

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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Romans 1:16-2:11
S*E*X and Being God's Family

My son has recently gotten into card tricks, so I'll begin with a simple card trick. (Pull out four cards – all Aces.) My deck is small, but I bet I can guess what card you're holding; not the suit, perhaps, but I'm 100% sure I can guess what card it is. This is a great trick, because no one can persuade me that my answers will ever be wrong.

I'm now going to read selected verses from today's passage. I need to say upfront that this passage is difficult, not because of what it says, but because of what it doesn't say. To properly interpret it, you have to read it in light of what it doesn't say, in light of what is said elsewhere in the bible and what is known by our modern experience. However, to do that is to risk being accused of playing "fast and loose" with the plain sense meaning of the text. Some claim that such a broad reading distorts Paul's meaning, when, in truth, not to do a broad reading is to distort Paul's message. (Read Romans 1:16-17, 22-27, 2:1, 9-11.)

Last week I shared a recipe for how to properly misuse the bible. It involved taking a verse out of its context, insisting that the English translation is exactly the same as the word's original Greek meaning, that our 21st century use of the word is exactly the same as Paul's 1st century use of the word; and lastly avoid considering the larger message of the gospel, lest it dissuade you from a narrow, biased reading of the text. Similar to the sermon last week, I want us to look at Paul's text from a scholarly perspective so that we don't fall victim to the recipe for misusing the bible.

First, what is the theme of this passage from the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans? No, it is not about homosexuality; that is something only mentioned in passing in two verses near the end of the first chapter. The theme of this passage is idolatry. Paul begins his letter by stressing that the Romans need to make a choice about whom they will serve: Will they serve the one, true God or worship false gods? Will they be guided by the Lord of life or become lost and deluded by idolatry? Preachers today still ask this same question: Do we trust in the God of love and justice, or in the gods of the marketplace, the gods of weapon systems, the gods of hedonism and consumerism and "me-first" mentalities in a world designed for community? Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and many others have preached this same sermon. Idolatry is when we worship false gods, when we make something other than God an Ultimate Concern for our life, and to do so is to sin against God and all humanity.

Second, in this letter, Paul is speaking as a Hellenistic-Jew. (By that I mean a Jew who lived out his Judaism within the context of polytheistic Greek culture). So when he writes, Paul is going to use examples that come from his own experience and faith tradition. He is going to talk a lot about purity issues, what is clean and unclean in life, because that is important to him from his Jewish background. He is going to mention Greek philosophy, like the Stoic belief in doing all things in moderation, nothing in

excess. He is going to speak as a patriarchal male, because he is the product of a culture that insists maleness and power must always dominate over femaleness. And he is going to use the rhetorical devices of his day and age to make his points. In simple terms: He's going to preach as he's been preached to.

Now here's where the biblical scholars go to town. Many insist that to understand Paul, you should rummage through his library and figure out what might have influenced him to say the things he did. For example, around the time of Paul, Greek writers would list off catalogs of vices that are very similar to the lists Paul quotes in his writings. You have the Jewish historian Josephus saying things like "The law of Moses knows no sexual connection but the natural intercourse with a wife and that only for the procreation of children" (*Ag.Ap.* 2.24 \199). And you have writings like the *Wisdom of Solomon* (part of the Apocrypha contained in the Catholic bible), which outlines the same argument Paul uses here in Romans – how we reject God and fall into idolatry, which then leads to corruption, disorder and debauchery (*Wisdom of Solomon* ch. 14).

The twist, though, is that Paul doesn't follow the line of thought of these other Jewish thinkers, who were quick to say how Greeks are prone to these sins, but fortunately Jews are not. Paul's genius was to take the dominant Jewish message and now warn that both Jews and Gentiles fail to live up to God's standards. Romans 2:1 – *You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, do the very same things...There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...For God shows no partiality.*

So the bible scholar will stress how Paul was speaking, not about homosexuality, but about idolatry. Paul illustrated his letter with material about abuses and vices that was part of the common language of his day and age. But Paul's main point was not about homosexuality, but that Jew and Gentile alike fail to honor God and therefore no one should judge, since God's impartial grace alone is what saves us from ourselves. Having said all that, some will still not be convinced. They will argue that I've avoided the clear message about sexuality found in verses 26-27. They will say that all that scholarly talk is just a way to distract folks from the real message of God's holy word.

So, let's look at the plain sense meaning of what Paul wrote. **1) Who is Paul talking about in this passage?** In Paul's world, there were only two groups of people – Jews and Gentiles. But we know, in today's world, there are Chinese Buddhists, Pakistani Muslims, New Delhi Hindus, and so on. Even by "plain sense standards," people must acknowledge that Paul's conversation is bound to be narrower in focus than any similar conversation we would have on this topic today. We may still be able to talk about people who follow the Lord Jesus Christ as opposed to people who believe in other gods or no gods, and we may still be able to use categories of faithfulness versus idolatry; but at the very least, it must be acknowledged that Paul's life categories are narrower than our life categories today.

