, really, I have made steps back in that direction, all I can say is that God very lovingly has put his hand upon me and said, no, I don't want you going back in that direction. And he kind of picked me up and put me back on the narrow road, which, remember, Jesus spoke about. The narrow road, of course, one that's hard to travel. And it is hard to travel at times. But it is the road, says Jesus, which leads to eternal life. So I hope right at the outset that a little bit more personal testimony helps to convince you if you had any doubts before this morning, and I'm sure you don't. You seem to be a grace-filled church. But there are Christians who have doubts about God's attitudes towards gay people. And certainly people in the gay and lesbian community often believe that Christians seem to be hateful of them or certainly anti-gay. And they believe that maybe God is anti-gay, that he hates gay people. But God does not hate gay people. God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for gay people too, so that they can have an opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and to respond and to put their trust in him. Okay, well, let's now take that testimony, if

you like, into this passage of 1 Corinthians 6, 9 to 11. I hope I can help to show you that this is a passage.

Yes, it comes with some warnings, but it's actually a passage that is full of hope as well for those particularly who struggle in this way. But in fact, for Christians who struggle in all kinds of ways or have come from all kinds of backgrounds. Let me just say a little bit about the emerging church at Corinth, which Paul is writing. It's gained itself something of a mixed reputation, we could say. On the one hand, it is a very gifted church. And Paul opens this letter, chapter 1, verse 7, by reporting how he thanks God that the Christians in Corinth are not lacking any spiritual gift. That's the phrase he uses. But their apparent spirituality and gifting is marred by various problems in this church. Problems such as divisiveness and the cult of personality. So there were some people who say, I follow Paul, I follow Apollos. There was this sort of divided community. Some were putting their hope in men rather than in God. And not least one of their other problems was that there were various forms of sexual immorality prevalent within the church. So we could say that Paul is writing to a culture, not unlike our own, in fact, where pretty much anything went sexually. Ancient Corinth was a society renowned for all kinds of sexual promiscuity, including same-sex practice. One of the great landmarks in Corinth was the Temple of Aphrodite. And that temple was reputed to be staffed by over a thousand slave prostitutes. That gives you a feel for what was going on in the city of Corinth.

And what I want to do is draw out from this passage three things. Three things that I think are really important that Paul is teaching from this short passage in 1 Corinthians 6. Firstly, there is a warning. Don't be deceived, says Paul. Don't be deceived. Now that heading is lifted directly if you look from the middle of verse 9. 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. So the issue Paul is addressing here is who is going to inherit the kingdom of God. It's another way of saying who's going to get into heaven. And Paul is warning, don't be deceived as to who will get into heaven. I think there's a lot of deceit in our culture, isn't there, about who's going to get into heaven. People talk in terms of, well, I hope when I die I'm going to get to heaven. Or you go to a funeral of someone who has had no signs of any belief in

God and we're so thankful that that person is now at peace in heaven. There's a lot of assumptions being made about who's going to get into heaven. And the general assumption for most people who are not Christians would be that it's someone who tries their best to be good. And if you try your best to be good, well, you'll be okay. You'll get into heaven. So that's what Paul is talking about here.

[12 : 33] Now we need to clarify some terms from this passage. Firstly, who are the unrighteous or the wicked you may have in your translation? See, that word wicked or unrighteous suggests to many people today the idea, I think, of really bad people, people who are particularly sinful. So I think many people's minds would naturally turn to ideas of, I don't know, the murderer or the rapist or the child abuser. I don't know what it's like over here, but over in England at the moment, the whole question of paedophilia and child abuse has been massively in our news. It's just been relentless over the last few weeks with various situations that have arisen. But the biblical meaning of that word unrighteous or wicked actually strikes much closer to home and in fact should make every one of us feel uncomfortable.

Because unrighteous or wicked in biblical terms, it simply means anybody and everybody who is not trusting in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. That's the biblical meaning of wicked. Anyone and everyone who is not trusting in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. It's the natural state, in fact, of every single human being. Every one of us here, that is our natural state. And that is whether we think we've lived a pretty good life and we've been brought up perhaps in a Christian home, or whether in fact we know we've lived a pretty rotten life and God has had to kind of drag us up from the gutter. There's no difference in biblical terms. Each of us by nature are wicked or unrighteous. You see, it's all to do with the rejection of Jesus Christ as Lord. And what are the marks of people who reject Jesus Christ as Lord? Well, Paul lists them there in verses 9 and 10. We've read them through. And it's actually a very sobering list, isn't it, when you look at it. Now, I want to be very clear. Paul is not saying that anyone who has ever done these kinds of things, or indeed the Christian who struggles in these areas and sometimes slips up and falls back, he's not saying that those people have no chance of ever getting to heaven.

