“Washed, Sanctified, Justified,” 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (October 20, 2013)

9 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, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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 our God.

PRAY

The words that jump out at you in our text for this morning, or at least they jump out at me, given where we are in our culture, are those words “men who practice homosexuality.” I think that in this day and age it would border on pastoral malpractice if I failed to give a lot of attention to those words this morning, and I will.

I know this topic is very close to many of you. Maybe you identify as a gay man or woman. Maybe you have a loved one or dear friend who does – certainly that’s many, many of us. And if you think, “Well, I don’t know anyone who is gay, I’m never around anyone who’s gay,” yes, you are. You may not realize it but you are. If you come to our church regularly, you are.

And the church hasn’t done a good job of addressing this subject. On this subject, perhaps more than any others, Christians have come across as shrill, as hateful, as especially judgmental. If that’s been your experience, I’m sorry for that. That’s not right, it’s not helpful, it’s not the way Jesus would speak to you about this topic.

After having had lots and lots of conversations with people on this subject, I am convinced of the reason why: Christians simply don’t know how to think about homosexuality. We don’t know how to think about it so we certainly don’t know how to talk about it in a loving, caring manner.

Do you know why Christians don’t know how to talk about it, and therefore talk about it so badly? Because thirty years ago, twenty years ago, ten years ago even, Bible-belt Christians didn’t have to think about it. Bible-belt Christians were in an America where there was overwhelming agreement that homosexuality was wrong, and because almost everyone agreed that it was wrong meant that Christians were never forced to do disciplined, careful thinking on this subject. Everyone agrees it’s wrong; why bother with the reason why? End of discussion. Christians didn’t learn how to engage in a respectful discussion on this topic because for so long there was no discussion – it just wasn’t an issue.

Obviously that has ceased to be the case. Because of a concerted effort by some very motivated interest groups, now probably a majority of Americans, and certainly the overwhelming majority of non-Christian Americans, have no moral objection to the practice homosexuality.

© 2013 J.D. Shaw
Now Christians in America are forced to do something on this topic that we’re not accustomed to having to do: think. Christians in America are some of the laziest thinkers in the world because we haven’t had to think – we’ve been in the majority for so long in America that we just assume public opinion on any given matter should always be on our side, and when many Christians have talked about this issue in the last decade we’ve adopted a tone of condemnation and disgust so often probably because we didn’t know what else to say.

So while this cultural sea-change we’ve experienced on the issue of homosexuality has been so radical and can be just plain frightening to so many Christians in our county, I think it can be a good thing because it’s forced Christians to go back to the Bible and be reminded, or maybe learn for the very first time, what a biblically-informed, God-gloryifying, sexual ethic looks like for Christians. And what Paul says in our passage for today may be the most helpful words anywhere in the Bible when it comes to making that happen.

Before I get to what Paul actually says, I feel like I need to say one more thing: if you are here today and you are not a Christian, and especially, if you identify yourself as gay, welcome, we are glad you are here. You may be thinking, “I picked the wrong day to visit Grace Bible Church.” No, you didn’t – because at the very least you will walk out of here and you will know what the Bible (which is, after all, the most foundational book in Western Civilization) – you will know what the Bible says about something very important to you: sexual orientation, same-sex intimate relationships. Why wouldn’t you want to know what the Bible says about that? I’m not saying you have to agree with it, but why wouldn’t you want to know? Why would you want to be ignorant?

So, what does the Bible say? When Paul addresses homosexual behavior in these verses, he doesn’t just pluck that topic out of thin air and address it in isolation; rather, he talks about it in terms of “habitual sin.” Habitual sin, or regularly practiced sin. Being in the habit of committing certain sins. The Bible is clear: homosexual behavior is sinful; it is wrong.

Now I tried to imagine this past week how saying that would land with certain groups of people that might be here today. If you are in the group that feels firmly that no one should have a moral objection of any kind to the practice of homosexuality, then you need to know at the outset that you’re not going to agree with a lot of what I say this morning. It’s not like I’m teaching that if Christians will just think more then they’ll all of the sudden be in favor of the practice of homosexuality. They won’t – when as a Christian you understand what the Bible says about homosexual behavior I think you only become more opposed to it.

