

Mark D. Reichert

Matthew 19:3-12 – Orient Your Life toward Christ

10/12-16/22 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

So what does the Bible really say? It says that it's a sin. It's damnable, evil, and could exclude a person from God's kingdom. It's so bad that God destroyed an entire city that was engaged in it, and Jesus says that those who practice it are liable to face judgment rather than salvation when he returns. And those who think they can continue to practice it and still think they are genuine followers of Christ are deceiving both themselves and others.

Still, our culture has accepted it as a virtue instead of a vice. Even our Christian culture is letting it slip into our churches unnoticed. We sometimes applaud it and place people in leadership who are too weak to preach against it. Many churches, if they are not actively endorsing it, try to remain neutral. But neutrality is nothing more than endorsement covered in sheep's clothing.

But actually, I'm not talking about homosexuality, a sin that's specifically addressed in Scripture only maybe seven times total. I'm talking about the misuse of wealth – a sin that's condemned in more than two thousand passages throughout God's inspired Word. See, that's the danger in directing all our righteous wrath at one particular sin like homosexuality, especially when that's really not *our* temptation. While our guard stays hyper-sensitive against that sin, we leave ourselves open for the devil to attack us through idols like money and materialism, or gossiping, or youth sports, or political agendas, or all the myriad ways that *straight* people sin against the 6th Commandment. So as we explore this issue of God-pleasing sexual orientation, let's make sure we keep Godly zeal to slaughter all types of sins, especially those in our own lives. Because then, and only then, should we properly address the sins of others [*ad. from Preston Sprinkle, People to Be Loved, 2015*].

You know, Christian faithfulness is kind of like flying a plane. If you're going to fly a plane, you need two wings that balance and stabilize each other, and for Christians, those two wings are truth and love, just like our Verse of the Day said. Well the truth of the Bible says that God's plan for marriage is to be a life-long union of one man and one woman. Any kind of sexual desire or activity outside of that framework is sinning against that plan. Homosexuality in particular violates God's clear Word, as well as God's order of creation and the laws of nature. It frustrates God's plan for marriage companionship, because God made man and woman to correspond to each other and complete each other that way. It frustrates God's plan for chastity, for sexual fulfillment, because only a man and a woman are made to be, let's say, anatomically complementary in sexual activity. And it frustrates God's plan for children, because only when a male's sperm comes together with a female's egg can children be conceived. Then on top of all those spiritual dangers, homosexual activity also carries with it some serious physical dangers too, like increased instances of sexually transmitted diseases, bodily injuries, mental disorders, cancers, and other health risks that lead to a significantly shortened life span on average.

But now here's another truth that is even more important for us to remember: “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*” (Romans 3:23-24). Yes, thank God that he's allowed us to stand firmly on his *truth*. But where that gets difficult is finding a good balance with love, especially toward those whose temptations

and sins are different from our own. And actually, that's not so different from people in Jesus' day, or any other day in human history. In fact, only Jesus himself has balanced truth and love perfectly in his life, and so that's why the best way to strive after a better balance in our lives – especially in matters of sexual orientation – is to orient your life toward Christ, because only when we learn *his* truth and reflect *his* love will we be able to fly faithfully like he wants.

And our Gospel reading for today gave us three important lessons to help us do that. The first lesson is to be careful who you listen to. When the Pharisees came to test Jesus that day, they wanted him to comment on an ongoing debate about divorce that reached all the way back to Moses in the Old Testament. One group of Jewish teachers said that a man should be able to divorce his wife for something as little as burning his supper; another school of thought said that he could only divorce his wife if she was somehow sexually unchaste. Here were these famously hypocritical Pharisees taking sides in a debate dripping with sexism and appealing to Moses, all the while not properly representing what Moses actually said and did.

So what did Jesus say? “*Haven't you read...?*” He put an end to the debates and questions. He appealed not to man's feelings and opinions, but to God's clear Word. God created marriage in the beginning to be one man and one woman together for a lifetime, and therefore no one has any right to change it.

