

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 27, 2019
based on Acts 10:9–16; Acts 10:34–35***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series that is preparing us for the upcoming United Methodist special General Conference, when our general church will be addressing, and possibly changing, our church's present stance on human sexuality. At the center of the debate is a statement in our United Methodist Discipline—our church rule book—which says, “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” That statement is highly debated; and in this series we are considering whether it is in fact Biblical. {prayer}

If you look in the Bible for what the Scripture says about “the practice of homosexuality,” the most striking thing you discover is that the Bible says almost nothing. This raises the question — if God is concerned about the practice of homosexuality, why is it that the Bible says almost nothing about it? Throughout the Bible, moral issues of all sorts are addressed at length. There is a great deal about marital fidelity, honesty in business dealings, concern for the poor, the need for peace among peoples—showing us that God is very concerned about these issues. But if you look for something about same-sex relationships, you look for a long time. Look through the prophets—the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—and the twelve minor prophets—all of whom have much to say about important moral issues. There is not a single word expressing concern about same sex relationships anywhere in the prophets. Look through the wisdom writings—Psalms, Proverbs, and so forth—which give much moral guidance on all sorts of subjects; again there is nothing about “the practice of homosexuality.” Look through the historical books—Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah—again nothing. In the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, there is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and people often think of that as being about homosexual practice; but we noted last week that this actually is not the concern of that story.

It is a general rule in the Bible that Old Testament trajectories come to their fulfillment in Jesus; and this again is true on this subject. What did Jesus say about “the practice of homosexuality”? Absolutely nothing. There is a message here. God does not seem to be worried about this. This leads us to consider whether maybe this should not be an issue in the church.

When churches condemn the practice of homosexuality, from what are they drawing in the Bible? One place is the book of Leviticus. In the 39 books of the Old Testament, there are a total of 23,145 verses. Two of those verses do talk about the practice of homosexuality—two verses in the entire Old Testament—a good indicator that we are probably not going to be dealing here with a universal, eternal principle. The verses are both found in a section of the book of Leviticus. Leviticus 18:22 states, “You shall not

lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” And Leviticus 20:13 states, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” That seems clear enough; and it is directly upon these two verses that many current church attitudes are built.

But there is a problem—in fact a multitude of issues when we really start looking at these verses. First of all, they only talk about male behavior. These are obviously not comprehensive statements about all kinds of same-sex relationships. Secondly, there is a punishment prescribed in the second verse, which is not only clear but emphatic—the phrase “their blood is upon them” means that their execution is entirely their own fault, and they shall receive no clemency.

Many years ago I spent some time attending fundamentalist churches, and I remember a phrase that was often used when it came to interpreting the Bible—“it means what it says and it says what it means.” The idea was that you don’t need any elaborate investigation to understand a Biblical text; you just read it in a straightforward fashion and take the literal meaning. Sometimes in history people using that approach have established laws that actually punished the practice of homosexuality with death, as prescribed in Leviticus 20. In England, the last such execution was in 1835, when two men caught in the act were hanged. Today, most Christians who oppose the practice of homosexuality would want to drop the death penalty part of Leviticus 20:13. But that results in a logical contradiction—how do you decide that the first half of the verse “means what it says and says what it means” but the second half does not? People who want to read the Bible literally thus become selective literalists. The basic problem is with the whole literalist approach. When people declare, “It means what it says and it says what it means,” the actual function of that is—“it means what I think it means.” But verses in the Bible do not simply mean what I imagine them to mean. They mean what they were intended to say in their original context. To rightly understand Leviticus, we need to dig deeper to find what these verses are actually talking about and why whatever was being described was so serious that it called for the death penalty.

The verses are found in a section of Leviticus called the Holiness Code, in chapters 17 through 26. This was a long set of rules, many of them expressed in single verses, whose primary concern was to set the people of Israel apart from their pagan neighbors. Many earlier chapters in Leviticus have the same function, to make the people of Israel distinctive. A key issue for the people of Israel was a tendency to be drawn into pagan worship, as practiced by all the peoples around them, which involved worshipping many gods and engaging in various bizarre rituals designed to manipulate the gods. The people of Israel were supposed to worship one God—“in spirit and in truth,” as Jesus would later say (John 4:24)—but it was easy to be influenced by one’s neighbors and be pulled into devotion to the many gods of the land. We know the problem of being influenced by the culture around us. We seek to worship the Lord and to follow Christ in our living; but it is

very easy to be drawn into the materialism and the self-centered lifestyles that are so prominent in our culture.

The central concern of Leviticus was to help the people to stay faithful to God and not be lured into the surrounding paganism. This was the purpose of all the food laws that you find in Leviticus. Leviticus says that you cannot eat pork, and you cannot eat shellfish, and you cannot eat bugs, except that you can eat crickets and grasshoppers, you will be happy to know. These laws were established not out of health concerns; human beings by this time had been eating pork for millennia and knew how to cook it. If there had been a problem with pork, other cultures would have restricted its use. But in fact all the pagan peoples in the area ate pork regularly, and the ones along the coast also ate shellfish, and this is precisely why the people of Israel were told not to eat pork or shellfish, because if they did not eat pork or shellfish, they would not be sitting down at dinner tables with pagan people getting influenced by pagan ideas. The food laws set the people apart, which was very important for a tiny people struggling to be faithful to God in the midst of a thoroughly pagan world.

One of the particular challenges in this regard for the people of Israel had to do with fertility rituals. When they moved into the Promised Land, they stopped being exclusively shepherds and started to be farmers. But how do you get your crops to grow? According to the pagan peoples of the land, in order for your land to be fertile, you needed to go to the temple of Baal and perform fertility rituals. These involved temple prostitutes. There were female temple prostitutes and male temple prostitutes; male farmers would go to the temple to engage in ritual sexual acts with both. Baal worshippers believed that the god Baal, who was thought to make the crops grow, was spurred into action by sexual acts in the temple which then supposedly moved Baal to make the land fertile.