That's not the point he's making at all. And in fact, you see this in the rest of Scripture. What Paul is teaching is that those who consistently and continuously live in these kinds of ways, with no signs of repentance, that is no evidence of their behaviour being transformed over time, Paul is saying, well, they are showing by their actions that they're not truly trusting in Jesus Christ, not genuine citizens of heaven. So Paul is talking about consistency of behaviour, continuous behaviour, no evidence of repentance. That's really, really important.

Two other terms that we need to clarify, particularly as we think about this whole subject of being gay, are the terms relating to homosexual practice. Now, I don't know what versions you have in front of you there, but some versions will translate the words in the Greek as male prostitutes and homosexual offenders.

[15:46] So some will look at a passage like this and they will say, well, look, Paul clearly isn't talking here about loving, consensual, same-sex relationships. That's an argument that's often made when people read 1 Corinthians 6.

Well, the translation here is actually a translation of two Greek words, and the original Greek words are malikos, literally the soft ones. That's what malikos literally means. You could say perhaps the effeminate ones.

malikos, and another word, arsenokoitis, which is actually a constructed Greek word, and it's from two words, koitis, which means intercourse, and arsen, which means male. So I don't really need to be more descriptive than that, I think. Now, it's true that malikos was sometimes used in the Greek of the day to refer to boy prostitutes. But it seems to me a much more natural reading of the text to understand these two Greek words together, to be referring to what we might today call the passive and active partners, if you like, in same-sex acts. So I think the ESV translation that I've read from this morning goes for a very helpful paraphrase. It says men who practice homosexuality. If you're wondering about female same-sex practice, that's picked up in Romans 1. But I think that's a very helpful paraphrase, men who practice homosexuality. It's an all-inclusive phrase. But let me say, this passage is hotly debated. But even if Paul is referring here to particular forms of homosexual behaviour, such as, let's say, male prostitution, let's say, even if he is, the stark truth is that there is no evidence in any of his writings that he or the Lord Jesus condones same-sex practice in any other context. Indeed, there's no positive reference anywhere in the whole of the Bible, Old or New Testaments, to same-sex practice, even when it takes place in the context of a loving same-sex relationship. You can search through the Bible. There is not one positive reference. So don't be deceived, says Paul. It's very easy, I think, with the cultural tide at the moment, for Christians to lose confidence in God's Word and to allow ourselves to be deceived. And people say, oh, well, things have changed. The culture has changed. You Christians, you need to just move on and accept that actually we're in a different world now. Don't be deceived, warns Paul. People who consistently and continuously live in all of these kinds of ways are demonstrating by their actions that they're not truly trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord. Now, we know, don't we, that we don't become Christians because of anything that we've done or anything that we've not done. We become Christians by grace, by faith in Jesus Christ alone. But the Bible also teaches that the evidence of a genuine faith is that actually our behaviour over time is transformed too. So James says, faith without deeds is dead. It's not real faith. And that's really the point Paul is making here. Here are marks of those who are not really trusting in Jesus Christ if these are ongoing marks of how we live and there's no evidence of transformation. But people will sometimes argue, well, look, I was born gay.

[19:04] A lot of people say this to me. I was born gay or I was born lesbian and therefore God made me this way. Why would a God of love make somebody gay and then deny them the right to be in a loving same-sex relationship? That's a common argument that's put to me. Well, I think there are a couple of interesting assumptions being made in that kind of statement. First of all, that assumption that I was born gay. People often say that kind of thing and we maybe as Christians just sort of think, well, yeah, that's true. How could God do that? But does that statement actually stand up under the scrutiny of scientific and medical research into the causation of same-sex attractions? Well, I'm going to pick this up a lot more this evening in the seminar, but the short answer for now is no. No, it doesn't. Suffice to say that no one gene or set of genes have been discovered which in and of themselves make somebody gay. And there seems to be a good measure of consensus amongst the most respected experts that we need to recognise that there are many different factors that can work together to cause some people to be attracted to those of the same sex. As I say, I'll

pick this up in more detail tonight. But for now, to say I was born gay just simply doesn't reflect the findings of most medical and scientific research. But let's just say for argument's sake that one day somebody discovers that it is possible to be born gay. I personally don't think for one moment that's going to happen.