My prayer, rather (and I’ve been praying for this all week) is that you will simply see what the Bible says about this topic. I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that my job as a preacher is not to convince you of what the Bible says. My job is not to sell you on the Bible. My job is not to defend or apologize for what the Bible says. My job is simply...
to explain to you what the Bible says. But I have confidence that if I do that faithfully, wonderful things will happen. Charles Spurgeon says that the Bible, the Word of God, is like a lion. You don’t need to defend a lion. You just let the lion out of his cage. My job as a preacher is to let the Word of God out of its cage, expose you to it, and let you wrestle with it.

But even though the teaching that homosexual behavior is sinful may not sound like a promising introduction for some of you, it is – just hang in there, especially if you struggle with homosexual feelings and you don’t want them, because I know there are some of you here too – hang in there. There is good news for you in this text.

Three points: first, the seriousness of habitual sin. Second, the habitual sin in homosexuality. Third, the triumph of the gospel over all sin.

First, the seriousness of habitual sin. Let’s read verse 9: 9 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, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

What’s Paul doing in those verses? He’s issuing a warning. He’s writing to the church at Corinth – to the professing Christians who gathered two thousand years ago in the ancient Greco-Roman city of Corinth, and he’s saying this: I don’t care if you claim to be a Christian. I don’t care if you’ve made a public profession of faith in Christ before your family and friends. I don’t care if you’ve been baptized. I don’t care if you’ve walked down the aisle and prayed the sinner’s prayer. If you habitually practice one of these nine vices listed in verses nine and ten, you have no reason to think that you are a Christian. You have no reason to think that you are going to heaven when you die. You have no reason to think you will inherit the kingdom of God.

The Bible is very clear on this point: you cannot claim to be a Christian and habitually practice sin. But what does that mean?

Does it mean we cannot be Christians unless we are perfect in word, thought, and deed? Never thinking a negative thought? Never speaking a harsh word to someone else? Never telling a lie? Is that what Paul means here?

If so, then nobody in this room can be a Christian – certainly not the man behind the mic. If our being perfect is the standard, then no person on the planet can be a Christian. No one.

Rather, it is when we make a practice, a habit, a lifestyle, of committing certain sins that we should have no assurance that we are Christians, that we will inherit the kingdom of God.

© 2013 J.D. Shaw
In 1 John 3:4-6 we read this: "4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him."

One of the vices in Paul’s list is greed – so Paul says, “If all you can think about when it comes to money is how you can spend it on yourself, more stuff for your house, your hunting camp, your vacation home, and if you can hardly bear to give any significant portion of it away, if all you are concerned about in your business is maximizing your profits and getting a higher salary for yourself, if that is your regular practice, do not think you will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Sexual immorality and drunkenness are two other vices, so Paul, were he here today, might says this: “Guys, if you go out on Saturday night after the football game and get drunk, and have sex with some girl you’re not married to, and that’s your practice every chance you get every weekend of the year, then I don’t care if you’re in church on Sunday morning, you have no reason to think you are a Christian and that you will inherit the kingdom of God. You are sowing the wind, and one day you will reap the whirlwind.”

And then, of course, there are the words we’ve already talked about – Paul says, “Do you not know that … men who practice homosexuality … will not inherit the kingdom of God?”

And of course at this point there are those who don’t want homosexual desires, who want to be rid of them and follow Jesus wholeheartedly, who might say: “What hope do I have in that? I can’t change the way I feel. I’ve been dealing with this for years, for decades, for as long as I can remember been struggling with same-sex desires, and Paul says that homosexuals will never inherit the kingdom of God – what can I do?”

Ah, but Paul did not say that, did he? He did not say that those who habitually struggle with homosexual desires will not inherit the kingdom of God! He said, “Those who practice homosexuality” will not. That’s an important distinction.

Second, the habitual sin in homosexuality. Friends, please know: if you struggle with same-sex attraction, if you are a man and you’re not attracted to women, but to other men, that doesn’t make you ineligible for the kingdom of God. It doesn’t mean God’s wrath is waiting for you.

Say you come up to me after the service for pastoral counseling and say, “J.D, I struggle with same-sex attraction. I struggle with homosexuality.” Now, I may not say this quite so quickly in an actual counseling scenario, but fairly quickly – certainly before we parted ways – I’d reply with: “Guess what? I struggle with opposite-sex attraction. I struggle with heterosexuality.”

