

# Love and Sexuality

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## Table of Contents

1. A Note on Love and Sexuality .....	5
2. Sexuality: A Study of the Creation Stories in Genesis 1 & 2. ....	6
3. Sodom and Gomorrah: A Study of Judgment in Genesis 19 .....	8
4. What Would Jesus Say? A Interlude on Jesus' Teachings about Sexuality. . . .	10
5. Faithful, Loving Relationships A Study of Paul's Condemning Language in His Letter to the Romans .....	18
6. Youth Adaptation .....	22

## **A Note on About This Study**

This study has been curated with the purpose of starting a conversation about faith and sexuality. We understand that this is a personal, vulnerable conversation to have. And we know that studies like this have been the cause of much harm for people throughout the greater Church. We lament and repent for any harm done by the Church against any one who has experienced shame or violence simply for being who God made them to be.

We also acknowledge that the two authors of this study have many limitations with regard to the content and the volume of academic work done on these subjects. In most cases, we have read and deferred to scholars and authors with more expertise than ourselves. We have merely begun a discussion and ask for readers to be open to learning and listening along the way.

We have set up the sessions of this study to consider themes in first the Old Testament and then in the New Testament. Some of these passages are well known, but we would ask that you come into these sessions with a fresh lens.

Again, collect any questions that arise as you move through this study. And be gentle with yourself and with others as you enter into faithful conversations.

## **Sexuality**

### **A Study of the Creation Stories in Genesis 1 & 2**

#### **Introduction**

Sexuality has been called the greatest gift that God gave humanity. It has also become the most controversial in the last few decades – particularly in regard to lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual issues, along with gay marriage and ordination of those in same-sex relationships.

In the next few sessions, we hope to thoughtfully and intentionally wrestle with scripture and this often volatile issue.

The Rev. James Dent in his book *This I Know* writes, “. . . do not tolerate a shallow reading of the Bible, but intentionally struggle with the depth of God’s love, the mystery of the Spirit’s work, the abundance of Christ’s grace, and the inherent fallacies of human insight.” (page x)

I propose that we approach this subject with open minds, hearts, and spirits. Let us pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we wrestle and struggle with God’s word. Like Dorothy and her friends in the Wizard of Oz who follow the yellow brick road, it is an exciting road but there are also lions, tigers and bears. As Paul writes in Philippians 2:12: “... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure.” Let us go bravely for God is with us.

#### **Let’s Start at “In the Beginning”**

In Genesis 1, the Bible states rather clearly that God is the Creator. God does this with intentionality, love, and purpose.

When God creates the humankind, Adam, He created them male and female in His image. God blessed them and says “be fruitful and multiply . . .” (NRSV, Genesis 1:27-28) Now as Dr. A. J. Levine points out in a monograph for “Outreach,” “From the First Commandment, some Christians argue that sexual intercourse should be limited to fertile heterosexual couples.”

#### **Questions for Discussion**

- How many of you think intercourse is intended only for procreation?
- What then do you say to people who think, based on Scripture, that such is the case?

#### **Creation & Procreation**

As Levine goes on to point out, this borders on the ridiculous. That text is an endorsement of procreation, not a limitation of the sexual act. God evidently likes children and babies. However, nowhere does scripture say sex for the sake of enjoyment and pleasure is bad/evil. I believe that we will see as we progress that lust, sexual violence, and use of sex to intimidate and use for power and control are not what the Creator had in mind. In fact, a close reading of the scriptures will find just the opposite. Marriage and children are wonderful! But, the other stuff where people are used and abused is just wrong. If we are turning human beings into nothing more than “baby making machines,” then we have totally misread scripture.

Since we are dealing with the creation story, many people say, “Well, God created Adam and Eve – not Adam and Steve.” True, but God also created Steve! So what do we do with Steve?

