

## **“Loving Our Homosexual Neighbor: What does love mean?”**

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There are two main questions that face the Christian and the Christian Church with regard to homosexuality: The first is, “Is homosexual behavior contrary to the will of God?” This is the truth question. “What has God said? The second is, “What is to be the Church’s attitude toward persons struggling with same-sex fantasies, feelings and behavior?” This is the love question. “What does it mean to love my homosexual neighbor as myself? This presentation focuses on the love question.

I want to look at five attitudes I believe the Christian and the Church is to have with regard to our homosexual neighbor.

**First, we need an attitude of repentance.** I believe the place to start is with the Church confessing on behalf of ourselves and others our history of mistreating gay and lesbian persons, and repenting and asking them for forgiveness. We need to confess that under the guise of righteousness, the Church has shown little of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. There is a double repentance needed. First, a repentance by the homosexual person whom God calls to forego homosexual practices and draw on the grace and power of the Spirit of God for holy living. Second a repentance by the ‘straight’ members of the Church to forego pride, prejudice, hostility and homophobia.

**Second, we need an attitude of humility.** Scripture clearly teaches that homosexual behavior is sinful. But the Scriptures do not teach that homosexual sin is the worst of sins or that same-sex persons are subhuman. When one watches Jesus carefully, one notices that he dealt with sins of the flesh far more leniently than he did sins of the spirit. Let us remember that we all sin and none can look down on another. We all stand under God’s judgment and are in urgent need of God’s grace.

**Third, we need the attitude of acceptance.** We are called to accept one another as God in Christ has accepted us. He has accepted us with all our hang-ups, dispositions, experiences and histories. He has done so with all our warts and shortcomings and failures. Jesus’ attitude toward the woman of Samaria (John 4-26) should be ours. Jesus accepted this woman who had been married five times without approving of her behavior. Acceptance did not mean that he condoned her continuance in sin. We are to accept one another as fellow-penitents and fellow pilgrims, not as fellow-sinners who are resolved to persist in our sinning.

**Fourth, we need an attitude of compassion.** I don’t believe most homosexuals choose to be homosexual. Most are caught up in a developmental reality consisting of many different factors. These persons really struggle with their orientation and behavior. We must have compassion on them in their struggles. Someone has said homosexuals are the lepers of modern society. Who is reaching out and touching them?

**Fifth, we need an attitude of love.** Jesus says the whole law is summed up in two great commandments: a) loving God and b) loving my neighbor. Loving my neighbor means

showing hospitality to the stranger, that is, to the one who is different than us. It means associating with sexually immoral non-Christians. God loves sinners but hates their sin. Love means us doing the same, first in ourselves and then in others, for Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But Jesus' love is also a redemptive love. We need to probe deeper into Jesus two love commandments because there are those in our day who use this "*love your neighbor as yourself*" commandment as a screen by which to eliminate a prohibition of homosexual practice and almost any sexual offense.

The first problem with that view is that it essentially equates love with tolerance. But the problem with that is that some tolerant actions turn out to be unloving. When you are tolerant and let your five-year-old child play with a hot stove and she burns herself badly, that tolerance is not loving. That is why tolerance is not lifted up in Scripture as the supreme virtue. The ELCA's social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" embraces a tolerant view of love which is man centered. But in deciding what love is, it completely skirts the truth question, "What does God say?" If you start with the premise that what we do sexually doesn't in the end really matter of God, then you will have one interpretation of what love means.

But if you start with the Scriptural premise that what we do sexually could get us thrown into hell and disqualify us from getting into the kingdom of God, then you have a totally different perception of what love is because what you want to do is get people to a place where they will live eternally with God.

The second problem with this sorted view of "*love your neighbor*" is that it suppresses the first great commandment "*love God*". Loving God in the sexual area means doing what God wants us to do in our lives in terms of sexual purity. God has made clear in His Word that homosexual behavior is sinful behavior and contrary to His will for us.

The third problem with this view of love is that it overlooks a context. When Jesus gives us the second great commandment, he quotes from Leviticus 19:18b, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*". But the context is Leviticus 19:17-18a which defines what loving our neighbor means. It means not hating, not taking revenge, and not holding a grudge against my neighbor. But it means something else. Love also means reproving my neighbor when he does wrong lest I incur guilt myself for failing to warn him.

This view of "*love your neighbor*" as a support for immoral behavior also sees an antithesis between outreach and intensified ethics. Jesus had a more rigorous view of the Law than did the Pharisees. But he combined his rigorous view with love. Jesus reaches out aggressively in love to the biggest violators of the command. The people want to stone the woman caught in adultery in John 8. But Jesus says, "No," not because he believes adultery is a minor offense, but because he wants to reclaim her for the kingdom of God and dead people can't repent. Jesus tells the woman "*go and no longer be sinning*" lest something worse happen to you. What could be worse than being stoned to

death? What is worse is being excluded from God's eternal presence, lost of eternal life through an unrepentant life. Jesus' love is a redemptive love.

In summary then, with regard to homosexual practice, the first issue that has to be faced is the truth question: "Are homosexual persons genuinely at risk in their relationship with God through serial, unrepentant behavior?" If the answer is "yes" then what does love mean in that context? Clearly, once the truth claim question is asked, love cannot mean perpetuating the behavior in question with the fewest negative side effects. Love must mean ending the cycle of behavior lest the individual