

**Homosexuality and Redemption, I Corinthians 6:9-11****by Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn (First Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA) - September 10, 2006**

This section summarizes the material before its beginning in 5:1. It is a feature of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth to warn her of a spurious faith and false identification as Christians. People who believe themselves to be Christians but live wicked lives may be fooling others; they are certainly fooling themselves. No matter that a man or woman is a member of the Christian church; if his or her life is not an authentically Christian life, he or she can have no confidence of acceptance with God at death or in the last judgment. Christians must be reminded of this many times lest they relax their guard and slip back into worldly ways of living. So Paul gives a list of the kind of behaviors that are incompatible with a profession of faith in Christ. He had already given such a list in 5:10-11, and now adds to that list of sins, four more.

The terms that the NIV renders "male prostitutes" and "homosexual offenders" require some further comment. As you can imagine, with a full scale effort underway in some circles to deny that the Bible actually condemns homosexuality, the meaning of Paul's vocabulary here has been subjected to extensive scrutiny and debate. As it happens, however, the evidence is pretty clear and there is quite general agreement as to the basic meaning of Paul's terms in this context. The first Greek term is *malakoi*, which means "soft," and, when applied to men means "effeminate." It was used in this context of men and boys who allowed themselves to be used homosexually. That is, the term refers to "passive homosexual activity" whether for pleasure or for pay. [Thiselton, *NICGNT*, 448; cf. *BAG*, 489; Fee, *NICNT*, 243-244] Pederasty, or homosexual sex with boys, was the most common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world, and as the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant churches and very many American schools have learned to their shame, it is a very common form of homosexuality in our day as well. The term, as Paul uses it here, does not necessarily refer only to pederastic sex, but does refer to the passive partner.

The second term is *arsenokoitai*, a compound of "male" and "intercourse." In the standard dictionaries it is defined as a "male homosexual" [e.g. *BAG*, 109] The only real question is whether, in a pairing with *malakoi*, Paul's first term, this term refers especially to the active partner in a homosexual tryst.

v.11

Characteristically, the NIV has but one of Paul's strong adversatives. It reads, "but you were washed, sanctified, justified..." What Paul writes, much more emphatically a contrast between their before and their after is, "but you were washed; but you were sanctified, but you were justified..." They were one thing, they lived one way before, but since they have become Christians they are different indeed.

Last week we began this short series on the Bible's teaching about homosexuality, a subject much in the news nowadays and the cause of present controversy in our society. I said that it is important for Christians to have an intelligent grasp of the Bible's teaching so that they can both withstand the onslaught of the culture's attack on it and explain it and recommend it confidently to others. We began last time by saying that the Scripture views homosexuality as a betrayal of our Creator's intention in making man male and female. Such is Paul's argument in Romans 1. It is no surprise that homosexuality flourishes, efforts to normalize it become bolder, and many people begin to wonder why the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual makes any difference precisely in those times when it is either denied or largely forgotten that man is a creature, that he has a maker and that he is obliged to live his life according to his creator's plan and purpose. His life does not belong to him. Homosexuality prospers when divine creation falls on hard times.

But the terrible irony is that to save homosexuality in this way we must abandon everything that makes human life meaningful and gives it any transcendent purpose. This point must be shouted from the housetops by Christians today. If the argument for the normalization of homosexuality is valid – and the only serious argument for homosexuality amounts to a denial of divine creation – then human beings are accidents and their lives mean nothing at all; that is, they have no purpose, their lives have no value beyond what they themselves can give to them. They came from nowhere; they are going nowhere. Right and wrong are nothing but opinions because there is no Creator to impose a transcendent moral standard. There can be no law if there is no law-giver. There can be no purpose if man wasn't made for one.

The irony is that to save homosexuality, one must embrace a view of mankind that, if held consistently, places the homosexual and the hater of the homosexual on equal footing. Neither can claim that the other is wrong; neither can justify his outlook. Moral justification is nothing more than the assertion of private opinions. That is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the denial of creation. Without a Creator, without a divine purpose for human life; without a moral law that applies to each and every human being, without a final judgment, all that is left is the self, a self that for some reason thinks that it has some importance when it is really nothing but a collection of molecules; a self that imagines that certain things are right and others wrong when moral judgments are really nothing different from the growling of a stomach. If the homosexuals are right, homosexuality is normal alright; but no more normal than the hatred of homosexuals. None is any less normal than the other; perhaps the latter is even more normal because, as homosexuals often make a point of saying, the hatred of homosexuals is found much more often in human life. And if normal, it is right; whatever that means.

