



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1268-2
1 Corinthians 13:13
Mark Mitchell
February 29, 2004

Responding to Same-Sex Partnerships with Truth and Grace

SERIES: *Same-Sex Partnership?*

When we confront the issue of homosexuality, we must not forget that we are dealing with people; not just fact and theories, but real people.

I think of Steve. Steve sat in church Sunday after Sunday, nursing his secret shame. His confusion and guilt was overwhelming at times, and he desperately wanted to tell someone. But he didn't dare. Comments from the pulpit and attitudes reflected by some at church sent a clear message that it wasn't safe to discuss this with fellow believers. After Steve finally found the courage to confide in his pastor, he was shocked to find out that the pastor had told others of his problem. People he had known for years suddenly acted aloof. Fear gripped him when the pastor told him the elders wanted some time with him. His sense of alienation deepened when the elders informed him that he could no longer teach the fifth grade Sunday School class. It really didn't seem to matter to anyone that he wasn't acting out on his desires, and that he sincerely wanted to change.

But I also think of Lisa. She had finally found the acceptance and fellowship she longed for. She and a small group of other homosexual women were welcomed into the warm embrace of this grace-filled church and accepted for what they were. Their church's understanding of Scripture was different from what she had been raised to believe. She was invited into membership - no questions asked. She and her friends were encouraged to celebrate their same-sex identity, only in a responsible way. Her pastor even offered to officiate at the "union" ceremony of she and her partner. At times Lisa felt a pang of guilt, but she couldn't deny her feelings of relief at finally being accepted.

Unfortunately, these two very different experiences characterize what men and women with same-sex desires usually find in the church today. Either the church rejects them for what they feel in order to maintain God's righteous standard, or they're embraced and encouraged to celebrate their same-sex desires as a natural expression of how God made them.

Are these the only two options open to us? Is there a third response? Is it possible to embrace both unchanging truth

and unlimited grace? Two weeks ago I gave a biblical perspective on homosexual behavior. What I didn't do was give a biblical view of what the relationship should be between the church and those who live with homosexual inclinations. That's what I want to do this morning. To do that I want to use as an outline Paul's triad of faith, hope and love in 1 Corinthians 13:13, "**And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**"

I. The Call to Faith

Let's start with faith. Faith is our human response to God and his word. Faith is believing what God says and acting upon it, even when it doesn't make sense to us. Hebrews 11 is the "Hall of Fame" of faith. There we read about the likes of Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses and Rahab. In every case, they heard the word of God, believed it as the word of God, and acted upon it.

Faith starts with hearing and accepting God's word. Last week we saw that God's word says the only alternative to heterosexual marriage is singleness and sexual abstinence. If you're not married, that's a very difficult calling to have. You have to battle your own desires. You have the constant temptation of the enemy. And you have the secular world which tells you, "Sex is essential to your fulfillment. To expect people with homosexual desires to abstain is to condemn them to a life of frustration, neurosis and despair. It's cruel to ask you to deny yourself what is for you a natural and normal mode of sexual expression."

But God's word says something different. It tells us that while our sexuality is part of who we are as human beings, we don't need to be active sexually in order to be fulfilled.

Take Jesus Christ. Despite what some people tell us today, Jesus was single and he never had sex. But Jesus was perfect in his humanity; he was a whole person, he knew great joy. He teaches us that it's possible to be single, chaste, and fully human. Fundamental to our faith as Christians is that God's commands are not there to deprive us, but they're for our good. The yoke of Christ brings freedom, not slavery.

You say, "Well, he was Christ. He was different." But that's not what Scripture says either. Scripture says even he had to "**learn obedience through the things which he suffered**" (Heb. 5:8). Scripture says he was "**tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin**" (Heb. 4:15). Tempted in every way? Was Jesus tempted to lie? To steal? To murder? To commit adultery? Might Jesus have even been tempted in a homosexual way? I shudder to say that. But at the very heart of the gospel message is the fact that Jesus was our human representative on the cross. How could he represent sinners whose sins he had never faced or never conquered?

