**MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM**

**PART VII**

**BROKEN WORSHIP CAUSES BROKEN SEXUALITY**

**Romans 1:18-27**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Romans 1. Today we resume our series on gender and sexuality after a brief pause to celebrate the wonder and joy of Christmas. This is Part VII of our series called “Male and Female He Created Them”. Let me briefly review what we’ve covered so far.

We began this series on the authority of Scripture, because the Christian position on gender and sexuality stands or falls with our position on the Bible. Do we believe that the Bible is God’s word? That its truths have been breathed out by God himself? If so, then we will trust that what it says is true, even if we may struggle at times to accept what it says.

We then spent three Sundays looking at Genesis 1-3. We saw in Genesis 1-2 that our identity as men and women, created by God as physical beings able to enjoy physical union in marriage, is part of God’s created order. God declared his creation “very good”, and thus we have no right to change it through the alteration of gender or the expansion of the definition of marriage.

Then we looked at Genesis 3, where we saw that Satan tempts us to abandon the Bible’s teaching on gender and sexuality much like Satan tempted Eve to abandon God’s command not to eat of the forbidden fruit. The strategy Satan ultimately employs is this: he tries to make us doubt the goodness and love of God; to believe the lie that God is holding back from us; and to break away from his lordship to become the gods of our own lives and determine right and wrong for ourselves.

Lastly, we spent two Sundays looking at what the examples of Mary and Joseph in the Christmas story teach us about biblical femininity and biblical masculinity. While these stories do not exhaust the definition of what it means to be a man or a woman, their examples certainly give us a picture of the types of men and women we want to become.

Today, we come to our first text that specifically addresses homosexuality. You may be wondering why, in a series on gender and sexuality, I have taken so long to reach a text like this. The reason is that I do not believe that it is sufficient in this day and age to just turn to a text like this and say, “The Bible says it’s wrong. Therefore it’s wrong.” There are too many factors pulling us towards accepting homosexual relationships and transgender theory for such a simple response to this issue. We have friends or family in happy relationships with gay partners. We have respected coworkers who refuse to be characterized as male or female. We read and watch opponents of same-sex marriage and transgenderism get roasted on radio, TV, and social media again and again and again. Some of you may even struggle with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria.

In the face of all these personal and cultural pressures, we need more than just rules. We need to move beyond the *what* and understand the *why*: why God made marriage for one man and one woman, and why God made us male or female. And in looking at the why, my hope is that we begin to see the beauty of those truths. That’s the only way we are going to hold steadfast to the Scripture’s teaching.

Our text today is the clearest passage in the New Testament addressing homosexuality. As we will see, it’s clear that the Bible teaches that homosexual practice is wrong. And yet, our text today is not ultimately focused on homosexuality. It is focused on something far worse, something that everyone has done regardless of their sexual orientation or sexual activity. It is focused on the fact that all people, including you and me, have committed the grave sin of idolatry.

I have titled this message **Broken Worship Causes Broken Sexuality.** We will have three points today:

1. The Sin of Idolatry
2. The Sign of Homosexuality
3. The Saviour of All Sinners

(1) **THE SIN OF IDOLATRY**

Canada is a multicultural society. Our country is made up of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and religions. We live among Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Catholics, Protestants, atheists, and others. In order for all these diverse peoples with diverse beliefs to live together peaceably, we need to be tolerant. Tolerance is good, so long as it means being respectful of the beliefs of others and learning to engage in thoughtful discussion about those beliefs in a loving way.

But that’s not what we’re told tolerance is. We’re told that tolerance amounts to leaving the beliefs of others alone. This view of tolerance says that it is intolerant to try to persuade someone to abandon their religious beliefs and adopt your own, even if it’s done in a respectful, thoughtful, and loving way. Our culture would tell us that tolerance must accept all religious truth as equally true, and not claim that the claims of one religion are superior to the claims of others. If you say things like that, you are seen as intolerant and disrespectful.

The assumption behind this view of tolerance is that religious belief isn’t a moral issue. Everyone would say that we have an obligation to tell people not to do what is wrong. We need to tell thieves and liars that stealing and lying are wrong. But our culture would tell us that we can’t tell people that their religious beliefs are wrong, because religious belief isn’t a moral issue. People can believe whatever they want without doing something wrong. If people believe that God is a mountain, that’s fine. If people believe that God is a mermaid, that’s fine too. People will only be held morally accountable for their actions, not for their beliefs.

Our text today teaches that religious belief is very much a moral issue. God will hold us accountable not just for our actions, but for our beliefs about him. And the reason why God will hold us accountable for our beliefs about him is that all of us, regardless of our religion, know certain truths about God. But though we know these truths about God, we reject them and choose to believe other things instead.

