

## “The Bible and Homosexuality: The Holiness Code”

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Leviticus 18:1-5, 20:26, 18:22

Matthew 13:33

Today I want to talk to you about holiness: the holiness of God and what qualifies and disqualifies us from coming into the presence of our holy God. Leviticus teaches us about holiness. To say “God is holy” means God is separate from all over creatures: completely other: immortal, all knowing, all powerful. God’s steadfast love and mercy go beyond anything human beings can imagine.

Israel is meant to be a holy nation. “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.” Leviticus 20:26: Israel was to reveal God’s character to the world. How can this happen when Israel so often opposes God? The first part of Leviticus describes the sacrificial offerings of animals and grain used in worship meant to bridge the gap between God and Israel. The people place what is of genuine value on the altar, a sacrifice for the atonement of sin. Through offering sacrifices, those who are unworthy can again be qualified to come in the presence of a holy God.

Leviticus describes holiness in great detail: what and who is holy or clean and what/who is not. Only the priests were qualified to enter into the holiest part of the Jerusalem temple. Yet even priests were disqualified if they were blind, lame, had cataracts, crooked limbs, skin problems or crushed testicles. Menstruating women and men with bodily discharges (an oozing wound, any blood) were also disqualified from approaching God in worship.

The Israelites were to be set apart from the Canaanites, the Egyptians, other nations who populated the land God gave them. Leviticus lists the rules about what set them apart. There were rules about food, not cheating in business, caring for the strangers, shunning mediums and wizards, and never wearing garments made of two different kinds of materials. There were rules about sexuality including Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”

Today we ask, “does homosexuality disqualify someone from approaching God? This is one of three verses in the Bible that specifically condemns homosexuality. Why is it detestable for “a man to lie with a man as with a woman?” Knowing the sexual customs of ancient Israel gives us clues. Our Hebrew ancestors believed that male homosexual acts were unnatural for very specific reasons. Reason number one: it compromised a man’s dignity. The ancient Israelites believed that patriarchy was the natural order – the rule of men over women and women being considered the property of men. To place a man in a subservient (receptive) stance in an intimate relationship was unnatural because it denigrated him by making him appear to be like a woman. (Just as an aside, women performing sexual acts with other women are never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Presumably these were OK because they didn’t threaten male dominance.)

The second reason male homosexual acts were considered unnatural is they didn’t result in more babies. In their pre-scientific worldview, the ancient Hebrews thought only male semen was needed for new life. The “spilling of a man’s seed” was considered the equivalent of abortion or murder. The Israelites were vastly outnumbered in Palestine and struggled fiercely to populate their country. Male homosexual acts were forbidden because of the need for the population to keep growing.

Thirdly, male homosexual acts were unnatural because they were un-Jewish. They were an “abomination.” The word abomination in Hebrew is to’eba. Each time that word appears in the Hebrew Bible it refers to an act of worshipping a foreign god. Heterosexual and homosexual acts were part of Canaanite religious worship, as were child sacrifices. The Israelites said it was an abomination to offer a child sacrifice to the Canaanite God Molech. And Leviticus 18:22 says male homosexual acts were called an abomination, the reason being their association with the customs of foreign nations. If Israelites started doing things the Canaanites were known for, the line between holy and unholy, clean and unclean would get blurry. And that could not be tolerated because the blurring of those lines offended a Holy God.

So the sexual customs of ancient Israelites said for a man to lie with a man as with a woman was unnatural because it violated patriarchy, didn’t make more babies and was un-Jewish. Here are some other things they said were natural:

- polygamy (one husband, many wives)
- concubines (a sexual partner of a married man with lower status than a wife)
- men having sex with female slaves and using them for breeding;
- prostitution
- Levirate marriage (when a widow had sex with her deceased husband’s brother until a male heir is produced).

Sexual practices considered natural to the writers of Leviticus do not match what we’d label natural and acceptable today. Notice Leviticus 18:22 is not condemning two adults of the same sex in an intimate, committed relationship, marked by fidelity, love, respect and mutuality. This possibility was completely foreign to the Biblical worldview. For our Hebrew ancestors, there were only straight people committing homosexual acts which were contrary to their nature. The notion that someone could have a homosexual orientation from birth was completely unknown in Biblical times. We still haven’t answered the question “does being homosexual disqualify someone from approaching our holy God?”

