

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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6/1/25

Sermon Title: “Fallen Sexual Desires and Behavior”

Sermon Text: Romans 1:24-27

Rom. 1:24 ¶ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

Rom. 1:25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Rom. 1:26 ¶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

Rom. 1:27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Main Point: According to Scripture, one example of the way that human beings suppress and resist God is in their desiring, acting out, and approving of same-sex sexual behavior which is contrary to God’s natural and written law.

Introduction

It’s really important as we begin that you understand why I’m devoting a whole sermon to this subject. Really two sermons if you count my last sermon.

The point of this passage here in Romans is not that Paul was like, “In 2000 years, people are going to become obsessed with sexual identity and same-sex desire and behavior. So I’m going to give those Christians 2000 years from now a clobber passage to really give it to them when they need it.” No, of course not. He has a

purpose that is immediate to his argument in Romans. Paul is doing something else. His bigger point here is unbelief, which gives rise to expressions of creation worship instead of *creator* worship. We have to keep our eye on that larger focus. If we don't, then we miss the forest and get lost in the trees.

And yet... and yet we have to talk about this subject that Paul uses as his premium example of the depths of self-deception and unbelief. And that example he gives here is the fallen desire and practice of same-sex relations.

Now, here's the issue. Paul does, in fact use same-sex desire and behavior as his example of what unbelief and rejection of the creator can produce in the hearts and lives of people. But the point here is not fundamentally the behavior or even the desires. Because if someone said, "Okay, I agree. This is bad. I shouldn't want this. I'm going to deny myself, I'm going to say no..." well there is a word for that. And I've used it before and I'll use it again. The word is "moralism" which is aiming for behavior change but not gospel-motivated heart change.

The point of this passage is not, "If we can just get everyone in the world to stop desiring this one specific forbidden thing, and if we can just get everyone to stop doing this, then we'll live in paradise."

That is absolutely not what Paul thinks. That would be like saying, "If I could just get my check engine light to turn off, then my engine would stop making that weird noise."

Because remember, the big problem here is fallen human nature and the problem of sin. Paul hasn't forgotten his overall point, which is that we are all in sin, and we are all in trouble, and we are all in need of a Savior. And if we won't recognize our problem and turn to Christ, then a strong dose of moralism will not solve our unbelief. As I've said repeatedly, there is no spiritual life in moralism. The law only brings more condemnation. For an unregenerate person, the only good the law produces is social good. It is better to live in a society where people aren't living out their deepest and darkest desires. But it still doesn't bring them peace and reconciliation with God.

The only way to know peace with God is to turn to Christ in faith. And Paul absolutely wants that for you, for me, and absolutely he wants it even for those he is talking about in this passage.

Now, I just made the point that this overall passage is not *really* about homosexuality. It's not really about sexual behavior. It's about the rebellion underneath that gives rise to that sexual behavior and all kinds of other sins, too.

Paul is saying, we all have a problem, and we can see that problem working its way out in lots of ways. You'll notice that in verse 28 onward he talks about the other ways that we see this working its way out. So all that we're really dealing with here today is a major example. A presenting symptom, you might say.

Now, here is the reason I think we need to focus on this example today: not only because *Paul* focuses on this particular example of sin, but because we live in a culture that at the moment has written a MASSIVE hall pass for anyone who experiences this specific temptation, or temptations that are adjacent to this.

Our Society says, "Yes, there's lots of evil in the world." And if you ask the elites of our society, they'll tell you all the evils of the world around us. Hatred, yes. Injustice, yes. Murder, sure. But here's what happens, they come to *this* sin and they say, "Not this. This isn't a sin. It's wrong to steal, it's wrong to cheat, it's wrong to lie... but this is not wrong." And there are lawn signs all over the place where folks try to prove to us that they're one of the good guys, that they know what real love is. It's the secular catechism that so many keep repeating.

Here's the problem. The world writes this massive hall pass for this sin. But Paul says, "The prevalence of this sin is one of the ways that we are forced to *admit* that sin is real, and that death is real, and that we need a Savior."

If we let the world have this hall pass, then we enter into a much more serious problem: a world that doesn't even need a Savior because it no longer even believes in its own sinfulness. If it won't believe that this is sin, then to follow Paul here, what even IS sin?

This sin is the lens through which Paul is convincing us that sin is real.

[1. Natural vs Unnatural]

In verse 27, Paul speaks of same-sex relations as something that results when a person “gives up natural relations.” So he is saying that this particular sin he is using as an example here is “unnatural.”

