

Human Sexuality

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[0 : 00] Due to the nature of the topic that we're going to be discussing and looking at and covering tonight, it's going to be a fairly deep evening, one which will demand our concentration.

Because of the nature of things, there's a fair bit to cover to do it some justice. It's also a deep evening, as I think it's going to request our willingness to engage with views which we may not have arrived holding for ourselves.

And it's a deep evening in terms of maturity, as some of the topics covered in the language and the terminology that I think is necessary to use.

It's not perhaps suitable for younger ears, and that's why we basically gave it a 15 certificate on the newsletter. I just wanted to make that clear at the top, because there's some words that will come up tonight which you may not have used in your everyday language before.

So just so you know what you're coming to, and there is a reason for the language that will be used, I promise you. Your mind's bungling now, isn't it? I mean, the idea really for tonight is to help us increase our understanding on issues surrounding human sexuality, and in particular we'll be looking at what the Bible has to say on same-sex behaviour and relationships.

[1 : 22] And I fully appreciate this is a complicated and at times controversial subject. And someone asked me the other day, why now? Why have you chosen this time to talk about this stuff?

And I don't know about you, but I know for me, at least, I've been thinking and praying and studying on this, and wrestling as well with the issues involved for over 10 years now, with an idea of, I was a youth worker before this, so I had to have some kind of opinion on it that people would come up and approach me with.

So I've been wrestling with these issues for a decade or so now. And whilst I've been at this church for just over five years, it's only recently that, in my gut, I've just felt it was the right time to provide a setting for us as a church to consider the issues.

Some would say it's well overdue, and you may be right on that. But if that's the case, then better late than never. But really, that's what I want to be, or tonight to be about, a chance for us to consider things.

I'm not going to be, and I won't be asking for you to come to any conclusions tonight. And we're not going to have an open discussion time afterwards, like we have done at Film and Faith kind of evenings in the past.

[2 : 40] That's not to stifle debate. But, in fact, far from it. It's just that I'm very keen that, due to the sensitive nature of what we'll be looking at, an open discussion is perhaps not the best way for us to process things.

Instead, just to let you know what we'll be doing tonight, after I've shared some thoughts, which will be fairly chunky. There will be a space to pray quietly. And then there's an invitation to stay around if you'd like to, simply as a safe space to sit by yourself if you want to, with your own thoughts and prayers, to talk with those you've come with or those you've sat with, if you'd like to.

Alternatively, you might just want to leave quietly at the end for a slow walk home or a pint or whatever. And that is equally fine as well. I guess my hope is that by bringing up this subject of human sexuality, and in particular same-sex behaviour and relationships, it might be the start of a more open conversation that we can have as a church, which can be continued in other settings, whether that's prayer groups or real groups, just over a coffee or whatever.

So with all that in mind, let's do the decent thing and let's pray and let's commit ourselves into God's hands. So Father God, thank you for this church and for your community here.

Lord, as we come to think about this delicate, complicated and perhaps controversial issue surrounding human sexuality, our prayer is that you would be at the centre of all that we're about tonight.

[4 : 23] Please, Holy Spirit, make your presence known and be speaking to us, both as a church and as individuals. Lord, our desire is to be in line with your will and your word.

So open our eyes, open our ears, our hearts and our minds to all that you want to say to us tonight. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Now, starting at the beginning, seems a very good place to start. And in the creation accounts in Genesis, humans were created really as the pinnacle of God's good creation.

Humans alone, we're told, in Genesis, had God's spirit breathed into them. And it was humans alone who were intimately linked by God with him as his image bearers, those who could reflect and represent and display something of the image of God in our lives, his character, his creativity, his love.

And in Genesis 1, 27, tells us that God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them.

[5 : 45] God made humans as physical and spiritual beings. And our sexuality is part of both that spirituality and that physicality.

We're told that when God saw what he had made, it was good, indeed very good, when he looked at the sum of all that he had created. Sexuality and sex itself, therefore, is good.

It's created by God. And it's part of his order. And if the first chapter of Genesis is all about the big picture stuff of creation, then chapter 2, in many ways, runs parallel with it.

But it focuses on the human aspects of this bigger picture. And we seem to discover that the only thing in God's creation that he said was not good, was that it is not good that the man should be alone.

And God says, I will make a helper suitable for him. This statement, I think, reveals a recognition by God, and in turn, by the man in the story, that we are created by God to be in intimate communion with others.

[6 : 58] Ongoing solitude, if you like, is not part of God's plan for us as humans. When the woman, Eve, is presented to the man, Adam, he acknowledges that she is not just a companion in a spiritual way, but also in a physical way.

He says this in Genesis 2.23, She's bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. The idea is that this companionship will be possible on every level, including on a sexual level.

Now, as part of the affirmation of our nature as sexual beings, Genesis 2 immediately lifts up the gift of marriage as an important part of God's good creation.