But even if it were, let's just take that thought for a moment. Does that then mean I was born gay, therefore God made me gay? Would that be true theologically speaking, I mean? Well, I would say again clearly not. The existence of a gay gene wouldn't prove that God makes people gay. I think it would rather be a reflection of the fact that we are, if you like, born as Genesis 3 children. We're born into a fallen, sinful, broken world. So every one of us is genetically flawed. What does David the psalmist say? Even at birth, I was sinful. Sinful from the time my mother conceived me. So a gay gene, even if it did exist, I would suggest to you that that would be a gene that is surely groaning and crying out for rescue and redemption, rather than a proof that God makes people gay. So don't be deceived. But secondly, just in case any of us are tempted to feel too confident and sure about ourselves, say, well, you know, this isn't my problem. I'm not gay. I'm not struggling in this area. Secondly, don't be, don't show prejudice. Don't show prejudice. Once you notice very carefully that same-sex practice is listed in these verses amongst a number of what I think many Christians, they may not say this openly, but inwardly we're kind of tempted to think these are, quote, lesser sins. Look at that list again in verses 9 and 10. It's a very challenging list. So there are sins such as greed, drunkenness, theft, reviling or slandering, and they're all listed there, you notice, alongside same-sex practice.

Indeed, you notice that the very first reference is to a more general sexual immorality. I want to ask you a question to think about. When did you last hear a message in church about greed? Probably somebody's going to tell me last week now. That's probably what's going to happen. Or about slandering?

When do you hear the church preaching out against these things, slander and greed? And yet it does seem that the church seems to be particularly focused often on homosexuality, same-sex practice. And yet Paul lists them here amongst a number of other sins. And he doesn't mark one out and say, oh, but this is the worst one. He just simply says, look, these are all marks of what it means to be someone who's not truly trusting in Jesus Christ. But unlike some Christians, the Bible doesn't major in on same-sex practice as if it's somehow in a league of the very worst sins. Some time ago, I was speaking to a group of sixth-form students in sixth-form college. And there were about 200 or so students.

And I was asked to speak on this subject. And I gave them a multiple choice as to how many times did they think that same-sex practice was mentioned in the Bible, homosexuality. And it ranged from less than 10, 10 to 50, 50 to 100, 100 to 500, or every page of the Bible. Those are the five options.

[23 : 44] And I have to say that out of these 200 or so students, there were a good half a dozen or so who genuinely believed it was on every page of the Bible. And there were many more who were kind of in the, you know, up to 500. That was what people were feeling, that actually it was really mentioned a lot.

in the Bible. And that said to me that perhaps the church is doing something wrong, if that's the impression that we're giving to young people growing up, that it's mentioned so frequently in the Bible. You know, there are actually less than 10 references, less than 10 references in the whole of the Bible, that is Old and New Testaments together, less than 10 references to same-sex practice. So it's really important that we don't get this out of proportion and we don't focus just in on one sinful action where God actually focuses on a number of sinful actions. The emphasis on the Bible is in fact on God ruling out any and all sexual activity that takes place outside of a marriage between one man and one woman. That's the emphasis in the Bible. We'll pick this up a little bit more. I'm going to do a little bit more detailed teaching this evening on how we develop, if you like, a theology of sexuality. But for now, I just want to mention that the word that is translated in the New Testament, sexual immorality, appears quite a number of times in the New Testament. And that is usually translated from a variant of the Greek word, *porneia*, or *porneia* in the plural. Now, you do not need to be a Greek scholar to work out the English word that comes from the Greek word *porneia*. If you're not sure, then speak to somebody at the end and I'm sure they'll explain it to you.

But it is pretty obvious that we get our English word pornography from that word. And really, porneia in the Greek carries with it the meaning of any sex outside of heterosexual marriage. So porneia includes, for example, adultery, incest, prostitution, same-sex practice, lust. The key issue biblically is not actually whether it's heterosexual or homosexual sex. That's not really what concerns God the most. The key issue biblically is the special place of sex within heterosexual marriage. Sex is a good gift from God, but God, in giving this good gift, has also given good boundaries in which it's to be enjoyed. And that boundary is exclusively within heterosexual marriage between one man and one woman. So don't show prejudice. Let's not elevate sexual sins to the top of this sort of imaginary premier league of the worst sins. Really important that we don't do that. So don't be deceived, firstly.

