

“Let Marriage Be Held in Honor” — Thinking Biblically About So-Called Same- Sex Marriage

June 16, 2012/ by John Piper/ Scripture: Hebrews 13:1–6/ Topic: Homosexuality

Hebrews 13:1–6,

Let brotherly love continue.² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”⁶ So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

Today’s message is built around eight points designed to give a biblical vision of marriage in relation to homosexuality, and in relation to the proposed Marriage Amendment in Minnesota. I asked that Hebrews 13:1–6 be read not because I will give an exposition of it, but to highlight that one phrase in verse 4: “Let marriage be held in honor among all.” That is what I hope to advance, for the glory God and for your guidance and your good.

1. Marriage is created and defined by God in the Scriptures as the sexual and covenantal union of a man and a woman in life-long allegiance to each other alone, as husband and wife, with a view to displaying Christ’s covenant relationship to his blood-bought church.

This is seen most clearly from four passages where these truths are woven together.

1. Genesis 1:27–28

Genesis 1:27–28: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

2. Genesis 2:23–24

And then God linked his design in manhood and womanhood with marriage in Genesis 2:23–24. When the woman is created from his side, the man exclaims: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”²⁴ Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

In other words, God created man male and female so that there might be a one-flesh sexual union and covenantal cleaving with a view to multiplying the human race, and displaying God's covenant with his people, and eventually Christ's covenant with his church.

3. *Matthew 19:4–6*

Remarkably Jesus picked up on this link between creation and marriage and life-long covenant, weaving together these very two texts from Genesis. Matthew 19:4–6:

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female [Genesis 1:27],⁵ and said [quoting Genesis 2:24], “Therefore [linking creation and marriage] a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

And in our cultural setting, the words “Let not man separate the male and female that God has joined together,” has vastly greater significance than anyone ever thought it would.

4. *Ephesians 5:24–32*

One more text on the meaning of marriage makes the distinction between male and female — husband and wife — covenantally significant as a portrayal of Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:24–32:

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . 31 “Therefore [quoting Genesis 2:24] a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

In other words, from the beginning there has been a mysterious and profound meaning to marriage. And Paul is now opening that mystery. And it is this: *God made man male and female with their distinctive feminine and masculine natures and their distinctive roles so that in marriage as husband and wife they could display Christ and the church.*

Which means that the basic roles of wife and husband are not interchangeable. The husband displays the sacrificial love of Christ's headship, and the wife displays the submissive role of Christ's body. The mystery of marriage is that God had this double (of wife and husband) display in mind when he created man as male and female. Therefore, the profoundest reality in the universe underlies marriage as a covenantal union between a man and a woman.

2. There is no such thing as so-called same-sex marriage, and it would be wise not to call it that.

The point here is not only that so-called same-sex marriage *shouldn't* exist, but that it *doesn't* and it *can't*. Those who believe that God has spoken to us truthfully in the Bible should not

concede that the committed, life-long partnership and sexual relations of two men or two women is marriage. It isn't. God has created and defined marriage. And what he has joined together in that creation and that definition, cannot be separated, and still called marriage in God's eyes.

3. Same sex desires and same sex orientation are part of our broken and disordered sexuality owing to God's subjection of the created order to futility because of man's sin.

In Genesis 3 we read about the catastrophic moment when the first man and woman rebelled against God. The effects on them and on the world are described in chapters 3 and 4, and then illustrated in the sin-soaked and death-ridden history of the Old Testament — indeed the history of the world.

The apostle Paul sums it up like this in Romans 8:20–21:

The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

And we know from verse 23 that part of the creation that was subjected to death and futility was our own bodies — and he stresses, yes, the bodies of the redeemed. “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

And I am arguing that same sex desires and same sex orientation are in that category of groaning — waiting for the redemption of our bodies. Which means they are in the same broad category with all kinds of disordered bodies and minds and emotions. If we tried to make a list of the kinds of emotional and mental and physical brokenness of the human family the list would be unending. And all of us are broken and disordered in different ways. All of you are bent to desire things in different degrees that you should not want. We are all disordered in our emotions, or minds, our bodies.