Indeed, the very next verse says this, Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Now, leaving aside for a moment, how it could be that Adam would have a father and mother to leave if he was the first person created. That's a whole other evening's teaching there.

[8 : 12] We see very clearly, I think, that as early as chapter 2 in the Bible, God's ideal for sex is that it belongs in marriage. It belongs as part of a committed, lifelong relationship.

In leaving the family home to set up a new home together, the man and the woman are united together as husband and wife, united together spiritually, physically, emotionally, sexually.

And because of this unity, in God's eyes, they are no longer two, but one flesh. One flesh, which as Jesus himself would say when quoting from the same passage in Genesis, Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

It's in Matthew 19, verse 6. Let no one, in other words, get in the way of this spiritual, physical, emotional, sexual union between a husband and wife.

And so it's primarily from these Genesis verses and subsequently Jesus' use of them in Matthew 19 that Christians over the centuries, and indeed most today, would teach and believe that God's ideal for sex is that it belongs in marriage.

[9 : 31] It belongs in a loving, lifelong, committed and exclusive, monogamous, we might say, relationship. Promiscuity and adultery, sex outside of a loving, lifelong, committed and exclusive relationship, is not part of God's plan for us because it violates the union that two people enjoy when they become one flesh on every level.

Now, as the Bible continues, there's an important development which takes place concerning marriage because the language of love and marriage begins to be used not just for the connection between human beings, but between human beings and God.

Most candidly, you get books like The Song of Songs, sometimes called The Song of Solomon, and it's an essential, beautiful love poem celebrating a passion that binds lovers together.

And yet more than just a biblical endorsement of love and sex, it's also seen as a picture of the love which binds God to his people.

There's a closeness, there's a loving intimacy to that relationship. And the various Old Testament prophets pick up this idea of God's relationship with us as being like a marriage.

[11 : 00] So we read this in Isaiah 54, For your maker, God, is your husband. The Lord of hosts is his name. Elsewhere, as the bride rejoices, as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

And then in Hosea chapter 2, In that day, you will call me, says God, my husband, and I will take you for my wife forever.

It's in the Old Testament. Jesus himself uses wedding and marriage imagery in various parables to describe a picture of how God is with his people. And then in Revelation, in the final book of the Bible, Jesus is described as the bridegroom who eventually marries his bride, the church.

So you get verses like this in Revelation 19, 7. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory for the wedding of the Lamb, Jesus, has come and his bride, his church, has made herself ready.

Now, something which I think is worth reflecting on with this marriage imagery is that there are two quite different ways to look at it, I think.

[12 : 18] On the one hand, we might look at these passages and conclude that God's love for us is like the love that binds a husband and wife together in a good marriage.

marriage is the highest, most intimate form of love possible and therefore God uses the imagery of marriage to describe what his love for us is like.

That's one way to understand it. However, a second way to understand it is that actually it's the other way round in that the love that exists between a husband and wife in marriage is like the love that exists in God's heart for us, his people.

And it's not married love which is the highest, but God's love is the highest, most intimate form of love possible. So which is it? Is God's love for us like a marriage between a man and a woman?

or is a marriage between a man and a woman like God's love for us? Which is the higher form of love?

[13 : 35] Married love or God's love? Which is the love by which all other kinds of love are measured? And you might think it's a bit of a daft question because it's pretty clear that God's love is the highest form of love because God is love.

And therefore marriage between a man and a woman is simply one way albeit a very important way in which that love is expressed and reflected between humans.

And for me I think getting this understanding right it matters it matters for a host of reasons not least for those who are single whether by choice or circumstances.

I mean I don't think any of us would say that unless we're married we can't hope to understand or experience or reflect something of the fullness of God's love for us.

That would be the same as saying unless we've had children we can't understand God as father. No. Whilst being married can help people to appreciate something of the love which God offers to us as his beloved and yes being a parent can open people's eyes to the father-like love which God has for us as his children marriage and parenthood are essentially I think reflections or images which God uses in the Bible to help us understand something of the indescribable overwhelming nature of his love for us.

[15 : 16] they're symbols and pictures and they're incredibly informing but there are many other equally informing images which God uses elsewhere to help us understand the extent of his love for us such as it being like that of a loving brother or of a friend or of a shepherd loving his sheep and so on.

God is love says 1 John 4 16 and those who live in love live in God and God in them. So marriage whilst important is certainly not the only loving relationship between two people in which the love of God can be experienced through or reflected in.

You've got parent and child brother and sister uncle and aunt and niece and nephew one friend to another and so on. They're all I would say relationships in which God's love is present and his blessing can be given.

And so I guess perhaps one of if not the key question that we're going to reflect on tonight is this. Can a loving committed exclusive same sex relationship also be a place where God's love is experienced and reflected and in which his blessing can be received?