No human being, much less human society has ever been able to live with that consequence; none ever shall. It is a profound denial of what every human being knows is true down to the bottom of his or her being. Human life is significant; there is such a thing as Right and Wrong; and moral passion is not akin to digestion or the circulation of blood but the expression of man's inescapable nature as a creature made in the image of the Living and True God. Deny this however he will, man cannot escape the fact that this is the life he lives. He does not and cannot live as if he actually were a meaningless accident, as if he has no Maker.

But today we move on to say the next great thing the Bible says about homosexuality and the most hopeful and wonderful thing about it. Homosexuality is a set of desires and a pattern of behaviors that, like all other sinful desires and behaviors, can be both forgiven and overcome through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Now, you may be aware that the entire idea of a homosexual leaving his homosexuality and changing into a heterosexual has become very controversial in the last few years. That is, again, entirely understandable. If a homosexual can change, that fact goes a long way toward disproving the claim that homosexuality is a normal, genetically based and fixed condition akin to left-handedness. Given that the entire argument for the normalization of homosexuality has been based on that assertion, it is not surprising that there is a furious resistance to the claim that homosexuals can change and leave their homosexuality behind. The American Psychiatric Association views the effort to convert the homosexual to heterosexuality as virtually a form of malpractice. It too has staked its reputation on the assertion that homosexuality is a natural and unchangeable condition. A psychiatrist is a doctor and a doctor is supposed to cure. But to “cure” homosexuality is to suggest that the condition is an illness, a disorder: the very thing that is now denied.

I will say, very briefly, that what literature there is certainly confirms the fact that homosexuals can and do change if they want to. All do not by any means, but many have. [Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, 168-170] This fact is ignored and often denied in the press, but it is a fact well-enough demonstrated in the professional literature. Few modern studies are being done on this point, of course, precisely because the very premise of such a study would be offensive both to the powerful homosexual lobby and to the professional guild. Funding such studies is well-nigh impossible. Of course, in addition, as our society gets used to the idea that homosexuality is normal and should be regarded as a lifestyle with no moral implications – as good as any other way of life – fewer homosexual people naturally are likely to seek help to change. I read this week an interesting and helpful study of homosexuality published in 1979, six years after the American Psychiatric Association’s about-face on homosexuality (that is, when homosexuality was removed from its list of psychiatric disorders), written by the psychiatrist Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse and kindly loaned to me by Dr. van Dooren. Barnhouse is the daughter of the famous preacher of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Donald Grey Barnhouse. The daughter did not, alas, follow in her father’s evangelical and Reformed footsteps, but she was a bright woman and wrote a valuable study of homosexuality entitled, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion*. In that study she takes note of this very point, obvious and important as it is.

“It should be borne in mind that no symptom or neurotic pattern which the patient does not experience as unacceptable or troublesome has much likelihood of being the object of successful therapeutic intervention. This is one reason why the incidence of improvement or recovery for patients who are referred by courts or dragged in unwillingly by their relatives is so disappointingly low. The central importance of the patient’s motivation and initiative is not confined to homosexuality.” [98]

In other words, one of the chief effects of the normalization of homosexuality in our time is that fewer and fewer homosexuals will want to change or seek help to leave their homosexual lifestyle. They will neither ask for help nor take seriously the help of others when it is offered. Why work to change when

the society is telling them that they are perfectly healthy and normal? But that homosexuals can and do change is a fact. Barnhouse and many others survey the evidence.

All of that is simply background. We are Christians and we expect to find certainty in one place and one place only: the Word of God. And when we turn to the Bible what do we find?

Well, we find that homosexuality is listed in a catalog of sins that have been forsaken by those who found new life in Christ. Homosexuality is found together with idolatry and adultery, with fornication and drunkenness, with theft, greed, and slander. Homosexuality is one of those behaviors that God condemns. It was so, of course, long before Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. It was condemned as a sin in Genesis, the first book of the Bible; it was condemned as sin in the law of God in Leviticus, and so on. Now we Christians are the first to admit that man often denies the sinfulness of his behaviors. All the more in our day of rampant subjectivity, when feelings are the measure of most everything, there is a strong inclination to regard what feels natural as good and what feels artificial as bad. We have been taught that it is actually harmful to repress our feelings. We need to be ourselves and to express ourselves freely. We are very used to hearing such things. We are not, of course, the first to idolize nature. Rousseau's romantic notions of the "noble savage," which are still with us by the way [Barnhouse, 33], is another example of the same tendency. Whatever comes naturally must be good. I feel homosexual desires and I want to engage in homosexual activity, so this must be right for me. As the great American philosopher Debbie Boone put it, "what feels so right cannot be wrong."