Don't show prejudice, secondly. And then thirdly, don't miss the point. Don't miss the point. What do I mean by that? Well, what is often missed, I think, from this passage, and it is sometimes used as a kind of stick with which to beat gay people over the head with 1 Corinthians 6, 9 to 11, or it's sometimes used as a passage to condemn Christians who are struggling in this way.

[27 : 02] But really, I think the exciting and challenging reality is that quite clearly there were members of the church in Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago who had been rescued, saved, from a background which for some included same-sex practice. In fact, it included all kinds of sexual immorality.

I want you to notice what Paul writes in verse 11. He says, And such were some of you. That is you Christians. Paul is writing here to the church, not to the world.

He's writing to the church. And he says, And such were some of you. Or the Net Bible translates it, Some of you once lived this way. And I think that's a really helpful paraphrase again. It probably better reflect the thrust of what Paul is saying. He's not saying, Look, some of you were gay, but you were miraculously transformed and you became fully heterosexual overnight. That's not the point Paul is making. He said, Look, some of you once lived in all of these kinds of ways. But what happened? Well, clearly, they had a saving, life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. And the implication is that although they used to live in these kinds of ways, now increasingly they don't live in these kinds of ways because of that life-changing, saving encounter with Jesus Christ. So look what he says. It's actually a verse of great hope in verse 11.

You once used to live in all these kinds of ways, but, he says, but, what does he say? You were washed. That is, you were made clean, purified. You were sanctified. That is, to be made holy, to be made like Jesus, set apart from sin to God. And you were justified.

That's a fantastic Christian word, to be justified. It means to be brought into a right relationship with God. It's actually a legal term. So it's really acquitted, declared to be not guilty.

[29 : 16] So he's saying to these Christians, Look, you may have lived in all these kinds of ways or some of these kinds of ways in the past, but you don't now need to be burdened by guilt and shame and embarrassment about that past because actually now you've been declared by God to be not guilty.

As Johnny was saying earlier on, that condemnation, that punishment of God has been taken actually on the shoulders of the Lord Jesus Christ as he bore our sins on the cross. It's a great phrase really, a great redemptive phrase, a phrase of rescue. It's a phrase that Paul doesn't use anywhere else in any of his writings in exactly this same way. You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.

And actually that should give real hope, I think, both to people who've come perhaps from a background of same-sex practice or for Christians that we know, perhaps even some Christians here today.

I don't know most of you personally, but there may be some here today who are struggling in this whole area of same-sex attraction. Not unusual for teenagers to grow up sometimes confused about their sexuality and to go through a whole kind of phase of being attracted to all kinds of people.

But actually it gives great encouragement because it says that however we may have lived in the past, whatever we may have struggled with, actually we can be assured that in Christ, if we're trusting in him we've been washed and sanctified and justified, brought into that right relationship with him.

[30 : 49] Now we don't have any examples in the Gospels of Jesus encountering a gay person. There simply isn't there. In fact, in the Bible, the Bible doesn't really understand that whole idea of

somebody labelling themselves according to their sexual attractions. That's one of the reasons why I don't do that. The Bible doesn't talk about gay and straight. It simply doesn't talk in those terms.

What we do have are a number of examples of Jesus ministering grace and truth to people who had strayed from God's purposes for sex and marriage in a whole host of ways. The Apostle John describes Jesus in the opening chapter of his Gospel as being full of grace and truth. Full of grace and truth. I love that phrase and I think it's really important. It's hard for us to get our heads around this, but when John talks about him being full of grace and truth, our human minds might think, well that's 50% grace, 50% truth. That's how you're full of something, isn't it? But in fact, it's not that at all. It is full of grace and full of truth. Jesus was completely full of grace and completely full of truth at the same time. And that's one of the reasons why, as a ministry, Truth For Him Trust, that's what we seek to aspire to by God's grace that we can respond to these issues full of grace and full of truth.

