

IS IT FAIR OF GOD TO DEMAND CELIBACY FROM GAY CHRISTIANS?

Sunday, June 28th, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #1814

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Hebrews 3:12-19, 4:11-13 - "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. [13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. [14] For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. [15] As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." [16] For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? [18] And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? [19] So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief....4:11-13...." Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. [12] For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [13] And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

1) HOW SHALL WE READ THE DESIRES OF OUR OWN HEARTS?

The opening words of this text make it clear they are intended as words of instruction and encouragement to the church - "**Take care, brothers....**" But the story comes from the Old Testament account of the Israelites - a whole generation of them - being **banned** from inheriting what God had promised. Mark that down. These people would **not** receive what God had **promised** to give them. Red lights should go on all over the place.

The twelve spies had gone up into the promised land to assess the best way of taking it. But ten of the twelve came back and led the rest of the people to wrongly assume this task was undoable. God had unrealistic expectations of them. And just as those spies had been gone on their assignment for **forty days**, the Israelites would be judged with wilderness wandering for **forty years**. One year of unfulfilled wandering for each day of the expedition's unbelief.

Now, what does the writer of Hebrews see in this account that fills him with urgency to drill it into the consideration of the church? What is his concern? He tells us in **verse 11** of chapter 4 - "**Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.**"

Those last four words are very carefully selected. He's not just worried about **disobedience**. The writer is worried about a certain "**sort**" of disobedience. There is a **kind** of disobedience that is harder to **recognize** as disobedience. There's a **sort** of disobedience that doesn't **feel** like disobedience in our fallen hearts. There's a kind of disobedience that seems more reasonable - easier to rationalize. There's a kind of disobedience that looks less sinful because its very naturalness makes God seem unfair. After all, so the twelve spies reported, there were **giants** in the land. The assignment from God was greater than their capacity to accomplish.

This is the heart of the writer's caution in **Hebrews 4:11** - "**Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.**" Actually, the writer is repeating a caution in **chapter four** that he began to flag in **chapter 3:12-13** - "**Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.** [13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

There's a "**sort**" of sin (4:11) that **deceives** before it **corrupts** (3:13). And we are **all** easily led into it. The deceitfulness of sin is defined by our text very specifically as the condition of regulating your life by desires that **feel more natural than God's law**. So here's where we've landed in this study of these texts. There's a uniquely dangerous **sort** of disobedience that roots itself in our hearts through **deception**. There's a **sort** of disobedience that **self-justifies** more than other **sorts** of disobedience. They capture the conscience and turn it against the fairness of the God who created us and has rights over all of us.

This is where we begin to understand the **context** for some of the best known and frequently quoted words in the whole New Testament - **Hebrews 4:12** - "**For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**"

Notice those words, **“...discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”** It is in the inner being - the heart - that personal identity is launched. Dreams are formed. Love is grown. Choices are made. There is a **“sort”** of disobedience that metastasises in the human heart when the Word of God isn't allowed its proper governing place. And the issue simply defined is **how shall we discern the state of what we feel in our hearts?** What authority adjudicates my inner life?

Our text in **4:12** says the Word of God is the **discerner** of what I feel in my inner self. It is the base from which I form all opinions of my own feelings and desires. As God's Word holds its proper place as the discerner of my inner being I begin to see the difference between what feels **natural** and what is divinely **acceptable**. Something isn't **innocent** just because it feels **natural**. But because what I'm feeling reads as **natural** to me I can't, without God's divine discerner, **recognize** my feelings as anything other than innocent.

One thing is certain. I will use **something** to **interpret my inner life**. If the Word is ejected as the ultimate **discerner** of my inner self something else will replace it as the discerner - the adjudicator - of my being. And the **default discerner** will become what my own desires tell me about who I am and what I feel. I will **self-define** my heart by its natural inclinations.

So either God's Word will interpret my heart or I will interpret God's Word by my heart's desires. That's where we've come so far in this teaching.

2) WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST JESUS?

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - “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.**”

2 Corinthians 5:14-17 - “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; [15] and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. [16] **From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.** Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. [17] **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**”

Both of these texts come at the same reality from different angles. Christ has effected a great change in those who are **“washed,” “sanctified,”** and **“justified”** (1 Corinthians 6:11). This change is so potent in substance that Paul dares to call each of these Christians a **“new creation”** (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But he says something else very telling in the first part of **2 Corinthians 5:16** - “From now on, therefore, **we regard no one according to the flesh....**” What can this strange phrase possibly mean? **Regarding** has to do with the way people look at things. It's a word describing the way we **consider** and **describe** things. Paul uses this term to describe the way these Christians picture each other - **consider each other** - and the way they consider **themselves**.

So Paul is saying they no longer consider themselves **“according to the flesh”** (2 Corinthians 5:16). They don't **interpret their lives** just by their own beings. Or, in the words of **Hebrews 4:12**, they don't **self-discern** their own hearts. The Word of God defines how they interpret everything about their lives.

Let me try to make more plain what I mean. Let's think of some of those people Paul described in **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** - “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.”

Everything hinges on what you interpret Paul to be saying in these verses. These people - the ones Paul says are now **“washed,” “sanctified,”** and **“justified”** (1 Cor. 6:11) - what is Paul telling us about them? Is Paul saying the **“sexually immoral”** man was never again going to be tempted by prostitutes or pornography? And what about the **“greedy”** woman? Did she never again feel the desire for fine jewelry or silk? Did the **“drunkard,”** perhaps after years of addiction, never again feel the longing for drink? And what about the **“homosexual”**? Did this man never again feel the draw of same-sex

attraction?

