

## **Beyond Will and Grace**

**by Rev. Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA)**

### **Introduction**

Several recent events have brought the issue of homosexuality to our attention. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Texas law that bans homosexual sodomy, declaring: "the State cannot demean a homosexual person's existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime." People with a same sex orientation celebrated the decisions as a step toward legitimacy and liberation. Others lamented the decision as a step toward dismantling marriage and family.

About the same time, Ontario became the third Canadian province to declare traditional marriage laws were discriminatory and unconstitutional, and a week later, the Canadian cabinet set in motion a national policy that appears to pave the way for same-sex unions.

In July, the Episcopal Church U.S.A. approved the election of a bishop in New Hampshire who is openly homosexual and living in partnership with another man.

In addition to these political and ecclesiastical developments, network and cable TV have brought us a new wave of programming that celebrates the gay lifestyle—shows like *Boy Meets Boy* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

A week doesn't go by without a leading news story on the changing cultural landscape regarding homosexuality and its place in American society and consciousness. If you're like me, more than once you find yourself reading an article or listening to a story, and you think, "How am I supposed to feel about these things? Do we have the right to set boundaries around human behavior and relationships? If so, where do we draw those boundaries? And how do we respond civilly and Christian-ly to people who live outside those boundaries?"

### **The people behind the issues**

It occurred to me that I wouldn't be a faithful shepherd if I didn't provide you with biblical guidance on these difficult and pressing issues. These things are too important and timely to ignore. But because I am a pastor—a shepherd—I'm not just thinking about the issues regarding homosexuality; I'm thinking about the people I know who are dealing with these issues. As I think about these people, their circumstances raise all kinds of difficult pastoral questions.

I'm thinking of a middle-aged woman who has been following Christ for about 30 years. She's a faithful participant in church life and one of the most committed prayer partners I've ever had. She was terribly abused as a child, and all her life she found herself emotionally and romantically attracted to other women. Is it possible for a person to be a committed, faithful Christian and still struggle with confused sexual identity and desires?

I'm thinking about one of my Christian college professors: the man who taught me a lot of what I know about Christian education—a man I admired and appreciated, who, a short time after I graduated, left his teaching post, left his wife and children, and went off to the West Coast to live with another man and minister in a church that affirms homosexuality. Is homosexual behavior in a loving, committed relationship a viable option for fully-devoted followers of Christ?

I'm thinking of some wonderful, godly Christian parents who came home one evening to find a note from one of their teenagers: "I'm gay. I'm leaving. I'll be ok." They didn't hear from him for days. How does that happen? How do we explain the origin of homosexual desires, and how do we handle it when someone close to us chooses to act upon them?

I'm thinking of students—high school and college alike—who have been raised in the church with a certain set of beliefs and standards, who are suddenly confronted by gay and lesbian clubs on campus, by friends who announce that they're gay, and by teachers who challenge their traditional understanding of the Bible and morality. Does the Bible really teach that homosexuality is wrong, when more and more people seem to be embracing it as a healthy and happy way to live?

I'm thinking of people who show up at our Welcome Center or greet me in the hallway and want to know if gay and lesbian people are welcome at Grace Chapel. What do we say to them? How do we extend the love of Christ to people while being faithful to our convictions about human sexuality?

I'm thinking about a friend of mine from a former church, divorced, with two children. For years he would drift in and out of church life—with us for weeks or months, and then he would disappear for similar stretches of time. After a few years of joking with each other at the door and then meeting for breakfast and lunch, he finally told me about his double life: his forays into and out of the gay scene. He hated it. He was lonely, he was tired, and he was terrified of AIDS. Could God really accept him and help him? Could my friend ever get control of his life and his desires? He wanted to know.

So do we.

### **Beyond Will and Grace**

Let's think about these things for a few minutes this morning. Let's think about the issue of homosexuality. We could think about it politically—a good thing to do—but it's not our purpose this morning. We could talk about homosexuality psychologically, exploring the factors that shape our sexual identity and behavior. That, too, is a valid pursuit, but that's not our purpose either. We could talk about it experientially. I could tell you about people I know who are miserable in their homosexuality, and you could tell me about people who seem happy in their homosexuality. We're not going to do that either, because basing morality on experience is as foolish as it is futile. No, we're going to think biblically about these things, seeing what the Bible says positively and negatively on the subject of marriage, sexuality, and human relationships.

I've never seen an entire episode of Will and Grace, the popular network sitcom about a gay man and his female friend and roommate. I've seen bits and pieces. I've heard about the show and read about it. Will

and Grace is our culture's answer to homosexuality. You don't really have to watch the show to get the message—the title says it all. Homosexual people need to exercise their will, courageously choosing to embrace their orientation and fulfill their desires. Heterosexual people need to exercise grace, generously accepting and affirming same sex intimacy and relationships. It's a simple and appealing message that plays great on primetime, but it's not good enough for the men and women God loves and designed for lasting sexual fulfillment and joy. I would like to take you beyond the will and grace of primetime. I'd like to talk to you about the will and grace of God.