© 2013 J.D. Shaw
You say, “J.D., I’m burdened with my homosexuality.” Well, friends, if that’s you, you share that burden, best estimates I’ve seen, with around 3-5% of the population. But the other 95-97% of the population is burdened with heterosexuality.

You may think, “J.D., what do you mean by that? How is heterosexuality a burden?” Every single person on the planet has at least three things in common: first of all, we are made in the image of God and precious in his sight. Second, we are all fallen, we sin, we fall short of the glory of God. Third, one of the ways we are fallen is in our sexuality. All of us share that in common.

Our sexual drives and impulses were made by God for expression in only one place – inside of marriage between a man and a woman. But of course, as I think everyone who has hit puberty knows, we face all kinds of temptations to find expression for those impulses outside of marriage, no matter what your sexual orientation.

Jesus very famously said in the Sermon on the Mount: 27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew 5:27-28.

Lust – that’s sexual sin that every single person will struggle with, and being heterosexual does not somehow exempt you from that. We are all alike in that we all struggle with sexual sin. So the habitual sin in homosexuality cannot be having the desires. In fact, the struggle is a sign of God’s work and grace in your life.

I can imagine at this point one question and two objections in the minds of some listeners: first, why does God care how and with whom we have sex? Why does it matter? We know the rules, but why are the rules the rules? We don’t have enough time to answer that this week, but we’ll try next week.

First objection: someone might say maybe that’s true, but at least, J.D., under the Christian view of things, heterosexuals can get married and can find a legitimate place for the expression of their sexual desires in the marital bed. Homosexuals cannot. So, don’t tell me that heterosexuality is the same kind of burden that homosexuality is.

Friends, if that’s you, with all due respect, you are completely wrong. Because too many people naively view marriage as the answer to all their sexual issues. Rosaria Butterfield: “What good Christians don’t realize is that sexual sin is not recreational sin gone overboard. Sexual sin is predatory. It won’t be ‘healed’ by redeeming the context or the genders. Sexual sin simply must be killed … I think that too many young Christian fornicators plan that marriage will redeem their sin… Too many young Christian internet pornographers think that having legitimate sex will take away the desire to have illicit sex. They’re wrong. And the marriages that result from this line of thinking are dangerous places. I know … why over 50% of Christian marriages end in divorce: because Christians act as though marriage redeems sin. Marriage does not redeem sin. Only Jesus himself can do that.”
So there’s that. And on top of all that there’s the reality that if anything, the burden of heterosexuality becomes greater, or at least more complicated, when you get married. Before marriage, the answer to sex is easy: I can’t engage in it, because I’m not married. But once you get married, of course, yes, you can engage in it, but then the husband wants it more than the wife, and feels unloved when he doesn’t receive it, and the wife feels used by her husband, like that’s all he wants, and she feels unloved. If you don’t believe me, ask any couple who’s been married for at least a couple of years, and they’ll tell you (if they’re honest): marriage does not magically solve all your issues in that department.

But I can imagine a second objection: maybe that’s all true, but J.D., the Bible, the church, in denying the possibility of the full range of sexual expression to homosexuals, is basically denying their humanity. It is by definition an act of hatred. Therefore, I cannot ever be anything but an enemy to someone who supports that kind of view.

If that’s you (and if you’re still listening), you need to know something: that view of human nature is unique to our culture and our time in world history. The vast majority of people who have ever lived on this planet haven’t thought that. It’s only in the last 150 years or so in the West that kind of view has even been conceivable – it’s a product of the Enlightenment. There has always been homosexual behavior (certainly it existed in Paul’s day, or else he wouldn’t have written about it), but no one has ever before identified themselves in terms of sexual orientation. If you grew up at any other time in world history or in the Muslim world or in a Hindu context today, it would make no sense.

But that is the point of view of those who want all people to accept that morality and normality of the practice of homosexuality – you’re denying my humanity. This gets us to the habitual sin in homosexuality.

Peter Kreeft [krayft] is a well-respected philosopher at Boston College and a Christian, and once years ago he has a conversation with a homosexual activist who took this view. The activist said, “I hate it when Christians say, “Hate the sin; love the sinner,” because when you attack homosexuality, you attack homosexuals.”