This is a call for careful distinctions lest you hurt people — or yourself — unnecessarily. All our disorders — all our brokenness — is rooted in sin — original sin and our sinful nature. It would be right to say that same-sex desires are sinful in the sense that they are disordered by sin and exist contrary to God's revealed will. But to be caused by sin and rooted in sin does not make a sinful desire equal to sinning. Sinning is what happens when rebellion against God expresses itself through our disorders.

4. Therefore, same-sex intercourse, not same-sex desire is the focus of Paul's condemnation when he threatens exclusion from the kingdom of God.

The clearest statement is found in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10.

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.

The words, “men who practice homosexuality” is a translation of two Greek words which refer to the passive and active partners in homosexual intercourse. See Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001], 306–331). The focus is not on same-sex desire, but on same sex practice. And notice that homosexual practice is not singled out but included with other ways of sinning: idolatry, adultery, stealing, greed, drunkenness, reviling, etc.

The point is not that one act of homosexual or heterosexual experimentation condemns you, but that returning to this life permanently and without repentance will condemn you. “Men who practice — who give themselves over to this life, and do not repent — will not enter the kingdom of God.” They will perish.

5. Therefore, it would contradict love and contradict the gospel of Jesus to approve homosexual practice, whether by silence, or by endorsing so-called same-sex marriage, or by affirming the Christian ordination of practicing homosexuals.

We must not be intimidated here. The world is going to say the opposite of what is true here. They are going to say that warning people who practice homosexuality about final judgment is hateful. It is not hateful. Hate does not want people to be saved. Hate does not want people to join the family. Hate wants to destroy. And sin does destroy. If homosexual practice (and greed and idolatry and reviling and drunkenness) leads to exclusion from the kingdom of God — as the word of God says it does — then love warns. Love pleads. Love comes alongside and does all it can to help a person live — forever.

6. The good news of Jesus is that God saves heterosexual sinners and homosexual sinners who trust Jesus, by counting them righteous because of Christ, and by helping them through his Spirit to live lives pleasing to him in their disordered brokenness.

After warning the Corinthians not to fall back into lives of sinful practice Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “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.”

This is the heart of biblical Christianity. “Such were some of you.” There are Christians in the church at Corinth who were fornicators and adulterers and thieves and drunkards and “men who practiced homosexuality.” They were not driven away. They were folded in.

And the way they were folded in was that they were “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is, they put their trust in Jesus, they turned from their practice, they renounced sinful pursuit of their desires, and God justified them — he imputed to them the righteousness of Christ, and counted them as acceptable in his sight, and adopted them into his family — our family.

They were washed. That is, God took away all their guilt and shame. “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24). So when they trusted Christ, all that he did counted for them, their sins were washed away.

And then they were “sanctified” — God set them apart for himself and gave them his Spirit and was working in them a power for holiness that would swallow up their disordered desires in something greater and more beautiful and more desirable so that they could walk in a way pleasing to God, even in their brokenness.

The heart of Christianity is that God saves sinners through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The best news in all the world is that Jesus Christ died and rose again so that the most bizarre sexual predator — homosexual or heterosexual — can be rescued from his path of destruction, washed, justified, sanctified and given a place in God’s all-satisfying presence, by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the heart of our message.

7. Deciding what actions will be made legal or illegal through civil law is a moral activity aiming at the public good and informed by the worldview of each participant.

Minnesota citizens are being asked this November to vote yes or no on this question: “Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to provide that only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in Minnesota?” And a blank vote is a no vote. If passed section 13 will be added to Article xiii of the State Constitution which reads: “Only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in Minnesota.”

How should Christian citizens decide which of their views they should seek to put into law? Which moral convictions should Christians seek to pass as legal requirements? Christians believe it is immoral to covet and to steal. But we seek to pass laws against stealing, not against coveting. One of the principles at work here seems to be: the line connecting coveting with damage to the public good is not clear enough. No doubt there is such a connection. God can see it and the public good would, we believe, be greatly enhanced if covetousness were overcome. But finite humans can’t see it clearly enough to regulate coveting with laws and penalties. This is why we have to leave hundreds of immoral acts for Jesus to sort out when he comes.