## The In-Between

Let's look again at Genesis 1. In verse 4, God said, "Let there be light; and there was light. God separates the light from the dark" and then in verse 5, "God calls the light day and the darkness night."

Now for those of you who are early risers or perhaps grew up on a farm, you are familiar with the phrase "from can see to can't see." Twilight is described as the period or the light from the sky between full night and sunrise or between sunset and full night (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Can see to can't see – that is twilight! When God created light and dark, He didn't use a huge light switch – up it's light, down it's dark. God gives us twilight.

Further, in Genesis 1:6-10, God separates the earth and the sea. Wonderful! However, what do we do with marshes, swamps, quicksand, etc.? Having spent some time in the swamps and marshes hunting and fishing, I can tell you they are not sea but they are certainly not earth. They are something in between. Perhaps, we need to look at the "in between."

In the same vein, let us think for a moment. The following is written with all grace, love and peace to the LGBTQ+ community. I would suggest that there are humans that God loves whose sexual attraction is not heterosexual but homosexual. Their sexuality is found in the twilight -- something other than what we might label "heterosexual."

## Healthy, Human Relationships

God says in Genesis 2:18 "that the man should not be alone so God creates woman." I find it interesting that God gives man a woman because man is lonely! As Jim Dent points out in This I Know, page 16, "God first gives man the animals but they do not offer the depth of companionship that the woman is able to give." Now, many people find companionship and joy with their dogs, cats, horses, etc. However, it seems God recommends human community and relationship.

In Genesis God desires for the man, community, someone like himself but not totally like himself; someone who understands but has different ideas and is like me, but different! Does this mean God likes diversity? So it seems!

## Questions for Discussion

- What things we know exist (like roaches) does Genesis says nothing about?
- Is God still creating? If so, can you give examples?

## What Does This Mean For Us Today?

I find it hard to believe that the Creator God who creates a universe of such breadth, width and diversity, who made day and night and twilight, did not create some humans male and female who are different. Throughout scripture, Jesus seems drawn and reaches out to those who his culture and society called "different." From lepers to the Samaritan woman it is quite evident that Jesus broke cultural boundaries and expectations. Likely, one of the reasons he was crucified.

Now during this study, we will try to present different views and outlooks on sexuality in scripture. We would hope that all who study sexuality in scripture will remember the Old Testament story of Jacob at the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22). Jacob, in a fearful agitated state, wrestles the entire night with a man, an angel, or is it the Lord God himself? At any rate, Jacob was blessed even though he would always walk with a limp. Perhaps our attitudes, convictions, and belief systems might take a hit and we will walk, think and act a bit differently, but we will have been blessed by God.

## **Sodom and Gomorrah**

### **A Study of Judgment in Genesis 19**

#### **Introduction**

This is a well-known story found in Genesis 19. If you have not read it, I advise you to do so. As you read, set aside any preconceived notions about this story.

Many of us have read this story as one that condemns homosexuality. That is simply not true. As countless theologians and Old Testament scholars will tell you, this is a story about lack of hospitality, Sodom and Gomorrah's disregard of the needy, and sexual violence. In many ways this story should make us recoil in horror, not because of homosexual sex, but the threatened violence on Lot's visitors and his willingness to allow his daughters to be gang-raped. That is the truly repulsive part of this story. Lot is willing to let the crowd do harm to his daughters in the name of hospitality toward his guests. Jim Dent states, "Lot's righteous act was his practice of hospitality."<sup>1</sup>

#### **Question for Discussion**

Ezekiel 16:49-50 states clearly, *"This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before; therefore I removed them when I saw it."* With regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, what was Ezekiel apparently concerned and not concerned about?

#### **Hospitality**

It seems clear from this that Ezekiel had no concern for the "homosexual" aspect of the encounter. What is offensive and an abomination to God is the violence and lack of hospitality that is shown to the visitors. Their prosperous ease and their negligence to the poor and needy bring about their destruction. One final note – homosexuality is not the real issue in this story.