Scripture calls Jesus in Hebrews 12:2, "**the author and perfecter of faith.**" He's the one we're to follow. He's our model. At the very center of being a follower of Christ is the call to take up our own cross and follow him. If you're a person with same sex desires, that means that as an act of faith you have to lay your sexuality at the foot of the cross. If you're a single, heterosexual person you have to do the same. Those of us who are married know that we too must take up our cross. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. We may think that our cross is heavier than someone else's, but, in our own walk of faith, we all have a cross to bear. One of the problems we have in our society is that we Christians, who want to protect the sanctity of marriage, have not always been the best examples of that. Divorce is just as prevalent in the church as it is in the culture, as is premarital sex. Perhaps if we kept our own house in order, the culture would be more prone to listen to God's word.

Though we're not perfect, faith believes that God is able and willing to give us the grace we need to be obedient to his call on our lives. Hebrews says that since Christ himself has suffered temptation, he is able to help those who are tempted (Heb. 2:17-18). So we're not left to ourselves to fight this battle. Not only does he forgive us and cleanse us, he gives us new life and his Spirit strengthens us. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was for sure. What if that thorn in the flesh was a same sex inclination? He asked for God to take it away. Three times he asked and each time God said the same thing, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness**" (2 Cor. 12:9). In our brokenness and weakness, we do have God's power. To

deny this is to portray us as helpless victims of the world and of our own sinful natures. But we're not victims, we're victors! We have new life in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 we see a list of sins which Paul says characterizes those who will NOT inherit the kingdom of God. Among them are those who practice homosexuality. But then in v.11 he says something we often miss: "**Such were some of you...**" There were people in that church who had come out of this lifestyle. Notice the past tense. That's what they WERE, not what they ARE. Something changed them. Paul says, "**You were washed...you were sanctified...you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.**"

II. The Call to Hope

This leads me to the second thing - hope. What kind of hope for change is there for a homosexual person? Is there a cure? Is there healing? Can they really change? Our answer to that question will depend on our understanding of the cause of same-sex inclination. Studies are NOT conclusive as to a single cause. Most scholars believe it's caused by multiple factors. There may be a biological predisposition, there are cultural and moral influences, childhood environment and experience, as well as repeatedly reinforced personal choices.

There are two prevalent distortions in the church about the possibility and process of real change and healing for those inclined towards same-sex relationships. The first is the conservative Christian myth that a quick, sincere repentance and prayer for healing will instantly change that person. Although that's always possible, the problem is that's rarely what really happens. The more prevalent myth is the opposite, that there is NO hope at all for healing and change. The person with same-sex inclination will just have to fight these crippling desires his entire life.

Here is where we need the balance of Scripture. Scripture teaches that sanctification and change is a lifelong process. There is a balance in Scripture between a theology of victory and a theology of suffering. Like any other sin, you may never completely rid yourself of same-sex desires until you see Christ and are transformed into his image. But this hope makes our present suffering bearable. Alex Davidson writes, "One of the most wretched things about this condition is that when you look ahead, the same impossible road seems to continue indefinitely. You're driven to rebellion when you think of there being no point in it and of despair when you think of there being no limit to it. That's why I find comfort... to remind myself of God's promise that one day it will be finished."

BUT, there is also hope for change - here on earth. I have a book here called *Portraits of Freedom*, which includes the testimonies of 14 followers of Christ who've come out of homosexuality. Many of them are happily and heterosexually married. For all of them, it didn't happen overnight. It was a process, but there was progress. Barbara Swallow, who struggled with same-sex desires most of her life writes, "I want to encourage you, to let you know that Jesus truly heals...homosexuality. There is more available to you than just abstinence, more than struggling with temptation for the rest of your life. Jesus can set you free from every aspect of your unhealthy thought patterns and from all the junk that goes with them. Don't be afraid to let Jesus into the painful areas of your life. Allow him to walk through them with you. With Christ's help, force yourself through the pain. I know at times it is so tempting to try and avoid feeling the pain of the past because when we feel it, it's just as real as if it were happening all over again. But just think, if you trust Jesus, he can heal the hurt and you will never have to live with that pain again. Just imagine the freedom. When you push through the past with Jesus Christ, he can heal you forever. I assure you that he is able to do this. He did it for me."

Tim Stafford, a Christian writer whom I greatly respect, did an investigation several years ago into the success of ex-gay ministries such as Exodus International. His conclusion was that ex-gays seldom experienced a 180-degree reversal of their sexual desires but rather a gradual reversal in their understanding of themselves as men and women in relationship to God, which helped them to relearn distorted patterns of thinking and relating. They were people in process.