I'll read it through again. Can a loving committed exclusive same sex relationship also be a place where God's love is experienced and reflected and in which his blessing can be received?

[17 : 03] And for some Christians the simple answer is no. No. They would say that in the Bible God clearly prohibits same sex relationships and therefore a same sex relationship is in its very essence not one that can ever be blessed by God.

Now of course most people who hold that view would want to affirm that both parties in a same sex relationship can experience and reflect God's love in their lives as individuals and they are loved by God to the same degree as anyone else.

But the same sex relationship between them on all levels cannot be one which reflects or experiences God's love.

That's one response to this question. For some other Christians though, the answer is yes and no. And by that the understanding for many is that yes there is clearly genuine love and companionship within a same sex relationship and elements of that love are inspired by and informed by the love which comes from God himself.

Where perhaps the line would be drawn for them is whether that love is expressed in physical sexual ways. Because if that same sex relationship is sexually active then the view is that it's not in line with the teaching of the Bible and therefore cannot be an expression of love which comes from God.

[18 : 46] As far as I can tell the official Church of England line is that being gay and being in a committed exclusive cohabiting same sex relationship is seen as being okay and civil partnerships are seen as being okay but that partnership for Christians should not be sexually active.

Abstinence or celibacy is therefore key. That's the second response I think to this kind of question. And then the third one still for other Christians the answer to this question would be yes.

Yes a loving committed exclusive same sex relationship even one which is sexually active can be one in which God's love can be experienced and reflected and on which his blessing can be given.

Supporters of this view would say that not only are the individuals loved by God but the relationship between them can also be one in which God's blessing and love is experienced and reflected on every level.

Now there may well be more nuanced views within these three responses to this question but by and large I think most people will find themselves identifying with one of these three responses and I imagine here tonight there are probably each of those three views represented among us that same sex relationships are always wrong that same sex relationships can be right as long as the relationship is not sexually active and that same sex relationships including sexual activity within them can be seen as right and blessed by God.

[20 : 45] the different responses to this question in many ways form the bedrock to the current debate in the church and in its church circles regarding human sexuality and same-sex relationships and yet what's common to all three views regardless of which wing of the church or which Christians hold them is that the Bible is held up as being in some way authoritative in helping people reach the right conclusion and so what I'd like to do tonight is to look at some of the key verses which are used to shape people's views on same-sex relationships and see what we might learn from them in order that our own views might be more fully informed.

I just want to say a word first though before we get into the verses themselves about some of the principles of interpreting the Bible. I mean firstly it's clear if you've ever read it and we all have that the Bible needs interpreting.

Jesus himself was aware of this as when travelling with those two disciples on the road to Emmaus we're told that beginning with Moses and all the prophets Jesus explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

They hadn't clocked it they needed Jesus to explain and interpret it for them and this means we're to do the same I think we're to meditate and think deeply about God's words in order that we might not just understand the basics of it but understand the reasons behind God's teaching behind his commands and in doing so our relationship with God develops and flourishes as we mature as his disciples.

Jesus alludes to this by calling us friends with God no longer servants who don't know the master's business. So first up the Bible needs interpreting.

[22 : 42] Secondly the Bible needs interpreting and revolving if you like around Jesus. Jesus the ultimate revelation of God the word become flesh and as you've been seeing in recent weeks with this digging deeper series we've been doing in the mornings the whole of the Bible points to and revolves around Jesus.

The Old Testament anticipates and looks forward to him the Gospels record him and the rest of the New Testament explains him. Jesus really is as we sing at the centre of it all and therefore all biblical interpretation needs to be consistent with a person and the character of Jesus.

Thirdly we need to interpret the scriptures by the scriptures and by this I mean that if a verse seems to be saying one thing and that's troubling us we can ask whether that message is consistent with the other passages in the Bible or with the overall themes that emerge from the scripture.

For example the New Testament seems to imply in places that slavery is something which is okay and to be accepted. But since we know in various other places that God works to release people from captivity and talks time and again about the worth and value of all people.

It's fairly straightforward when we look at the whole picture of the Bible to conclude that slavery is not God's way and even if at times Paul for example even if we think he doesn't quite condemn it as much as we might hope he would.

[24 : 14] So we use the overall themes of the Bible to help us interpret individual trickier verses. And then fourthly and this is probably my favourite way into the Bible often the context of the passage is key and by context we mean the historical circumstances and backgrounds in which the passage was written but also understood and heard for the first time.

So on Sunday last week we looked at the word gate which on the surface seemed a pretty simple word for us to tackle and yet when we know the context of when it's mentioned in the Bible when the Bible talks about gates the historical background about them is not about a way in and out it's about a place of justice and then we can understand it in quite a different way.

So context, historical context, cultural context is key I think to understanding the Bible. And so tonight what I want to do is keep these four principles in mind and do hold them there as we're going to look at some key verses used concerning same-sex behaviour.

