



Central Christian Church Bradenton

Where EveryONE is Welcome

LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Exclusion and the Church

What Does Scripture Teach?

Part 6 – Loving Yet Challenging Conversations Series

cccBradenton 10/25/20

SLIDE 1: Sermon Intro

Preparing this message was the most difficult of the series so far.

Emotions overwhelmed me multiple times as I researched the topic.

It's only fair to warn you that the same may happen to you as you listen.

Just as hearing the stories of several women wrestling with the decision whether to keep an unplanned pregnancy or terminate it was heart-wrenching to listen to a couple of weeks ago,

LGBTQ+ inclusion or exclusion by the church elicits deep emotions.

Still in 2020.

Both for the members of the LGBTQ+ community and members of their family, friends and fellow believers that have been taught homosexuality is a sin and a homosexual lifestyle is incompatible with being a practicing Christian.

As well as for parents who grew up believing that, and now struggle with what God thinks of their gay son or daughter.

While there are many churches who are **Open and Affirming, like ours**, this question has caused much pain.

It has caused many young people to give up on God and Christianity and not just people in the LGBTQ+ community.

Heterosexual young people across the country cite the church's intolerance towards the LGBTQ+ community as one of the reasons they think we are all hypocrites.

Talking about love, yet protesting against same-sex couples trying to have a covenantal monogamous loving marital relationship.

Some of my gay and transgender friends in seminary still have broken relationships with family or former members of churches they used to belong to before they came out publicly to acknowledge their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Here at this church, most of us make no distinction based on sexual-orientation or gender identity.

We have an openly gay Ministry Associate and an openly lesbian Elder, both of whom are loved equally as every other member of our church family.

So then, you might wonder why we need this message as part of our Loving Yet Challenging Conversations series.

For multiple reasons I feel it's important that we not be silent on this issue.

We cannot be content that we don't discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community.

Just as in other justice issues, **silence secretly supports the oppressor**.

As long as there are Christians proclaiming that homosexuals cannot enter the kingdom of God, or that they are welcome, but have to stop having sex with someone they love, we must live up to **our mission to embrace those who have felt "unwelcome" at other churches**.

I can't think of another group that feels less welcome at too many Christian churches than the LGBTQ+ community.

I've had several evangelical friends say the famous, "*love the sinner, hate the sin*" phrase that is heard and understood by the gay community as Christians hate them.

For someone with a same-sex orientation, that is part of their identity, who they are, you cannot say you hate part of their core being but love them.

For these reasons, **you may notice that I will be less balanced on this topic**, than on the previous two issues we've addressed.

God has blessed me immeasurably since I've followed my call into ministry.

I have met so many committed, faithful, loving Christians who happen to be from the LGBTQ+ community.

Many who were chased out of their churches and now are following God's call into ministry in their own life.

One of these is our friend and brother Erwin Goodwin.

Even before that however, God was already working on growing my understanding of what it meant to *"love our neighbor as ourselves."*

In my secular career I worked alongside both gay men and women, some of whom thought God and Christianity was horrible, **if real at all**,

others who had grown up with faith but struggled to find an accepting church where they could feel like they belonged.

Last year the United Methodist church was holding their worldwide General Church conference.

One of the items on the agenda was two opposing plans to either accept openly gay clergy and same-sex marriage or stay with their tradition plan opposing them.

I want to show you a short video from a young follower of Jesus Christ about what that possibility meant to him.

Slide 2: Video: UMC LGBTQ+ Testimony

Slide 3: Rainbow Flag

Every time I see that tears come to my eyes.

The power of that young man's faith is undeniable.

Sadly, at that conference they voted to affirm the Traditional Plan which excludes openly gay clergy and prevents clergy from performing same-sex marriages.

Unfortunately, that decision is going to lead to the split of the UMC into two separate denominations.

The apostle Paul, were he alive today, would not be happy.

Not because he thought homosexuality is an abomination (we'll talk about that next week), but because he loathed division in Christ's church.