In truth, this story of Sodom and Gomorrah is at most a story that condemns homosexual rape.<sup>2</sup>

Now, let's deal with that word abomination. Many folks latch onto that. "See, that (homosexuality) is an abomination!" Well, let's look at that. Abomination can be considered anything disgusting, vile, shameful, or terrible. Every culture has these "abominations." For example, eating dogs. And sometimes we use the word "taboo."

In our world, incest as in Biblical times is considered an abomination. However, most studies, and there are a few, acknowledge that incest is far more common in our present-day culture than is realized. The Statista Research Department reported on February 2, 2024, that around 15% of families have had an event of incest in the family. That is scary! Also, what was considered incest in the Biblical world is not the same as in our culture. Example: Abraham is married to Sarah who is his half-sister. Later such unions were banned (Leviticus 18:9). Things change as the culture changes, or so it seems.

Without getting too lengthy, there are a number of things found to be abomination in The Holiness Code: eating swine (so long BBQ and bacon) mixing seeds when planting, two kinds of animals plowing together, two kinds of cloth woven together – all considered unclean, abhorrent to the Lord God. So get rid of your polyester/cotton clothing (Deut. 22:9 – 23:18), careful how you plant your



garden, and don't use a John Deere tractor and a Massey Ferguson in the same field. (That is a joke!) Further, for those of you who have tattoos I would suggest you consider laser removal, surgery, or dermabrasion (ouch!). See Leviticus 19:28 for the prohibition against tattoos.

Since I have wandered this far from Sodom and Gomorrah, let me mention the Lord God also considers the following an abomination:

Dishonesty (Proverbs 12:22) – tax time is coming;  
Arrogant pride (Proverbs 16:5) – let's don't name names;  
Devising evil and sowing discord (Proverbs 6:16-19) -- Christians should pay special attention – of course that never happens in Christian churches.

The point is, many of us pick and choose the things that we consider an abomination. We are not going to stop picking and choosing (I'm not going to say stop eating pig and cheeseburgers), but acknowledge we are doing it and own the criteria/reasons for our choices. Just as the Genesis story about Sodom and Gomorrah is about lack of hospitality, greed and violence, so are these abominations about something more than what they seem at first read. Please consider the context! That is crucial! Context – context – context!!

### **What Does This Mean for Us Today?**

If we don't consider the context of these abominations, we get ourselves in serious trouble. Dr. Ben Witherington, a professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, puts it this way: "The Bible should be read in context and that a text without a context can be used to mean whatever one wants."

The writers of the Holiness Code were telling the early Hebrews, "You are different from your Canaanite neighbors."<sup>2</sup> You worship the Lord God. You do not worship Molech or Baal or any other idols. You Hebrews are to be different. So are we as Christians.

Superficial reading of scripture does more harm than good in God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup>This I Know by Jim Dent 2018 by Nurturing Faith, Inc., Macon, Ga.

<sup>2</sup>The Children are Free by Jeff Miner and John Tyler Connoley

## What Would Jesus Say? A Interlude on Jesus' Teachings about Sexuality

This is a short interlude between our sessions from the Old Testament and New Testament. As Christians, we put a lot of stock in what Jesus says about certain subjects. However, Jesus does not have any recorded quotations in the four gospels that refer to a theology of sexuality.

There are many arguments that can be conjured out of conversations that Jesus had about romantic relationships and marriage. For example, Jesus speaks on divorce and adultery in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 16. He also mentions it with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Jesus even references the teaching:

*“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:6-10, NRSVUE)*

However, these conversations do not condemn any sort of relationship that is outside of the traditional man-woman marriage. They simply address the brokenness of some relationships and how to tend to such things. There is no discussion of what a healthy, love-filled relationship between two men or two women might look like, or why those things would be prohibited.