And it might surprise you to know, you may know this already, but it might surprise you to know that there are really only seven Bible passages that appear to be concerned with same-sex behaviour.

Four in the Old Testament and three in the New. And we're going to take each one by turn. I told you he was going to be meaty tonight. First up though, we're going to turn to Genesis chapter 19 verses 1 to 11 which says this.

[25 : 54] Two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground.

My lords, he said, please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning. No, they answered, we'll spend the night in the square.

But Lot insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them. Before they'd gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old, surrounded the house.

They called to Lot, where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them. Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, no, my friends, don't do this wicked thing.

Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.

[27 : 08] Get out of our way, they replied. This fellow came here as a foreigner and now he wants to play the judge. We'll treat you worse than them. They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

I tend to say this is the word of the Lord. Yeah, there we go. It's a difficult one.

It's a difficult one. So this guy, Lot, he invites two angels into his home and offers them hospitality. And hearing about these two guests, the men of the town, both young and old, we're told, come and demand that they be brought out so that they can have sex with them.

Lot says it's a wicked thing. And instead offers his two virgin daughters to the mob. This offer is rejected. The mob try and break down the door and eventually the two angels strike all the men in the mob with blindness so that they lose their way.

[28 : 21] And if we were to read on in Genesis in that story, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are soon destroyed by God. Now, this passage has commonly been used as an example of the way in which the Bible condemns same-sex activity.

Indeed, the word sodomy is derived from this story and is used to describe sexual acts which are deemed to be unnatural or immoral.

As such, the sodomy laws have been used to prosecute people for engaging in, and here's where we get terms which may offend some, but it prosecutes people for engaging in anal sex, oral sex, or bestiality, sex with animals.

And yet, when we read that passage, is it about sex, anal, oral, or otherwise? Or is it actually about rape?

See, I can't see anything in that story in which the consent for sex is sought or given. Instead, both the demands of the mob and Lot's offer of his daughters are potential encounters involving unwanted sexual intercourse.

[29 : 40] Rape, in other words. Now, Sodom, as a city, is used in various places elsewhere in the Bible as a shorthand kind of term for sinful behaviour, ranging from being associated with adultery and lying in Jeremiah, to sexual immorality and perversion in the letter of Jude.

But when we look at this passage from Genesis 19, it's primarily attempted rape, and more to the point, the attempted rape of angels, which is recorded.

Now, we may well think that anal sex is wrong, and same-sex activity is sexually immoral. But because this passage in Genesis 19 is actually about rape, I don't think we can use it as a biblical basis to say that consensual anal or oral sex between people of the same sex is wrong.

We may think that, but we can't use this passage as a proof text. Where next? Well, let's turn to Judges chapter 19, verses 16 to 25, which is the next text where same-sex behaviour is mentioned.

And it says this, That evening, an old man from the hill country of Ephraim, who was living in Gibeah, came in from his work in the fields. When he looked and saw the traveller in the city square, the old man asked, Where are you going?

[31 : 18] Where did you come from? He answered, We're on our way from Bethlehem in Judah to a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim, where I live. I've been to Bethlehem in Judah, and now I am going to the house of the Lord.

No one has taken me in for the night. We have both straw and fodder for our donkeys and bread and wine for ourselves, your servants, me, the woman, and the young man with us.

We don't need anything. You're welcome at my house, the old man said. Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square. So he took him into his house and fed his donkeys.

After they'd washed their feet, they had something to eat and drink. While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.

The owner of the house went outside and said to them, No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this outrageous thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter and his concubine.

[32 : 36] I will bring them out to you now and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing.

But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them and they raped her and abused her throughout the night and at dawn they let her go.

There's a lot in another difficult story there that we could focus on. And there are some obvious parallels with that story from the city of Sodom.

Indeed, there's some pretty appalling behaviour from the old man in offering his daughter and his guests concubine, his mistress in other words, to the baying mob who wanted instead to rape his guest.

Behaviour which underlines how important in that culture hospitality and protecting your main guest was. Even more important, incredibly, to us than protecting your daughter's body or that of your guest's mistress.

[33 : 48] And yet quite apart from the sobering way in which this reveals the lack of status of women at that time, once again the underlying context for the sexual encounter between the men and the male guest is one of rape or attempted rape.

And so once again I think whilst we may believe that same sex, sexual practice is wrong, I don't think we can use this passage as a biblical basis for that belief.

This text is solely about rape and it doesn't even raise the prospect or indeed offer a view on consensual same sex behaviour.

Where else is same sex behaviour mentioned in the Old Testament? Well let's turn to Leviticus. Leviticus 18.22 and Leviticus 20.13. Two verses which say this.

Leviticus 18.22. Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman. That is detestable. And in Leviticus 20.13.

[34 : 57] 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, on first reading, these verses look like a pretty clear biblical mandate for prohibiting homosexual intercourse.