This terminology of natural or unnatural was really an important term in Paul’s day, and it was very meaningful.

Greek thinkers, especially, had considered this question of what *is* good, and what *is* virtuous. Perhaps the greatest thinker on this subject was Aristotle, who said that all things in nature aim at some end – some purpose. Everything is “for” something, and when it isn’t used for the thing it was made for, then it is lacking in virtue.

And so for example, an acorn is for becoming an oak tree. An eye is for seeing. A knife is for cutting. And a human being is made for reason and virtue. And when we use a knife to paint or use an acorn to try to see, we are living unnaturally. Even the Greeks believed this, that to be a good human meant to live a life of rational activity in accordance with virtue and nature. Evil, for the Greeks, meant to live against your own design. In other words, you did evil if you lived unnaturally.

And the Greeks also understood that there is a such thing as “natural” aspects of our lives. That because we were made for virtue and reason, if we see areas of our life that we are not living that out, then we are living against nature.

And this included sexual activity. For even the Greeks, there was a such thing as “unnatural” sexual activity.

Paul, then, is speaking to Gentiles using terminology that they know well.

Remember: this section of Romans is Paul showing the Gentiles that they are sinners, and that God’s wrath is real, even if they don’t have the written law. This argument will not make a tremendous impact on his Jewish readers.

Why? The Jews already know that what Paul is talking about here is a sin. It’s all over the Old Testament as something that God condemns. Obviously it is a part of

the natural order that if we are going to be fruitful and multiply as God commanded Adam and Eve, that means God intends men and women to be together, since only men and women have bodies that are built around creating and gestating life. But there are also some really clear examples from the text that show us what God thinks of those who reject what is natural. Both of these are from Leviticus. They're very well known and also very direct.

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev. 18:22)

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death. (Lev. 20:13)

So this is behavior that is clearly condemned in the Jewish Scriptures, and this sort of activity is never commended or portrayed positively in Scripture. So this passage where Paul writes today in verses 24-27 would not be controversial to anyone, let alone a Jewish reader. It really isn't written for the Jews. This isn't a behavior that Jews are going to be caught up in, by and large, so he would be talking past them if this was for them.

This section really is for Paul's Gentile readers. What he's talking about is something they would have witnessed a lot of in their culture, and they've seen the effects and seen it play out. In that sense, what's being talked about here is very much something that is relevant for us in our culture in our day.

This passage in the Greek, in its most literal Paul says that these men gave up "natural use of women." So what Paul is talking about here is the "use" of the body in a way that is natural.

So how would a person in Paul's day have known what is "natural"? Well for ancient thinkers who believed that God had testified to himself in the natural law, you found the answer, in part, by asking the question of what the body was obviously designed for. Once you know what the body is for – once you know it's *telos*, its purpose, its right use –you can know if it's being used either in keep *with* nature or against nature.

And even the Greeks knew, the bodies of men and women were designed to fit together in marriage, and were built around the ability to conceive and make

children. Even people who are unable to conceive because of some physical issue still have bodies that are constructed around this ability. And when that purpose is transgressed, then that behavior is against nature. Paul is saying this, but Ancient writers agreed with Paul that same-sex behavior was unnatural. Just two examples from pagan writers, though there are many.

Pseudo-Phocylides (“facilities”), writing a little before the New Testament period, says this: “Transgress not for unlawful sex the natural [physeōs] limits of sexuality. For even animals are not pleased by intercourse of male with male. And let not women imitate the sexual role of men. (Pseudo-Phocylides, Sentences 190–92)

Pliny the Elder, in his book *Natural History* wrote this around 70 AD: “In the human race also, the men have devised various substitutes for the more legitimate exercise of passions, all of which outrage Nature; while the females have recourse to abortion. How much more guilty than the brute beasts are we in this respect!” So for Pliny one way you can know what is natural is to look at animal behavior. “Even animals don’t do these things,” says Pliny. And he’s also pointing to the fact that this behavior cannot result in offspring, which is another sign that something is unnatural. Again, you see this idea – something is against nature if it goes against our evident design and purpose. Men and women were made to fit together and make children. Our bodies are designed around that purpose. The behavior he is talking about transgresses that purpose and is therefore unnatural.

How do you know something is natural? Well the answer I just mentioned was that for the Greeks was twofold: what is the human body designed for, and are we using our bodies in accord with that design? And secondly, by observing the natural world around us to see what is good for the world and what is bad for the world. So you see it through design, and you see it through the results of contrary behavior. You see what happens when this line is crossed.