Look at verse 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” There is something unrighteous in all of us, something immoral, which leads us to suppress the truth. The truth we are suppressing is “plain” to us, as verse 19 tells us. But what is it? It’s the plain truth that God exists, that he is infinitely powerful, and through his infinite power he created all things. It’s the plain truth that God, as the Creator of all things, is not part of the creation, but made creation to reveal himself to us. That’s what we see in verse 20: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”

Such knowledge calls for us to respond by worshipping God. A God so infinitely powerful deserves to be honoured and praised. A God who made all things deserves to be thanked for the good things that he has given us. A God who sustains all creation by his power deserves the full devotion of people committed to live for him and for his glory.

But what do we do with this knowledge? We suppress it, and rather than worship and follow him, we choose instead to worship and follow gods of our own creation. That’s what we see in verses 21-22: we knew God, but didn’t honour him as God or give thanks to him, but rather exchanged his glory for mere images.

All of us had knowledge of God, and all of us had a choice: would we worship God and follow him? Or would we worship and follow lesser things? The Bible says that we all chose the lesser things. We chose to worship created things rather than the Creator. We exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the mortal things of this world. We are all idolaters.

You may be thinking, “how can you call me an idolater when I’ve never worshipped an idol?” This is where we need some definition. What is a god? When we think about god, we think about a spiritual, powerful being. That’s how many religions conceptualize god. But that doesn’t really answer the question of what is a god. It tells us where people may look to find god, but it doesn’t tell us what a god actually is.

A god is whatever we derive ultimate meaning from. Our god is what we look to for purpose, for our identity, for satisfaction. Our god is what our lives revolve around. For many people, their god is in fact a spiritual being, a divine entity that they seek to put at the center of their lives. But for the vast majority of people, including many who claim that a spiritual being is their god, their true gods are the things of this world. It could be your children. It could be money. It could be career success. It could be your physical beauty. Our gods are the things or the people that give our life meaning. They’re the things that take priority over everything else in life. They’re the things that are so precious to us, so central to our identity, that if we lose them, we seem to lose our very purpose.

That’s what idolatry is. When we make anything other than God the center of our lives, we’re worshipping a false god. When we look to anything other than God for meaning, satisfaction, and identity, we’re worshipping a false god. Idolatry is taking the good things that God has given us for his glory and giving them his glory instead. It’s the valuing of lesser things to the position of the greatest thing. It’s taking the praise, honour, and devotion that God alone deserves, and giving them to something else.

When we understand idolatry like this, then all of us must admit that we are idolaters. All of us must admit that we have exchanged the glory of our Creator to worship things in creation that were only meant to point us to him. All of us, without exception, have failed to honor God as God through the thanksgiving, praise, and devotion that he alone deserves.

What is God’s response to our idolatry? We see it in verse 18: “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven” against the ungodliness that led us to suppress the truth about God and to worship lesser things. Our idolatry incurs God’s righteous judgment. He made us to worship him. That’s the very reason of our existence. But rather than worship him, we rebelled against him and worshipped his creation instead. We have become enemies who have rebelled against the will of a righteous king.

This is how the clearest New Testament passage on homosexuality begins. It doesn’t begin by pointing fingers at gays and lesbians. It begins by pointing fingers at humanity as a whole. All of humanity is indicted for the worst sin of all: abandoning the God who created us to worship him, and turning to worship false gods instead. Even though homosexuality is wrong, as we will see in the next few verses, it’s not the heart of the problem with our world, our relationships with others, or our relationship with God. The heart of the problem is our idolatry.

(2) **THE SIGN OF HOMOSEXUALITY**

Our idolatry has disastrous consequences, not only in our relationship with God, but in our relationships with one another. This leads to our second point: the sign of homosexuality.

The reality of homosexuality as wrong is clearly set out in verses 26-27. It’s clear that he’s speaking about homosexuality, as he’s talking about women having sexual relations with women and men with men. It’s also clear that he’s saying that homosexuality is wrong, for three reasons:

* Verse 26: homosexual behaviour is the product of “dishonourable passions”. They are passions that do not befit the honour and dignity of people made in the image of God. They are a corruption of what is right and good about how God made us.
* Verse 26-27: homosexual relations are described as “contrary to nature” or the “giving up” of “natural relations”. Homosexuality is contrary to God’s intended order. It violates the natural laws of creation that he put in place both for our good and to display his goodness. And when we offend God’s created order, we offend God himself.
* Verse 27: those who engage in homosexual activity will receive in themselves “the due penalty for their error.” Homosexual activity attracts God’s just punishment, and God only punishes what is sinful.

