

# Living free

3 sermons to explain the stance which Christians  
are called to take on matters of sexual morality

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# The authority of Scripture

## 2 Timothy 3.<sup>10</sup> – 4.<sup>8</sup>

### 2 Timothy 3

<sup>10</sup>You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings— what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. <sup>12</sup>In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

### 2 Timothy 4

<sup>1</sup>In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: <sup>2</sup>Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage— with great patience and careful instruction. <sup>3</sup>For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup>They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. <sup>5</sup>But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

<sup>6</sup>For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day— and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

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Most of you have at least heard of, and many of you will have seen, the film *Braveheart*.

Perhaps key to this particular film, which is a slight oddity in some ways insofar as it stars a small Australian man in the role of a manifestly large Scottish individual (and that's symptomatic of the accuracy of the film itself) – but a key moment comes towards the end where the star of the film, William Wallace, is strung out, tortured and about to die. Almost his final word is that eloquent and extended word “*Free... dom!*” as he cries out in pain and agony. It's a word that reverberates all the way through the film, and resonates still in the hearts of many individuals.

Certainly, since the second World War, freedom has become in the minds of many folk a key, key part of experience. Increasingly that freedom has been rolled out across all different spheres of life, as though somehow being free was the essence of life itself: and there's at least an element of truth in that. What we have tended to assume, though, and what has often been promoted is the notion that somehow freedom is being free from any authority.

Now, we have a different word for that in the English language – that particular scenario where we are free from any authority at all – and in English we call that *anarchy*. If you want to know what anarchy looks like, or what anarchy feels like, then you would probably do well to have been a shopkeeper in some of the parts of London during the riots last summer. That's what anarchy is really like.

When we say “*I really don't want that*”, then you have to consider that freedom means certainly coming under some authority. The only experience you can have, where there is no authority, is anarchy; and therefore the key question for us always is “*What is my final authority?*”

For many folk it's not a question that they regularly apply their minds to. They simply get on with life and don't necessarily think too much about what their authority is. But one way or another we all have an authority in our lives. For some it is the media; it slips out, that perspective, in some of the things that people say – e.g. “*it must be true; I read it in the newspaper*”. We can assume, often without thinking, that actually this is the authority; these are the folk that know; and if you read it, or if you saw it, or if you heard it, then it must be true.

Sometimes the authority that we sub-conscientiously adopt is our peer group. That may be a very specific peer group – the crowd of people that we go around with – or it may be in the broader sense of what popular opinion actually is and where society, as a whole, is at. We are happy just going along with the crowd and allowing our society, or allowing our peer groups, to set the agenda; to determine effectively what is valid and what is not valid and to inform our understanding.

Over against all of that, for the Christian, the final authority is Scripture. Few things are more important for us in our living out the Christian life than grasping that as the basis for our perspective. Scripture is our final authority.

Now you might think that's quite an extravagant claim. It is certainly the perspective that the Christian church has had down through the centuries. It is certainly ingrained right at the very outset of the Church of Scotland's subordinate standard which really spells out what it is that we confess and what it is that we believe; it makes it very, very clear that that's our starting point. The Scriptures are the final authority.

We do well, therefore, to understand *why* it is that we adopt that stance, when it is so out of line with what the rest of our society now believes. The rest of our society has drifted to the position where actually **you** are the final authority.

It was the Roman moralist of a long, long time ago, called Seneca, who said that that, actually, is the worst sort of tyranny of all – when *you* are the final authority. He wasn't even a Christian but he could understand that when you reach that position when *you* are the final authority, it's not freedom that you enjoy at all; it is the most dreadful tyranny.

So why is it that Christians believe that Scriptures are our final authority? There are two reasons as you'll see; the first of which is that we acknowledge **the authorship of God**.

## **THE AUTHORSHIP OF GOD**

We acknowledge that the Scriptures are authored, ultimately, by God. In the passage here that we read where Paul makes reference to the Scriptures, he rounds off chapter three there by saying that "*All Scripture is God-breathed*". Now that's not to say that the individual books of the Bible (there are sixty-six books in the Bible) – and they were all authored by different

individuals and you're able to recognise the different personality, the different language, the different background of the individuals and the different sorts of writing that there are – but behind all of that, and through all of that, we're told by Paul that God, himself, was the One who breathed out the Scriptures.

That's a very telling phrase that Paul uses, a very deliberate term that he uses to describe the origin of the Scriptures – they originate in God. They are breathed out by God.

He uses that language because in the Scriptures the word 'breath' in both Hebrew and Greek is the same word that is used *of wind* and *of the Spirit* of God. It is *the breath, the wind, the Spirit* of God and it is through his Spirit that God works. The Scriptures originate in God and God breathes out His Will.