And yet because these are the only verses in the whole of the Old Testament which appear to specifically prohibit such same sex consensual behaviour, I for one want to make pretty sure that we've interpreted them correctly before we use them as a basis for what the Old Testament says about same sex behaviour.

And having spent, as I say, a great deal of time looking at these verses and the context in which they're written, there are for me a number of issues with how we might interpret them.

For a start, it's only men who are mentioned. It's a curious thing that women are not included too. Is that because women were not deemed to have the same sexual urges to be with each other as men might have?

[36 : 22] Well, that doesn't seem to be the case. It doesn't seem to make sense because we know they do and I'm sure they knew in those days. Is it that because women can't engage in penetrative genital to genital sex in the same way as men, that it isn't seen as detestable?

Well, perhaps. But elsewhere in Leviticus, indeed in the very next verse to these, says this in Leviticus 18.23.

Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it.

That is a perversion. And so if a woman is known to be capable of having sex with an animal, and that is outlawed, seems strange perhaps that nowhere is female same-sex behaviour also mentioned.

Now, lesbian sex may well be against God's intentions for us, but it is simply not mentioned in the Old Testament. And we therefore have no Old Testament law against it.

[37 : 42] All of which suggests that the law in Leviticus is specifically about male homosexual acts. Why might Leviticus say in these verses that this male sex act in particular is an issue?

Well, I think it's worth saying at this point. In the culture of the time of the Old Testament, sexual orientation was not a marker of identity in the same way that it is today.

There were no such labels or categories as heterosexual or homosexual as we would understand them today. Instead, people were differentiated by other categories.

Age, gender, status, and so on. And their sexual activity with either gender was simply an aspect of what they did, not a definition of who they were.

The expectation was that every man would be married in this culture to at least one woman. Although there is a great deal of historical evidence from the ancient Near East that male-male sexual activity was a relatively common reality.

[38 : 57] Now, apologies if this gets even a bit more graphic. But the key categories within this male-male sexual act concerned which male was identified as the active, penetrating partner and which male was identified as the passive, receiving partner.

In that culture, and indeed well into Roman times, the active, penetrating man was always the older one who had the higher social status, whilst a passive recipient would always have been a younger man or indeed a boy from a lower social standard.

Giving in a male-male sexual act was deemed to be a sign of social superiority, those who were powerful, rich, and elite, whilst receiving was looked down upon as being reserved for the socially inferior, boys, slaves, workers.

Indeed, to be the man or the boy who received was to be associated with all things feminine, which in that culture, as we've seen, was a mark of dishonour, since women were seen as the lesser gender.

In the ancient world, there was no category of homosexual, and the idea of a homosexual relationship, as we understand it today, of mutual love, commitment, self-giving, and so on, didn't exist.

[40 : 39] In fact, for the mass culture, homosexual behaviours were either socially condoned or condemned according to whether someone was the active penetrator or the passive recipient.

Now, this matters, because many biblical scholars argue today that Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 seem not to be prohibiting homosexual sex as we would understand it today, mutually submissive and loving, but a homosexual act which robbed the man receiving of his social status by feminising him.

It was not about homoerotic desire, but was instead associated with a socially degrading act. That would appear, I think, to be why both of these verses talk about having sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, because it could be argued that it's about outlawing the use of sex as a way to dominate someone else, not specifically about homosexual desire in itself.

Now, I'm not asking you to agree with that interpretation, but we do well, I think, to not simply dismiss this cultural background to these passages.

And if we are tempted to dismiss the culture as not being important, because on the surface the meaning is obvious without it, I think I'd ask us just to look again at the second half of Leviticus 20.13.

[42 : 20] None of us, I don't think, would dream of following the command stated in the second half of the verse, because according to the rules of how to read scripture, by interpreting it, by focusing on Jesus and his approach, by using the bigger themes of scripture and by knowing the original context, we clearly understand that this behaviour mentioned at the end of the verse would be wrong and barbaric.

That raises the question, I think, why then, if we're willing to interpret the second half of the verse along cultural grounds, would we be insistent on not doing the same with the first part?

That's a question, I think, we'd do well to consider. And that's about it, as far as the Old Testament goes, regarding same-sex behaviour.

Holding all that in mind, let's move on to the New Testament, where there are further three passages concerning same-sex behaviour, a little bit shorter, which you may be pleased to know.

But let's start by reading 1 Corinthians 6, verses 9 to 11. It says this, as Paul writing, Don't you realise that those who do wrong will not inherit the kingdom of God?

[43 : 54] Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Some of you were once like that, but you were cleansed, you were made holy, you were made right with God, by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.

Now, the key words for us tonight amongst this list of destructive behaviours here are male prostitutes and practice homosexuality.