There is no doubt that the Bible teaches that engaging in homosexual activity is sinful. That conclusion is inescapable. The question now for us is how do we respond to this? Will we believe it, or will we reject it? We will only believe it if we trust the Scriptures; we will only trust the Scriptures if we believe that the Scriptures have a better grasp of reality than we do; and we will only trust the Scripture’s view of reality if we believe that they are God’s words and that God is good.

Like Eve, Satan may be tempting you right now to believe the lie that God is not good, and that God is not loving. And because he is not good, his commands are not good and that we can’t trust them. Instead, you may be tempted to trust your own judgments and conclude that what is really good for us and for humanity is the opposite of what God says is good.

Don’t believe this horrible lie. Of course God is good! Of course God loves us! We know that because he sent his Son to die for us. As sinful as we may be in our idolatry and our dishonourable passions, and as broken as we may be in our worship and sexuality, God doesn’t just spit on us and abandon us to our own self-destruction. God reaches down to us in the person of Jesus Christ and saves us. We’re going to look at this more in the next section, but for now, I urge you not to forget what God has done for us just because we’re looking at what God forbids.

But before we move on, we need to put homosexuality into context. After all, as I said earlier, our text is not ultimately about the brokenness of our sexuality. It’s about the brokenness of our worship.

Look at verse 24: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity”. The word “therefore” is essential. It connects what Paul is about to say with what he had just said about idolatry. What does God give us up to in verse 24? God gives us up in the lusts of our hearts to “impurity”. The word “impurity” is usually used in the New Testament to refer to sexual immorality, and this interpretation is reinforced when he says it’s the “dishonouring of their bodies among themselves”. Paul’s saying that God gave us up to the dishonouring of our bodies through sexual immorality in general, which is any sexual activity outside of the bonds of marriage between one man and one woman.

The word “therefore” in verse 24 tells us, then, that the connection between idolatry and sexual immorality is that sexual immorality is the consequence of our idolatry. We are idolaters, therefore God gives us up to sexual immorality. Our worship is disordered, therefore God hands us over to disordered sexuality. The presence of such prevalent sexual immorality in our world is part of God’s judgment on us for our idolatry.

This doesn’t mean that God causes us to commit sexual immorality, for God never tempts anyone to sin. But it does mean that he chooses not to hold us back and gives us over to suffer the consequences of our own brokenness. As scholar Douglas Moo says in his definitive commentary on Romans,

“Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin.” (p. 111).

And it is this terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin that leads God to go one step further and hand us over to homosexuality. It is because we continued to exchange, as verse 25 tells us, the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator that God *further* gives us up to homosexuality. Homosexuality, like sexual immorality in general, is part of God’s judgment on humanity for the sin of idolatry that we all share.

We may not all experience homosexuality, but the presence of homosexuality is meant to serve like a dark reminder of the grave sin that we have all committed against God. The brokenness of human sexuality serves as a sign of the brokenness of our worship. God hands humanity over to unnatural sexual relations so that we can see just how unnatural our worship has become.

We see this reasoning again in verses 25-26: “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions.” The reason why God gives people up to homosexuality is that we had given up the worship of the Creator for the worship of the creature. We exchanged God for idols, and so God allows our exchange of natural relationships for unnatural ones.

This has significant consequences on how we interact with those who experience same-sex attraction and those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community. It tells us that the brokenness of their sexuality is the result of the brokenness of *our* worship. Their judgment is our judgment. God could have chosen any one of us as the objects of his judgment and handed us over to the same dishonourable passions. The fact that he may not have done so is an act of his mercy, and not because we did anything to deserve it.

When I used to practice law, I counselled and defended a transgender woman – that is, a person born as a man who now self-identifies as a woman. This person was extremely difficult to deal with. No one wanted to represent him. I took on his case as a favour for a colleague of mine. As his trust for me grew, it became apparent that he was trying to flirt with me. He would bat his eyelashes at me, ask me to feel how soft his hands were, and speak glowingly about me to his trangender community support people.

How do we react to someone like that? Do we react with pride at the fact that we’re not like that? Or do we react with compassion for a broken person who reflects the brokenness of all, including us? Seeing people experience same-sex attraction is no occasion for pride. There is absolutely no room for us to say that we’re better than them. Instead, the brokenness of our fellow human beings must serve as a reminder of our own brokenness before God, a brokenness in our hearts that is far deeper and prevalent than the brokenness of their sexuality.

(3) **THE SAVIOUR OF ALL SINNERS**

So what do we do with the knowledge of our brokenness? We follow Paul’s example in our text, and see that his purpose in showing us our brokenness is to point us to the Saviour of all sinners.

