

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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I Corinthians 6:7-11
S*E*X and Being God's Child

I am not going to read the scripture lesson for today's sermon quite yet. There are some words in today's passage that need to be explained in detail before they can even be spoken out loud as part of a Sunday worship service. Please turn in your songbooks to page #6, for we will be studying this passage together. And let us ask God's blessing and wisdom to be with us as we seek to grow in faith and knowledge. Let us pray:

God of the living Word, the Word made flesh in Jesus: You dwelt among us in this world of families, friendships, and loving relationships. May your Spirit continue to be with us – in the relationships that shape us, so that our lives may fully, completely, joyfully reflect your will in all we say and do. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Here is a simple recipe for how to misuse the bible. It has five ingredients. First, find a word or phrase that interests you and pull it out of the context in which it was written. Second, insist that the English translation means exactly the same as the word's original meaning in Greek or Hebrew. Third, insist that the writer, in today's case, the apostle Paul, used the word in the 1st century AD in exactly the same way as we would use the word in the 21st century AD. Fourth, disregard the larger message of the gospel lest it distract you from the biased point you're trying to make. And fifth, if you are criticized for abusing scripture in this way, accuse your critics of not taking God's word seriously and of being influenced by secular values instead of God's eternal truth. Repeat this last step as needed, increasing the volume if necessary.

Human sexuality is one of the trickiest topics to discuss in church. We talk all the time about the incarnation, about God becoming flesh, but we struggle to talk about physicality. We talk every week about love, but almost never talk about intimacy. It's funny, because what other word in the English language do we routinely whisper? *Oh dear, this Sunday, the pastor is... going to talk about sex.* The bible actually talks quite a lot about sex and procreation. On the other hand, for as controversial as the topic is, there are only eight verses in the bible that speak about homosexuality, with two of the most direct passages coming from the writings of the apostle Paul. The one from I Corinthians we'll look at today; the other one from Romans we'll look at next week.

I began by giving you a recipe on how to misuse the bible. Let's change those same five steps into things that can guide us in properly interpreting God's word. So, first, instead of finding a word or phrase that interests you that you rip out of its biblical context, let's examine the phrase carefully in light of its scriptural context.

In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he makes this comment: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" Now that gets our attention! No one

wants to be a wrongdoer excluded from God's kingdom, so we read a bit further and discover a list of 10 groups that appear to be excluded from the kingdom of God: fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers. From out of that list, you never hear preachers focusing on drunkards or partygoers, but many have chosen to focus on the two words that appear to relate to male homosexuality and to rip them out of the context of Paul's letter.

That's why I had printed in your songbooks all of I Corinthians, chapters 5 and 6. Look at the last big paragraph on that page, which starts this way:

"In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud – and believers at that. Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. 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."

In this section of his letter, Paul is talking about three topics: sexual immorality involving a church member living with his father's wife, church members suing one another in civil court, and church members sleeping with prostitutes. The focus of this section is not homosexuality, but rather a much larger issue related to the behavior of Christians and the purity of the church. Now let's move on.

Our second recipe ingredient is to look carefully at whether our English translations accurately reflect the meaning of the scripture's original Greek words. Out of that list of ten vices, two words have gotten an excessive amount of attention – the words "malakos" translated as "male prostitutes, and "arsenokoites" translated as "sodomites." Are those accurate translations? That's hard to say, especially for the second word that simply combines the term for "males" with the word for "bed". When Paul used "arsenokoites," it was the first time that word ever appears in known Greek writings. So we can't look at how other authors used that word and then decide what Paul means by it. But we can be pretty sure that Paul did not imagine the word meant "sodomite" because that word did not even exist until 1611, when the writers of the King James bible decided that was how Paul's 1st century word should be translated into English.

Rather than give a lecture on etymology, let it suffice to say that these two words, "malakos" and "arsenokoites" seem to be related to forms of male prostitution and the pimping of male slaves. There is an element of abusive power and economic gain present in these words that is missing from our English translations. Which leads us to the third recipe ingredient: Paul was writing for a first century AD audience; how does that compare to our 21st century reality?

Imagine opening your bible and reading the following verse, "Thou shalt not buy anything from the pagan halls of Wal-Mart." If that happened, I imagine Sam Walton himself would personally pay for a new translation of the bible to be placed in every

hotel room and church pew in America. There are some words that do not appear in the bible because the knowledge of the things to which these words refer did not exist in bible times – words like Wal-Mart, Big Mac, nuclear weapons, space travel, DNA chromosomes and genetic predispositions.

