

Homosexuality and Holiness, Romans 6:1-14**by Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn (First Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA) - September 17, 2006**

The text that we have read, as you well know, is, like so many other parts of Paul's argument in Romans, remarkably dense. There are layers upon layers theology in these 14 verses. Large books that remain still today classics of the theology of the Christian life were written as expositions of these verses and even they did not say all that could be said. So, you will forgive me for not giving you a verse by verse account of Paul's argument. When read as a whole, the gist is clear enough in any case. Paul has just spent the opening five chapters of Romans expounding the doctrine of justification by faith. Man is a sinner, guilty before a holy God and unable to discharge his debt other than by suffering the punishment of God's holy wrath. The law of God is no help. It exposes man's sinfulness. It could never serve as a ladder on which we might climb up to heaven. But in love God intervened by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, as our substitute, who lived a perfect life on our behalf and suffered that righteous punishment in our stead that we might be forgiven and declared righteous in God's sight. We are put right with God by the work of Christ on our behalf, satisfying the demands of God's law on our behalf.

As emphatically as Paul taught in those opening chapters that our forgiveness, our acceptance with God, and our entrance into heaven depend not upon what we do or can do but what Christ did for us, he anticipates a misunderstanding and misapplication of his teaching. Paul knows the way a human mind operates. He knows the deceitfulness of our hearts. He knows people are going to read his first five chapters and think: well, if my going to heaven has nothing to do with how I live or what I do and everything to do with what Christ has already done for me, then I should be able to kick up my heels and live however I please, so long as I believe in Christ and trust in his work for my peace and acceptance with God.

"Not so fast," says Paul. There is more to this salvation than I have so far said. Christ did not die and rise again simply for your forgiveness. He died and rose again to transform you. He died to break the power of sin over your heart and life. When by faith we are united to Christ, we are united to him in all that he did for us as our Savior. It isn't only sin's guilt, its punishment that he took away, but sin's influence, its power. Indeed, it can be said that forgiveness is the smaller part of salvation. Restoring a bad life to goodness, hatred to love, selfishness to other-centeredness, impurity to purity, pettiness to wide-spiritedness, idolatry to the worship of the true and living God, this is the better half of salvation. It is this that makes true communion with God possible, it is this that makes a man or woman fit for heaven and eternal life, it is this that brings the fulfillment of life that God intended for mankind. And this too is Christ's salvation! Salvation is as much about transformation, about conforming human beings to the likeness of Jesus Christ himself, as it is about forgiveness and escaping punishment. We serve a living Savior. He died on the cross but he rose again. And all his people were in him when he did so. They died to their old life and they rose to a new one. And he, being the King of Kings, brings his will to pass. When he forgives a man he also begins to transform him. It is his plan and purpose. There is never forgiveness without transformation. And that fact is our calling. If that is Christ's purpose – to renew our lives – and if his victory over sin has freed us from its power -- then it must become our purpose to walk in the way of Christ and to live according to his example and his commandments. Anything less than that is to

despise Christ's suffering and death for us. He died to free us from sin not so that we could live as sinners without impunity.

James Stalker, the Scottish preacher of an earlier era, put it this way.

“St. Paul’s whole teaching revolves between the two poles of righteousness through the death of Christ for us and holiness through the life of Christ in us.” [Cited in Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 104]

Now, I want to apply that general truth – that salvation is both forgiveness and transformation -- to our specific subject. It is homosexuality that we have been talking about, Christian sexual ethics in other words. And that makes this text all the more relevant. When Paul urges us not to present our members to sin – “members” meaning the parts of our bodies, limbs, organs, and such – he is not talking only about sexual holiness, but he is certainly including it in what he says. We have, so far in this short series, considered homosexuality as a betrayal of the Creator’s intention for the life of man and woman. It is, as Paul put it, unnatural in the highest sense of that term. It is against nature as God created nature. It is, therefore, not only wrong, as the law of God makes clear, but a way of life that must lead to futility and frustration. It is not how God made human life to be lived or how he made it to prosper and reach fulfillment. Homosexuality cannot produce the rich fulfillment of life that is possible for men and women made in the image of God. Then, last time, we took note of the Bible’s explicit teaching that homosexuality is one of those sins that Jesus Christ delivers men and women from: both from its guilt and from its power. The church and kingdom of God has in its membership folk who once lived as homosexuals but who do so no more. To the homosexual as to everyone else in the world – for in this there is no distinction – the gospel says, you are a sinner – it is true and you must admit it! – but Christ came into the world to save sinners.

