

God's Giving Up

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[0 : 00] St. John's Shaughnessy Church St. John's Shaughnessy Church The problem is that the whole question has been taken over by ideological voices which have gained control.

On both sides I think. At one extreme gay rights activists demand our unqualified acceptance of all homosexual activity. On the other extreme there is an unqualified condemnation of homosexuals which lacks compassion and uses truth as a weapon of hatred.

When we turn to the scriptures we find that homosexuality is never ever allowed to become a central issue. However this second half of Romans 1 is one of the clearest and most unambiguous condemnations of homosexual activity.

But the issue is not homosexuality. The second half of Romans 1 is the history of the world. And the Apostle Paul describes with searching accuracy the story of each one of us.

And he says that human spirituality is marked by one essential component and that is a determined rejection of honouring God as God.

[2 : 14] So that we might become God in his place. See we don't mind so much that there's a God. It's just we hate it if it's anyone but me. This is how human spirituality progresses Paul says.

We fundamentally refuse to honour God as God. We know the truth. We suppress the truth of God and keep it down so that we might set up an idol in its place and worship it.

And where we end up in verse 22 claiming to be wise they and friends every time it says they in this passage it means you and me claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

That's why when we move into our passage verses 24 and onwards we have several exchanges. We exchange the truth of God for a lie. We exchange the worship of the creator for the worship of creatures.

We exchange God's design for our sexuality for our design. And that's why this whole section comes under the sentence that begins in verse 18 that speaks about the wrath of God being revealed now in the present tense.

[3 : 30] The question is how does God work his wrath in history now? And the answer is it has nothing to do with earthquakes, floods and fires in Los Angeles.

Although it's very tempting to say something about that. The way God's wrath works out in history now is in this terrible phrase that comes three times.

God gave them up. Verse 24 God gave them up. Verse 26 God gave them up. Verse 28 God gave them up. So you see the wrath of God is not some impersonal cause and effect process in history.

The way God expresses his wrath now in history is a quiet, invisible work where God gives us up to our own desires.

He removes the restraints from us and abandons us to the tyranny of our own desires. This is the work of God's wrath. It is to give us what we choose in our foolishness.

[4 : 33] And it operates not by God's intervention but precisely by God not intervening and letting us go our own way. The terrible reality is that as we resolutely suppress the truth of God and reject God and set up our own idols in our hearts God takes a step backwards away from us.

And he abandons us to construct our own beliefs. And as we follow the sophisticated idols and beliefs that we've designed our hearts become imperceptibly harder. Look at the first giving up.

Verse 24 and 25 Therefore he says God gave them up in the lusts of their heart to impurity to the dishonouring of their bodies amongst themselves because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie who worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. The basic truth about us is that we would far rather form our own lie and then worship that and live by it than we would God and Paul says it inevitably spills over into our sexual behaviour.

Verse 24 is a perfect picture of how to live pretending there is no God. We're pulled around by our own desires and we dishonour our bodies. And here is the key that sexual sin is not the cause of our alienation from God but it is the result of our radical rebellion against the creator.

[6:03] Here is the process in Romans chapter 1. Four things. God reveals himself to us. Secondly, we reject his revelation. Thirdly, God expresses his wrath.

And fourthly, his wrath is worked out in all our perversity. So that the dishonouring of our bodies in any sexual way is not the cause of God's wrath, it's the result of God's wrath.

That's why he turns in verses 26 to 27 to homosexuality. Let me read them again for you. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.

Men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. When God created us, he created us in his image to be his image.

We were to be like mirrors in his world reflecting the image of God to one another. But when we reject God and we turn our mirrors downwards, all we can do is reflect our own image back to one another.

[7:17] And one illustration of that, the apostle says, is homosexual activity which does not mean that homosexual activity is any more sinful than any other kind of sin nor that homosexual persons are any more sinful than any other kind of sinful person.

But it just merely means that homosexual activity demonstrates a rejection of God as creator. I want to spend a few moments on this issue if you'll allow me. Not just because it's high on our cultural agenda but because the Bible does deal with it and for many of us this is not an academic issue. This issue has faces to it. Faces of friends, family members, children. While it is true that homosexuality is never a major topic of interest in the Bible, there are a dozen or so texts that deal with it and every single text that addresses the issue is unambiguous and unremittably negative in its assessment.