How you answer those questions has everything to do with perceiving what Paul is saying in these wonderful verses. I'm arguing Paul *isn't* and *never intended* to say any of these people never again experienced these desires. What he *is* saying - the kind of *newness* he's describing - is not one of these people was any longer defined by these desires.

That's what Paul means when he says, **"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh...."** (2 Corinthians 5:16a). People aren't defined by what goes on in their own hearts. They aren't merely the sum of their desires and instincts. There's a new *interpreter* of their lives. In the words of our *Hebrews* text (4:12), there's a powerful new *discerner* of our inner selves.

But none of what we've said so far actually goes to answering the question of this teaching's title - ***Is it fair of God to demand celibacy of gay Christians?***

3) **DOES OUR GOOD SHEPHERD REALLY LEAD US IN THE "RIGHT PATHS"?**

Psalm 23:1,3 - "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want....He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

This is the alternate reading for **"paths of righteousness"** in the *ESV*. God has a script for our lives that runs contrary to the discerning of our own hearts. And because the **cultural air we all breathe is polluted** we can't find those **right paths** following our own inclinations.

But **right** paths doesn't mean **pleasant** paths or **comfortable** paths. It means **right - righteous** - paths based on the **fulfillment of God's character** - paths ordered around the **original design of our Creator's heart**. This is where any paths of genuine Christian redemption lead.

As we've already seen from Paul's letters new creations experience old desires. What happens when God's right paths cut through dark areas of human greed, addiction, pride, and sexuality. The **right paths**, as any explorer knows, frequently trudge uphill. And when they do, those paths never feel **fair**.

So is it fair for God to call a person of same-sex desire to a life-long sexual restraint? **Marva Dawn** in her wonderful book, **"Sexual Character,"** says the following: **"Perhaps my physical handicaps make me more aware of the true nature of the questions - or perhaps they make me more blunt. I can't help but respond to the question of fairness by asking in turn, 'Is it fair that I who once was extremely active and skilled in sports am denied the physical pleasure of running and playing because of a crippled leg? Is it fair that, loving music as profoundly as I do, I am denied the sensual pleasure of hearing it because my deaf ear constantly rings? Is it fair that severe visual limitations prevent me from enjoying beauty and make me unable to do the reading that I love and must do for my work?'"**

She then goes on to say she would trade sexual fulfillment in a moment to have her sight back.

And what about those other people - heterosexual people - who feel trapped in a marriage without love? What about all those people - I've talked to them - who have silently prayed God would take them home rather than spend another week with a spouse they would rather die than be with? Yet they know, so many of them, that God holds them with a covenant in that marriage. The right path can be hard indeed.

Where are we going to go in our broken, fallen world with this question of fairness? How much of life always feels fair? Yet this is the world - the **only** kind of world - in which we are called to follow Jesus. The list of unfulfilled desires is long. In fact, it's endless.

There's a clever little book called **"Dog and Cat Theology - Rethinking Our Relationship With Our Master"** by **Bob Sjogren**. The thesis behind the book is if you feed a dog and clean a dog and pet a dog and love a dog and take care of a dog the dog thinks **you must be God**. But if you feed a cat and pet a cat and love a cat and fuss over a cat the cat thinks **he must be God**.

At one point he imagines a conversation with the thirteen children of Job, all of whom were killed at the same time. He imagines their questions upon meeting God face to face:

"Kids: 'Lord, do you mind if we have a few moments with You?'"

Lord: "Oh, of course. Absolutely!"

Kids: "Umm, Lord, we're kind of curious—why did we all die at the same time?...Lord, just why exactly did You do that?"

Lord: "I wanted to reveal My glory by teaching your father a lesson."

Kids: "What! (They say incredulously). You took us home early just to teach our father a lesson?"

Lord: "Yes, that's right."

Kids: "But, God, my brothers and I had a business, and it was just starting up. It was going really well," says one. And the oldest adds, "Yes, Lord, and I was going to inherit my father's business." One daughter remarks, "Yes, Lord, and I was dating this person, and we were going to get married and have kids." Her little sister adds, "And, God, I was hoping to get married too." And another one says, "I was hoping to go into the ministry. I had all these plans." And then in unison they all say, "In the midst of all this, you wanted to teach our father a lesson? What about us?"

Lord: "I'm sorry you're so confused. You see, it's not about you. It's about My plan and revealing My glory in a myriad of ways. And I allowed you to die early so that I could reveal My glory through your father."

Kids: "But, Lord, it just doesn't seem fair!"

Lord: "Well, just to let you know, the way I run My creation is not based on fairness; it is based on revealing My glory.

And in what I did through your father, My glory shone brightly; but here, I have something for each of you."

Then God rewards them in ways they never would have imagined! They are speechless but finally mutter some words.

Kids: "What? We get all this?"

Lord: "Yes, I love you so much, and you played your roles so well in being a part of revealing My glory, and that is what it has been about from the beginning. Some I bless with things, some I allow to be persecuted, and some I bring home early--it's all a beautiful stained-glass window revealing My glory."

Then author **Bob Sjogren** concludes. You *see*, **Cats only focus on God's blessings while on earth.** "Where are the blessings in these seventy years that I'm alive?" they ask. **Dogs realize that their lives can be in ruins for those seventy or so years, and eternity is where the Lord's glory is greatly revealed in their lives.**"

The apostle Paul writes, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...."

Right paths don't always *feel* right to any of us with our fallen hearts. But God calls everyone of us to display his glory in different ways. Those who don't marry can devote service and devotion to the Lord in way no married person can. Marriage is the **picture**. Christ is the **reality**. Follow Christ completely and don't make an idol of the picture. The will of God is what any of us - straight or gay - would choose if only we had **all** the facts.