Well that also teaches us an important lesson for *this* debate about sexual orientation. If you read up on this issue of homosexuality and the Christian, you'll find plenty of scholars saying that monogamous, committed, faithful gay marriage is perfectly sanctioned in the Bible, and the only things the Bible forbids are things like gang rape, temple prostitution, and *pederasty*, or older men taking sexual advantage of younger men because of social status. On the other hand, you'll find plenty in the church talking like homosexuality is the unforgivable sin, that people who have homosexual attractions are an abomination before God. They are unsavable outlaws, and God has no forgiveness for such deviants as *that!*

So who should we listen to? That first group has love without truth; they try to sugarcoat God's message about marriage and sexuality to the point that they miss it entirely. The second group has truth without love; yes, any kind of sexuality that deviates from God's marriage plan is sin that deserves punishment, but did not Jesus live and die and rise again to redeem us from those sins as well?

Let's not listen to all that noise. Let's listen to Jesus, because it is his cross that shows us the perfect balance of truth and love. Let's remember what Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery when the Pharisees wanted to condemn her. He said, “*Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.*” He didn't choose between truth or love. He chose truth *and* love, because the truth is that every one of us deserves condemnation for our sins. But Jesus loved us enough to take those sins to the cross and be condemned for them in our place. His blood is powerful enough to purify our hearts, our sexual orientations, and *all* our sins against his 6th Commandment. Yes, homosexuality is a sin; but it is a sin for which Christ died and *from* which Christ desires to set us free.

“*Leave your life of sin*” – the Catechism term for what Jesus was calling that woman to do is *repentance*, turning away from sin and turning toward God. Repentance is a change of heart that confesses our brokenness and wrongdoing and trusts in Jesus for healing and salvation. But that was a problem for the Pharisees who questioned Jesus that day. They either thought too highly of themselves to admit their sin,

or they managed to reason their sin away. After all, Moses ‘commanded’ divorce, so how could it really be a sin? But Jesus said, “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.*” Jesus saw through their excuses. The problem wasn’t with God or with Moses. The problem was with their hard, unbelieving hearts and their unwillingness to humble themselves and repent.

So friends, here’s our second important lesson to learn from Jesus today: let’s not lose our perspective like the Pharisees did. Being right with God doesn’t depend on our holiness, our perfection; it depends on our repentance. Being right with God isn’t about being gay or straight, married or unmarried as such; it’s about believing in Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives. The only sin that finally keeps people out of heaven isn’t homosexuality; it’s unbelief. The Gospel is not a message that says Jesus is coming to straighten out your crooked sexual orientations; it says Jesus is coming to straighten out your crooked, sin-broken hearts. And that is so important for all of us to understand and admit: we are *all* broken. Maybe some among us have a weakness for same-sex attraction, but *more* of us have weaknesses for opposite-sex lust, or porn, or anger, or alcohol, or greed, or pride, or envy, or whatever else. Let’s take those weaknesses together to the cross, because Jesus can shore up those weaknesses with his strength.

See, it’s important for us to remember that you can’t choose your feelings, but you certainly do choose how to act on those feelings. So just because someone might say they’re *gay*, doesn’t necessarily mean they’re openly embracing and actively engaging in homosexual practices. Some are, but some others just use that term to mean that they struggle against same-sex attraction while they truly desire to follow Christ first and foremost. They have the same tug o’ war going on inside them that every Christian does between what is good and Godly and what is evil and sinful. People who struggle against homosexuality because they’re dedicated in faith to Jesus and God’s Word don’t need to be condemned and ostracized. Their unwanted sexual attractions can make them feel like they’re drowning, so let’s not push them away from the lifeboat that is the Christian Church. Let’s give them the love and support, the help and compassion, the forgiveness and encouragement they need to keep fighting the good fight of faith.