And Kreeft replied, “But alcoholics don’t say that the Church attacks alcoholics when she attacks alcoholism … And murders don’t say the church is hypocritical for condemning their sin but not them, the sinners. Adulterers don’t deny the distinction between the adulterer and the adultery [do you see what Kreeft is doing here? He’s going down the list of vices Paul has in verses 9-10]. The only group of sinners I’ve ever heard of who do this is you. And all gay people do that – don’t they?”

The activist replied: “Yes. In fact, in trying to take away my identity as a homosexual, you’re trying to kill me.” Kreeft said that’s just crazy talk, so the activist tried to explain it to him this way: “You say the church tells me she loves me, even though she hates what I do, right?” Kreeft replied, “Right.”

© 2013 J.D. Shaw
“Well, suppose the shoe was on the other foot. Suppose you were in the minority. Suppose what you wanted to do was to have churches and sacraments and Bibles and prayers, and those in power said to you: ‘We hate that. We hate what you do. We will do all in our power to stop you from doing what you do. But we love you. We love what you are. We love Christians, we just hate Christianity. We love worshippers; we just hate worship. And we’re going to put every possible pressure on you to feel ashamed about worshipping and make you repent of your sin of worshipping. But we love you.’ How would that make you feel?”

Kreeft said: “I’ve never thought of it that way – thank you. You made me see things in a new way. If that happened to me, I would say you were trying to kill me. But do you realize what you’ve just said? Do you realize what you’ve just showed me?”

Activist: “What?” Kreeft: “You’ve shown me that homosexuality is your religion.” And the activist agreed with him.

Friends, the habitual sin in homosexuality is not that you struggle with the desires, that sometimes you embrace the desires, that sometimes you have even acted on the desires. Everyone struggles with some kind of sinful desire that occasionally, more than they would like or want to admit, they act on. That is common to man.

Rather, the habitual sin in homosexuality that will keep you from inheriting the kingdom of God is when you take that part of your being and make it your identity, and say, “This is who I am.” The habitual sin in homosexuality is when you give yourself over to it without reservation, such that you might as well call it your religion.

And it’s not just true of homosexuality – it can be true of all kinds of things, good, bad and indifferent: if you give yourself over to alcoholism and drug abuse and make it your identity, you won’t inherit the kingdom of God. If you give yourself over to money and say, “This is my identity – this is who I am, this is all that really matters” you won’t inherit the kingdom of God. If you give yourself to sex of any kind and say, “This is my identity – I’m the guy who hopes they serve beer in hell; my identity is being able to get any woman in bed,” you won’t inherit the kingdom of God. And friends, if you build your identity on having the perfect family, with the perfect 2.5 children, and the perfect house, and the perfect safe little life, if that is all that matters to you, you will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Friends, if you are bound and determined to make your identity anything other than God, God will respect your decision. He won’t force himself on you; he will allow you to go your own way. In fact, that is a sign of God’s judgment on you, when you no longer care about having your identity in Him, your Creator, and instead completely identify with something else. He respects your own opinions enough that he won’t force you to come to him. As C.S. Lewis said, “Hell is the ultimate monument to human freedom.” Giving yourself over to it such that it becomes your identity – that’s the habitual sin in homosexuality.
Thus far it’s been bad news after bad news. Now for good news.

Third, the power of the gospel over all sin. Paul says to the church at Corinth: “And such were some of you [in other words, there were some people in Corinth who had so given themselves over to slander, to alcohol, to greed, to adultery, and even to the practice of homosexuality, that it looked like they weren’t going to inherit the kingdom of God]. But [!!!] you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Corinthians 6:11. The promise is when you believe the gospel – that Jesus Christ died in your place to take the punishment you deserve for your sins – when you believe that gospel, that good news, then you’ll be clean. You’ll be made new – washed, sanctified, justified.

If you are here this morning and you struggle with same-sex attraction, it would be so easy to think, “Are you serious? There is no way believing in Jesus will help me with this.” I know, I know.

That’s why earlier in the service I read from 2 Kings 5 – the account of Naaman. Naaman was the prime minister of Syria, a rich and powerful man, and he had leprosy. He had this horrible skin disease that left him disfigured.

But he heard there was a prophet in Israel who could heal his disease. So he went and met Elisha the prophet, and Elisha told him, “Go and dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times and you’ll be clean.” And Naaman storms off in a rage because he’s sure it will be a waste of time – he thinks this is the dumbest idea he’s ever heard. Bathing in the nasty, dirty Jordan River to cure leprosy? There’s no way this can help.

