



gospel & culture

GOSPEL & CULTURE: SEXUALITY
WEEK 6 | PASTOR JOSH STRINGER

Gospel & Culture: Sexuality

Over the past two centuries, western civilization and culture has experienced a change in its view on sexuality. What was once seen simply as one aspect of a person's humanity, is now the lens by which all of personhood is viewed. On Sunday, July 31, Pastor Josh Stringer demonstrated that in light of the complexity before us, the church needs to develop a framework for how we view ourselves and our culture with regards to sexuality in light of the gospel.

Introduction

The sexual revolution has sped up at a historic pace, leading us to wonder what we should do? How now do we respond? How do we lead? How do we change? Where's the hope and how do we help? For some, the problem still lies in the broader category of culture. But for most of you, the problem is no longer cultural; it's personal. Questions surrounding sexuality have invaded your neighborhood, your family and your own personhood.

There are many ways that we could get at answering these questions. Sexuality isn't primarily an issue of values and morality—although it certainly includes those. Sexuality is primarily part of God's created order for humanity. However, because of indwelling sin, our sexuality, like every part of our personhood, carries the brokenness and stain of our separation from God. Because of sin, our sexuality must be brought under the redemption and forgiveness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is the only hope we have for wholeness and healing in the midst of sexual brokenness.

1) Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

The current sexual revolution didn't begin with the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling on same-sex marriage. We need to go back to the 18th century, when the secularization of western society began during the period of history we call the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment brought us the age of industry, science and coffee shops. However, the spirit of the age was one of anti-supernaturalism which elevated the glory of human reason. Ultimately this led to the unmooring of culture from its Christian moral and ethical roots and its intellectual commitments. Christianity, specifically, was, and to many today, is seen as untenable.¹

In the mid-19th century, Sigmund Freud began to publish his works on culture, personhood and human sexuality and orientation. Freud claimed that "you know truth through the lens of your personal experience and that no overriding or objective opposition can challenge the primal wisdom of someone's subjective

¹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr. *We Cannot Be Silent* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 6. For a fuller discussion on the historical effects of secularization, please see Chapter one of this book, *In the Wake of a Revolution*

frame of intelligibility."² This was not simply a move to embrace self-expression and self-representation, but a call to redefine personal experience as a form of epistemology (how I know what I know) and personal identity, which answers the question, "Who am I?"

With that all-important question now answered almost completely on the basis of personal experience, individuality, personal freedom and expression were now at the core of one's identity. Since personal identity is directly tied to and determined by one's sexual identity, in order maximize personal experience and human happiness, sexual expression and freedom was no longer seen as hedonism. Rather, it was viewed as individual authenticity and integrity to one's true self.

Through the 20th century, we saw the rise of unprecedented opportunities for anonymity through urbanization and the Internet and technological advances, including contraceptive technology. We also experienced landmark legal decisions, including *Roe v. Wade*, as well as a growing revolution in academic circles regarding morality and sexuality.

What has been the church's response?

Over the decades, the church's response has largely been to run for cover and lob caricatured and un-nuanced verbal hand grenades at the perceived enemy. In large part, we have pridefully ignored our own sexual brokenness while accusing and blaming the de-moralization of America on people with more visible and seemingly more damning sexual brokenness than our own.

2) What Does the Bible Say?

Romans 1:18-32 reads like a social commentary on modern Western civilization. Here are two observations:

Sexuality and sexual sin does not begin with actual sexual sin. It begins with a redefinition of truth (vv. 18-20).

In the case of Romans 1, and within the bounds of biblical, historical Christianity, God and his Word are the source of truth. As created beings, we live best and to the fullest when living within the bounds of the truth set forth by the Creator. It's his world. He knows best how to tell us to live in it.

But what happens when we suppress that truth and live according to what we think—and *feel*—is truth? Pride and brokenness. And this takes us to Genesis 3.

When Adam and Eve were in the garden, the serpent, who was "more crafty" than any other, said to Eve, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" This is a question of the source of truth.

² Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2015), 95.

However, in our culture of relativism, truth is always in question, even with sexuality and identity. Let's look at the definition of a few important terms as presently defined by the American Psychological Association (APA):

- **Sex/Sexuality:** a person's biological status as is typically categorized male or female.
- **Sexual Orientation:** an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.
- **Gender:** the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex.
- **Gender Identity:** one's sense of oneself as male, female or transgender. When one's gender identity and biological sex are not congruent, the individual may identify as transsexual or as another transgender category.

Perhaps we could agree with the broad definitions of sex and gender as it relates to biology; however, the addition of orientation and identity as categories of personhood actually means that we've made every individual the sole, responsible determinate of personal truth and, therefore, sexual identity.

