

Blessings discussion 24th May: What does the Bible say about same-sex relationships?

Dan's comments – a traditionalist perspective

In 2015, I did a series of talks here on Love, sex and relationships. As part of that, I preached a sermon I called “God loves gay people and hates prejudice.” My position hasn’t changed much in the last 8 years, but I hope I have more compassion and understanding now. Before I sketch out my reasons for what I believe, let me just make it clear that it would be far easier for me if my conscience allowed me to bless or marry same-sex couples. It would make life easier in the Church of England; it would make life easier in our society. I don’t find it easy to hold this position.

Let me also say that this is my current position. I’m open to correction and change, as I hope we all are, if people can persuade me that God endorses same-sex relationships. We should all have the humility to submit our views to the teaching of Scripture as God’s word.

Nor have I come to my conclusions lightly. I’m all too aware of the life-changing consequences of my more traditional position; and as a pastor, I feel the weight of my calling to lead people to God and his live-giving, freedom-bringing truth. Scripture has harsh words to say about false teachers and prophets who lead people away from God – those warnings ring in my ears.

So **why do I believe** that God has given the gift of sex to be used in heterosexual marriage? Let me mention 5 reasons.

First, **the general sweep of Scripture**. [‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Eph 5)] From the very first pages of the Bible, when God brings man and woman together, to the very last pages of the Bible when Jesus is presented as a bridegroom with the church as his bride, marriage is a dominant theme. Marriage isn’t the pinnacle of creation; single people are never presented as somehow lesser than married people. But the gift of marriage is presented a bit like a movie trailer. Just as a film trailer is a foretaste of the full-length film, so male-female marriage is presented as a foretaste of the union between Christ and his church. That union is always presented in difference – the complementary male-female nature of marriage in the Bible points the way to the complementary nature of the church as the saved, and Jesus as the saviour. As I understand it, to say that same-sex relationships are equal to opposite-sex relationships fundamentally distorts the complementary nature of the saved-and-saviour relationship that marriage points towards. Furthermore, I can find no places in Scripture which present a homosexual relationship in a positive way. So for me, the general sweep of Scripture is heterosexual.

Second, the **purpose of marriage**. [“Male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number’” (Gen 1)] Genesis 1 says that male and female are to ‘be fruitful and increase in number’. Having children is not the only purpose of marriage; and obviously science has made it possible for same-sex couples to have children, and for single people to have children. Some also take the hugely sacrificial path of

adoption. But it seems to me that the complementary biology of male and female bodies is a massive pointer from God towards heterosexual marriage being a key part of his design.

Third, **Jesus' teaching on sexual relationships**. ["It is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy ... All these evils come from inside and defile a person." (Mk 7)] It is true that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality specifically, just as he didn't mention pornography or Tinder or Grindr – or slavery or a whole host of other topics. So we have to extrapolate from his teaching to apply it to our world today. Jesus was one of the more conservative teachers of his day on the topic of marriage. He quoted Genesis 2 as still applicable in his day – which is why it is sometimes called a creation ordinance – ie God's gift of male-female marriage is for all cultures and every age. He also spoke against sexual immorality, using a word that his listeners would have understood to include any sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. Jesus never undermined the idea of male-female marriage or lowered the standard of sexual ethics. In fact, he consistently reinforced them. By his standards, all of us are sexual sinners – single, married, gay or heterosexual. None of us can take the moral high ground. But Jesus also showed wonderful grace to those who had sinned sexually, offering forgiveness and life. I thank God for his mercy!

Fourth, the **Old Testament texts** on homosexuality. ["Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable." "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable." (Lev 18, 20)] Now, I'd encourage us to tread with extreme caution here. In the LGBTQ+ community, these texts are often known as 'the clobber texts' – in other words, they have often been used to clobber people with same sex attraction, causing immense pastoral damage in the process. I'm sure you wouldn't, but please never present one of these verses as if it's a knock-out argument which settles the debate forevermore. That said, Leviticus does make it clear in a couple of places that God does not want his people to engage in homosexual practice, just as it also says he doesn't want them to engage in other sexual practices such as adultery, incest or bestiality.