Slide 4: God and humans

In this series we've been talking about the role life experience, Scripture, reason & science, and church tradition in understanding God's will.

I believe Scripture was written to help humanity understand what God was already showing them through their life experiences and that our life experiences, both individual and communal help illuminate Scripture.

It works both ways.

I feel similarly with science as well as church traditions, which have changed dramatically over the centuries.

For this conversation we'll intertwine several of these rather than tackle them one at a time.

I believe that **Scripture is inspired by God** and is, as the author of the second letter to Timothy says; *"is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness"*

Most of the research I've done was written by people who grew up in the more conservative traditional understanding of Scripture.

Three of the four books I read were not by members of the LGBTQ+ community but by straight ministers who could no longer reconcile what they believed the Bible taught about homosexuality with the life experience of the LGBTQ+ community.

They were not asking for life experience to override Scripture, just that, as it had many times in the past, cause us to reexamine our interpretation of what it was that Scripture taught on the question.

So how can we tell if our interpretation is correct?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against false prophets, using a term that has long been understood to refer to teachers of false doctrines as well.

Jesus explained how his followers could determine true prophets from false prophets.

Slide 5: 1,2,3,4 – Matthew 7:15-20

In Matthew 7:15–20, he said:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus, you will know them by their fruits.”

What are the fruits of the doctrine that homosexuality is a sin, an abomination before God.

What are the fruits of denying loving monogamous covenantal marital relationships between-same-sex couples?

Pain, brokenness of families, turning away from God and the church.

Can anyone think of the good fruit that comes from such teaching?

Just like the **life experiences of slaves** forced us to reconsider the Biblical interpretation that endorsed slavery,

and **the experience of women** caused the church to reinterpret what the church thought the Bible taught about female inferiority and male superiority,

the **life experiences of our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers** call out to us for a reexamination of the Scriptures relied upon to oppress this group of God’s created people.

Slide 6: Six Clobber Passages

Six passages in the Bible relate in some way to same-sex sexual behavior.

Three are in the Old Testament, and three are in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, Genesis 19 tells the story of the men in Sodom who threatened to gang rape Lot’s angel visitors (see verses 4–11).

Further, in Leviticus, male same-sex intercourse was prohibited for the Israelites. (see Leviticus 18:22; 20:13).

In the New Testament, Paul denounced the “unnatural” same-sex behavior of Gentile idol worshipers (see Romans 1:26–27).

Then in 1 Corinthians 6:9, he condemned the practices of the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, two Greek terms that may encompass forms of same-sex sexual behavior.

Lastly, the condemnation of the *arsenokoitai* is repeated in 1 Timothy 1:10.

Over the next couple of weeks, we’ll address each of these.

These have been coined as “Clobber Passages” because they have been used over the last fifty years to “clobber” LGBTQ+ people over the head (figuratively).

This week, we’ll address the Old Testament and next week the New Testament passages.

Slide 7: Genesis 19:1-8

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, *“Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.”* They said, *“No; we will spend the night in the square.”* But he urged them strongly; so, they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, *“Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.”* Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, *“I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.”*

Hard to imagine Lot being more willing to let the crowd rape his virgin daughters than violate the hospitality and safety he offered to the strangers.

It says two things, first the immense importance the ancient world placed on hospitality, and secondly, the sad reality that women were so lowly valued.

Slide 9: Sodom and Gomorrah

If Genesis 19 was Scripture's only mention of Sodom and Gomorrah, it could perhaps be reasonable to believe that one of the sins (perhaps even the sin) of the decimated cities was related to sexual immorality (if, of course, we ignore the science about how gang rape is about power and not sexual desire).

However, both the Old Testament and New Testament weigh in on the sin of Sodom, giving us all the insight, we might need as to why that story was preserved and what it meant.

We don't have to work too hard to interpret the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, because prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and then Jesus himself, all do it for us.

In the days of Isaiah, the people of God had desperately lost their way.