The male prostitutes term is perhaps the easier one of the two to understand, as it uses the Greek word, and excuse my pronunciation, but malakoi, malakoi. The root meaning of this word in Greek is soft, but it also came to mean effeminate, a term used for the passive recipient in a male-male sex act.

Now, much the same way that we saw in those verses from Leviticus, in Greek and Roman life at the time of the New Testament, this passive recipient was usually seen as being in what's known as a pederistic relationship, whereby the giver in the sexual act is an older man, whilst the receiver is a younger man, often a prepubescent boy, usually between the ages of 8 and 12.

[45 : 41] These days, that would be outlawed as paedophilia. But in those days, this sexual act between older and younger males was often associated with prostitution, hence the reason why the passage here uses the translation male prostitutes for this word malakoi.

And it's pretty clear to see why that behaviour is wrong. Second term in this passage, practice homosexuality, translated in other versions of the Bible.

This one's from the New Living Translation. Other versions translate it as men who have sex with men in the NIV, or sodomites in the NRSV. You might want to think about the use of the word sodom there and what that's implying.

The word in Greek, though, that's used to translate this in different ways is this word. Again, apologies for the pronunciation. Arsene koitai. Arsene koitai. Now, though it's a term which only applies to men, the difficulty in translating this Greek word is that this is the earliest known use of it in any preserved literature.

And it's a little used term after this. So there are very few other contexts to help us understand its precise meaning. In fact, most scholars reckon that Paul himself created or made up this word by combining two separate Greek words.

[47 : 14] Arsene koitai meaning man and koitai, which means lying with. The interesting thing, and focus on this because I appreciate it's going to be a bit, okay, how do we do this?

But the interesting thing is that these two Greek words, arseneo and koitai, are the exact same two words which the Greek translation of the Hebrew version of Leviticus uses in those two verses from Leviticus which we looked at earlier.

Leviticus, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew, condemns a man, arseneo, lying with koitai, another man, arseneo.

Now most scholars agree that Paul, who knew his scriptures inside out, is deliberately invoking and has the commands in Leviticus in mind when he makes up this new kind of hybrid word, arseneo, arseneo.

Arseneo. And so this raises, I think, important questions for us. Is Paul, for example, condemning homosexuality as this particular translation from the New Living Translation suggests?

[48 : 34] Well, I think it's difficult to come to that conclusion because as we said earlier, homosexuality as an identity or even a type of sexuality wasn't a concept in biblical times which would have been recognised whether in the Old or the New Testament.

Is Paul condemning all male male sexual activity and therefore sexual activity which we might think would be part of a loving, committed, exclusive relationship?

That's a good question. Well, again, I think it's difficult to come to that conclusion because such a concept, again, of a loving, exclusive, committed, same-sex relationship, that idea didn't exist in Paul's day.

There was no such thing as a same-sex relationship as we would understand it today in which there was equal status and mutual self-giving. Or is it that by using the same language as that which is found in Leviticus, Paul is condemning the same-sex practice of using anal intercourse as a way of establishing social status whereby the giver was of a higher status than the one who received?

of all the three, and primarily because of the language that's used, it seems to me this third point about it being a thing about status and dominance is probably the closest to what Paul meant.

[50 : 07] And as we've seen, the passages in Leviticus are primarily about the use of anal sex as a means to dominate another man socially. And I think that interpretation ties in with the other vices which Paul lists in the surrounding verses in Corinthians, all of which, if we look at them, have nothing to do with love but degrade or bring harm to others.

Now, two more New Testament passages left to look at. Let's turn to 1 Timothy 1 verses 8 to 11. Again, it's Paul writing, We know that the law is good when used correctly.

For 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.

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

Here again, we have this phrase practice homosexuality and it's the same phrase that crops off in 1 Corinthians because it's the same Greek word behind it, arsenokoitai.

[51 : 41] And so again, it's difficult to interpret it in a way which doesn't seem to be deliberately recalling the meaning of the words in Leviticus when they seem to be referring to exploitative status-enforcing anal sex.

And again, it's worth noticing the list of vices in which this same sex act is listed. Murder, slave traders, liars, promise breakers, all behaviours which degrade or harm others.

And this leaves us with one final passage to consider from Romans 1, 26 to 27. And here the Apostle Paul, once again, is writing, well in writing to the Jewish Christians in Rome, here he's talking about Gentiles, non-Jews, who worship idols and indulge in all sorts of wrong behaviour.

It says this, because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

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.

[53 : 06] So the language used here is that of lust, unnatural sexual relations and shameful acts. What might Paul mean by these words?

Well, lust, uncontrolled desire, is almost universally recognised as a bad thing, which leads to exploitative, dehumanising or dominating behaviour.

In whatever way, between men and women, women and women, men and men, lust is not a good or a godly thing. And so it's relatively, I think, straightforward to understand why Paul is objecting to that here.

But since Paul uses the word lust a couple of times, it's difficult to know if it's the lust or the physical acts themselves which Paul finds to be more problematic.