One of the basic rules of biblical interpretation is that “Context is King”. Considering context requires us to zoom out from a particular text and understand how that text fits into the larger argument. We’ve done that already in understanding how the truths in Romans 1 about homosexuality are related to the deeper problem of idolatry. But now we have to zoom out a little more and see how this entire section of Scripture fits into Paul’s argument in Romans.

To truly understand our text, we need to start with the previous two verses:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

This is Paul’s thesis statement for the entire book of Romans. He wants to teach his audience, including us, about the gospel, about its power to save, and about the righteousness of God revealed to us in the saving power of the gospel. This is good news. Although the book of Romans may show us the impotence of man in becoming right with God, it is ultimately about the power of God to make us right with him. Although Romans may teach us about judgment, it is ultimately about salvation from that judgment. And although Romans teaches us about the wrath of God, it is ultimately about the righteousness of God: his faithfulness to his people to do whatever he needs to do to keep them in a right relationship with himself.

We see Paul’s explanation of “the righteousness of God” come to a climax in Romans 3:21-25, which many theologians consider the most important passage in all of Scripture. This is what it says:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested…the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

The reason why Paul shows us that homosexuality is a sin is so that he may show us that all of us are sinners due to the idolatry in our hearts. And the reason why he wants to show us that we are all sinners is so that we would all know that we need a Saviour. And the reason why he wants to show us that we need a Saviour is so that he may show us that God has provided that Saviour. In his righteousness, God gave us his own Son, Jesus Christ, who would satisfy the full wrath of God against us through his death on the cross on our behalf, so that we could be justified by his grace as a gift.

God knows that we could never be righteous by our own efforts. Our problem is that we don’t know it. Our hearts are so darkened, our thinking so futile, that we convince ourselves that we can make it on our own. But we can’t. We never can. Our hearts are too broken. They are idol factories, looking to anything but God for meaning, satisfaction, and identity.

This is why God hands some of us over to homosexuality. The brokenness of human sexuality helps us see the brokenness of our worship. It is meant to remind all of us, not just those who experience same-sex attraction, but all of us, of our desperate need for Jesus. The disorder in our relationships is a picture of the disorder in our hearts. We seek unnatural sex just as we seek unnatural gods.

But Christ is sufficient for both the idolater and the homosexual. Jesus pays the penalty of God’s judgment for anyone who would turn from their sin in repentance and turn towards him in trust. And when we do this, he forgives us of the penalty of our sin and begins to free us from the power of sin. We will continue to struggle with sin. Just as someone may struggle with the temptation to view pornography for the rest of their lives, those who experience same-sex attraction may never be free of it. But one thing is certain: regardless of how much you may struggle, you are righteous before God if you have put your trust in him. You belong to him, and he will help you in your darkest hours of temptation.

I love how Sam Allberry puts it in his book about homosexuality. Sam is a pastor in the UK who has struggled with same-sex attraction since he was an adolescent. He is also someone who has experienced the rich grace of Christ and the deep satisfaction of knowing him. This is what he says:

“Is God anti-gay? *No*. But he is against who all of us are by nature, as those living apart from him and for ourselves. He’s anti *that* guy, whatever that guy looks like in each of our lives. But because he is bigger than us, better than us, and able to do these things in ways we would struggle to, God loves that guy too. Loves him enough to carry his burden, take his place, clean him up, make him whole, and unite him forever to himself.”

* Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*

Speaking up about homosexuality isn’t an end in itself. We win no victories by convincing our culture that homosexuality is wrong. The real victory is won when we point sinners, whether they be homosexual or heterosexual, to the saving power of God made available to all of us in the gospel.

We may have to tell our friends, our colleagues, our loved ones, that homosexuality is wrong, but we must never leave the conversation with that mere, insufficient point. We need to dig deeper into the idolatry of the human heart, to show that our deepest problem is not our sexual-orientation, but our God-orientation, so that all people would truly see both their desperate need for Jesus and the saving grace he shows us to meet our needs.

**CONCLUSION**

The next time we meet a gay or transgender person, or read an article about the pride parade, or receive more disturbing news of how the LGBTQ community is eroding religious freedom, let’s carefully examine our reaction in order that we may carefully examine our hearts. Do we respond with an “us versus them” mentality, that they’re the problem and we’re the solution? Or do we respond with a humble acknowledgement before God that we are sinners with broken hearts living in a broken world?

Our reaction to the LGBTQ community must never be one of pride or malice. It must be one of compassion. For it was our idolatry, our sin, our brokenness, that led to God handing them over to these dishonourable passions, and it is God’s mercy, God’s grace, and God’s compassion that holds us back from experiencing the same thing. May we all, with God’s gracious help, lovingly point all people to the Saviour of all sinners, that all would share in the joy of God’s salvation.