But all of this sentimentality is utterly condemned in Holy Scripture. In the Bible we are taught that our natures are fallen and are no reliable guide to right and wrong. It is, in any case – this principle of doing one's own thing, of doing what comes naturally – a principle so vicious, if carried to its logical conclusion, that no one actually believes it. People employ it very selectively to justify certain behaviors and conveniently ignore the argument when it might be used to justify, for example, rape, or theft, or lying, or murder or, for that matter, any manner of selfish behavior – all of which people can find very natural and to which they can find themselves easily inclined. Everyone knows that the unruly passions of human sexuality – which are a permanent feature of human life – have caused untold sorrow, pain, and mayhem. Still today they cast a pall over human life all over the world and are a source of grief and despair to countless men and women, boys and girls. No one can say that human inclinations in this area of life are any safe guide to human goodness, happiness, or fulfillment. It is no surprise that virtually every human being goes wrong here; very wrong! Christians are the first to admit this about themselves!

When Paul says here that once some of the Corinthians engaged in homosexual activity of one sort or another but now they have been washed, sanctified – that is, set apart to the service of God – and justified – that is, put right with God – he is as much as saying that as homosexuals there was something wrong with them, something unclean, something about their lives displeasing to God, something that had to be changed. In the ordinary language of the Bible that is to say, they were sinners – in their case in part sinners because homosexuals – and they needed to be delivered from the guilt and the power of that sin. In the language of the Bible they needed to be converted. And they were!

The fact that the homosexual found his behavior natural and pleasing proves nothing. Human beings are past masters at justifying all kinds of sinful behaviors. The fact that the behavior is compulsive and seems fixed and inevitable also proves nothing. Human selfishness, pride, lust, temper, and so on are often behaviors to which people find themselves little more than slaves. Sin is the master addiction of human life. If the homosexual argues that he finds his desires impossible to control, the heterosexual male says, “welcome to the club!” Finding desires too strong for you is hardly a recommendation of those desires! Bondage to a set of desires and behaviors is no proof that those behaviors are good and right. The entire history of human beings in this world has been a history of what is nowadays called the “Stockholm Syndrome.” You may remember the origin of that term, a hostage-taking in Stockholm, Sweden in 1973. It describes the behavior of the victims of kidnapping who over time – through stress and manipulation – come to identify with their captors. In the Stockholm incident, at the end of six days of captivity in a bank, several kidnap victims actually resisted rescue attempts and afterwards refused to testify against their captors. The term was also used to describe the behavior of the kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst in 1974, who, after prolonged captivity, came not only to sympathize with her captors but eventually to assist them in several bank robberies.

Well so it is with human beings. They may be in bondage to their sins, they may suffer all manner of bitter and harmful consequences from those sins (as homosexuals typically do), but they make friends with them nevertheless and then resist efforts to free them from bondage. This universal phenomenon is one of the grand demonstrations of man’s fallenness: he will not free himself from the very behaviors he so strongly condemns as wrong in others and which cause him and others so much pain.

Corinth was, at the time Paul wrote these words, full of people who lived very happily with these sins: all manner of sexual sins and sins of many other kinds. And many of the Corinthian Christians had once lived indulging the same sins. There were, by Paul’s express testimony, people in that congregation who once played a passive role in homosexual sex – either for pleasure or for money – and others who had been more dominant partners in homosexual trysts. But the grace of God had found them out, the Spirit of God had summoned them to a new life, and the power of Christ’s redemption had changed them. And they had left their former sins behind. Not, Paul admits elsewhere, without struggle, without effort, without pain. Holiness is not easy even for the new man or woman in Christ. Holiness will not be perfectly natural until we are in heaven. Here, Paul often teaches, it is a battle. But the before and after, the revolution, the dramatic change was a fact obvious to all. Men who had indulged in homosexual activity did so no more. Adulterers were suddenly faithful to their spouses. Single adults who became Christians were no longer promiscuous; those who made a practice of theft stole no more, liars told the truth, and so on. It is precisely this fact that Paul uses to warn those in the church in Corinth who may have been indulging the illusion that they could be Christians, that they could find peace with God, without leaving their former lifestyles behind. Becoming a Christian always requires a great change. It requires recognizing as sinful and unworthy practices that were commonplace in your life before. It means turning away from them to Christ and living according to his commandments. It is always so!

And ever since it has been so. One of C.S. Lewis’ fellow high school students was staggered to learn years later that the author of *The Screwtape Letters* was the same foul-mouthed Jack Lewis he had known as a teenager. Paul was a murderer before he became a believer in Jesus. And the number of

people who made a practice of sexual sin but who left it behind when they became Christians is very large. And among those people are numbers of folk whose sins were of the homosexual kind. I have met some of those folk myself; some of you have also. They are ashamed of their past; as every Christian is ashamed of the sins of their past. But we are not ashamed of them. We glory in the fact that they, like we ourselves, are no longer the people that they once were and no longer live the lives they once lived. We love them and are proud of them.