Yes, the best way to address sexual orientation with truth and love is through repentance – and not just telling homosexuals that *they* need to repent, either. Jesus loved sinners so much that he surrounded himself with them, so that he could save them. Well that’s not just *them*, that’s *us*. Jesus loved *all* of us so much that he calls us to follow him through this life and even to live with him in heaven someday. Gay or straight, married or unmarried – it doesn’t matter. What truly matters is that when in humble faith we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus as our Savior, he promises to change our hearts and save our souls now and forever.

Now that all sounds great, but that can mean a harsh reality for Christians tempted by same-sex attraction. They might fully intend to deny that temptation in order to honor God’s plan for sex and marriage... But that’s exactly the thing: is that really all we have to offer them? A life of saying “sorry, nope, can’t do that;” a life of self-denial, of refusing sexual fulfillment, and missing out on the companionship and togetherness of marriage and family?

Jesus answers that question here by teaching us something about *eunuchs*. Eunuchs were people back in those days who swore off sexual relations so that they could be fully dedicated servants to their rulers and their kingdoms. Jesus says, “*there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have*

been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, for those people whose sexual orientation might not fit God’s sex-and-marriage mold, they can make the best of their situations by thinking of themselves as eunuchs in the kingdom of heaven, people who are dignified and dedicated for serving Christ their King.

And that’s our final lesson from Jesus for today. That way of life is called *celibacy*, and that actually has a sacred and time-honored history in the Church. Celibacy is not just a way of life that is characterized by saying no and going without. It is a way of life that is characterized by fulfilling, Christ-like self-sacrifice and saying yes to serving God in undivided devotion. It’s a testimony that a relationship with God is the greatest joy and desire in my life and Christ is enough to meet all my needs. Some people might look at a lack of heterosexual desire, or even just singleness in general, as a deficiency. But that’s not the way Jesus talks about it, and that’s not the way Paul talks about it – both of whom led celibate lives to the glory of God and to the great benefit of their brothers and sisters in faith.

So how can unmarried folks serve Christ their King in the best way possible? They can focus on all the unique opportunities and gifts they have to reach and help others. A married person can have many different responsibilities between work, spouse, children, and whatever else occupies their time and attention. But a celibate person can use their relative freedom to invest deeply into spiritual growth and friendships and caring and listening and seeking out the hurting. They are in a great position to sympathize with others who are struggling, because they themselves know what it is to struggle and overcome. And they are uniquely sensitive to those who might otherwise fall through the cracks, because sadly the church has sometimes emphasized marriage and family to the point that it has let *them* fall through the cracks.

But no, the celibate singles among us should never feel out of place or unappreciated. They have so much to offer in service to Christ, so many special ways that they can serve him well, and they have an example of whole-hearted faithfulness that is worthy of our honor and imitation. So let’s encourage and love them. Let’s validate and affirm them not as people who are fundamentally broken – at least not any more so than the rest of us – but as people whom God has redeemed and gifted for service. And finally, when those ugly thoughts of loneliness and shame and unwantedness do enter their minds, we can drive them away by being the true, eternal friends and family they need and providing all the genuine, Godly care and support that will strengthen them to keep serving faithfully throughout their lives.

Truth and love. These two are not at odds in a Christian’s life, and they certainly don’t make us enemies of those whose temptations and struggles are different from ours and that we just simply can’t fully understand. The truth is that we are all sinful and deserve God’s punishment equally, but he loved us so much that he sent Jesus here to save us and make us his family. That means, brothers and sisters, that we are more than just our sexual urges, and we can rise above them when they go against God’s Will. We are true children of God, heirs of his kingdom, and people whom God wants to see in heaven someday. When it comes to sexual orientation, there is a lot that is messed up in this world. But if our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ oriented himself and everything he came to do toward us and our salvation, then let’s listen to him, let’s repent before him, let’s dedicate ourselves to serving him. Let’s *all* turn away from our sins, whatever they may be, and let’s orient our lives toward Christ, because then we will live in his truth and love both now and forever. Amen.