### **God's will**

Let's begin with God's will. Whenever we turn to the subject of God's will and homosexuality, we immediately think of the prohibitions we find in Scripture, of which there are several. But biblical thinking about homosexuality doesn't begin with these prohibitions. It begins with creation, in the book of Genesis, with a series of affirmations that lay the foundation for the instructions which follow. These positive passages are every bit as important—if not more important—than the negative passages we'll look at in a minute.

We're familiar with the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, so we won't take time to read all of them this morning. We read in Genesis 1:27–28 that "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number.'" Later, in Genesis 2:18, we read that it was not good for the man to be alone, so God created a suitable helper, a counter-part. Verse 21 tells us God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man. Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were naked, and they felt no shame."

There are several wonderful and foundational affirmations made in these verses. First, gender is good. When God created human beings, he created them purposefully to come in two varieties—male and female. That wasn't an accident or an experiment. God didn't create one kind of image-bearer; he created two, each reflecting a distinctive dimension of God's character—which includes both masculinity and femininity. Men and women were created to be similar to one another and yet different in very important ways.

Second, we learn that sex is good. From the very beginning, God designed human beings to be sexual beings that could experience and express their sexuality as males or females. He designed sexual intercourse to be the means of procreation ("be fruitful and increase") as well as an incredibly satisfying experience of intimacy ("the man and wife were naked and felt no shame"). Sex is not something human beings thought of afterward, sneaking around behind God's back. It was God's idea from the very beginning, and it was a very good idea. I think we'd all agree.

Finally, we learn that marriage is good. Every human relationship is to be celebrated as a gift from God and an expression of his image. The marriage relationship is the most dramatic and intense of all human relationships, for it most vividly portrays the intimacy, the connectedness, and the oneness that are

God's vision for every human relationship. God's vision from the very beginning of creation was the vision of oneness—that we would be one with him and one with each other. This oneness is not the kind that's achieved by bringing together two or more of the same thing; it's the oneness that's attained by bringing together two or more different things to form one new thing. Oneness in the church is the union of Jew and Gentile into one body. Oneness in marriage is the union of man and woman into one flesh. Complimentarily—not similarity—is the secret of oneness. The genius of marriage is that  $1 + 1 = 1$ . It's lousy math, but great theology. One man, plus one woman, equals one flesh, perfectly suited for one another.

It doesn't work that way in same-sex relationships. One man, plus one man, equals two men. There's no complementary nature, so there's no oneness. John Stott points out that when God created the woman, he did it by taking something out of the man. In marriage, he brings a man and woman back together to reclaim the fullness of the divine image—masculinity and femininity. No such union takes place when members of the same sex come together. There can be intimacy, companionship, and even love between members of the same sex, but there can't be oneness. And oneness is what marriage is about!

Thinking biblically about homosexuality means saying, "Yes." Yes to gender, yes to sexuality, and yes to marriage. God's design for human beings is that they should embrace and express their God-given identity as male or female. God's design for sexuality is that it is to be a procreative and intimate celebration of love within the context of marriage. God's design for marriage is that it is to be a covenant of love between a man and a woman, in which God's vision for oneness is vividly expressed and experienced.

Having established that positive foundation, let's now consider what the Bible negatively says about homosexual behavior. There are a handful of passages that speak to the subject, in both the Old and New Testament. Historically, people opposed to same-sex relationships have pointed to them and said, "See, it's a sin." In recent years, proponents of homosexuality have pointed to them and said, "Look again, you've misinterpreted them." We'll briefly consider four passages.

First, let's consider the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, found in Genesis 19. In this unsavory episode, two heavenly messengers, angels in human form, come to visit Lot in the ancient and wicked city of Sodom. A mob of men from the city come to Lot and demand that he turn over the two men so that they might have sexual relationships with them. Lot refuses, and in fear, he offers his daughters instead. The mob gets unruly and tries to take the men by force, but God delivers them. Shortly thereafter, God brings destruction on the city for their wickedness.

The story seems to clearly reveal God's view of homosexual activity. Some have argued that the sin for which Sodom was judged was the sin of inhospitality—failing to provide welcome and refuge for these heavenly visitors. Linguistically, culturally, and contextually, it simply doesn't hold up. In fact, the New Testament Book of Jude makes it quite clear that it was their sexual immorality that led to their destruction.

A second passage that forbids homosexual activity is found in the Levitical law that governed the religious life of the nation of Israel. Leviticus 18:22 reads, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." The command is later repeated in Leviticus 20:13. Some have argued that these ceremonial laws are no longer relevant to God's people, but the fact that the prohibitions are mentioned in other contexts—and even in the New Testament—indicate that they have a more universal application.

A third passage is found in the New Testament Book of Romans, where Paul is making a case for the moral and spiritual failure of all humankind. Romans 1:24: "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie." Skipping down to verse 26: "Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another."

This passage is significant in that it sets forth same-sex desire and activity as unnatural and contrary to God's will for human beings. Paul goes on to name envy, murder, gossip, pride, and even disobedience to parents as evidence of humanity's descent from God's design and purposes. Homosexual lust and behavior is not the only sin Paul mentions—nor is it the most awful sin—but it is certainly one of them.

A fourth passage to consider is 1 Corinthians 6:9: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 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."