You may be aware that some advocates of the homosexual lifestyle – some inside the church and some outside – have purported to discover that David was a homosexual and that his friendship with Jonathan is, in Holy Scripture, a thinly disguised or account of a homosexual relationship. Others have suggested that Paul was. Now all of this is poppycock. It is propaganda, not scholarship. There is no evidence for any of that and much to the contrary. David, for example, found his greatest problems in life stemming from his desire for a woman who happened to be the wife of someone else. But in reacting to this, Christians should be careful not to suggest that there is not among the pantheon of Christian heroes someone who was, at least at one time, a homosexual or who found within himself even as a Christian homosexual desires. The Bible itself bears witness to the fact that Christians have been redeemed by the blood of Christ from that sin as from so many others.

We come now to our last subject, namely, the homosexual and holiness, by which I mean the life of the Christian homosexual. Obviously I do not mean that a true Christian can continue to indulge in homosexual sex. We have said, as the Bible says unmistakably and emphatically, such behavior is forbidden by God. But every Christian must live his or her Christian life in defiance of sinful desires that rise up in the heart and in the body. Every devout heterosexual man knows very well that a holy life for him means denying himself the sexual pleasures of thought and behavior that, no matter how

relentlessly condemned and forbidden in the Bible, still powerfully attract and entice him. Every unmarried Christian man knows very well that loyalty to Christ requires him to refrain from sexual encounters with women and single Christian women, in the same way, understand that the purity to which their Lord and Savior has called them requires them to refrain from sex unless and until they marry.

As C.S. Lewis pointed out, “This leaves the homosexual no worse off than any normal person who is, for whatever reason, prevented from marrying.... Like all other tribulations, it must be offered to God and his guidance how to use it must be sought.” [Cited in Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, 147-148]

This is a very important point to stress nowadays, because of the homosexual party’s emphasis on the fixity, the immutability of homosexual orientation. The usually unspoken assumption everywhere is that this so-called homosexual orientation is and should be a calling. Heterosexual people have a desire for one another and they fulfill their desires. Homosexual people have a desire for one another and, in the same way; they ought to be able to fulfill them. Let me say as an aside here, how important it is that heterosexual Christian people live lives of sexual purity. It cuts the legs out from under our argument that Christians must and Christians can live lives of purity, if, in fact, most Christians or even many do not. How much easier it would be for the homosexual to face the denial of his sexual urges if he saw every other single Christian doing the same.

But with regard to this idea that desires are a calling, two things should be said. First, as we have already said, desires, in and of themselves, are right and title to nothing. The heterosexual man or woman has desires as well, but outside of marriage they are not free to fulfill those desires or even to give vent to them in the heart. But the point can be put more strongly still. You will sometimes hear even conservative Christians say that it is only homosexual activity not homosexual desire that is forbidden. James White, a conservative evangelical psychiatrist, in *Eros Defiled*, a popular book published by Inter Varsity Press some years ago (1977), wrote,

“...let us make no mistake about what the Bible condemns. Nowhere is a man or woman condemned for having homosexual feelings. It is the act, not the urge that is condemned.” [Cited in George Rekers, “The Development of a Homosexual Orientation,” *Homosexuality and American Public Life*, 83]

But that is a serious misstatement of the facts. Paul condemns the desires as well as the actions of homosexuals in Romans 1:26-27. And, as you well know, the Lord Jesus made a point of insisting that the reach of God’s law was by no means limited to behavior. The thoughts and intents of the heart, the desires of the inner man, the bent of his character, also must be made and kept pure before God. We are all, for example, deeply selfish. Our self-centeredness goes down to the bottom of ourselves. It is fixed deep inside us, in the darkness below where we cannot see it. It stains everything we are, we think, and we do. We will be sinners until that bent, that disposition, that disorder is finally rooted out of us when we are at last in heaven. And it is so with every sin. We only see the outcropping of our sin in thoughts and deeds. The substratum of evil desire that lies beneath is the source of our problem and where we are most wrong. The very last thing a Christian should ever do is to excuse or exonerate

himself for his sinful desires. If he is ever really to grow in true godliness he must repudiate his sin down to its source deep within himself.

It is precisely this insistence that separated Jesus from the Pharisees. They too indulged a far too superficial understanding of sin. They thought of it as something relatively innocuous and easy to control. They thought of it largely in terms of acts rather than inner dispositions and desires. And it was there that Jesus most firmly contradicted their teaching and their view of righteousness.