Some say that these verses are only referring to practices which might have been prevalent in the surrounding cultures – such as gay rape. But this second verse makes it clear that both parties are held accountable, which sounds to me like Leviticus is prohibiting even consensual homosexual activity.

Please note, by the way, that Leviticus refers to other sexual sins as abominable and Proverbs lists deceitful speech, pride and murder as abominable to God as well. Homosexual sin is not in a category of its own in this regard.

Now, Leviticus includes plenty of laws that we disregard today, so **are we just picking and choosing which texts to keep?** Well, Leviticus had different sorts of laws. Some were **civic laws** – relating to Israel as a nation-state. In the New Testament, those are no longer relevant as God's people live in every nation, under local laws – hence the new teaching about how to relate to the government. Some were **ceremonial laws** – basically to do with worship. Jesus' death and resurrection changes everything about worship so those laws are superseded – hence the NT teaching about baptism and communion etc. And some of the

laws were **moral** outlining God's own character—his integrity, love, and faithfulness. God's character hasn't changed, and so all the Old Testament says about loving our neighbour, caring for the poor, generosity with our possessions, social relationships, and commitment to our family is still in force. Similarly, the sexual ethic of the Old Testament is re-stated throughout the New Testament, meaning those laws are still applicable for us today.

Fifth, the **New Testament** texts on homosexuality. [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. (Rom 1)] The **Romans 1** passage would take too long to look at properly now, but certainly the natural reading of it is that homosexuality is unnatural, and along with other things that he talks about, a sign of God's judgment. I'm not saying that homosexuality is a particular judgment against particular people; Paul is writing at a societal level. Some people argue that Paul is talking about what would be unnatural for individuals – for example, for a gay man to have sex with a woman, or for a heterosexual man to have sex with another man – that that is what he means by 'unnatural'. I'm not persuaded by those arguments – I'm sure that Paul is talking about what is natural and unnatural in terms of God's creation not our subjective experience. All of us have desires that are warped as a result of our fallen nature. Desires for things God has forbidden are a reflection of how sin has distorted humanity, not of how God has made humanity.

["Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [*the words 'men who have sex with men' translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6)] The **1 Corinthians 6** passage contains two different words that have been translated from the original Greek in various ways down the centuries. That's partly because one of the words Paul uses is a word not found elsewhere, partly because ongoing study of other ancient texts help to fill out what Paul was most likely referring to, and partly because as the English language changes over time, certain words shift their meanings slightly. But every modern English translation either uses two separate words relating to same-sex sexual activity – or uses a phrase like the NIV here. It seems that the two Greek words refer to the active and passive partners in homosexual sex. Note that Paul's list includes other forms of sexual sin (sexual immorality and adultery), and it includes non-sexual forms of sin (drunkenness, greed and theft, for example). Homosexual sin is incredibly serious, but it is not alone in being so. Paul also makes it clear that with God's help, a lifestyle change is possible, just as we saw in Luke's story a few minutes ago.

There is one other place in the NT that uses that new word and various other places that use the *porneia* word – the general term for sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage.

Now, some people argue that these New Testament passages referring to homosexual sex **aren't relevant to this discussion** because they were primarily referring to cultural practices of the day – such as man-boy relationships or master-slave relationships, whereas what

we're talking about is blessing consensual, loving, monogamous same-sex relationships. Even if that were true, which is highly debatable, it is notable that elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, Paul condemns a relationship between a man and his step-mother which the church had tacitly accepted. Presumably that was a loving relationship; but Paul is clear that that loving heterosexual relationship was not acceptable in God's eyes because it was expressly forbidden in God's moral law. That moral law is the bottom line for him, not the depth of love.