This is something that Paul gets at in verse 27, because he says that same-sex behavior produces Harmful Results (1:27). He doesn’t spell it out in graphic detail thankfully, but he does say that when men in particular lived out these unnatural passions for one another, he says they “received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

Notice he says that what he's condemning is passion for one another. He's not just talking about behavior where one party doesn't consent, or where one party is dominant. It is the mutual back and forth passion between the two which is so reprehensible.

He says they "received the penalty in themselves." The idea here is not just that God stands in judgment, but their own *bodies* stand in judgment. The thing that comes from using the body in a way that it was not meant to be used is that it produces suffering that it ought not to experience.

So what I'm trying to do here is follow Paul's argument. Not necessarily give a whole Bible argument when it comes to this topic. [If you want a really solid whole-Bible examination of this topic, there is an excellent book written by Don Fortson and Rollin Grams, and it's called *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition*. In this book, not only do they look at all of the biblical material that relates to this question, but they also give a stunningly thorough overview of the views of the Church Fathers all the way up through and past the Reformation, showing that the church has always spoken with one voice on this subject.

There are some people (probably not in this room, but they may listen to this sermon on our church website) who will be especially keen to know: Is Evergreen an "affirming" church? But if you've been following along, you already know the answer: a faithful church cannot affirm anything that God has called sin.

Instead, we have to think God's thoughts after him, going to the Scriptures, and hearing HIM tell us what he is like. So while we are affirming of the image of God in every human being, no we are not affirming of this or any other sin.

And furthermore, churches should not be afraid or ashamed to say what God has said. This is a culture that won't treat us kindly for saying these things, but I have found that Christians and churches who address this subject with timidity or hesitation don't get some sort of pass or some sort of merciful treatment by the culture. Our world treats this sort of thing as a zero sum heresy test, so we might as well be heretics boldly with God's word and not be afraid of crossing the world's picket line.

So no, we don't affirm same-sex behavior or the desires that lie behind such behavior. But that doesn't mean that the church is not a place for people who experience such desires or temptations.

The church is a place for sinners of all stripes, who suffer the effects of sin in all sorts of ways. We are all here as people who have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, but who have brought our sin before God and committed ourselves to God, who is greater than our desires and our sin.

If you have a desire for sin in your heart, the greatest act of love I can show to you is to encourage you *not* to give in, and to submit your fallen desires to God. If you want something that God has forbidden, in Christ your sin is not inevitable. God has given us Jesus Christ. And in the Gospel Christ does two things: he lifts the judgment of God from those who rest in and receive him once and for all, and second, he gives his Spirit so that now you have a greater love for him so that you can say no and want to say no to your sin.

Christians do not glory in this topic. It doesn't get any of us out of the bed in the morning. In fact, it's a subject that I wish wasn't relevant to us, and which we wouldn't need to discuss. But the truth is, we have to talk about it. We've been forced to talk about it by the culture around us and by compromising churches.

There are so-called churches in our land [and I'm going to use strong rhetoric here because I mean it] that have folded in pathetic and cowardly ways, and they have decided that it is easier to give people what they think they want than to give them what God wants. I hate to put that so starkly, but it's what has happened.

And these so-called churches which have yielded to the culture around us at such a basic and simple level on a topic that the Bible is so clear on have put all real churches in a bind.

Because now there is a false impression among some out there that this is something Christians disagree on (and that they are free to disagree on). It is not. Christians all have the same Bible, and Christians do not disagree on this. The Bible is so clear, so simple, so obvious, that the only kind of church that would give this

issue up is a useless building, and a tomb full of dead-men's bones, and yes I'm using strong language here for a reason. God has incredibly strong language for those who claim to speak for him but avoid the problem of sin:

There were times in Israel's history where their supposed leaders were afraid to tell people the truth, and so they preached happy things, and good things when the people (more than anything else) needed someone to say the truth. And so what does he say? God says this in Jeremiah 6:13, "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." And then Jeremiah keeps going: "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush."

What good is the church if all we are is another outpost for the world, the flesh, and the devil? What good are we as a church if we won't say what God says? What good are we if we aren't willing to be the one in the crowd to say that the emperor has no clothes? We're no good. We would be like someone who dresses up like a doctor but who sees a serious disease and says, "Go and be well. All is well."

God is troubled that people who claim his name sin and encourage others to sin. Churches and leaders who fold on this give the false impression that there is a diversity of opinions on this, or that Christians can agree to disagree. But this is not true at all.