There are also some arguments that can be surmised from other gospel stories. For example, there is a story about a centurion who is seeking to find healing for his servant:

*“When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.’ And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’ The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.’ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.” (Matthew 8:5-13, NRSVUE)*

There are scholars who have studied this passage and determined that the centurion may have a sexual relationship with the young man that he calls his “servant.”<sup>1</sup> This has catalyzed a discussion about Jesus’ opinions about sexuality. However, this is not a fully accepted theory. And, again, there is no judgment or decision cast by Jesus about the relationship between the centurion and his servant. Instead, he simply heals the servant because of the faith and efforts of the centurion.

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<sup>1</sup>Resource used: Jennings, Jr., Theodore W. and Tat-Siong Benny Liew. *Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13*. Journal of Biblical Literature 123/3 (2004) 467-494. Accessed at [jstor.org/stable/3268043](http://jstor.org/stable/3268043) on 18 oct 2013

The bottom line is that we could speculate for pages upon pages about what Jesus said or would have said about sexuality. And we would never reach a solid conclusion.

What we do know about Jesus' teachings is that he consistently landed on one common motivation for a life of faith:

*“Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28b-31, NRSVUE)*

This is the foundation of our faith. And this should be the truth that we fall back on whenever we find ourselves lost in a conversation without a simple answer.

What would Jesus say about all of these things? He would tell us to love God and to love our neighbor.

## **Knocking Down Walls** **A Study of Philip's Ministry in Acts 8**

### **Introduction to Acts**

The Book of Acts is full of stories about the followers of Jesus after Jesus had been crucified, died, risen from the dead after three days, and ascended into heaven. It is actually a sort of sequel to the Gospel of Luke, known to have been organized by the same author. This is obvious when one compares the first few sentences of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

*Luke 1: "Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed."*

*Acts 1: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"*

Throughout the sequence of stories in Acts, we follow well-known characters like Peter, Paul, and other disciples as they try to live out the lives for which Jesus prepared them. Jesus promised, though, that he would not leave them alone. Instead, he would send them the Holy Spirit to accompany them, empower them, and hold them accountable in the days ahead. As readers, then, we follow the movement of the Spirit and what it is doing in and around the people of faith all over the region. There are some pretty far-fetched adventures and improbable miracles portrayed in Acts. At the root of it, though, are lives that are changed and often turned upside down by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

These stories remind us that we, too, are often surprised by what the Holy Spirit is up to in our lives and in our world. And that we, too, might find that the Spirit is working in unexpected ways.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Have you read any of the stories in Acts? If not, take a moment to flip through some of the pages now and familiarize with some of the headings.
2. Do you have any stories about how the Holy Spirit has moved or acted in your own life? Or have you heard any stories that you're willing to share?
3. How do you know that you're living the kind of life that God has called you to live? What helps you to make decisions faithfully when you are faced with them?
4. When you're in a time of transition or when you're about to start something new, what do you do to try to listen to or become aware of where the Spirit is calling you?

## Read Acts 8, Pt. 1

*“Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed, and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.*

*“Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.*

*“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.’ Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.’*

*“Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.” (Acts 8:4-25)*

### Questions for Discussion

1. What are your initial reactions to this story? What are your feelings about each of the characters?
2. What stuck out to you about the differences between Philip and Simon?
3. The story is clear about what evangelism looked like for the early leaders in the church. What does evangelism look like to you? What do you do to try to spread the gospel or live your life in a way that exemplifies God’s love?
4. What did you notice about the Samaritans who were converting and “accepting the word of God”? How did their lives change?

## Deeper Look

The major storyline here is that Philip was engaging with a Samaritan community. As followers of Jesus began to teach and preach and live out the gospel in the surrounding region, they encountered different social and cultural obstacles that could have prevented them from building worthwhile relationships. In this case, Samaritans were not likely to interact with Jews. Therefore, it was quite the surprise that a follower of Jesus, like Philip, would be so brave as to enter into this community as an evangelist.