Genesis 1 describes for us who God is from the outset. He is the God who not only creates but, more particularly, communicates. Recurring through that chapter is that single phrase '*and God spoke*'. God articulates His will – '*this is what I want to see; this is what I **will** to happen; and God said, 'Let there be light and there was light'*'; His will is done. His speaking is the means which God communicates His will. That is the starting point that the Scriptures have. The God who made this world is a God who communicates his Will and who reveals himself and He does so through His Holy Spirit. So we read at the outset of Genesis that *in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and dark and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters*; the breath of God; the Spirit of God; and the next thing we read '*..and God spoke.*' The breath of God breathing out the creative will of God.

Therefore, as well as recognizing that the Scriptures originate in God we are to understand that they **issue in life**.

There is something about the breathed out Word of God that is altogether different from the speech of you and me. It is a life-generating word; it is a wonderfully creative, extraordinary powerful word that God speaks.

The way that Paul speaks here is deliberately designed to help us draw that parallel with what happens the very first time we are exposed to God speaking. Because in Genesis 1 we find God's speaking brings both light and order; light into the darkness that there is and order out the chaos that there is. That is essentially what Genesis 1 is about; it is the way in which God, the Great Creator, articulates his will and through his word being breathed out like that he

brings light where previously there has been darkness and order where previously there has been chaos. It issues in life and that is what Paul is saying – exactly that.

What does the word of God -what do the Scriptures – effect in a person’s life?

Paul says here they first of all make you wise for salvation. They clue you in as to how you may indeed enjoy God’s saving power in your life. They illumine you; they give you an understanding so that into the darkness of your understanding, a light shines; they make you wise for salvation.

Moreover, the Scripture is breathed out from God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In other words, they bring illumination and transformation; they effect, in other words, light where previously there has been darkness, so that all of a sudden we’re able to say ‘*Now I see it!*’ And they bring order to lives that previously have been dis-ordered.

God’s whole intent is that He might shape out of the dark, dis-order and chaos of our lives and our living that which is marked by light and beauty and order. The word of God effects that, says Paul, so the Scriptures breathed out by God, **originate in** Him and **issue** in life.

That’s our starting point and we need to recognize alongside that a couple of other things.

First of all you’ll see in the passage that Paul points Timothy to certain examples. He says, ‘*You know me. You know about my faith; you know about my purpose; my living; my endurance; you can see the effect in me.* (Timothy has lived and worked with Paul for a long time)

*This is not just a kind of doctrine; this is the reality; this is what the word of God, the Scriptures of God have effected in me. You know those from whom you learned the Scriptures* (talking about Timothy’s mother and grand-mother). He is able to point to them and say ‘*You can see what the Scriptures have done in their lives as well.*’

The powerful word of God, breathed out by God through His Spirit, effects change like that in us; making us wise for salvation and transforming us more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

That’s our starting point and you will see it is a comprehensive statement. It is *all* Scripture; not just the purple passages; not just the bits that you learned in Sunday school; but *all* Scripture from beginning to end from Genesis 1 right the way through to Revelation 22; all Scripture is breathed out by God. As such it is invested with that illumining and transforming power.

Even the hard bits – even the bits that are difficult to understand – even the bits that we struggle to take on board. All Scripture is breathed out by God to that effect; that it brings light into our darkness and order into the chaos of our living.

It is the consistent statement and affirmation that is made by, not just Paul, but by Peter in his second letter, for instance; by the whole range of New Testament writers; it is the consistent affirmation of the whole Old Testament; countless different instances of that – Psalm 119 is a celebration of the Scriptures as the Word of God; and it is there, the longest chapter in the whole book itself, standing out a million miles for us that we might all be able to see very clearly this is what Scripture is. It is the Word of God breathed out to us.

Most significantly, it is, of course, the perspective of Jesus, himself. That's how Jesus viewed the Scriptures and that's what he taught about them. So in the Sermon on the Mount, before he has even got going, he prefaces everything he says in Matthew chapter 5.<sup>17</sup> – *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets: (the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Don't think that I'm putting them aside now as something that you can conveniently ditch.) “No”, he says “I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfil them ...”.*

Later on in Matthew 19.<sup>4</sup> when he's speaking on a different theme, he addresses that theme that has to do with marriage by reference to the scriptures. *“Haven't you read”, he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female,” and said, “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”?...”*

What is interesting here is that Jesus takes the words of Genesis 2.<sup>24</sup> – which is basically just a commentary on what has been going on – he takes the words of Scripture and equates them with the words of God the Creator. *‘Haven't you read how in the beginning the Creator said – not **Scripture** said; not the **writer of Genesis** said – but the **Creator** said “...for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife...”*

That's why in Luke 24, after his resurrection, what he does with the disciples is that he takes them through the Scriptures and explains the Scriptures to them and how they point clearly to himself and to the resurrection that has been effected in his life.