Maybe Jesus can help here, you may ask. Jesus said nothing about homosexual acts by men or women. Jesus knew Leviticus though and he knew the importance of holiness. He often turned traditional ideas about holiness upside down. Take the parable of the leaven for instance: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

Here Jesus compares God’s kingdom with a woman who intentionally hides leaven in a big batch of dough. The Kingdom of God is like leaven? Leaven or yeast was unclean. You got rid of during the eight days of Passover. Then you ate only unleavened bread which symbolized what was holy. Leaven/yeast was a metaphor for corruption. Just like “one bad apple spoils the whole barrel.” This story would have been a slap in the face to the religious authorities, the ones in charge of keeping all the laws in Leviticus. Here it’s a woman who ushers in the kingdom of heaven. Women were at a disadvantage in the holiness code; monthly menstruation rendering her unclean. But yet a large number of Jews in Jesus’ day were also considered unclean, unable to perform all the ritual laws for purity outlined in the holiness code. They couldn’t afford to pay for all the sacrifices at the temple. Most were subsistence farmers, barely able to stay alive. Jesus’ parable of the leaven gave them hope. Jesus was saying maybe they were not the unclean ones after all!

So, does homosexuality disqualify someone today from entering into the presence of a holy God? Here’s what I believe. You may not agree with me. If you don’t agree, I hope you’ll join me for conversation after worship to share your thoughts. There are things worthy of being called an “abomination.” But homosexuality is not

one of them. If we read Leviticus apart from the context of the sexual customs of that day we miss its meaning for us today. Sexual customs of ancient Israel are not ours. Thank goodness slavery, patriarchy, concubines, prostitution are not seen as “just the way things are” any more. I do not believe it’s a sin for two people of the same sex to be in a loving, mutual, consensual sexual relationship. Being in this kind of a relationship doesn’t disqualify someone from coming into God’s holy presence.

Let’s go back to where we started today: the holiness of God. The writers of Leviticus may have lacked scientific understanding but when it comes to holiness they were right - holiness matters. Finding ways of coming into the presence of a holy God matters. It’s what we yearn for.

Let me tell you a story about a time when I confronted the holiness of God in an unlikely place. I was on the Capital Square one Saturday morning a few years ago, enjoying the Dane County farmer’s market. You maybe know the scene - lots of vendors, food, flowers, kids, colors, tastes, smells. I had spent the last hour buying my fresh vegetables, sipping coffee, enjoying the taste of a sweet roll. As I got swept up in the flow of shoppers, all of a sudden I heard singing. I looked over and there was a group of Amish people – about ten men and women in their simple clothing – sweating in the summer sun. They were singing hymns in gorgeous four part harmony. I stopped to listen. They were singing old time gospel songs. Songs with words like “what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus...” They were singing about sin and our need for forgiveness, how Jesus makes us right with God, faith in him alone. I thought rather cynically, “How many people in downtown Madison – which over time has been seen as a place of unbelief/wild students/place where people let their urges have free reign - how many people here are going to pay any attention to this Christian witness?” These Amish seemed like they were from another world, another time. But then I turned and saw a woman standing near me. She had black hair streaked with gray and was wearing typical hip urban clothes. And she was mesmerized by the music. There were tears streaming down her cheeks. Clearly she sensed the otherness of God in that moment, in that music. As I watched her, and listened to the singing, suddenly that Amish music touched that place in me. That gospel music about sin, and the need for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, his life given for us on the cross. That music touched a place in that woman’s heart, the same place Leviticus touches: that place where we realize that while we are capable as we are of great good, we are still not able to approach a holy God completely on our own. There is a gap between us and our holy God.

For all its beauty, diversity, wonder things are not right in this world. Things are not always right in us. That we don’t worship clay statues like the Canaanite did doesn’t mean we don’t worship idols too. Don’t we too let other things take the place in our hearts that rightfully belongs to God? At times don’t we love almost too much the good things of this life—fresh vegetables, coffee, pastry, a summer day with no obligations, freedom to spend our money as we wish, leisure activities? These can become our own idols. We love these things so much they take the highest place in our hearts. And we think we don’t need God. We think worship of a Holy God doesn’t matter. And then when troubles come we realize these idols can’t save us.

Leviticus was right: we are not qualified to approach a holy God alone on our own. That woman with hip urban clothes with black hair streaked with gray could have been straight like me or LGBT. It didn’t matter. My gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender friends stand in the same relationship to God that I stand; that we all stand. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). There are things we have done and things we have left undone, that harms others. We need a way to come clean again. We need the one who alone makes us and bring us into God’s holy presence.

So we use the language of Leviticus today. We listen as Jesus like a priest speaking to us of sacrifice. Offering what is of value freely, as a sacrifice of praise. Through faith in Him we are qualified to enter into the presence

of a holy God. He alone can take our brokenness and make us whole. And through faith in Him by grace we can become holy people once more.

Because of him, now we can approach our holy God, right here, right now. As we hear the words of invitation: "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him.....etc."

*Sources for this sermon include "What The Bible Really Does (and Doesn't) Say about Sex" Matthew O'Neil Pitchstone Publishing 2015 and an article by Walter Wink "The Bible and Homosexuality."*

Leviticus 18:1-5

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 20:26

You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

Leviticus 18:22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Matthew 13:33

He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'