Too many people have taken a few, isolated words written by Paul 2000 years ago and dropped them right in the middle of a very modern conversation about human sexuality and homosexual orientation, claiming that one speaks directly to the other. Stop and think about Paul's world for a moment. Paul was first and foremost a preacher, an orator. That meant, like other orators in his day, he used standardized lists of things to make his point. He would roll out the phrases "greedy, immoral, idolaters, and drunkards" the way contemporary pundits say "red state, gun-toting, Fox News watchin' conservatives" or "blue state, latte drinking, New York Times readin' liberals." Second, Paul was a Pharisaic Jew, focused on issues of ritual purity and the law while living in a Greek culture that practiced questionable rituals but not a lot of purity. As a Christian apostle, Paul wanted the church to look different from the world around it. So when the church said nothing while its members were intimate with prostitutes or one was now living with his stepmother, Paul got upset. When believers were suing one another in court instead of showing sacrificial love for one another, Paul challenged them.

Regarding homosexual practices, if we can speculate on Paul's thoughts at all, it seems that he is speaking out against practices of pederasty – situations where older males had relationships with youth as sexual slaves. Paul rightly saw this Greek practice as abusive, as linked to pagan worship habits, and as an exploitation of others that should not be part of the life-spirit of the Christian community. Any intimacy that is exploitative, that is abusive, that is one-sided and enslaves another is not in keeping with the mutual, self-giving love literally embodied by God in Christ. But Paul's conversation about pederasty and sexual slavery is different from a conversation today about genetic disposition, same sex orientation, and loving, mutual relationships.

Step four in our recipe: We cannot let the message of a few verses be read in isolation from the message of an entire chapter, an entire book, or especially the entire gospel as expressed in the bible. In 1 Corinthians 5, verse 10 and 11, Paul rattles off a list of vices to make an oratorical point about immorality. In chapter 6 verse 9 he expands this same list to include the words "malakos" and "arsenokoites", which most likely refer to male prostitutes and pimps or sexual slave-traders. Paul's categories all describe abusive practices; but these categories should not be broadly defined in order to support anyone's prejudices and biases. Paul speaks out against the greedy, but that does not forbid us from eating in moderation. Paul speaks out against drunkards, but that does not bar us from sharing the wine of communion. Paul speaks out against pederasty and prostitution, but that does not forbid expressions of intimacy in loving, mutual, faithful relationships.

But let's suppose that Paul, in this verse, truly intended to forbid all expressions of homosexual intimacy. He would then be saying that salvation is tied to behavior and following a particular law, which would be a statement totally at odds with everything

else in Paul's letters. Paul's whole message is that we are saved by grace, not by the law. We are washed, sanctified, justified by grace through Jesus Christ, not through our own efforts to earn salvation by obeying legal requirements. Where there are behaviors that are abusive, destructive, violent and selfish, God's grace enables us to step away from these habits and enter into a new life. That is far different from believing God calls us to isolate a group of people whom we have de facto decided are in violation of a law and thereby are automatically excluded from God's grace and God's realm. Such would be the direct opposite of Paul's entire message and contrary to the heart of the gospel.

As I wrap this up, I want to be clear with you. I cannot tell you precisely what Paul intended when he wrote these verses in his letter to the church in Corinth. All scripture must be read first and foremost with a spirit of humility, seeking God's help to understand its timeless truth. It seems evident that Paul rattled off his list of vices mostly because all of us fit into several of those categories. He listed the vices as a way to remind us that all of us fall short of God's intent, even as all of us have been saved by God's grace – washed, sanctified, justified, as Paul put it. And this new freedom is to be lived in community: In congregations that hold one another mutually accountable. In churches that work to do what is right in a world far too prone to do what is unjust and immoral concerning many of our sisters and brothers. For as a community of individuals, we are partners in the ongoing miracle of incarnation – this “enfleshment” of God that is both expressed through acts of tender compassion, through dances and caresses, through familial affection and sexual intimacy.

This is not an extremist, liberal position; this is a centrist position. It arises from the very heart of the gospel and the heart of the scriptures. God's love for creation as proven in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ is the center point around which people of different cultures, experiences, and orientations stand side by side. As Paul affirmed in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, we are to live in our diverse cultures with a common spirit of faith. To affirm in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free means we will proclaim a gospel that challenges all abuses of power and injustice. To affirm in Christ there is neither straight nor gay means that the same criteria for love and intimacy will be used by all, as we work to ensure that conditions of respect are extended to all people regardless of sexual preference.

As Paul said in Ephesians 4, put away falsehood. Let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. This is at the heart and center of what we believe. To live as members of one another in all our words and deeds, intimate or otherwise, is to become the living body of Christ in the world. To that, may we join with Paul in offering a hearty “Amen.”

AMEN