

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

By Sam Allberry

This article is an exploration of the specific passages that mention homosexual behaviour, but it's important to remember that God's blueprint for sexuality is interwoven throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. The passages below need to be set in the wider biblical framework of teaching on sex.

It is a surprise to many people to discover that there are only a handful of passages in the Bible that directly mention same-sex relationships. Yet despite its infrequent mention, where the subject does come up, the Bible has some very important things to say about it. We need to understand them if we're to avoid the twin mistakes of homophobia and thinking God is indifferent about how we use our sexuality.

The first two passages that directly mention homosexuality come from the Old Testament, the other three are from the New Testament.

1. Genesis 19

Sodom has become so associated with homosexual conduct that its name was for many years a byword for it. But is "sodomy" really what Sodom is about?

The account describes the men of the city attempting to forcibly have sex with two angelic visitors to the city, who have appeared in the form of men. Later parts of the Old Testament accuse Sodom of a range of sins: oppression, adultery, lying, abetting criminals, arrogance, complacency and indifference to the poor. None of these even mentions homosexual conduct. This has led some people to wonder if we have read homosexuality into the Genesis narrative, when in fact the real issue was social oppression and injustice. But a close look at the text makes it clear that homosexuality was in fact involved.

Although the Hebrew word for "know" (yada) can just mean to "get to know" someone (rather than to "know" them sexually), it is clear from the crowd's aggression (and Lot's dreadful attempt at offering them his daughters as an alternative) that they are looking for much more than social acquaintance. Hence what happens next: the angels warn Lot that judgment is imminent (v.13).

In the New Testament, Jude adds an important insight:

...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 7)

What happened at Sodom is clearly meant to be something of a cautionary tale. Jude makes it clear that their ungodliness involved sexual immorality. They were punished for sexual sin along with the other sins of which they were guilty.

Jude also highlights the nature of their sexual desires: they pursued “unnatural desire” (literally, unnatural “flesh”). Some have suggested that this relates to the fact that the visitors to the city were angelic—Jude references angelic sin earlier in his letter. But these angels appeared as men, and the baying crowd outside Lot’s house showed no evidence of knowing they were angelic. Their desire was to have sex with the men staying with Lot. In other words, it was the homosexual nature of their desires, and not just the violent expression of them, that is highlighted in the New Testament.

2. Leviticus 18 & 20

Leviticus contains two well-known statements about homosexual activity:

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

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

(Leviticus 20:13)

Sometimes people claim that these verses appear in a book of laws that no Christians think we should follow today. Hence, they say, the prohibitions on same-sex sex do not now apply. Others note that in the Old Testament Law “an abomination” is often used to describe idolatry. They therefore suggest these verses do not condemn all homosexual behavior, but only cultic prostitution connected to pagan temples.

However, the language used is not that specific—it refers in general terms to lying with a man “as with a woman.” In addition, the surrounding verses describe other forms of sexual sin (such as incest, adultery and bestiality). These have nothing to do with pagan temples or idolatry, and Christians would recognise that they are still forbidden today. It is moral—not just pagan religious—behaviour that’s in view. Furthermore, Leviticus 20:13 highlights both male parties equally. This also suggests that general, consensual homosexual activity is in view (as opposed to rape or a forced relationship).

3. Romans 1:18 - 32

Turning to the New Testament, Romans 1 has much to say about the nature and character of homosexual behavior.

In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul shows that the whole world is unrighteous in God’s sight, and therefore in need of salvation. Romans 1:18-32 zeroes in on the Gentile world, describing how it has turned away from God and embraced idolatry. The particular details in the passage may indicate that Paul is using the Greco-Roman culture surrounding his readers as a case in point.

Gentile society faces God’s wrath because it has suppressed the truth that God has revealed about himself in creation (verses 18-20). Paul then illustrates how this has happened. He gives three examples of how what has been known about God has been exchanged for something else. They exchange the glory of God for images of creatures (verse 23). They exchange the truth of God for a lie,

worshipping created things (verse 25). And they reject the knowledge of God (verse 28), exchanging “natural” relations for “unnatural” ones:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27)

Two important and sobering truths are apparent from these verses:

1. Homosexual desire is not what God originally intended. This does not mean that homosexual desire is the only thing that God did not originally intend. All of our desires have been distorted by sin. But Paul does describe both lesbian and male homosexual behavior as “unnatural.” Some have argued that this refers to what is “natural” to the people themselves— heterosexual people engaging in homosexual activity and thereby going against their “natural” orientation. According to this view, Paul is not condemning all homosexual behaviour, but only that which goes against the person’s own sexual inclinations.

But this view cannot be supported by the passage itself. The words for “natural” and “against nature” refer not to our subjective experience of what feels natural to us, but to the fixed way of things in creation. The nature that Paul says homosexual behavior contradicts is God’s purpose for us, revealed in creation and reiterated throughout Scripture.

Paul’s reference to lesbianism as well as male homosexual conduct also supports the idea that he is condemning all homosexual activity, and not just the man-boy relationships that occurred in Roman culture.

The strength of Paul’s language should not make us think that homosexual conduct is the worst or only form of sinful behaviour. Paul may be highlighting it because it is a particularly vivid example, or because it was especially pertinent for his readers in Rome given their cultural context. Either way it illustrates something that is the case for all of us: as we reject God we find ourselves craving what we are not naturally designed to do. Even those desiring heterosexual sex find themselves doing so in a way that does not fully accord with the creator’s design for sex. There are no grounds in this passage for singling out homosexual people for any kind of special condemnation. The same passage indicts all of us.

2. Our distorted desires are a sign that we have turned away from God. Paul writes that alongside the gospel, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Though there will one day be a “day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Romans 2:5), there is already a present-day expression of God’s anger against sin. We see God’s wrath in this: he gives us what we want.