In Leviticus 18.22, God forbids his people to engage in homosexual activity. He says that he is deeply, deeply offended by it. In Leviticus 20.10-16, homosexual activity is included alongside adultery, incest and bestiality.

And here's the interesting thing. There is no comment or no interest in orientation. It is the act of lying with a male as a woman which is categorically prescribed.

[8:48] You may say that's all very fine. That's in Leviticus. What about the New Testament? Well, when we come into the New Testament, we find the same understanding. If you keep your finger in Romans 1 and turn right to the very next book, 1 Corinthians 6, we find that Paul supports that Levitical understanding.

1 Corinthians 6. Look at verses 9-11. Do you not know that the unrighteous, those who practice unrighteousness, will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Do not be deceived. Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkard, nor revilers, nor robbers, 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 in the spirit of our God. I want you to notice three things about this.

The first is, the last word in verse 9 is the word for male sexual intercourse. And the apostle says that an ongoing lifestyle of homosexual activity is called unrighteous.

[10:09] That's the first thing I want you to notice. The second thing is, so is an ongoing lifestyle of greed. So is the ongoing lifestyle of adultery and the other sins mentioned there.

They are no different from each other in God's mind. And the third thing I want you to notice is most remarkable of all, Paul says, and such were some of you. But there were some in the Corinthian congregation as there are some in the St. John's congregation.

He used to live a lifestyle of active homosexuality but now are living under the lordship of Christ and have left those practices behind them. We could look at other passages but I want to go back to Romans 1 if you would go back there because the apostle could hardly be clearer.

The word for relations in verse 26 and 27 is a common Greek word for sexual intercourse. And the word natural looks back to the will of God in creation.

God created humankind in his own image. Male and female he created them and God institutes marriage between man and a woman as a heterosexual union.

[11 : 23] The only context for the one flesh relationship the scripture sanctions is heterosexual marriage. And homosexual partnerships no matter how loving and committed they may claim to be are against nature Paul says and against God and can never be thought of as a legitimate alternative to marriage.

Now many of you will be aware that over the past 20 years this passage has come under attack and its meaning has been challenged primarily in two different ways. And I just want to deal with them very quickly.

The first challenge comes from an author called Robin Scroggs and he argues that Paul is opposing the use of young male prostitutes in temple worship and that Romans 1 is not condemning adult committed homosexual relations.

The problem for that view is that the word Paul uses for woman and man is the word female and male. And so what Paul is condemning is not any age difference.

He is condemning sexual intercourse between someone of the opposite gender. The second attack has come from John Boswell and he claims that Paul is denouncing heterosexuals who have engaged in homosexual activity and he says that is why it is against their nature whereas the person who has homosexual feelings engages in homosexuality according to their nature.

[12 : 52] But when the apostle Paul uses the word nature he is not talking about my nature. He is not talking about what is natural to me. He is talking about what is in accord with the intention of the creator the way he made us.

There are no loopholes or acceptive clauses for accepting homosexual activity under special circumstances. But again I say this does not mean that homosexual activity is any more sinful or evil nor does it provoke the wrath of God.

Instead it is the consequence of God's wrath of God's giving over. It is terribly important for us to see in both the first paragraph 24 and 25 and in the second paragraph that the fundamental human sin is the refusal to acknowledge and honour God.

That when we banish God we no longer draw our identity from him. and the natural place for us to look is toward our sexuality.

And the question for us is does our sexuality serve our spirituality or does our spirituality serve our sexuality? It is very interesting in our culture you will find two almost opposite answers to that question.

[14 : 07] If you go into a new age bookshop you will find a new gnostic spirituality which says there is no connection between my spirituality and my sexuality.

What I do with my body has no connection with my spirit I am free to do what I want. If you go to some Christian bookstalls today you will find that writers are saying that my sexuality and my spirituality are the same thing.

That the way I experience God is through my sexuality. And if that is the way I experience God no one can tell me that what I am doing is wrong. And the point that the apostle is trying to make is that we get our identity from God our creator our saviour and our judge and to gain our identity from our sexuality is merely another form of idolatry.

To treat sex as an end in itself either heterosexual or any kind of sexual experience is its own anti-reward. To define ourselves by our sexuality is to find ourselves under the wrath of God.

And you may be feeling that's all very fine but what has that to do with me? And I am very grateful that the apostle Paul includes the third paragraph verses 28 to 32.

[15 : 26] Let me remind you the third time he says God gave them up. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God verse 28 God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.