There is incredible pressure on the church today. We are constantly being pressured so that we would fold and go with the culture on this. The culture says, "If you want something badly enough, then you should not be stifled from living it out and experiencing it." The culture is done having this debate. Ever since the Supreme Court decision of *Obergefell v Hodges* that debate is really done. It's not debated by our political candidates. It is not even argued about anymore in public. The debate is over. The culture and politics have moved on this, but Christ's church has never moved on this, and *can* never move on this.

We saw this last week, that our culture has taken the extraordinary step of listening to Sigmund Freud and other humanistic thinkers who make sexual desire

the *center* of peoples' whole personal identity, such that if you say what Paul is saying here, you are really talking about the person, not just their sin.

This approach has a powerful grip on the social imaginary. As I said in my previous sermon, God does not define you or me by our desires. All human beings, from the youngest to the oldest are made in the image of God, created with a purpose – a *telos* – to rule the earth with nobility, to multiply and subdue creation, and to represent God in the created order as Lords over the garden. We are not simply beings whose bodies don't matter, or whose sexual lives do not matter to the creator who made us.

All sexual sin makes us liable to the wrath and judgment of God because HE made us, we did not make ourselves. We are not our own lords, we do not give ourselves meaning, God does. And so all sexual sin is an expression of our broken and fractured hearts and is an expression of rebellion against the Lord. We cannot excuse or write it off.

This includes all categories of sexual sin.

Jesus says, if a man looks at a woman with lust in his heart, that is a sin. Many men strongly desire this sin. But we may not suddenly say it's fine because so many want it badly enough. And vice-versa it is a sin when a woman does the same. Jesus says that divorce, except for cases of adultery or abuse/abandonment is evil and that the only reason God allows it to exist is because of the weakness of human nature, but from the beginning it was not so.

Sexual sin is actually a very broad category of forbidden behavior, and the church shouldn't be embarrassed to speak to these things, or embarrassed about exposing sin to the light.

Conclusion

So what should our attitude be when it comes to outreach?

There is a challenge here, because many people today are spiritually *hungry*, but they are really hoping they can get that spiritual itch scratched by looking for a church that will tell them what they want to hear on this subject. And there are

enough places that call themselves churches out there who *will* tell people what they want to hear that many of these folks never hear what God has actually said on this.

I have shared this story in the past. I apologize if you heard this before. But when I was pastoring at my previous church, there was a teenage girl standing in line to meet with me after a Sunday service. And when she came up to me, she asked me this question. She said, “I’m bisexual. I’m attracted to boys and girls. Would I be welcome here at your church?”

I wonder how each of us would answer that question if someone asked you that. Here is someone who believes that her desires define her. She didn’t just say, “this is my temptation,” but she said, “This is who I am.”

My answer was, “100% you are welcome here, and I hope you’ll come back and keep coming back.” Full stop, no equivocation. Then I said, “Now you asked if you’d be *welcome*. Are you really asking me whether we will preach about sexual sin in this church?” She nodded her head and I said,

“You know, I’m required to say everything that’s in the Bible. And each Sunday everyone here gets their toes stepped on. Everyone here hears some kind of word that tells them they’ve fallen short. But we also give the good news here. If you’re telling me that you experience sexual temptation, then just know that you’ll be encouraged to run from sin and temptation just like everyone in this room is encouraged to run from the particular temptations that they experience. So yes, you’re welcome, but I mean this with love: everyone here needs to have their sin pinpointed and confronted, and that would include you as well.”

She thought about it a moment and said thank you and left. I could tell she was let down. I really felt like Jesus when he looked at the rich young ruler, and it says “he loved him,” but then he told him hard news and the man went away sad. This girl wanted me to say, “Everyone here is a sinner, but not you. Not in this area. You’re perfect.” And because I knew what the Bible says, I just couldn’t do that for her.

This is why I have to preach on this text: because we’re *all* sinners, and God doesn’t give *any* of us a hall pass for our sin. The truth hits everybody. Sin is a

problem for *all* people. Just because we want something badly enough or persistently enough doesn't mean that we get to be a special class in the church with a sin exemption. Our sin needs to be confronted in all its forms. It's why Jesus came: to not only deal with our sin, but to equip us to confront our sin and actually see it conquered and overcome in Christ.

If you experience same-sex attraction (in one form or another) you are *welcome* here. But just like all Christians, expect God's word to step on your toes and confront you. The church is here so that we as sinners in need of a Savior can stand shoulder to shoulder and encourage each other in our daily battles against sin. The book of Romans is telling us to bring our sin to Christ. But to do that, we first have to admit that sin is a problem for us.