In response to the exchanges Paul has described, we see three instances of God giving societies over to live in the wreckage of our sinful desires. This is his present-day judgment against sin. We ask for a reality without him and he gives us a taster of it.

In each case the “giving over” results in an intensification of the sin and the further breakdown of human behavior. God gives humanity over to impure lusts and dishonorable bodily conduct (verse 24), and to “dishonorable passions” (verse 26). The exchanging of natural relations for unnatural leads to being given over to a “debased mind” and the flourishing of “all manner of unrighteousness” which Paul unpacks in a long list of antisocial behaviors (verse 28-31). Sin leads to judgment, but judgment also leads to further sin.

The presence of all these sinful acts is a reminder that we live in a world which has deliberately turned away from God in all sorts of ways, and is therefore experiencing a foretaste of God’s anger and courting its final outpouring on the day of judgment.

It is important to recognize that Paul is talking here in social rather than individual terms. He is describing what happens to culture as a whole, rather than particular individuals. The presence of same-sex desire in some of us is not an indication that we’ve turned from God more than others. But it is a sign that humanity as a whole has done so. It is not the only sign, and in everyone there is no doubt more than one sign or another. But it is a sign that human nature has been changed from what God originally intended.

4. 1 Corinthians 6:9 - 10

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

In these verses Paul describes different kinds of people who (unless they repent) will be excluded from the kingdom of God. Four kinds relate to sexual sin, and two of those specifically to homosexual behavior. The ESV takes the latter and puts them together as “men who practice homosexuality”, while the NIV translates them as “male prostitutes and homosexual offenders”.

The first of the terms relating to homosexuality is *malakoi*, which translated literally means “soft ones.” In classical literature it could be used as a pejorative term for men who were effeminate, for the younger, passive partner in a pederastic (man-boy) relationship, or to refer to male prostitutes (hence the NIV’s translation). In 1 Corinthians 6 *malakoi* comes in a list describing general forms of sexual sin, and the context suggests Paul is probably using it in a broad way to refer to the passive partners in homosexual intercourse.

The second term Paul uses is arsenokoitai. This word is made by adding “male” (arsen) to “intercourse” (koites, literally “bed”). These two words are used in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which suggests that Paul is linking back to those two passages. (Paul has already just made a connection with Leviticus in 1 Corinthians 5, where he condemns the church’s acceptance of a man living with his father’s wife using language that echoes Leviticus 18:7-8. For Paul, the sexual sins which Leviticus prohibits remain forbidden for New Testament Christians.) Arsenokoitai, then, is a general term for male same-sex sex. Its pairing with malakoi indicates that Paul is addressing both the active and passive partners in homosexual sex.

What does all this mean for our understanding of homosexuality?

1. Homosexual sin is serious. Active unrepentant sinners—including those actively involved in same-sex relationships—will not enter God’s kingdom. Paul urges us not to be deceived on this point. He assumes there will be those who deny this teaching, and argue that some forms of homosexual conduct are acceptable to God. But Paul is clear: homosexual conduct leads people to destruction. This is a serious issue.

2. Homosexual sin is not unique. Paul’s list includes other forms of sexual sin (sexual immorality and adultery), and it includes non-sexual forms of sin (drunkenness and theft, for example). Homosexual sin is incredibly serious, but so is greed. We must not imply that homosexual sex is the sin of our age. If we are to be faithful to Scripture, we must preach against theft, greed, drunkenness, reviling, and defrauding others, many of which are also trivialized in our society, and all of which also characterize the unrighteous.

3. Homosexual sin is not inescapable. Paul continues in verse 11: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

These forms of behavior are not appropriate for the church of Jesus Christ, precisely because it is not who we are any more. Clearly, some of the Corinthians had been active homosexuals. They did once live in these ways. But no more. They have been washed, sanctified and justified; forgiven, cleansed from their sins, and set apart for God. They have a new standing and identity before him.

However ingrained it may be in someone’s behavior, homosexual conduct is not inescapable. It is possible for someone living a practicing gay lifestyle to be made new by God. Temptations and feelings may well linger. That Paul is warning his readers not to revert to their former way of life suggests there is still some desire to do so. But in Christ we are no longer who we were. Those who have come out of an active gay lifestyle need to understand how to see themselves. What defined us then no longer defines us now.

5. 1 Timothy 1:8 - 10

Here Paul writes:

The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, men who practise homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. (1 Timothy. 1:9-10)

He again uses the term *arsenokoitai* (translated by the ESV as “men who practice homosexuality” as a catch-all term for all forms of homosexual conduct). Also in common with 1 Corinthians, same-sex sex is mentioned among other wide-ranging sins, non-sexual as well as sexual.

These forms of behaviour characterize those who are not “just” and for whom the law was given, in order to bring conviction of sin and the need for mercy. All these practices contradict “sound doctrine” and the gospel. They do not conform to the life Christians are now to lead. They go against the grain of the new identity we have in Christ.

Conclusion

Attempts to read these texts as anything other than prohibitions of homosexual behaviour do not ultimately work. The plain reading of each passage is the right one. It is homosexual practice in general, rather than only certain expressions of it, which are forbidden in Scripture. To attempt to demonstrate otherwise is to violate the passages themselves. Yet these very same texts list homosexuality alongside many other forms of behavior that are also against God’s will. The very passages that show us that homosexual activity is a sin, make it very clear that it is not a unique sin. It is one example of what is wrong with all of us.

The passages above should be read in the context of the wider teaching on sexuality in the Bible. We can only fully understand the goodness of the biblical teaching on homosexuality when we appreciate God’s design for sex within marriage, the design for community, the provision of non-sexual intimacy and the ultimate new creation hope for all of us.