Paul once again includes same-sex activity in a rather comprehensive list of things that separate us from God and from one another. These things are outside the will of God for human beings; they degrade the image of God in us, they undermine human society, and they ultimately bring pain and heartache to ourselves and to other people.

Some will argue that these New Testament passages refer only to particular kinds of homosexual behavior—ritual prostitution, pedophilia, or promiscuity—and that the Bible doesn't forbid loving, monogamous, lifelong relationships between people of the same sex. It is true that some of the passages we looked at call attention to particularly offensive homosexual behaviors, but when we consider the whole counsel of God—when we consider the positive affirmations of heterosexual marriage, the repeated prohibitions against a variety of same-sex activity, and that there are no affirmations anywhere in Scripture of homosexual desire, relationship, or activity—we must conclude that God's will for human beings does not include same-sex lust, activity, or union.

## God's grace

Let's also briefly consider God's grace. Remember that grace is undeserved favor. Grace is God's goodness, kindness, and mercy poured out on people who don't deserve it. It's for all of us—every one of us. The passage we read from Romans 1 isn't just about people who struggle with same-sex desire and activity; it's about people who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served themselves instead of their creator. That's all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation. The list of wicked people in 1 Corinthians 6 includes more than homosexual offenders; it includes heterosexual offenders as well. In fact, it includes people who gossip and slander, people who deceive, and people who always want more than what God has given them. It's about all of us. We all fall into the category of "wicked people." We've all exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and we're all far from the kingdom of God. That is, until God's grace comes into the picture—God's lavish, amazing, all-sufficient grace.

Grace means that even if you struggle with same-sex desires, you are welcome to come to God, just as you are. God doesn't ask or expect you to straighten out your confusion or overcome your tendencies first. Just come to him in the name of his son, Jesus. Grace means that sexual offenders can be forgiven, whatever that offense has been. Jesus Christ received the penalty of that sin so you don't have to be punished for it.

Grace means that you can be healed of your sexual wounded-ness, whether others inflicted it upon you, or you brought it on yourself. It doesn't have to haunt your heart or your relationships for the rest of your life. Grace means that you can overcome whatever distorted, destructive desires and habits have been robbing you of real joy and fulfillment. It will take time and teaching and practice and support and probably even failure. But you can overcome it with God's help; you can be free from sin's mastery over you.

Grace means that God can transform you from the inside out. He can enable you to embrace the sexual identity God has given you and help you discover healthy, happy, and honorable relationships with people of the same and opposite sex. You may even be transformed in such a way that you can discover romantic relationships with people of the opposite sex—even marriage. Not every homosexual person experiences that complete a transformation, but many do, and many are on their way.

## Conclusion

Once again, I'm thinking about the people I mentioned earlier and the questions their circumstances raise.

I'm thinking of that middle-aged woman, my prayer partner. Is it possible to be a faithful follower of Christ and still struggle with same-sex desires and attractions? Yes, it is. And God, in his grace, can give you the strength to curb those desires, to refrain from those activities, and to honor him in your activity and relationships.

I'm thinking of my former college professor. Is homosexual activity, in a loving and monogamous relationship, a viable option for Christian people? No, it's not; it distorts and destroys God's good design for human sexuality and the oneness of marriage.

I'm thinking of that Christian family struggling to understand and help their child. Can we fully understand why a person finds himself or herself attracted to people of the same sex? Are there simple explanations and sure-fire remedies? No, it's a very complex phenomenon that can rarely be blamed on one relationship, event, or factor. God, in his grace, can give us wisdom and strength to preserve our relationships with people we know struggle sexually and to allow those relationships to be channels of healing and wholeness to such a person.

I'm thinking of those students who find their beliefs and values challenged on a daily basis. Does the Bible really teach that same-sex desire and activity is wrong, and that it doesn't lead to happy and fulfilled life and relationship? Yes, the Bible teaches that clearly, from beginning to end, both positively and negatively.

I'm thinking of people who come to our Visitor's Center and want to know if homosexual people are welcome at Grace Chapel. The answer is, "Yes, of course they're welcome! Are alcoholics welcome? Are shoplifters welcome? Are gossips welcome? Yes, everyone is welcome. Welcome! Enter into the life of this community to meet the God who loves us—loves us so much that he will not leave us where we are, falling short of the glory and fulfillment we were designed for—but will lead us into his good purpose for our lives!"

I'm thinking of my friend who wonders if God can really accept him and help him to live an honorable and satisfying life. The answer is, "Yes, God has accepted him and forgiven him. God is healing him and helping him. God will eventually transform him into the man he was created to be."

There are many questions, issues, and circumstances we could have discussed in our time together. Most of them are too complicated and sensitive for this kind of a setting. But as a shepherd, I hope these truths will help you think biblically about homosexuality and to live and love as God's people in a fallen world.

These are strange days we are living in. People are looking for love and truth on these matters. May the beauty of our lives and relationships give people a vision of God's purpose for their lives and relationships. May the depth of our love for people lead them to wholeness and holiness in every area of life. May the clarity of our message lead them beyond human will and grace, to discover God's will, which is always good, and God's grace, which is sufficient for all of us.