We may recall some stories about Jesus interacting with Samaritans in his lifetime. However, this is not something that the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts had included thus far. Therefore, this story may have come as a shock to some of the initial readers.<sup>2</sup>

This story, then, is evidence that the work of the Holy Spirit was not something that was reserved for a certain group of people, a certain sect of religious piety, or a certain cultural construct. Instead, the good news and the benefits of a life of faith were for everyone.

Perhaps this was a scandalous claim. But the ministry of Philip makes it clear that God's Spirit was breaking down walls and moving beyond barriers that had previously caused division, judgment, and shame throughout society. And the kind of world that God's Spirit was hoping to create is one that does not keep anyone at an arm's length.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What are some examples of social and cultural barriers that exist in your community today?
2. What are some examples of ways that you try to cross over those barriers in your own life? Or are there examples of how your community of faith has stretched its reach to another group of people, perhaps an unexpected connection?
3. Christians often have a reputation of being overly exclusive. What are some ways that Christians can lean into a more inclusive mindset or pattern of behavior?

## Read Acts 8, Pt. 2

*“Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:*

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<sup>2</sup>Resource used: *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible*, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes (1998)

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.*

*“The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.” (Acts 8:26-40, NRSVUE)*

### Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever felt, like Philip, so moved by the Spirit to do something totally new? Did you feel unprepared? How did you get through it? What gave you the courage you needed?
2. Again, there is a clear distinction that this man Philip encounters is different: he’s an Ethiopian eunuch. How do you usually feel when you engage with a stranger for the first time? How do you interact in a gentle way when you meet someone who is clearly different from you (e.g. culturally, socially, etc.)?
3. What is different about this baptism from your own? What is similar?
4. What did you notice about the change in the Ethiopian eunuch before and after his encounter with Philip? What changed for him? What do you think the rest of his life was like?

### Deeper Look

Biblical scholars have done a lot of research to try to paint a picture of the Ethiopian eunuch for lay readers to understand why this encounter was so remarkable. The cultural difference is clear. Philip and this individual come from very different backgrounds. The eunuch’s social/economic status is interesting, too. The proximity to royalty means that he may have proximity to wealth as well. Then, there is the physical meaning of his role as a eunuch.

Scholars debate about the note that this man had come to Jerusalem to worship. A eunuch would not have been allowed in the Temple by rule of law, so had he actually been allowed to worship in Jerusalem? The physical consequence of being a eunuch also blurs the lines on his gender and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> There is no easy answer to how he would have been viewed by others in his society with regards to these labels.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Resource used: Kegler, Emmy. *One Coin Found*. Fortress Press, 2 Apr. 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Resource used: *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 9: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible*, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes (1998)



All of this is to say that none of the eunuch's identity stood in the way of the Holy Spirit. He asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The fact of the matter is that there may have been many things that could have superficially raised an issue for Philip. But, led by the Spirit, Philip baptized him, and their lives were never again the same.

The scroll that the eunuch is attempting to read in the chariot is from Isaiah 53:7-8. Scholars also make a connection to a line a few chapters later in Isaiah 56:4-5:

*"For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."*

This story orients us to the reality that no one is "cut off" from God.<sup>5</sup> That we cannot do anything or be anything that would turn God away from us. And we can take some inspiration from Philip that it is not our job to isolate anyone in our communities. But that the Spirit is calling for us to bridge the gaps that already exist, perhaps even gaps that are unexpected or uncomfortable.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What are your initial reactions to this conversation regarding gender and sexuality? How does this passage challenge you? How does it portray the good news?
2. What are some parts of your own identity that have been the source of shame? How does it feel to hear that God does not withhold any love and grace from you? Or that God does not want you to hide any part of yourself to try to earn God's love and grace?
3. How does this story change the way that you imagine God's Spirit acting in the world around us?
4. Does this conversation excite you? Does it make you uncomfortable? Does it raise any questions?
5. The overarching question in this passage seems to be, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Is there anything that should prevent someone from being baptized? Is there anything that should prevent someone from being a part of a community of faith? Is there anything that should stand in the way of someone receiving the gift of God's love and grace?