The heterosexual Christian man knows full well that he has already sinned against God and against man when he indulges in sexual fantasies regarding women not his wife. Jesus told him that explicitly. He knows very well that his first and foremost problem is not his actions, but the raging desires from which those actions spring. He knows from bitter experience that there is that deep within him that is always pushing him astray sexually. We are only showing the homosexual the respect he deserves when we view him as we view ourselves, when we require him to aspire to the same perfect righteousness of motivation, thought, desire, and deed, when we summon him to the same comprehensive ethic of self-denial – the same purity of thought and desire as well as of action – to which Jesus summoned all his followers. The homosexual is a sinner like all other sinners. We are one with him or her in that. But he is also summoned – and the Christian homosexual has given answer to that summons – to the same life of holiness to which every other Christian has been summoned: holiness of heart, of speech, and of behavior.

That is the first thing. The fact that one desires sinful things is no recommendation of those things or approval to pursue them. Sinful desires must be denied and eventually put to death. That is what true goodness and certainly what Christian godliness requires. It requires it of every Christian, no matter the particular sinful desires with which the man or woman struggles.

Second, the whole matter of homosexual orientation deserves some reflection. That there are people who feel sexual desire for people of the same sex goes without saying. And, that there are some people who only have sexual desires for people of the same sex must also be admitted. However, the origin and the development of that so-called orientation are matters of dispute and the moral significance that orientation still more so.

The fact is, a great deal remains mysterious in the development of human personality and of sexual desire and response as a part of that personality. We have already denied that the origin of homosexuality is genetic in the ordinary understanding of that term. No one is born a homosexual, so far as the research goes. But much that can produce homosexual responses happens early or relatively early in the life of a boy or girl and is hard to get at later on. Memories that are often unreliable or actually deceitful must be consulted. Events that have been entirely forgotten may have been of great significance. When asked much later about his or her past the adult may give answers shaped by present understanding and conviction. And still much is and will remain mysterious. Why does one boy grow up with a love of cars and another with a love of football? Why does one find the violin an oppressive burden and another find it the joy of his life? No one can really say.

A number of studies have reported “a family constellation for male homosexuals which included a close-binding, intimate mother and a hostile, detached father.” It is also very common for the fathers of homosexual men to be described by their sons as indifferent and uninvolved. In many other cases the father is absent altogether. But it is not so in every case. And, in any case, innumerable heterosexual sons would say of their fathers that they were hostile, cold, or detached. Studies have confirmed a very high incidence of childhood sexual molestation by a man among homosexual men. The rate of homosexuality among men who as boys were molested by men is many times higher than among men who were never molested. But molestation does not always lead to homosexuality. Early sexual experiences seem to be very significant in many cases, but they do not produce homosexuality in every case.

Researchers report that adult female homosexuals are much more likely to report having had an unhappy childhood than heterosexual women. A number of studies report that the childhood environment of female homosexuals is often marked by dysfunctional family relationships and most lesbians had a distant and unaffectionate relationship with their father. Researchers report that the fathers of homosexual women tend more often to be alcoholic or physically abusive or, if not, at least puritanical, overly possessive, and inhibiting of their daughters’ development as women. But none of these conditions inevitably produces homosexuality in adulthood and, in fact, many heterosexual people have had similar backgrounds. [This material from Rekers, 62-84] All of this information should make us all the more sympathetic with homosexuals. Theirs has often been a sad life and they have often been sinned against as children in dysfunctional homes. They have often been betrayed by the very people who should have loved them the most and cared for them most faithfully. We would not wish on anyone such a past as many of these people have had, such a family situation, such an upbringing. But all of this information does not tell us in every case, or in any particular case, precisely why one person became a homosexual and another did not.

It is a fair summary, I think, to say that there is no evidence that homosexuality is a genetic or biological condition, but, at the same time, there is no clear evidence that homosexuality is caused by any single psychological or sociological condition. It is the interaction of various factors with and within an individual personality that seems to be the cause of homosexuality. No one can say more. What is more, the formation of a settled orientation is something that happens over shorter or longer periods of time with different people and appears often to be more fluid and less permanent in many cases than the homosexual lobby wishes to admit. As we noted last time, there is plenty of evidence that homosexuals can and do change if sufficiently motivated to do so. Gender may be destiny, but homosexuality need not be.

One thing this means, of course, is that it is iniquitous for the psychological and educational establishments to assume that a child of school age should be encouraged in a homosexual direction as if by that age anyone knows that homosexuality is one’s true self and as if childhood factors can be known to settle any person’s sexual orientation for good.

But, much more important still, the Bible does not encourage us to lay any great stress on the cause or reason of some affliction that a person must bear in this world. The disciples were not told why the man was born blind nor did Jesus ever comment on why any particular person had leprosy or why this man and not some other was paralyzed or was demon possessed. The only causes the Bible pays real attention to are the ultimate cause – that is, the will of God – and the final cause, that is the purpose of the affliction – that the works of God may be demonstrated in a person. That is, at least for a Christian, if there is indeed a homosexual orientation, that orientation, like any other affliction, conceals a calling, a vocation, a way of serving God and giving him glory. It is God's will – however mysterious – for that person. It therefore must be accepted as the sphere in which that person is to love and serve the Lord, or it is unless and until that man or woman leaves those tendencies and desires behind.