One of the keys to change is the development of deep, loving, lasting, honest friendships, both with members of the same sex and the opposite sex. Where do you think that can best happen? The best place for that to happen is the church of Jesus Christ.

III. The Call to Love

This brings us to the third and final thing, the greatest thing, Paul says, is love. You see, we live between the present grace we grasp by faith and the future glory we anticipate in hope. In between these two realities lies love.

When I speak of love I don't mean a love that denies the truth of the gospel or the standards of Scripture. There is a misunderstanding today about love and more specifically about tolerance. It used to be that tolerance meant the ability to agree to disagree; that you could disagree with someone about what is right

and wrong but you still respected them and loved them as human beings made in the image of God. But now tolerance has come to mean there is NO right and wrong. You don't agree to disagree, you just agree that everybody can do what they want and believe what they want and somehow we're all right. That's not tolerance; that's foolishness!

Having said that, let's be honest, the church hasn't always felt like a safe place for the person who struggles with same-sex desires. A good case can be made for the fact the homosexual is the modern equivalent of the leper. In Jesus' day, lepers were social and spiritual outcasts. Historically, the church has responded to homosexuals like the Pharisees responded to lepers - with a mixture of irrational fear, hostility, and even revulsion.

When we do that, we overlook a few important things. We overlook the fact that most homosexual people are not solely responsible for their condition (though they are for their conduct). Would we treat a person who was rendered blind as a child the same way? We also overlook the fact that we ourselves share not only a common humanity but also a common disease called sin. In God's mind, sin is sin. We all deserve his wrath, and anything we get above that is pure grace. In his mercy and grace, Jesus welcomed the most despised sinners of his day, and the Pharisees cringed. I would ask who are we most like? Are we more like Jesus or are we more like the Pharisees?

So there needs to be a double repentance. Some Christians must repent of their homosexual behavior, while others must repent of their heterosexual self-righteousness and hatred. We should stop the queer jokes and insults. We should deal with our own emotional reactions. And we should determine to make the church a place where a person struggling to be obedient in the midst of homosexual desires can be embraced and prayed for. Are you willing to pray with, eat with, hug and comfort a man or woman who has homosexual feelings?

John Stott's writing has helped me immensely think through this subject. He writes, "At the heart of the homosexual condition is a deep loneliness, the natural human hunger for mutual love, a search for identity, and a longing for completeness. If homosexual people cannot find these things in the local church family, we have no business to go on using that expression. The alternative is not only between the warm physical relationship of homosexual sex and the pain of isolation in the cold. There is a third option, namely a

Christian environment of love, understanding, acceptance and support. I do not think there is any need to encourage homosexual people to disclose their sexual inclinations to everybody; this is neither necessary nor helpful. But they do need at least one confidante to whom they can unburden themselves, who will not despise or reject them but will support them with friendship and prayer; probably some professional, private, and confidential pastoral counsel; possibly, in addition, the support of a professionally supervised therapy group; and (like all single people) many warm and affectionate friendships with people of both sexes.”

It's time for the loving actions of Christians to be so obvious that the one thing the homosexual community cannot deny is that we love them and we care for them. For some, that will not be enough; they also want us to agree with them. We can't do that. But may they never be able to say we didn't extend a hand to help. There are thousands of people dying of AIDS right here in the Bay area and they're alone. Let me tell you something I believe with all my heart: Jesus would be there. For some reason, these were the kinds of people that were drawn to Jesus. Why aren't they drawn to us?

Conclusion

Many of us have seen the movie *“Passion of the Christ”* this week. We've grimaced as we've watched him endure the gruesome suffering of the cross. But in the cross we see more than just physical torture, We see faith, hope and love come together.

We see Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, willing to say to the Father, **“Take this cup from me, but not my will, but rather your will be done”** (Luke 22:42).

We see Jesus, who hoped against hope; **“...for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame...”** (Heb. 12:2).

And we see the purest expression of love ever given. People are asking, Who killed him? The Jews? The Romans? I think we know the answer. We all did it. My sin and your sin nailed him to that cross. But it was love that drove him to surrender to such brutality. John, the apostle of love, said this, **“God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love one another”** (1 John 4:9-11).