The point of this passage is not to say that this particular is the worst sin that anybody could ever commit. It's a serious sin with destructive effects. It's particularly unnatural, but we do make a mistake when we elevate this sin so high that we make it seem like there is no hope for the person who experiences this temptation. The grace of God is incredible, and reaches the darkest parts of our own heart.

In 1 Cor. 6 Paul speaks of people who formerly lived this way, even in the Corinthian church. He seems to know these people personally, and has seen their changed hearts and lives. And his encouragement to them is, "such were some of you. 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" (1 Cor. 6:11).

We will see this as we approach Romans chapter 7, but coming to Christ also doesn't instantly remove all of our desires for sin. Following Jesus will continue to be a challenge and a struggle as long as we are in this life and until we are glorified at the resurrection. But this is why the good news exists: because our hope doesn't depend on our performance or our own achievements of holiness, but rests in Jesus Christ alone.

What if you or someone you love feels this temptation in a particularly strong way? Well everyone addresses this somehow.

I want to suggest to you that the answer of the culture on this is the answer of death: because the culture says, don't identify it as sin, don't identify the desire for this as sin. Instead they seek to justify sin and deny that it is sin, accommodate yourself to it, and excuse it. This is a momentary and superficial answer that is focused on temporary psychological relief.

If I go to the doctor, and my cancer markers are off the chart, and the doctor lies and tells me that everything is great, I will leave his office feeling great. And I will also be no closer to a real answer, and in fact will be in worse shape than before. So if the doctor's sole focus is on psychological relief, that won't actually deal with the underlying problem. In fact, he's condemning me to death.

The people who lie to you and say that God doesn't care about sexual sin, or who say that God hasn't spoken on this don't love you, they hate you and are willing to watch you wreck yourself for the sake of a short-term sugar rush. If someone will lie to you about this it isn't because they love you, it's because they hate you so much that they are willing to watch you put your hand on the hot stove and not say anything. That's not love, that's hate.

I still think about that girl who came to our church. I wonder if she found a church like ours that would really love her. But I'm afraid that she somehow found a so-called church that really hated her, and was willing to heal her wound lightly, saying "peace, peace," when there was no peace.

Jesus is the good physician. He will not heal your wounds lightly. But we have to submit ourselves to his exam and his treatment. This means admitting that there are wounds. It does mean admitting that we are fundamentally sinful and that we have hearts that don't naturally love God apart from Christ.

To be healed we do have to admit that we *need* healing.

This is why this passage is here in Romans today: Paul wants all of us to see, none of us gets a pass. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and if it isn't this sin then it's another (we'll see that next week).

Rosaria Butterfield was once a lesbian professor who made friends with a pastor and his wife, who witnessed to her about Jesus. She makes an important observation that really what is needed is not an obsessive focus on sexuality, but to pay attention to Jesus. Listen to what Rosaria says:

“Decades ago, when I first met Ken and Floy Smith, started reading the Bible for my own understanding, and tried to come to terms with my homosexuality, I was grateful that Ken made knowing *Jesus* my primary task. Even when I wanted to derail him about gay rights and feminism and everything under the sun, he kept me focused on my need for salvation. His point was this: one step at a time. My sin of unbelief was my most foundational sin. I needed to repent and turn. After I came to Christ, I started meeting with Floy weekly so that Floy could disciple me on what it meant to be a woman of God. In theological terms, Ken and Floy were following the pattern of Scripture: justification (God's free grace that imputes the righteousness of Christ) must come before sanctification (growing to be more like Jesus as the Holy Spirit indwells, rebukes, and calls to repentance and new life).”

This is something we all need, regardless of what particular sins we might struggle with more than others. The answer of Jesus Christ on this subject is the same as his answer with other sins that all people have to deal with: recognize your sin (whatever it might be), repent by resting in and receiving Jesus Christ, and yield your whole self and your desires over to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Flee to Christ, and *then* strive to put those desires to death and mortify not just your sinful behavior but especially your sinful desires. And make that your lifelong pursuit: in Christ to see victory over your sin, taking things one day at a time.

Every time any of us desire what is contrary to the Lord we have to confess and take it to him, and look to Christ whose righteousness covers all who come to him,

and praying daily for the strength to live in keeping with our status as those who are “dead to sin and alive to righteousness” (Rom. 6).

Let's pray.