Similarly in John 17 he says about the Scriptures *“Your Word is Truth”*. You'll notice he deliberately doesn't say *“Your Word is true”* – although that is the case – but he says *“Your*

*Word is **Truth***". It is the actual and ultimate standard against which the truth of everything is finally measured.

So it is the consistent affirmation that is made about the Scriptures that they are the very Word of God, breathed out by God and issuing in life, bringing light and order into our lives. That's the first good reason why we view the Scriptures as our final authority: God Himself is their Author.

The second reason is really consequent on that; namely **we embrace the authority of Jesus**.

### **THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS**

*"It is through faith in Christ Jesus," Paul says "that salvation is found"; (v 15).*

We recognize, in other words, that Jesus is King. He is the anointed one; the Christ; the anointed ruler promised and given by God: and in acknowledging that Kingship of Him over our lives, we now embrace His Lordship in our lives.

That's what a Christian is; someone for whom Jesus is Lord. It is his authority that we recognize. That's not always easy because some of the things that he calls us to are hard in the extreme but nonetheless we recognize that this Jesus is indeed the very Son of God; he is risen from the dead; the one crucified on our behalf; the one who is our Saviour; the one who brings us into a new relationship with God; the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given; the one who is king; the one who is on the throne; the one who reigns; the one who is Lord.

We bow before him and adore him as such. We live out our lives on the basis of his authority.

Now it is commonly claimed, these days, that it is *Jesus* that we worship; it is Jesus that we follow; it is his authority that we recognize, and therefore there has been a tendency to downgrade the authority of the Scriptures – the written word – in deference to the authority of Jesus, the Living Word. That regularly happens.

In May 2009, for example, *Reporting Scotland* did exactly that. They had a little bit of an interview with myself from which they extracted half a sentence (but it was the half sentence they wanted) where I had made reference to 'the Word of God' in relation to the teaching that the Scriptures give. Then they cut it off at that point and immediately brought in another guy

whose line was *'We can dispense with the scriptures because now we have the Living Word – Jesus.'* That is a false distinction because the very Scriptures that point to Jesus are the Scriptures to which he, himself, refers and defers.

The authority of Jesus is ministered through the Scriptures.

We need to understand these things about the authority of Jesus because the Scriptures speak about Jesus as Lord.

First, **Jesus does exercise authority.** That's what impressed people when he taught.

Read through the whole of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7) and then right at the very end you'll find how people reacted; they were astonished because Jesus taught them 'as one who had authority', and not as the Scribes and the Pharisees. There was something different, something unique about him. It was the authority with which he spoke that impressed them. An authority that had run through the whole teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount where he repeatedly said *".. but I tell you..."* . Authority.

There is no doubt he exercised authority which was manifest in the lives of different people; which effected change in them. Things happened through his teaching; He exercised authority.

But **he was also under authority.** It is highly significant that the Sermon on the Mount is almost immediately followed by the narrative of a Roman centurion coming to Jesus because his daughter is in need and he is saying to Jesus *"..you only need to speak the word. You don't have to come to my house. You don't have to be physically present. You only need to speak the word and it will be done. Because",* he says, *"I, also, am a man under authority and I know that in the hierarchy of the Roman army, because I am under authority, that's why I have authority and I am therefore able to say to my servant 'Go! And he goes!'"*

Jesus applauds the man and says *you've got it. Half the Jewish people haven't got it but you've got it; you understand what is going on.* He is able to exercise that authority because he is under authority himself.

As I said, already it was very clearly the perspective of Jesus that the Scriptures were the Word of God under whose authority he placed himself. Jesus taught the absolute, divine authority of the Scriptures in at least 200 different references in the Gospel records. This is not an isolated, pulling out an occasional text. It is shot through the Gospel records Jesus taught the absolute

divine authority of the Scriptures. That makes his view of the Old Testament crystal clear; for him they were the very Word of God and he placed himself under that authority.

Moreover he not only exercised authority, he was not only under authority, but **he bestowed authority** as well in the appointment of the apostles. He made it clear that the Spirit of God would enable them to fulfil their task of setting down in writing that which would be as authoritative as the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Thus when he prays for the Christian church (John 17), he prays first for the Apostles, those through whom that message will be delivered, and then for *'those who will believe on me through their message'*. It was plainly the awareness of the Apostles that what they wrote did have that status as the very Word of God.

When we pull all of that together, the heart of it all is that true freedom is actually found in Jesus Christ. It is found as we come under his Lordship; we are set free from the slavery to sin, from an enslavement to all sorts of different habits; we come under his Lordship and he brings a marvellous deliverance.

Praise God that he gives to us, in Jesus, one who will set us free, who gives us a new start, makes us new people. That freedom, the Scriptures affirm, is found in him and in him alone. Only he can deal with the need that we have for forgiveness; only he can make us new people; only he can set us free to live new lives for the praise and glory of God. That's what he does. Marvellous!