### What Does This Mean for Us Today?

This is such a sensitive subject because faith is such a personal thing. It is deeply rooted in who we are and how we live our lives. This is also a sensitive subject because it often involves talking about the most vulnerable parts of someone's sense of identity. And it is a conversation that often involves an unhelpful power dynamic or one person telling another how to live their life. What this story (hopefully) does is encourage us to begin a conversation without any initial feelings of shame and judgment.

The clear answer here is that God's love is for everyone, and that nothing can separate us from God's love. We cannot do anything to get more of it, and we cannot do anything that will force God to withhold some of it. We are all beloved children of God - no more, no less.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Resource used: Hartke, Austen, and Emmy Kegler. *Reconciling Scripture for Lutherans*. 2019.



This story also brings up an idea that perhaps perspectives shift over time. The Spirit is always moving and adapting to how the world changes. That means that the faith that we have today might look and sound a lot different than the faith the disciples had at the beginning of church history in the Book of Acts. And that's okay. God's Spirit continues to fill us with love and grace along the way, even as we tackle different obstacles every day.

There are many questions that might be raised when we talk about integrating theologies around identity, gender, and sexuality. The questions that we can take with us after moving through this study are full of openness, curiosity, and compassion. What are we doing to make our community of faith a place where anyone and everyone feels safe to grow in their faith? What are we doing to prevent anyone from being welcomed into our community of faith? How can we lean into a pattern of listening and understanding more often than we lean into a pattern of proclaiming and judgment/expectation? How can we learn from the relationships we build with people whose lives are not like ours?

Philip is moved by the Spirit to meet people that he did not expect to meet. Whatever preconceived notions he had before these encounters, he had to leave behind. It is a vulnerable situation, but it is one that resulted in a rush of evangelism and life-giving conversations. How can we be more like Philip today and every day?

## **Faithful, Loving Relationships**

### **A Study of Paul's Condemning Language in His Letter to the Romans**

#### **Introduction to Romans**

This book of the Bible is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to an existing community of faith in Rome. Paul's letters (usually referred to as epistles) address a specific group of people at a specific point in time. It's important to know this when we read it because it helps us to understand that the content of the letter is contextual. Biblical scholars often remind readers that when we read these passages it is as if we are "reading someone else's mail." Groups receiving Paul's letters would usually read them aloud together as a group at one of their regular meetings.

Paul often proves to his readers/listeners that he knows who they are by acknowledging some of their background or faithfulness in his introductory paragraphs. In Romans 1:8-12 he writes:

*"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." (Romans 1:8-12, NRSVUE)*

After making a connection with this particular community of faith, Paul delves into a series<sup>7</sup> of theological arguments that address some of the questions they've had or the behaviors and rituals they've displayed.

In Rome, one of the major conflicts had been division inside of the church. Many early churches were made up of an eclectic group of believers. For example, there were many who had a Jewish faith background as well as many others, Gentiles, who did not. While both sets of people lived in faith together, there was some tension because of the differences in their cultural and religious backgrounds (e.g. circumcision, see Romans 2).

Historically, Jews (including the Jewish Christians) had been expelled from Rome in 49 CE by the Roman emperor Claudius. Five years later in 54 CE, the emperor Nero lifted the ban and allowed them to return. We can imagine how much further the existing schism between the Jewish and Gentile members of the church had grown during their absence.<sup>8</sup>

The letter, then, spends most of its time addressing these kinds of conflicts and trying to create unity between them. It can be so easy to judge one another based on differences, especially when they are rooted in such personal things as culture and religion. But, Paul hopes that the congregation in Rome will be able to lean on what matters most - their unity in Christ - and become even stronger when they commit to living in community together.