According to Isaiah, Israel's worship had become meaningless.

This caused them to neglect doing good, such as seeking justice, defending the oppressed, and tending to orphans and widows.

This prompted Isaiah to warn his people, *"If the LORD of heavenly forces had not spared a few of us, / we would be like Sodom"* (Isa. 1:9), and bluntly calling Israel's leaders, *"leaders of Sodom"* (v. 10).

Jeremiah lamented about the prophets in his day, specifically calling out their adulterous ways and their incessant lying about visions and dreams.

Worst of all, they neglected the most important job of a prophet: calling people to repentance.

Like Isaiah before him, Jeremiah compared his people to Sodom and Gomorrah, *"In the prophets of Jerusalem / I saw something horrible: // In my eyes, they are no better than Sodom; / its people are like Gomorrah"* (Jer. 23:14).

Ezekiel gives us the clearest window into how the memory of Sodom and Gomorrah played itself out in Jewish consciousness.

According to Ezekiel, Jerusalem had become, in the eyes of God, even more detestable and depraved than that old ash heap known as Sodom. *"Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore, I did away with them as you have seen"* (Ezek. 16:49–50 NIV).

As far as Ezekiel saw it, it was not sexual immorality (let alone homosexuality or same-sex sex acts) that brought down the fire from heaven.

According to the prophets, then, when the Hebrew people thought of Sodom and Gomorrah, they did not think of them in terms of cities that were wicked as a result of men wanting to have sex with other men.

No, the sins of Sodom were based on the fact that **they had plenty of resources but did not open themselves up to those who were in need.**

In short, they were notoriously inhospitable.

Finally, Jesus himself stood in the Jewish tradition of seeing Sodom and Gomorrah as historical examples of the wickedness of rejecting the outsider.

When he sent out his twelve disciples to go from town to town proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God, he said, *“If anyone refuses to welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or city. I assure you that it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on Judgment Day than it will be for that city”* (Matt. 10:14–15).

This is not a story about gay men, especially since the concept of “sexual orientation” would have been completely foreign back then.

But more than that, it’s not a story about men who are sexually attracted to other men.

The passion of the mob banging down Lot’s door was motivated by **a desire to exercise control over the two men**, not because they wanted to enjoy same-sex sex acts with them or develop a relationship with them.

What if we learned from our misuse of this Clobber Passage and instead took to heart the real message of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?

the entire point of Genesis 19 is that the people of God are called to be people who receive the outcast and the outsiders, not create them.

What if this story became a rallying point for calling the Church back to the importance of hospitality?

Of greeting people who are outside, embracing them, and leading them inside for nourishment and rest?

That’s a pretty powerful place to start when it comes to homosexuality and the Bible.

SLIDE 10: Leviticus 20:13

This brings us to the two passages in Leviticus. vv. 18:22 and 20:13, which says that a man lying with another man, like he does with a woman is an abomination and they both should be put to death.

Abomination is a loaded word, evoking something subhuman, vile, and gross.

And while I'm certain that most Christians would never intend to communicate that a gay person is vile or subhuman, the reality is that this happens every day in subtle ways and some not subtle at all.

At many Gay Pride festivals across the country, you can see counter-protestors holding signs that say things like; "love the sinner, hate the sin" or even the more blatant "God hates fags."

SLIDE 11: Abomination

In our first reading, we heard about several sexual acts that should cause a person to be put to death.

Of course, today, we don't think adulterers should be put to death, although there are still a couple of countries in the world that still have the death penalty for men laying with other men.

Our reading started with verse 10, verse 9 says all that curse their father or mother should be put to death also.

I felt bad for the animals in our reading, it wasn't their fault that either a man or woman wanted to have sex with them, yet they must be killed as well.

Interestingly, the Old Testament doesn't condemn having multiple wives and concubines or having sex with your slaves.

Yet today, we frown upon those things.

It does prohibit all kinds of food we frequently eat and the wearing of two kinds of cloth together at the same time.