In an ideological utopia where everyone is free from flawed judgment, this may sound like the great personal freedom our culture worships and holds at the core of personal identity. But empirical evidence, and more reliably, the Bible, reveal that at the very core of every human being we are not free. In fact, we are bound. Bound to sin—both in nature and action. Because of our sin it is impossible to make truth claims on our own—even about ourselves. That's why Romans 1 says that if we take God's revealed truth about ourselves, including boundaries for our sexuality, and exchange it for anything else, we are embracing a lie. And lies leave us broken.

The hard truth for our culture and for every one of us is that if you are holding on to any standard of sexuality that is apart from God's standard, you are not embracing the truth about yourself.

Sexual sin involves an exchange towards idolatry (vv. 22-32).

The first lie that Adam and Eve embraced was one about truth. The second lie the Devil told Adam and Eve is the same lie that we are still tempted to believe is of personhood. He said, "You will not surely die. For God knows when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The Trajectory of Idolatry

Human beings were created for worship. We all worship something. Biblically speaking, we were created to worship God, just as Adam and Eve were unblemished worshippers of God in the garden. They were experiencing their humanity and God-

given personhood in full because they were as closely tied to their Creator as any human in history. Without sin.

But, the doubting of God and suppression of truth (Did God really say...?), coupled with the temptation towards being like God, a question of personhood, put humanity on the trajectory of idolatry. Their idol became the idol of self.

While self is the general focal point as the idol, self never remains the idol. Why? An idol is generally something that we use to serve ourselves—at the beginning. Eventually, there is an exchange. Where self was once on the throne and these objects were used to serve self, the idol forces "self" off of the throne and to its knees before the throne where the idol now sits.

When self-expression and personal freedom towards the pursuit of personal happiness is the determinate of truth, and sexuality is at the core of personal identity, sexual gratification and fulfillment become the ultimate means to the goal of personhood. When physical and romantic love and sexual activity become the only commodity that fulfills personal identity, my body and your body simply become the currency by which that commodity is acquired. And brokenness ensues.

Given the historical trajectory of our culture as seen through the biblical lens of Romans 1 and Genesis 3, it is entirely logical that we have ended up where we are, because sin always over promises and under delivers. Where we were promised a better sense of self, greater fulfillment and happiness through personal freedom that discards any sexual boundaries, even from a secularized perspective, we are more broken than we've ever been. We are more medicated and isolated than we thought we'd be. We are pushing the boundaries of hormone therapy and physical gender reassignment all, according to the APA, because of one's sense of self.

Where do we go from here? Each of these cultural truths begin with each person. It is certainly within the realm of probability that everyone has experienced sexual brokenness. That might be related to questions of sexual attraction or gender identity. It might have been forced on you by the hands of another. Perhaps there is a pattern of behavior or addiction that you can't seem to overcome. Maybe it's related to a past event for which guilt and shame have become your unwanted, everyday accusers.

3) The Gospel

Now that we have an understanding of the nature and root of sexual brokenness, we must move quickly towards hope—the gospel. A biblical understanding of redemption lets us know that God not only has our future secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but we also have hope now.

The gospel says that God is the intentional author of all creation, including us. When God made man and woman, they were without sin, living as God intended in his world. Adam and Eve rejected God's truth and definition of their personhood. Because they represented all of humanity, their actions affect us too. At the core of who we are, by our nature, we are sinners, separated from God. Because God is the rightful, holy authority over his creation, our rebellion demands justice (Romans 6:23). In other words, we've earned a just punishment for rejecting God, the author of life. Thankfully, God is a loving Creator who shows himself to be justly wrathful towards our sin. He was determined to turn the evil and suffering we have caused into good that would be to his glory.

While the wage of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus, God's Son. Where the first Adam failed, God sent Jesus to be the second Adam. Through the first Adam we inherited sin and death. Through Jesus we are given the opportunity to inherit eternal life. Where we deserved the wrath of God through death, Jesus, after living a sinless, righteous life—the life we can't live—was put on a cross, took our place and bore the full wrath of God. He atoned for our sin. And through him God's justice was satisfied. Therefore, through him, we can be justified. Forgiven. Redeemed, or bought back.

Because Jesus rose from the dead after three days, defeating death, we can have new, abundant life. All we have to do is follow the leading of the Holy Spirit by repenting of our sin—that is to admit we are sinners, turn from our sin and trust in Jesus alone through faith.

But the story of redemption does not end there. God has promised, through Jesus, that he will renew the whole world. Ephesians 1 tells us that we are IN HIM and THROUGH HIM all things are being made new. The restoration of all things will take place. By submitting yourself to Jesus, and embracing this good news, restoration can begin in you. Even with regards to your sexuality and sexual brokenness.