Laws exist to preserve and enhance the public good. Which means that all laws are based on some conception of what is good for us. Which means that all legislation and all voting is a moral activity. It is based on choices about what is good for the public. And those choices are always informed by a world view. And in that worldview — whether conscious or not — there are views of ultimate reality that determine what a person thinks the public good is.

Which means that all legislation is the legislation of morality. Someone’s view of what is good — what is moral — wins the minds of the majority and carries the day. The question is: Which actions hurt the common good or enhance the common good so much that the one should be prohibited by law and the other should be required by law?

Here are a few thoughts to help you with that question.

1. A constitutional amendment should address a matter of very significant consequence. To give you an idea of what has been regarded as worthy inclusion in the state constitution, Section 12 of Article xiii was passed by voters in 1998. It reads as follows: "Hunting and fishing and the taking of game and fish are a valued part of our heritage that shall be forever preserved for the people and shall be managed by law and regulation for the public good." In deciding whether the meaning of marriage is significant enough to put in the constitution one measure would be to weigh it against hunting and fishing.
2. The recognition of so-called same-sex marriage would be a clear social statement that motherhood or fatherhood or both are negligible in the public good of raising children. Two men adopting children cannot provide motherhood. And two women adopting children cannot provide fatherhood. But God ordained from the beginning that children grow up with a mother and a father, and said, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Tragedies in life often make that impossible. But taking actions to make that tragedy normal may be worth prohibiting by law. That's a factor to consider.
3. Marriage is the most fundamental institution among humans. Its origin is in the mind of God, and its beginning was at the beginning of the creation of humankind. Its connections with all other parts of society are innumerable. Pretending that it can exist between people of the same sex will send ripple effects of dysfunction and destruction in every direction, most of which are now unforeseen. And many of those that are foreseen are tragic, especially for children, who will then produce a society we cannot now imagine.
4. Before now, as far as we know, no society in the history of the world has ever defined marriage as between people of the same sex. It is a mind-boggling innovation with no precedent to guide us, except the knowledge that unrighteousness destroys nations, and the celebration of it hastens the demise. (Deuteronomy 9:5; Proverbs 13:34; Romans 1:24–32)

8. Don't press the organization of the church or her pastors into political activism. Pray that the church and her ministers would feed the flock of God with the word of God centered on the gospel of Christ crucified and risen. Expect from your shepherds not that they would rally you behind political candidates or legislative initiatives, but they would point you over and over again to God and to his word, and to the cross.

Please try to understand this: *When I warn against the politicizing of the church, I do so not to diminish her power but to increase it.* The impact of the church for the glory of Christ and the good of the world does not increase when she shifts her priorities from the worship of God and the winning of souls and the nurturing of faith and raising up of new generations of disciples.

If the whole counsel of God is preached with power week in and week out, Christians who are citizens of heaven and citizens of this democratic order will be energized as they ought to speak and act for the common good. I want to serve you like that. And so does Jason Meyer.

Marvin Olasky expressed this well in this week's WORLD magazine:

Wise pastors prompt [Christians] to form associations outside the church, and leave the church to its central task from which so many blessings flow. That pattern in the 18th and 19th centuries

worked exceptionally well. New England pastors in colonial times preached and taught what the Bible said about liberty, and the Sons of Liberty—not a subset of any particular church—eventually sponsored a tea party in Boston harbor. Pastors through America during those centuries preached about biblical poverty-fighting, and in city after city Christians formed organizations such as (in New York) the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. (*WORLD*, June 16, 2012, 108)

There is so much more to say and I plan to write more on the Desiring God Blog this week, especially as it relates to personal relationships with people who have same-sex attraction. There is more hope in those relationships than you may think. And I would like to help as much as I can.

For now, remember, you who trust in Jesus, "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). Be amazed that you are saved. And offer this to everyone.

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