What does he mean by this phrase, unnatural relations? What a word Paul uses here describes those behaviours which the wider culture at the time sees as being against the norm, against prevailing customs and expectations.

[54 : 17] So elsewhere, for example, Paul says this, does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?

Sorry Steve. Now, our friend Steve over there. In our culture, long hair is no longer a disgrace and rightly so.

I'm just jealous. It is anything but a disgrace. But this means it's tricky to know if Paul's use of the words natural and unnatural to describe sexual activity is to do with timeless boundaries or cultural tastes.

Indeed, it seems difficult to say it's definitely about timeless boundaries when to go back to the hair example, Paul would have known that Samson in the Old Testament had longer hair, which was then seen as a sign of his consecration to God's service.

Going back to this passage in Romans. For example, it's interesting to note that most early biblical scholars in the first centuries following Paul understood, for example, his description of women exchanging natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

[55 : 42] To be describing not women having sex with other women, but women who rejected the traditional cultural submissive demeanour that they were meant to adopt when having sex, men were instead letting their passions out and demanding their own sexual needs be met.

It was therefore, at the time, seen as unnatural for a woman to enjoy or to assert herself sexually, even with her husband. The overall difficulty, I think, is that if this sexual activity mentioned here is therefore seen along similar lines, and that it's unnatural or shameful to that particular culture and not in a timeless sense, how are we to apply this natural unnatural standard to our own culture when same-sex relationships are widely seen as a good thing, protected by law and largely regarded as a normal part of life?

And so that's really it when it comes to both the Old and the New Testament passages regarding same-sex behaviour. Jesus himself is conspicuously quiet on same-sex behaviour.

Indeed, he seems far more concerned with people's attitude to money than he is with sex and who has it and with who and how. Something for us to think about, I think, when we see the amount of debate and discussion which sex generates compared to money.

Overall, however, I've done my best to outline what I think is a reasonable interpretation of these main seven Bible passages. I'm not saying, and please, please hear me in a minute, I'm not saying my interpretation is necessarily correct or right.

[57 : 35] Indeed, I could be wrong and new biblical scholarship and cultural insight might emerge which challenges some of the views I've expressed. Having said that, I'm happy to stand by what I've shared and a recording of this will go on a website for anyone who cares to hear it.

And yet, even if, I think, even if you have doubts about the correctness of the interpretations I've shared, what I think is clear is that there are significant and important problems with using these seven biblical texts as an authoritative statement that same-sex orientation, behavior, and activity is definitely not of God.

And so this is where things get perhaps even more challenging because if the Bible isn't particularly clear on whether mutually loving, committed, exclusive, same-sex relationships are places or not where the love and blessing of God can be experienced and reflected, we need to look perhaps elsewhere to help inform our view.

So let's just spend the last few minutes looking at the most common arguments that both Christians and non-Christians have for finding same-sex relationships difficult to accept.

And I guess the most glaring one is that of anatomy because it's pretty obvious that two men or two women are not anatomically genitally complementary.

[59 : 15] To put it bluntly, the male penis is designed to fit into the female vagina and nothing else. This view of the importance of a physical fit is used by some to argue that sexual activity between members of the same sex is therefore wrong because it goes against nature, nature which God has created.

Now whilst that is an undeniably strong argument, it could equally be argued therefore that oral sex, even between a man and a woman who are married, is also against nature and therefore against God's created order because you're putting parts of the body in places where they're not anatomically designed to go.

And if I'm honest, whilst certainly not every married couple enjoys or engages in oral sex, I don't know many, if any, people who would seriously put forward the view that oral sex should have no place in any married bedroom, Christian or otherwise.

What else? Well there's a view that since same-sex relations can in no way lead to procreation to children. They should be abstained from as this violates the fundamental underlying purpose or the possibility behind every sexual encounter.

Now that implies that all sex, where there is no chance of conceiving, is wrong. And yet that immediately, once again, rules out oral sex.

[60 : 59] But it also means that couples who are unable to have children, post-menopausal women, women who have been sterilised or had a hysterectomy, men, like me, who've had a vasectomy, and indeed any sex where birth control or contraception are used, it should also be avoided, even within a married relationship.

It also narrows the purpose of sex to procreation, to a function, whereas in the Bible itself, in the books like the Song of Songs, the joy, love, and connection that sex brings to a couple can be a good in and of itself.

Another view is that being gay is a matter of choice rather than design, and that people who are attracted to the same sex have chosen that way of life, either because of preference, lust, fashion, or willful disobedience to God's plan for their lives.

And a view of some Christians, therefore, is that this gay identity can be overcome or removed or healed. However, the overwhelming consensus amongst the medical and psychiatric community is that homosexuality is neither a mental illness nor a moral lapse, but is instead a discovery of someone's identity, which has been genetically determined.