Sexuality and sexual sin is not, primarily, an issue of morality, but of authority. By suppressing the truth and exchanging the worship of God and failing to recognize him as our authority, we become our own authority. We looked earlier at those cultural ideals that would place personhood in the realm of sexual identity based on subjective feelings. This robs God of his rightful authority as our Creator. However, the gospel reorients our worship, and therefore, our sexuality and identity are placed back under the authority of God.

This answers the most basic question of human personhood: "Who gets to tell me who I am?" It's the question you ask even before you ask "Who am I?" Therefore, the central premise for understanding human sexuality is not one of subjective, emotive human experience. The central premise for understanding human sexuality is one of authority. **"Who gets to tell you who you are?"**

Any truthful understanding of human sexuality must begin with our understanding of God—our Creator. It is accurate then, to say that the Bible has categories and definitions for sexual acts – moral and immoral, but it does not separate sexual identity from gender identity in the same way our current culture does. Our sexuality goes beyond our physical form to our essential "maleness" and "femaleness" as ordained by God.³ To reduce gender or sexuality to mere physicality or personal preference is to reduce our very being to the sum total of our sexual brokenness and miss the deeper essence of being image bearers—those created in the image of God—a category under which every human being falls.

Whatever definition of self and identity we once had is replaced by the new life we now have in the Jesus, through the gospel. In Jesus, you are not your sexuality. Our culture would say with regard to sexual identity, "Be who you are. Quit trying to be someone you're not and just be the real you." Kevin DeYoung says that the New Testament says the same thing, "God does want you to be the real you. He does want you to be true to yourself. But the 'you' he's talking about is the 'you' that you are by grace, not by nature."⁴ In other words, be the you that you've been remade to be in Christ alone. You are not defined by society, your past or your sexuality. You are the you who has been redeemed in Jesus, who is both seen and defined by God as his son or daughter.

And that is the Gospel. That is good news.

4) Hope & Help

Hope for Yourself

Find hope by embracing the gospel.

The hope for your sexual brokenness is not sexual fulfillment. The hope for your same-sex attraction is not opposite-sex attraction. The hope for your porn addiction is not "real" sex. Your hope is the truth of the gospel. When we embrace anything other than God for our identity as human beings, we are believing a lie. The gospel says, "You are not your sexuality and your sexuality will not bring you lasting fulfillment." That also means that your sexual past doesn't need to define your future. Embrace the gospel and find hope.

Find hope by embracing community.

One of the greatest concerns facing those who seek to live under God's boundaries for their sexuality – same-sex or opposite-sex attraction, married or not – is the real possibility of loneliness. I realize that many of the things written here might seem like wishful thinking ("if you only knew *my* struggles"), and perhaps this one seems more unrealistic than any other, given our cultural emphasis of relationship status.

³ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 97.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 100.

Within community, you can shed dangerous isolation and anonymity and can have intimate friendship and accountability. God tells us that we weren't created to be alone. And yet, because of our sexual brokenness we want to run and hide from God and from others who want to know us. The gospel frees us from the darkness of those fears and brings us into the light of community—namely the church family. And this means we must act like a family and not idolize individual families.

This is also a call to those who are married to repent of the idolatry of marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of the human experience. This mindset, sometimes inadvertently, but many times not, reveals that we've replaced fulfillment in Christ with fulfillment in marriage. That might be the starting place if you're having marital difficulties. If you are looking to a spouse for the fulfillment that only Jesus can bring, you are setting a burden on them they can't bear and setting yourself up for disappointment. We also must stop looking at those who aren't married as if they're missing out. You don't know why someone isn't married, and that doesn't mean that your main goal for their life is to get them down the aisle. Your main goal is to help them look more like Jesus, just like it is their goal for your life. For all of us, avoid being ingrown. Stop being around people just like you, the same age as you, in the same stage of life as you, with the same number of kids as you. As we push each other away from sexual brokenness and towards the gospel, we need each other. Embrace community and find hope.

Help for Others

Sin always over promises and under delivers. Sin promises that autonomy, anonymity and self-expression is best. However, living in the light of the gospel we must affirm what really satisfies: fidelity, complementarity and Incarnational love. That's why Russell Moore says, "we should be prepared for the wounded and displaced refugees of the Sexual Revolution. Refugees like us."

How then should we be ready as the church? How can we engage our culture?

Engage Culture by looking forward.

Our temptation is to glorify the past. Many of you would like to return to the days when none of the things we're facing were even thought of. But the truth is, every generation in human history has dealt with sexual brokenness and will continue to do so until Jesus comes back. To somehow see the past as more moral than the present is to ignore all of human history. Romans 1 was written 2,000 years ago and reads like it was written last week. The hope for our culture is not to look back, but to look forward.