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<sup>7</sup>Resource used: *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible*, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes (1998)

<sup>8</sup>Resource used: Martin, Colby. *Unclobber : Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever been at odds with anyone in your church community? How did it feel? How did you approach the conflict? Was it ever resolved?
2. How do you usually approach a conversation about faith? How do you hold fast to what you believe without antagonizing someone else for their beliefs?

## Read Romans 1:18-2:1 (this passage is taken from the NRSVUE translation)

*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.*

*“Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. 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 over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

*“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to an unfit mind and to do things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.*

*“Therefore you are without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.” (Romans 1:18-2:1, NRSVUE)*

## Questions for Discussion

1. How do you feel when you’re reading a passage like this one? What are the emotions that bubble up for you?
2. What kind of picture does this passage paint of God? What is God like?
3. The whole passage has some difficult “name-calling” kind of language in it, especially verses 28-32. Have you ever had such condemning words said to you? How did you feel? If not, how would it feel to be addressed so harshly?

## Deeper Look

As we noted before, Paul's letters are written with a specific context in mind. Therefore, when we look at a passage on its own we can often misunderstand its meaning or purpose.

This cut-out of Romans 1:18-2:1 is difficult to read. It is full of shameful language and judgment. Paul was no stranger to speaking honestly about his disappointment in certain behaviors or beliefs. We do not need to soften or sterilize his argument to make us feel better. But, it is clear that focusing only on this snapshot of such condemning words would only drive a larger wedge into the very kind division that Paul is hoping to mend in Rome.

The climax of this passage comes in Romans 2:1 when Paul writes, *"Therefore you are without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."* (Romans 2:1, NRSVUE) Judgment always creates an "us vs. them" kind of atmosphere. But, Paul tells his audience that they are no better than the people at whom they are pointing fingers.

Biblical scholars note that it is almost as though Paul writes this letter in a way that sets the readers up.<sup>9</sup> He dives into a hefty explanation of what unfaithful behavior can look like. You can imagine that the initial response is full of head-nodding and patting themselves on the back for abstaining from such unforgivable actions, only for Paul to knock them over with the punchline, "You're just as bad! Who are you to judge?"

Again, Paul is not one to hold back. He will not condone sinfulness or anything that he sees as unfaithful. But it would be easier to take a handful of verses of judgment and use them against a group of people than it would be to take Paul's entire argument into consideration and understand that he is trying to create a sense of solidarity.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of some other passages that you have heard/read taken out of context?
2. Does this deeper look change the way that you think about this passage from Romans?
3. What are your initial thoughts when you read Paul's words in 2:1?

## "Dishonorable Passions" (Romans 1:26-27)

These are the verses that are often quoted in conversations about sexuality and relationships. It seems as though Paul makes it clear that anything outside of a relationship that consists of one man and one woman is unacceptable and even sinful. That is more or less what these two verses indicate.

The major examples of these kinds of sexual relationships come from pagan rituals. Roman Christians would have separated themselves from communities of religious activities that included ritual sex and other pagan traditions. These would have differed from their understanding of healthy, love-filled relationships. And they would have seen these actions as outside of God's design for sexual behavior.

Paul and other Christians probably would have been tied to an understanding that love should be between one man and one woman. But it does not appear that this is necessarily an argument against

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<sup>9</sup>Resource used: Martin, Colby. *Unclobber : Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

the kind of relationships we might see today between a man and a man or a woman and a woman or between folks who may not identify as binary individuals.

The greater problem here for Paul seems to be idolatry. The individuals that Paul is condemning have lost themselves and their faith in these “dishonorable passions.” They have strayed from the purpose of their lives that God has given them.

So, when Paul sets his readers up towards the end, he begs the question, “Where have you also fallen short? Where have you also succumbed to idolatry?”