We like to pick and choose which laws still apply today and which do not.

For example, Leviticus 18 also says you can't have sex with your wife when she is having her period, or you'll be thrown out of the community.

Next week we'll talk about Jesus' fulfillment of these laws and what it means to live free from the law of Moses.

Since abomination is such a strong word and is attached in these specific Leviticus passages only to the sex between men, we need to look deeper at that word.

It comes from the Hebrew word toevah.

It was used to stipulate certain actions that, if committed, would render an Israelite indistinguishable from the surrounding nations, a betrayal of the Lord's unique calling to live holy (aka, set apart).

Toevah were cultural taboos.

They transgressed the boundary that was supposed to separate the Israelite people from both the Egyptians (from whence they came) and the Canaanites (to where they were going).

Four Hebrew terms are translated as "abomination" in the King James Version of the Bible.

Of those four, the main term is toevah, which appears in Leviticus 18 and 20.

It's used 117 times in the Old Testament.

In the vast majority of cases, toevah refers to idolatrous practices of Gentiles,

Here are a few:

charging interest on loans (see Ezekiel 18:13); and burning incense (see Isaiah 1:13).

Deuteronomy 14:3–21 contains an extensive list of abominations, including the eating of pork, rabbit, shellfish, and animals that are already dead.

So, while abomination is a negative word, it doesn't always apply to Christian views of sin.

we must still acknowledge the primary motivation behind why it was prohibited in the first place: because it was a violation of cultural boundaries, not because it was evil or unnatural.

Additionally, what is to be said about the lack of any condemnation toward women, if indeed this was intended to be a divine word against any and all same-sex sex acts?

So while we can say with certainty that under Levitical Law a man “*shall not lie with a male as with a woman,*” (whatever specific activity that might have meant) because it blurred the lines of the Israelites with the Egyptians and Canaanites, we cannot say with certainty whether or not a man lying with a male as with a woman was evil or sinful.

That is simply beyond the scope of what it meant for something to be *toevah*.

Yet, because our English translations use the word “*abomination*” to describe a man “*laying with a male the laying as of a woman/wife,*” any expression today of same-sex intimacy gets linked to adjectives like vile, gross, and subhuman.

The word *abomination* is loaded with meaning and implications that add an interpretive layer to *toevah* and takes it places where it was never meant to go.

Especially if we consider how Jesus redefined what it means to be in relationship with God.

The Hebrew people, as part of the family of God, were given the Law as a way to live out their calling.

Under the teachings, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, however, we have been given a new way to live out our calling: **faith**.

And we have been given a new way to understand the purpose and fulfillment of the entirety of the Law: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

This brings us back to the question: what do these two Clobber Passages have to say about homosexuality as an orientation, or with regard to a loving, committed, same-sex relationship?

I cannot, in good conscience (or in good scholarship), see how these two verses, which were written to help a liberated group of slaves understand how they were to be a uniquely called-out nation in the world, can offer any words of condemnation against the LGBTQ community.

These two Clobber Passages have been misused for too long to condemn the LGBTQ community and make them feel that they are less than human.

That is not only wrong morally, it is also wrong biblically.

We need to stop using ancient Levitical Laws that were designed for a specific purpose and a specific people as a means for understanding who we are today.

Is it not the proper place to discover what God's dream is for us today, and what it might look like to engage in a loving, committed, mutually respecting relationship with another person.

When it comes to questioning the sinfulness of people born with same-sex attraction, or the sinfulness of a gay couple living together in a loving, committed relationship, these two verses in Leviticus simply do not help.

They are not trying to answer those questions.

Next week we'll examine the passages in Romans, Corinthians, and Timothy. You may have notices as you came in, I have the four books I used for my research.

Anyone is free to borrow one of them if you want to understand even more fully.

I hope you will join one of our discussion groups this week on Monday morning at 10 or Wednesday evening at 7.

If you can't make it in person, you can join us on Zoom.

Let's Pray

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