Jesus *is* restoring all things—including individuals, his church, communities and families and, yes, culture. He will come again and will be the groom and we, the church, will be the bride. The marriage that we've longed for will be ours in Christ. And if we believe that Jesus was truly dead and really walked out of a tomb in Jerusalem and is coming back one day to wipe away all sin and restore all things,

then our hope is not a revisionist's utopian view of the 1950s, our hope is in the coming kingdom of God through Jesus. Look forward with hope, not backwards as you engage culture.

Engage Culture by speaking the truth.

Don't be silent about what the Bible says about sexual immorality. To capitulate on truth regarding sexuality is typically couched in the context of being more loving and accepting. The Bible is plain about these issues. To compromise on truth is to exhibit a lack of integrity and to suppress the truth which is the beginning of the trajectory of idolatry. Have enough courage to say what is true. However, in speaking the truth, you must include the gospel.

Many times when we engage in cultural debate we stop short of sharing about the changing grace and love of Jesus. We simply try to win an argument with proof texts to shame our opponent. When we reduce ourselves to making systematic arguments that are only to be won or lost, we devalue what we say about being image bearers and about loving our neighbor. The truth of the gospel eliminates the "us v. them" mindset and levels the playing field. Speak the truth—the whole truth—the truth of the gospel.

Engage Culture by loving your neighbors.

That's all "Engaging Culture" really means—loving your neighbor. We also must be loving. Being loving means being a friend and a neighbor. Not just a next-door neighbor but an intentional neighbor and friend. That means you likely need to listen more than you talk. You must seek to understand before you seek to be understood. That means that you don't sweep your sin under the rug when engaging someone else's. That means you don't engage in coarse joking, bullying, caricaturing or stereotyping people. You should be well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7).

You rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. And that's messy. We don't do messy very well. We don't have time for other people's messes because we barely have time for our own.

Many people are trying to live biblically faithful lives, yet are struggling everyday with same-sex attraction. Some struggle with all manner of opposite-sex attraction temptations, including pornography addiction. Some of you might be contemplating an extra-marital affair or in the middle of one. Some of you are recovering from abuse. We should be able to say, "I'm sorry. I mourn that with you. I don't know what all of that is like, but I know what some of that is like."

Question for Reflection:

Examine the points under "Hope & Help". Which one challenges you the most? Why?

Resources

Onward by Russell Moore

An evangelical, cultural manifesto of sorts which hits many current topics, including sexuality and family

We Cannot Be Silent by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

An analysis and commentary on the Sexual Revolution, with a biblical response.

Sex and the Supremacy of Christ by John Piper and Justin Taylor (editors)

A thoughtful and biblical encounter of God and human sexuality.

Counterfeit Gods by Timothy Keller

A broad look at cultural idolatry with specific application to sexuality.

What does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality by Kevin DeYoung

The standard for synthesizing what the Bible has to say about homosexuality.

Divine Sex by Jonathan Grant

A broad look at sexuality from a Christian perspective, within a hypersexualized culture, including much discussion on social dynamics, relationships, commitment, and pornography.

Rid of my Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault by Justin Holcomb

A beautiful, hope-filled encouragement for those who have experienced sexual abuse.

Understanding Gender Dysphoria by Mark Yarnhouse

An important work regarding the complexities of transgender issues.

Transforming Homosexuality by Denny Burk and Heath Lambert

A fair and helpful dialogue for Christians wondering how the gospel brings transformation for those experiencing same-sex attraction.

Finally Free by Heath Lambert

A most helpful and uplifting work for those trapped in porn addiction.

What's the Difference? by John Piper

A biblical look at gender roles.

Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life by Ed Shaw

A look at the plausibility problem facing the modern view of Christian sexuality and what the Bible says about sexual identity.

Love into Light by Peter Hubbard

A heart-felt, pastoral look at walking with someone struggling with same-sex attraction.

Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert and *Openness Unhindered* by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield

Both books are theologically sound and intelligently written in order to give categories for sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

What is Marriage? by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George

A secular argument for traditional marriage in the civil realm.

The Meaning of Marriage by Timothy and Kathy Keller

An apologetic for what marriage is and isn't, from a biblically faithful perspective.

God, Family, and Marriage by Andres Kostenberger

An overview on several broad topics facing Christians and the Church.

Is God Anti-Gay? By Sam Allberry, who also contributes to <http://www.livingout.org/>

A compact and biblically faithful look at who God is and how he informs our sexuality.

"You are Not Your Sexuality" by Sam Allberry (article and video)

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/you-are-not-your-sexuality>

A testimony from a pastor who struggles with same-sex attraction and yet is not defined by his sexuality.

True Friendship by Vaughan Roberts

An encouragement to reclaim deep, lasting friendships within a biblical framework.