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. How can we deal with the harshness of Paul’s language and the desire to be loving and affirming of folks we know in non-hetero-normative relationships today?
2. What are some other idolatrous behaviors?
3. How can we take these words seriously while also understanding that we may disagree with Paul about the sinfulness of sexuality?

### **What Does This Mean for Us Today?**

Again, it seems clear that Paul is addressing two major conflicts: division in community and idolatry.

Division is something that we know all too well in our contemporary society. We divide over many things: college football teams, politics, preferring dogs or cats, etc. We can understand the difficulty in trying to engage with people who believe so differently from us. But Paul challenges his listeners (and us) to bridge those gaps by creating empathy for one another. He invites this community to lean into a deeper understanding of each other’s stories in order to know where we’re coming from. He also wants us to land on the thing(s) that binds us - our unity in Christ. We all fall short. How can we come together on the fact that we are only one in Christ?

Idolatry is a bit different. We don’t speak in such terms colloquially anymore. But it seems as though Paul is concerned with any beliefs or behaviors that draw us away from God. He mentions specifically pagan rituals and other lustful relationships. But he does not condemn any kind of healthy, love-filled, consensual relationships. It is difficult to believe that Paul would not approve of someone in a relationship that helped them to better understand God’s love and grace. Isn’t that one of the best tangible ways we know how to understand God? In our relationships?

## Youth Activities for Christian Unity

Adapted by Deacon Deborah Poole  
Coordinator of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry

When I first started working in youth ministry, I swore I would stay away from conversations like homosexuality, transgender rights, and general sex stuff. I was determined to keep the focus on Jesus. But the problem is that the news, schools, and friends are talking about all of those things, and if we don't have those conversations at church, then students will gain nearly all of their learning from news, schools, and friends, along with social media.

Therefore, if you intend to use this Bible study with youth, please consider the following:

### Inform Parents

- You may think that 7th graders need to hear about how far is too far for totally valid reasons, and their parents may think that they're not ready, for equally valid reasons.
- Parents have the right to know what you're going to discuss and it's better if they find out before your talk with the youth instead of after. Be open and upfront with parents about what is happening in youth group.
- But what about when questions come up? What happens when a student or a whole group of students are faced with an issue and hijack an otherwise non-controversial session because a friend at school came out and they aren't sure how to handle it? It happens! Delay answering those questions until the next session.
- Promise students that next week, you will talk about this and then follow through on that promise. This gives you time to let parents know what's going on, and just as importantly, it gives you time to really prepare.

### Talk To Your Pastor

Just like the parents, the senior pastor would like to know that you're talking about potentially inflammatory issues.

### Keep Open Ears. An Open Mind Is Optional.

- Your students have wildly different opinions about issues like sexuality and those opinions come from a gamut of Biblical and non-Biblical sources.
- Keep your ears open.
- Give students time to think and process out loud, even if you disagree with what you're saying.
- The fastest way to lose your audience is to shut them up because you think they're wrong and lecture instead about what you believe is right.

### Avoid Meme-ification

There is a popular meme that condemns homosexuality by saying, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. End of story." Questions of sexuality deserve a much more thorough, well-thought-out response and discussion.

## **Love, Not Hate**

Regardless of your position on issues of sexuality, violence and hate are NEVER the path to take for any group of people for any reason. Love is always the way. Perhaps this a no-brainer and doesn't even need to be mentioned, but it might not be that way for your students.

There are, unfortunately, groups that both claim the name of Jesus and celebrate acts like the nightclub shootings in Orlando. They are a small minority who claim an undue portion of the publicity. For students on the fringes, they may read and hear about a church that celebrates hate against homosexuals. Make it clear they know that you are not that church.

## **Keep Jesus as the Most Important Thing**

- Conversations about sexuality are dicey and divisive, and at the end of the day, the most important thing is the love, grace, and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.
- Pray together and agree to walk together in a unified way to spread and share the love of Jesus even when there are disagreements among you.
- Agree to have more conversations like this one in the future.