Christians never deny that they were once very different people and lived very different lives than they do now. It is the glory of their faith that in Christ all things become new, that the old is done away and the new has come, that the change is so profound that it might be said that they are new creations, as if God started all over and made them again, but this time with a nature that was no longer in bondage to sin.

But you cannot get to this happiness, you cannot find this new life until and unless you admit that the life you are living now is sinful; that there is something wrong with it; that God is displeased with it; that uncorrected and unchanged it must expose you to his just wrath and punishment. As long as you are content to be a homosexual or an adulterer or a slanderer or a thief, you will never cry out to Christ for deliverance from your sin. But once you realize that it is sin and cry out to the Lord for deliverance, change comes to the desires and to the behavior.

You are aware that people nowadays, people like ourselves, who condemn homosexuality as sinful and object to its normalization are stigmatized as homophobes. The term suggests that we are cowards, insecure, and that our objection to homosexuality is a result of our insecurities, our fears. We are not healthy people, strong people, confident people, and that is why we feel threatened by people who are different from us. We are all well-used to the time-honored practice of stigmatizing the opposition. We put up with it as a feature of our political life every day.

The homosexual lobby understandably wants to paint opposition to homosexuality in unfavorable terms; wants to suggest that there is something wrong with anyone who objects to that way of life. Homophobe is, of course, a pejorative term. It is an insult. Clearly they don't want to describe opposition to homosexuality in the terms we would prefer to use. They certainly don't want to say in public that we object to homosexuality because we consider it, as has human civilization in general, as a deviation from what is normal and, still more, as a betrayal of the Creator's intention in having made man male and female; that, though we respect homosexuals as human beings and are obliged to love them as any other person, we mourn their condition and hope for them restoration to that way of life that God intended for human beings. They certainly don't want to describe our objection to homosexuality as an objection to what the Bible unmistakably calls sin, sin of the ilk of adultery or fornication, and so a behavior that must carry with it not only God's disapproval but all manner of painful and destructive consequences injurious to the sinners themselves and to society at large. All of that sounds entirely too reasonable, too thoughtful, too serious, and entirely too convincing. So, instead, objectors to homosexuality are homophobes.

But we gladly admit that there is certainly a sense in which that is true. Christians fear homosexuality precisely because it is sin, because it is a violation of God's law, and because it invites God's judgment. "I don't fear anything except sin," said Chrysostom to his persecutors. I don't fear death, I don't fear exile; I don't fear anything you can do to me. "I fear nothing except sin." Sin is the only thing in this world that can kill a person now and for ever. Sin is the only thing that can separate us from God. Sin is the only thing that can finally ruin and destroy a human life made in the image of the eternal God. In that sense it is absolutely right to fear homosexuality, to fear adultery, to fear idolatry, to fear drunkenness, anger, and every other sin that God hates.

But Christians don't fear homosexuals. I doubt that emotion has ever lurked in the mind and heart of a serious, thoughtful Christian. We have no reason to fear homosexuals. We don't fear them because they are just sinners needing salvation, as everyone else is and as we were. We don't fear them because we have hopes for them, the hope of the same deliverance and the same transformation that the homosexuals in Corinth experienced in the days of the Apostle Paul. The gospel, the Christian faith, is all about the transformation of life and deliverance from sin. It is the same for every human being. One of the early so-called evangelical defenses of homosexuality was a book entitled: *Is the Homosexual my Neighbor?* [Letha Scanzoni and Virginia R. Mollenkott, New York, Harper and Row, 1978] Well, of course he is; of course she is. But the more important question for the Christian is: can the homosexual be my brother or sister? And to that question the Christian answers with a resounding "Yes!" You can have been anything yesterday and be a Christian today. Paul is here reminding us that you can't be anything and be a Christian, but in order to make that point he reminds us and very powerfully that you can have been anything yesterday and be a Christian today, a child of God, and an heir of heaven and the life to come.

In a confrontational and combative environment – as in the culture wars in America today – it is easy to demonize the opposition and to see them as beyond the pale and hopeless. Christians can never do this. Believers in Christ and the Gospel can never do this. I remember reading of a pastor who read out Paul's list of sinners here in verses 9-10 and then asked his congregation: "how many of you were like that? And then, more remarkably, he said, "Stand up. For the sake of the unsaved and the children, stand up." In other words, let them see that Christ transforms human lives. Let them know that bondage to this sin or that need never be the last word about you. Christ died on the cross to deliver men and women, boys and girls from bondage to sin; to deliver them from the power of sins just like these. And he does transform and he does deliver.

The Bible's message about homosexuality in a nutshell is this: homosexuality is sin but Christ came into the world to save sinners.