And really, we see that nowhere better, I think, Jesus being full of grace and truth, than in the way that he interacts with those who have fallen and failed sexually. So think, for example, of Jesus' response to the sinful woman in Luke chapter 7, the one who wept at his feet and anointed him with expensive perfume. Probably a prostitute, certainly a woman of ill repute. But you remember, if you know that story in Luke 7, that Jesus actually rebukes not the woman, but Simon the Pharisee for failing to recognize that her extravagant act of love for Jesus actually was flowing from God's extravagant love for her in forgiving her many sins. So Jesus didn't say, look, go away and leave your life of prostitution, and then you can anoint my feet. No, no, no, he allowed her to anoint his feet. He dealt, if you like, with her sense of alienation. He showed her grace before speaking truth. Same way with the woman of Samaria. Think of the woman of Samaria in John chapter 4. I can imagine today certain evangelical Christians wanting to approach this woman carrying a banner, protesting at her adulterous lifestyle. After all, she's gone through five husbands already, and she's now, quote, living in sin with another man. That's not how Jesus deals with her at all. Again, he meets her in grace and in truth. He flies in the face of all the religious and social etiquette of his day, deals firstly with her sense of alienation and her misunderstanding about who God is and how he's to be worshipped.

And oh yes, he does go on to challenge her about her sinful life. He says, go off and get your husband, knowing that that's going to actually get to the heart of the issue with this woman. But he doesn't challenge her about her sinful lifestyle until his unconditional love has won over her trust and respect. Full of grace, full of truth. And it's the same with the woman caught in adultery, John chapter 8. The Pharisees, you remember, were ready to bring the full force of Old Testament law to bear, condemning her and demanding that she be stoned to death. That was what the law required. But Jesus, who ironically is the only one with any right to stand in judgment over her, he could have cast not only the first stone, but he could have cast every single stone until she was dead. He would have been completely justified. He actually says, no, I don't condemn you. He refuses to condemn her, even though he was the only one with the right to do so. Although, of course, again, he lovingly sends her on her way at the end of that account with a clear warning to leave her life of sin. But it's grace and then truth, you notice. Grace and truth. All the way through in all of these accounts, it's the same pattern each time. Grace and truth. Grace and truth. Grace and truth. Grace and truth.

[35 : 04] Jesus models for us quite perfectly, I think, what it means to speak the truth in love. And I think it's rather sad, but sometimes you do find that some evangelical Christians seem to be very, very strong on truth. So we want to speak the truth. We want to protest. We sometimes speak in ways that are quite harsh and condemning, but we sometimes seriously are deficient in grace. And I think we need to learn to reflect God's heart. It's human nature, I think, that so very often, our first reaction to the sins of others is judgment. It's just a natural human reaction.

But not so with God, not so with Jesus. His first reaction is always mercy and love. And I think we need to capture that same priority as we seek to relate to and to reach out to those who have fallen and failed sexually. So I want to leave you this morning with a challenge. I want to suggest that a truly authentic gospel church will be a church, in fact, that is full of exes. So there'll be ex-adulterers, ex-swindlers, ex-greedy people, ex-slanders, ex-people who used to have sex with those of the same sex, ex-thieves, people who once used to live in all of these kinds of ways, but have now been welcomed into the community of God and are supported and encouraged because they've had that saving, life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. To use Paul's language, they've been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

No longer alienated from God and alienated from the community of God's people, but now adopted into

God's family and warmly welcomed, even with all their ongoing weaknesses and struggles and failings, welcomed into the church, supported, encouraged, helped, spurred on to increasingly live as those who will inherit the kingdom of God. And my prayer for you here at Carraghine Baptist Church is that increasingly you'll be this kind of church, shining like a beacon into a dark world, proclaiming the gospel of hope to people of whatever kind of background, whatever their sexuality, whatever their culture, whatever their particular struggle, so that many more of your neighbours, your family members, your work colleagues can be washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Father, thank you once again for the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Thank you, Lord, that it is good news for all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds, with all kinds of struggles.

Pray that you'd help each one of us, Lord, individually to be faithful in sharing our lives and sharing our faith indiscriminately, Lord, with those that we work with, those of our family members, those of our neighbours and friends. Father, thank you that you never write anybody off as hopeless in terms of the gospel. Forgive us, Lord, when sometimes we do exactly that and we think that perhaps this person or that person could never, ever become a Christian. Father, thank you that you're in the business of saving people that others sometimes reject and we pray, Lord, that you'd make us into that kind of people. Pray that that will be this kind of church, Lord, that we will reach out with the hope of the gospel and that increasingly over the months and years to come that many will be saved from all kinds of backgrounds. That this will be a really welcoming community, supporting and encouraging those who perhaps have ongoing struggles in these kind of areas we've thought about this morning. Father, thank you for your goodness. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you that you are in the business of bringing all kinds of people into your kingdom. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.