That's **5 reasons** why I believe God has given sex as a gift for heterosexual marriage only. Let me quickly acknowledge some common objections to this position.

First, **isn't it cruel to say someone must remain celibate?** Singleness is a difficult but not impossible calling. I think our culture largely idolises sex, and I wonder whether the church in this country has idolised it too, especially with its emphasis on nuclear family life. We need to remember that sex isn't a right but a gift from God. We need to remember that Jesus remained single and celibate and spoke positively about celibacy. We need to remember that Paul talked about singleness as a gift – something to be valued. We need to remember the NT talks about singleness as an example of devotion to the Lord. So the Bible doesn't present singleness as second rate or impossible. However, I suspect many churches, including ours, have much to learn about properly valuing and including single people in our community life. I think Ed Shaw's book "The plausibility problem" is excellent on addressing how the church can support single people – whether heterosexual or gay; divorced or widowed or lifelong celibate.

Second, isn't it **inconsistent** to treat homosexual couples differently to heterosexual couples – for instance, by remarrying divorced people and baptising children of unmarried couples? I try to treat homosexual and heterosexual couples equally. I have certainly encouraged heterosexual Christian couples to abstain from sex before marriage, and I have certainly not remarried every divorcee who has come seeking remarriage – I take each case on merit. For me, baptism of children is a separate issue because baptism is about the child, not the parents.

Third, **doesn't this stance push gay people away from church?** The last thing I want to do is turn gay people away from this church. Remember, 7 people who responded to the survey identified as LGBTQ+. I haven't tried to hide my views, but nor have I thought it appropriate to preach frequently about sexual morality. I was intending to do so fairly soon when Synod pre-empted that by passing its motion. I would treat a gay couple in the same way I'd treat an unmarried heterosexual couple. For instance, in the past, I welcomed a young openly lesbian couple into the congregation and met with them. They stayed with us and joined a cell group, only moving on when their work took them elsewhere. Ultimately, it's the Lord's job, not mine, to convict people of any sin in their lives. Sometimes, as with that couple, I think there are other pastoral issues that Jesus wants to work on first.

Fourth, **doesn't God's grace and mercy lead us to be more compassionate?** This is the line that the Bishop of Oxford and others are taking in this discussion: allowing the blessing of same sex couples – and in due course, marriage – would be a way of making pastoral accommodation to these Christian sisters and brothers. But I can't see places in Scripture

where mercy outweighs the call to holiness. On the contrary, Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, but told her to leave her life of sin. He deliberately sought out the woman who'd had 5 husbands and was currently living with someone else – and offered her his living water – but it's clear he wasn't condoning her actions. In Romans, Paul writes, "Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?" and answers his question "By no means!" As I understand it, if homosexual sex is sinful, even in loving monogamous relationships, to bless that union would not be merciful – it would be unloving, because it would be ignoring and even encouraging sin.

Fifth, **hasn't the church changed its mind on other things** – women in leadership, divorce, slavery etc? Why not on this? Yes it has. But I think that on all those topics, you can argue convincingly from the flow of Scripture for that change. For example, there are positive examples of women in leadership and verses about the equality of male and female; there are verses that give an exception clause to remarriage after divorce; and there are places where the NT encourages freedom for slaves; it certainly never says that slavery is a good thing. But on the topic of homosexuality, I can't see any positive statements in Scripture to help counter-balance the negatives. So sadly, I don't see that Scripture gives us the freedom to change our mind on this.

I know I've covered a lot of ground. Let me say in conclusion. Jesus' teaching on sexual ethics was very conservative, but people flocked to him because of his mercy and love. To hold to those sexual ethics today is increasingly counter-cultural, but I'm reminded that Jesus' concern was primarily that **the church be distinct rather than conform**. "You are the salt of the earth," he said. "If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" I fear that if we lose our distinctiveness in this area, we will cease to offer good news to a society that carries so much hurt in the realm of sexual relationships.