Yes, there are genuine stories of people who have sought counselling and prayer when they believed they were gay and they now subsequently self-identify as straight.

[62 : 41] But if sexuality is essentially genetic or inherited, that suggests the need for the reverse is also to be championed, in that some heterosexuals who are experiencing homosexual desires, should also be counselled and prayed for, in order that they too might discover and be comfortable in their true identity, and that might mean they're helped to come out as gay.

Another argument that is often at the root of people's objection to same-sex behaviour is to do with taste. In particular that they have a fundamental aversion to the idea of anal sex.

Many people, if we're honest, find the idea of anal sex disgusting, and that sense of disgust informs their views on an aspect of the gay lifestyle.

And I understand that, I understand that. However, there are many other sexual practices alongside anal sex which people find disgusting or distasteful, ranging from S&M; to role play, to oral sex, to fetishism, and so on.

And yet, just because it's not to our taste, does it make all those behaviours wrong? And does it make anal sex between a man and a woman in a married context wrong?

[64 : 20] Or just something we ourselves may not find appealing? Equally, I think I'm probably right in saying that whilst it is the male-male act of anal sex which some people tend to find disgusting, the idea of two women being together, on the other hand, is for many men, even those who find male sex acts disgusting, quite a turn-on.

If that's the case, and let's be honest, if that's how we feel, then it shows that we're not disgusted by all same-sex behaviour.

And that in turn means it's predominantly a matter of taste or culture or upbringing rather than principle of same-sex behaviour in itself.

And so, to sum up, the issues regarding human sexuality and in particular same-sex identity, behaviour and relationships and the Christian faith are complicated and at times controversial.

And yet, let's return to that question I posed earlier on. Can a loving, committed, exclusive, same-sex relationship be a place where God's love is experienced and reflected and in which his blessing can be received?

[65 : 57] In trying to answer that question, I think we've seen that the classic Bible verses often used aren't actually that definitive in helping us to make up our minds.

And if we look to nature and the wider culture to help us determine whether same-sex behaviour is natural or ordained by God as part of the created order or not, we're faced with some powerful and perhaps persuasive arguments on both sides of the fence which tend to raise more questions than they answer.

one aspect which we haven't, which we started with really, which we haven't dwelt on, but which I want to conclude with is this, God's love.

God's love is the highest form of love that exists and all forms of human love in some way or other by definition if it's genuine love are fed by, inspired by, blessed by and informed by the same divine love.

And when we look at the life of Jesus we see someone who consistently demonstrated that love in generous, inclusive, surprising, affirming and challenging ways.

[67 : 20] The question I think we therefore need to ask ourselves is this, if having looked at the Bible and considered various arguments against same sex behaviour, if we're finding it difficult to find reasonable grounds to condemn same sex behaviour, might it not just be that God's love can indeed be experienced and reflected in a loving, committed, exclusive, same sex relationship?

and if that is the case we'd do well to pray through and reflect deeply on what that means for us as God's church because the implications of holding such a view are hugely significant for the way we live out our faith and for the way in which we encourage others to live out theirs.

I appreciate that's a lot of words from me thank you for listening so attentively words which have probably raised all sorts of thoughts questions responses concerns perhaps in our minds and as I said at the top what we're not going to do and by the atmosphere in the room is probably the right figure is not have an open forum or discussion tonight because it is too complicated too sensitive an issue to ask us to have an immediate response to instead what I'd like us to do as I said at the top and if you need to go then by all means go but if you can just stay just for a few minutes for silent prayer and reflection that would be great not just for us to be able to process our own thoughts and process what I've said tonight but for us to be honest with God to start perhaps with him where we are and engage with him in prayer we'll give it five minutes or so of quiet and then

I'll just round things off in a few minutes time I think overall I'm keen that tonight might be a catalyst a trigger for further thoughtful prayerful reflection and conversation so the invitation tonight is open to stick around if you'd like to no pressure at all but if you'd find it useful to externally process a bit to share with those around or those you've come with then by all means do that likewise tonight might have raised some things that you'd like to pray through either tonight or at another time with someone else if so do find or do ask for someone to pray with I'm sticking around tonight I'm very happy to talk or pray through any questions concerns thoughts you might want to speak to me about either now or in the weeks and months to come do please come back to me with thoughts responses challenges I'll be delighted to carry on the conversation because that's how I think as a church we get to the root of God's truth that God's word opens up to us and I'm equally happy please do for real groups to take this away and to look further at this whole area above all though thank you very much for coming out tonight

I didn't have a clue how many people were going to turn up tonight it could have been me and two people and a dog or whatever but it's great to have so many of you here thank you for indulging me for such a long time but I think as you'll realise it needed to be done in depth to tackle it and to try and do it justice thank you for engaging with this whole topic of human sexuality and so as we leave here tonight may we go may you go with God's blessing with God's peace and God's love Amen Amen