But his servant stops him and says, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’” So Naaman relents and he goes and washes – and he comes up and his skin is completely healed.

The gospel is so easy – it’s just believe that Jesus wants to deliver you from all sin. But because it’s so easy it’s hard to believe it. It would be easier to believe if you, like Naaman thought, had to do some great thing. Like the Wizard of Oz. Remember what the Wizard of Oz told Dorothy? “If you want me to help you get back to Kansas, then you must do some great thing: bring me the broomstick of the wicked witch of the west.”

We are conditioned to think that if we are going to receive some great deliverance from God or anyone else we’re going to have to earn it.

But the gospel says, “Just go to Jesus and be made clean.” Naaman thought it wouldn’t work for him, but praise God it did – he walked away clean. And I promise you: no matter what sin you struggle with if you come to Jesus he will make you clean. Go to him right now – right now – and ask him to make you clean. He can and he will.
Now, in saying that believing the gospel will make you clean, I’m not promising that all of the sudden all your same-sex desires will go away. I do know some people for whom they eventually did, but I don’t think that’s typical.

Instead, you’re in for a lifetime of struggle against sexual temptation. But guess what? That just makes you like everyone else. And there is grace for the struggle – you can call on Jesus when temptation comes and he will, by God’s grace, help you.

But the gospel does promise two things: first, complete acceptance by God. “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Corinthians 6:11. No matter what you’ve done, you’ll be accepted by God if you come to him through belief in his son Jesus Christ. No matter what you’ve done.

I heard a story last week by a favorite pastor of mine, Brian Habig. He was relating how he knew of a young lady who grew up in a Christian home, had great parents, but in college started dating the wrong guy. And she got pregnant. Not at all an uncommon tale, not the end of the world, but not the outcome anyone wants for their kid.

But she was determined to repent. She confessed what happened to her parents, she broke off the relationship with this guy, but before word got out that she was pregnant, and obviously before she began to show, another guy – a Christian – whom she’d known for a while began to take interest in her and he asked her out.

And to her credit she told him, “Well, I’ve got to be honest with you about something – I’m pregnant.” And this guy gives the all-time best response in that scenario. He said, “Well, I like pregnant women.” They are now married and they have that child and others as well.

Now, is it a good idea to go out and get pregnant out of wedlock? No, Jesus doesn’t like that. But you know what he does like? You know those whom he does love? Sinners. No matter what you’ve done, no matter how many times you’ve done it, no matter how many times you swore you’d stop and then you did it again – you come to Christ and he’ll take you, because he loves sinners.

Second, complete acceptance by the church. I know one of the fears of people who are Christians but who struggle with same-sex attraction is that they’ll wind up alone. Who’s going to hold me when I’m lonely? Who’s going to take care of me when I’m sick? If I don’t give in to these desires, am I going to have to die alone? That’s what I’d wonder if I struggled with that.

28 And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” 29 And he [Jesus] said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children [or lovers], for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.” Luke 18:28-30.
When we have to leave relationships behind to follow Jesus, where are we going to get this many times more? The church – the family of God. And Christians, we should long to be there for people who leave relationships behind for the sake of the kingdom of God. You know why? Because someone was there for us. “And such were some of you.” 1 Corinthians 6:11. If you’re a Christian, it must mean that at some point you had to leave something behind to follow Jesus – no one follows Jesus without leaving something significant behind. He’s always calling people to take up their crosses and follow him.

But when we’ve done that, and we see someone else leaving something dear to them in order to follow Jesus, we should run to fill in the gap as best we can – offering them coffee, a meal, our friendship, maybe even a room in our house.

I don’t know precisely what shape this acceptance will take, but believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ means never having to be alone again. It means we can be sure we will have the grace we need to be happy in Christ. And we can be sure of this because such were some of you, but you were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Amen. Let’s pray.

Father, we all need your grace to stay out of habitual sin and run to you through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Make us like Jesus – make us people who love sinners of all stripes and will welcome them into your family. Give us wisdom as we flesh out how that will look in our families, neighborhoods, friendships, and church. We ask in Christ’s name. Amen.

© 2013 J.D. Shaw