2) It is true that Paul uses language about impurity, degradation, exchanging natural for unnatural acts, and being filled with wickedness. And a plain sense reading of this passage seems to make clear that all these things are interrelated and speak unambiguously against homosexuality. But remember that Paul was giving a sermon here and his main point was against idolatry. To illustrate his thesis, Paul does what so many preachers have done and still do – he mentions three points. Three times Paul uses the phrase “God gave them up”: “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts, to the degrading of their bodies; “God gave them up to degrading passions; “God gave them up to a debased mind and things that should not be done.”

What are the three main parts of human beings? The physical being (body), the emotional being (passions), and the intellectual being (mind). Paul is emphasizing how idolatry affects all aspects of our being, that when we do not follow God, we are led astray in body, mind, and spirit. So like a good preacher, Paul makes his first point – how idolatry leads to a degrading of our bodies. Then he makes his second point – how idolatry leads to a degrading of our emotions and passions. For this one he wants to use an illustration. For material, he turns to the Greek world around him; and in particular, to the common, Hellenistic-Jewish description of abuses found in the Greek world around him. So Paul illustrates this second point with descriptions of men and women exchanging natural sexuality, sexuality solely for procreation, for unnatural (or non-procreative) sexual acts. Finally, for his third point, he says that idolatry leads to a degrading of our mind, and illustrates this point with an even longer example – a huge list of vices Paul borrowed again from the common, Greco-Roman vocabulary used around him.

Perhaps our “plain sense” critic will accept that Paul is talking more about idolatry than homosexuality in his three point sermon. But I’m sure the critic will argue that the fact Paul is against idolatry doesn’t change the “plain sense” meaning of the words he used to condemn male and female homosexuality. So, let’s look at those two troublesome verses after first hearing something from the prophet Ezekiel.

I want you to interpret the plain sense of this reading from **Ezekiel 1:4,13** – *As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like bronze or gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures of human form...There was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire.* Now which is the plain sense reading of this passage? **A)** The vision of Ezekiel is an allegory using Old Testament symbols of wind, clouds and fire to express God’s transcendent splendor, with the living creatures being the cherubim who hover continually near the throne of God. **B)** Ezekiel is describing a visit to Earth by extra-terrestrials, whose spaceship glowed like bronze and made a fiery landing in ancient Palestine. Erich von Däniken sold millions of copies of his book *Chariots of the Gods* proclaiming the second option as the better, plain sense reading of Ezekiel text.

Plain sense readings are not always the best readings. Go back to the first card trick I did this morning. When Paul made his comments about homosexuality, I believe he only had four cards in his oratorical deck. He had a card for natural sexuality, which for him meant male-dominated intimacy with women for purposes of procreation; a card for prostitution, a card for sexual practices associated with pagan rituals, and a card for homosexual practices associated with male pimping and pederasty (that we discussed last Sunday). That is the deck he had at his disposal. So when he wanted to talk about how idolatry leads us into sexual excesses, he played those cards – procreative intercourse is exchanged for non-procreative intimacy; women are not passive vessels but unnaturally are “active” in some other sexual role; men enter relationships of abusive, unbalanced pederasty, or lose their self-worth through prostitution and sexual slavery.

But what about the other cards in the deck? What about intimacy that isn’t linked to procreation? What about physicality and intimacy for people who live in singleness? What about women and men whose genetic orientation leads them to mutual, loving, same sex relationships? Paul does not speak about those questions because, as it were, they weren’t in the cards for him. I cannot say that Paul would be a supporter of gay rights in today’s world, given his own experiences and education back in 1st century society. But I do know that we cannot take Paul’s words about homosexuality from his 1st century context and use them as a blanket condemnation for all expressions of non-procreative and same-sex acts of intimacy.¹ To do so is to abuse the plain sense reading of the passage and distort the very gospel Paul is preaching.

In closing, if someone is bound and determined to do a “plain sense” reading of Romans, then have them read both Romans 1 & 2, where it says, *Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things... There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.*

The bible is a deck with 66 cards, played out in billions and billions of hands over the centuries, in lives that reflect the light of Christ and by grace shine forth the message of faith for countless generations the world over. Seek to love and serve the Lord; fall not into ways of idolatry, darkness and despair. And know that we are saved by grace, all of us, and we are called, all of us, young and old, gay and straight, male and female, to live into that good news. For God shows no partiality. Thanks be to God.

¹ Quote from Jeffrey Siker, NT professor at Loyola Marymount University: “We know of gay and lesbian Christians who truly worship and serve the one true God and yet still affirm in positive ways their identity as gay and lesbian people. Paul apparently knew of no homosexual Christians. We do.” Jack Rogers, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, p. 79.