That is true in two different ways. First, there will be ways in which struggling with homosexuality renders a man or a woman able to serve others in unique ways. C.S. Lewis wrote to a friend who had asked him about homosexuality that he had years before received a letter from a homosexual man who was a Christian in which this man had said that he found that there were certain kinds of sympathy and understanding that he felt his condition, his affliction had given him that other Christians did not and could not have. He couldn't remember the details, Lewis said, because he had destroyed the letter, but surely that is right. [A Severe Mercy, 147] I guarantee you that ministries to homosexuals trade on this fact. Homosexuals feel, and to some degree rightly so, that no one understands them or what they are going through. But there are people who do and are very well acquainted both with the fear and the shame and the near despair on the one hand and the power of the gospel and the light of God's Word on the other. And chief among those people are Christians who themselves have homosexual inclinations or have had them. And those same believers can help other folk, folk who are not homosexuals, whose struggles are of like kind.

Then, second, there are many things that we must bear in life, many facts about ourselves and our lives that are difficult. There are, of course, sinful dispositions that are common to all of us that we must overcome to offer to our Savior a pure heart and a holy life. But there are also, in every human life and in every Christian life, certain special factors that make true goodness more difficult. But in those difficulties we also find a way of our serving God and laying up treasure in heaven. Every Christian man or woman has a life to offer back to God. And many of those lives are made difficult by one thing or another. And it is the difficulty that makes the gift of one's life so precious, so valuable, and so impressive.

Believe me, brothers and sisters, every great Christian life had to surmount strong sinful desires and tendencies. It matters not whether it was a raging pride or temper that had to be subjugated, or dark depression that had to be surmounted, a profound disappointment that had to be accepted, or sexual desires of the homosexual or heterosexual kind that had to be denied. It is not for nothing that the Bible so regularly describes the holy life as a struggle, a warfare, a wrestling match, or an athletic contest. Godliness, in the Bible, is a matter of blood, sweat, and tears. It is and will be, so long as we are in this world, a grindingly difficult exercise of the will in the teeth of powerful and enchantingly enticing sinful desires. It was not for nothing that Calvin makes self-denial the organizing principle of his treatment of the Christian life in his famous Institutes of the Christian Religion. So let there be no thought that the

presence of desires liberates the homosexual from the Christian's calling to live a life of sexual purity. He or she, as every other Christian, must deny himself or herself and follow Christ to be his true disciple. This is very important to say clearly in our day. The homosexual is being told "this is what you are," "this is you." To which the Christian responds "Yes, but it is precisely myself that I must deny to be Christ's faithful follower." Again we embrace the homosexual Christian as one of ourselves: sinners saved by grace, made righteous in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, called to lay down our lives for our Savior's sake, and willing to do so, no matter the cost, because our Savior gave himself for us and our salvation.

We encourage them as we encourage ourselves in the sure and certain hope that sacrifices made here will bring everlasting joy in the world to come. Christina Rossetti put it beautifully.

"True, all our life long we shall be bound to refrain our soul, and keep it low; but what then? For the books we now refrain to read we shall one day be endowed with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not listen to we shall join in the song of the Redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn we shall gaze unabashed on the beatific vision. For the companionship we shun we shall be welcomed into angelic society and the communion of triumphant saints. For the amusements we avoid we shall keep the supreme jubilee. For all the pleasures we miss we shall abide, and for evermore abide, in the rapture of heaven." [Cited in Whyte, Bunyan Characters, iii, 36]

Let us be very clear about this. The only way to justify a homosexual living as a homosexual is to deny God, to deny Christ, to deny salvation, and to deny heaven. That is a very steep price to pay for the enjoyment of pleasures that even now carry with them so much pain.

If it is a difficult thing, a painful thing, a wearying thing to live a pure life as a man or woman beset by homosexual desires, well then, so be it. It was a punishingly difficult life our Savior lived for us and he said to us that it would be a distinguishing mark of those who truly followed him that their lives would be hard in the same way and for the same reason. It is hard, even for God's sake, even for salvation's sake, to withstand the world, one's own flesh, and the Devil. But it is what he has called us to do. It is what he has shown us how to do. It is what he has promised to help us to do. As our text reminds us, it is what he has given us the freedom to do. And it is what he has promised lavishly to reward when we have done it.