There was a particular Hebrew word used to describe an action that would pull you away from the right worship of God—the word תוֹעֵבָה *toevah*. The word appears 103 times in the Old Testament, and its general use was to denote a pagan religious practice. Making statues of gods was *toevah*. Child sacrifice was *toevah*. Worshipping the sun was *toevah*. All those things that the pagans did in their temples were described in the Old Testament as *toevah*. In the book of Leviticus, when two verses talk about a man lying with a man, that act is said to be *toevah*. The word is translated into English in the New Revised Standard Version and the King James Version as “abomination,” or in the New International Version it is translated as “what is detestable,” or in the New Century Version it is translated as a “hateful sin.” The word *toevah* has routinely been translated into English in misleading ways, in part because there is no good English equivalent. But when it is translated “abomination,” that implies that what is being described is something that is just intrinsically wretched, whereas in fact the word *toevah* is a cultic term, indicating something that would pull a person into paganism. The reference in Leviticus is directly to that pagan practice of going to the male temple prostitutes. But what about the female

temple prostitutes? They also are condemned in another section in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy. But the Leviticus passages singularly mention the male activity because that was especially associated with pagan religion. Israelites were quite familiar with female prostitutes of all sorts; but homosexual activity was something they saw as directly related to pagan worship. The punishment was severe because if people started to be drawn into pagan worship the entire effort to live as the people of God, which was a very fragile enterprise at this point, could quickly collapse.

From all this it is plain that these Leviticus verses are not talking about loving committed relationships between LGBT people such as we think about today. Leviticus is talking about a very specific ancient practice. The concern in Leviticus is not so much with the sexual activity per se but with the problem of getting influenced by the idolatry of the surrounding culture and so being pulled away from God. The same is true with the food laws in Leviticus. The problem with eating pork was not that there is something intrinsically wrong with eating pork; the issue was that people could get lured by the surrounding pork-loving culture into adopting many pagan ways that would result in their wandering away from God. The central point of Leviticus is the importance of staying faithful to God and resisting the pressure to just mix in with the values and the worship of the culture at large.

This is why a huge theme in Leviticus has to do with not mixing things. Leviticus 19:19, for example, says, “Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” If you just take the Bible literally—“it means what it says and it says what it means”—and apply what is said to the present day, this means the clothes you have on are against the Bible, because they probably contain more than one kind of fabric; and you better not have planted more than one kind of seed in that garden behind your house. From such verses it is clear that reading Old Testament verses at face value and simply plopping them into the present day does not make sense! We have to understand the context and purpose of each verse in order to “rightly comprehend God’s Word of Truth”—as II Timothy says. All these laws that have to do with not mixing things up were ways of emphasizing the spiritual theme of not getting mixed up with the pagan world, because to do so would pull the faithful away from God.

But now, every single Old Testament law that had to do with keeping the people of Israel separate from the world has been dropped—totally dropped from the practice of the church. We mix all sorts of fabrics together. You can plant however many different seeds you want in the same garden. You can eat pork, and thank heaven you can eat lobster and shrimp and crab. Why did the church drop all the laws having to do with being separate from the world?

It is because God told the leaders of the church that those laws no longer apply. The reason is because now as followers of Jesus, the Savior of the world, our calling is not to keep separate from the world but to go out into the world to all people with the gospel.

This was the message that came to Peter in that verse we heard from the book of Acts, where he was told that the food laws no longer apply, and Christians can eat anything. He realized, he said, that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34); he was not to separate himself from certain others but was to reach out to everyone with the good news of Jesus Christ.

So if those two verses in Leviticus about male sexual activity had to do with keeping the Israelites distinct from pagan religion, and if all the laws in Leviticus that aimed to keep the people separate from pagan culture have been dropped, it follows that those two verses also no longer apply; indeed we do not have a problem with male temple prostitutes today. Just consider: if the law against eating pork did not mean there is something inherently wrong with eating pork, and if the law against mixing fabrics did not mean there is something inherently wrong with your cotton/polyester blend, then the law in Leviticus against homosexual activity did not mean that there is something inherently wrong with all same-sex relations. These laws are from a particular historical context, in which people were trying to resist the pagan influences of their day. What we carry forward to the present day is not the specific prohibitions but the overarching message that we need to resist the negative cultural influences of our own time: materialism, racism, promiscuity, the tendency toward laxity in spiritual commitments—the list of negative cultural influences goes on and on—and we need to hold to our own faithfulness to God.

A central challenge that we have when trying to understand the Bible is that we all tend to come at the Bible with a certain set of lenses. Our view is refracted through the perspective of the culture in which we have grown, and the ideas we have picked up from our society and our upbringing over the years. When fundamentalists claim that they are just looking at the Bible straightforwardly, they do not seem to realize that they are actually looking through a very thick set of lenses—all the attitudes and assumptions they have picked up which now shape what they see.

Once when I was a kid my parents took me to visit a large cathedral. It was a sunny day, and I was wearing my new sunglasses, which I did not want to take off. Inside the cathedral I remarked continually to my parents, “It’s dark in here.” “Take off your sunglasses!” they said. But I refused. Sure was dark in that place.

If we want to see the Bible truly, we need to take off the shades—those distorting lenses of the assumptions we have carried with us—in order that we can see what is actually there in God’s word. We will be seeking to do that as this sermon series continues, and we consider many other relevant passages in the Bible, with the aim of seeing it all in the light of God’s saving grace.