And they were filled with all manner of wickedness evil covetousness malice full of envy murder strife deceit malignity they are gossips slanderers haters of God insolent haughty boastful inventors of evil disobedient to parents foolish faithless heartless ruthless is there anyone left out?

Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die they not only do them but approve those who practice them. Here's a list of sins we're more comfortable with perhaps they're a little more acceptable to us.

Here's the point they are of the same species as sexual disobedience they're just as much a demonstration of our refusal to acknowledge God as anything already mentioned covetousness the

desire to have more possessions or more money envy gossip dishonesty arrogance and the apostle turns it back on us in chapter 2 verse 1 and he says therefore you have no excuse oh man whoever you are when you judge another for in for imparting judgment upon him you condemn yourself there is no room for self righteousness the arrogant condemnation of homosexual behavior makes us just as guilty before God none of us have any basis to stand on before God apart from the love of Jesus Christ on the cross we should spend more time on this but I want to finish by giving you three words and these three words are each words of hope to us and each of them describe the context in which we live and the first word is the word creation we were made by God to reflect his image in the world this is who we are

God made us he created us and he owns us and we are never closer to finding our true identity than when we are honoring him that's why it's so important for us to meet week by week by week to hear the good news that we are not defined by our sexuality we are not defined by our position or by our possessions or by our power but by the one who made us most of all most of us I'm sorry experience our sexuality as compulsion and affliction and it is profoundly hopeful for us to hear this that we are not defined by our sexuality that we are not locked into some sort of biologically determined lifestyle that we are not God but that we belong to the one who made us for himself that we are not determined by our behaviors or by the culture around us but that we are determined by the transforming grace of our creator God creation very important the second hopeful word is the word community none of the issues that Paul touches on in Romans chapter 1 have to do with private morality they are all about the health of the body of Christ and don't you find it interesting that long list of 21 vices at the end of chapter 1 is a devastating picture of relationships broken by our self-centered preoccupations the point is we do not live in a private world disconnected from one another when we come to belong to Jesus

[19:37] Christ Christ we are brought into his body and we become members one of another and the health of the body is at stake in the conduct of every single individual member of that body what the Bible teaches and I think this works in two ways the first if any of us is engaged in sexual disobedience of any form it will mark this body it will mark the whole body sin is like an infection in the body which is why when we meet together every week we confess our sins and we hear the words of forgiveness but continued sin where we do not attempt to repent from it and turn away from it is like a part of the body that will not submit to the head doing its own thing in medical terms you may call it a tumour and unless it's dealt with it will damage the entire body secondly this not only works negatively but it also works positively

God has placed us in this very strange corporate caring group together there is not a single one of us that does not struggle with sexual brokenness of some form friends we are not meant to struggle with it alone I recently heard a wonderful Christian leader say that if he had his life over again the one thing he would do is that he would share his struggle in the area of his sexuality with those who are closest to him and in our culture that is gradually losing the art of friendship we need to develop this practice of Christian friendship we need to learn about being intimate with one another on a friendship on a Christian friendship level and I think it's critical for those who struggle with homosexual feelings and it's just as critical for those who struggle with arrogance or with gossip condemnation is not our job but to love as Christ loved us this is our job creation community and the third and hopeful word is the word

Christ don't you find it remarkable that this passage fits between chapter 1 verse 17 and chapter 2 verse 1 and in chapter 1 verse 17 we are told of the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel and in chapter 2 verse 1 we are told of the desperate need of it we are all of us every single one of us equally in need of the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel none of us here are above God's judgment none of us has a secure platform in ourselves and that's for instance that is why there is the deepest possible hope in these words God gave them up you see God is like the father of the prodigal he will not hold us at home against our will but God's wrath in the present is a strategy of hope and the hope is that our present experience of wrath will save us from the final wrath the hope is that when we are reduced to eating pig's will after following our desires we might come to our senses and say to ourselves father I have sinned against you and against heaven but the hope in these words

God gave them up is deeper still because Romans goes on to say that God gave up Jesus his only son in chapter 8 we read what then shall we say to these things if God is for us who can be against us he who did not withhold his own son but gave him up for us all will he not give us all things with

him in his love God gave up his only son and in the Greek it is exactly the same word used here friends the difference is that Jesus was given up unconditionally absolutely and utterly so that you and I need never be and that is what we celebrate this morning in the communion and that is why the gospel is the revelation of the righteousness of God and that is why in our lives there is one thing we need not be ashamed of

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