True freedom is found in the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives.

And that's why the constant week by week challenge to us all is to place our lives under the Lordship of Jesus because that's where freedom is found. It is the most liberating and glorious experience that anyone can ever know. It is to be set free.

But if freedom is found in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, our faith in him, as Lord, involves embracing the authority of Scripture. Submitting our lives to the Lordship of Jesus means that we submit them to the authority of the Scriptures. They are not two separate things: the Lordship of Jesus is exercised through the Scriptures: and they are liberating: they do make us wise for salvation: they do bring order to lives that are chaotic: they do give direction: they do give drive: they do give dynamic: they do give that power: they do give that purpose to our living: they make us new people.

I was at a funeral recently of a lady that I'd only met a couple of times.

Back in August 1962, as a 14 year old, she heard the Gospel and she knew that she had to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ – and she did. She bowed in spirit before him and acknowledged her need of Him, and gladly embraced Him as Lord in her life and she recognized from the outset that that Lordship of Jesus over her life involved her placing every aspect of herself under the authority of the Scriptures.

Those Scriptures shaped her life in an astonishing manner. They changed this young girl and made her a woman of extraordinary influence: a woman who prayed: a woman whose influence was known within her family – five youngsters all being raised and growing to be fine godly individuals: a woman of enormous hospitality whose home was always open (the estimated record was 54 people staying under her roof one night – typical of the woman’s hospitality).

The influence that she had on a range of different folk was all effected because this woman was wise and ordered, and God had done something remarkable in her life. There were well over 300 people at that funeral: it required three ministers, two long tributes and one full-length sermon to begin to do justice to all that her life had been.

After the service her husband received letters from folk who had already written to him expressing their sympathy and their appreciation to all that she had been. They wrote again saying, having been at that service, they now began to understand why it was that she was what she was.

I cannot underline sufficiently for you how basic to that transforming work of God in a person’s life is our exposure to, and submission to, the Scriptures of God. That’s why Jesus, as he rounded off his ministry, said to his disciples *“..all authority in heaven and in earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations .. teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

Virtually the same as what God had said to Joshua (Josh. 1) at the start of Joshua’s ministry as he takes over from Moses as leader of the people there: God speaks to him and says *“.. be strong, be courageous, be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left; do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do **everything** written in it.”*

Please God we shall recognize that ourselves, and understand that our true freedom is not in distancing ourselves from the authority of the Scriptures, but is actually found in submitting to the authority of God's Scripture.

They are God-breathed and they bring light and they bring order: illumination and transformation: and it is glorious liberty.

# The sanctity of marriage

**Genesis 1.** <sup>26-28</sup>, **2.** <sup>8-24</sup>  
**Ephesians 5.** <sup>8-33</sup>

## Genesis 1

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. <sup>27</sup>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

## Genesis 2

<sup>8</sup> Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. <sup>9</sup>And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground— trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. <sup>10</sup>A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. <sup>11</sup>The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup>(The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) <sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

<sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup>but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. <sup>19</sup>Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the

*birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup>So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.*

*<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>The man said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man. <sup>24</sup>For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The sanctity of marriage. This is the theme that we look at this morning and we do so with a concern to build on what was our starting point last Sunday morning, which was a recognition that our perspective, our way of viewing the world, and the understanding that we bring to all the different aspects our life in that world, is framed by the scriptures. God himself teaches us how we are to understand these different parts of our lives.

One of the initial problems that we have when it's come to this particular area of our lives is the fact that we were brought up on fairy-tales. Fairy-tales, doubtless, have their part to play in our education but they regularly feed us fallacies and those fallacies become ingrained into our thinking in a way that proves singularly unhelpful. The basic pattern of the fairy-tales is, broadly speaking, that after a whole series of disappointments and potential setbacks, eventually the man and the woman get together and they get married and they all lived happily ever after.

There are variations on the theme – *The Sound of Music* is basically a modern day fairy-tale, for instance (I know it's based on a true story). It follows the same pattern; you go through all the troughs of despair and all the peaks of expectancy and there are all sorts of different highs and lows, and eventually they get married and .. well, it's lovely.

But they are fairy-tales and the fairy-tales have certain fallacies; and before we start we really need, I think, to recognise just how profoundly ingrained into our thinking these fallacies have very often become.

**Fallacy 1 – Getting married is the ultimate blessing.**

That's the line that the fairy-tales feed us; marriage is really the culmination of human happiness. That's not the case. Being single is not, in any sense, second best: and marriage is not the ultimate blessing: we do well to understand that from the outset, that in God's ordering in things marriage is not the ultimate blessing.

Knowing God is the ultimate in blessing. To confuse the two is to make a very, very profound mistake.

**Fallacy 2 – being married is a self-fulfilling relationship.**

The second fallacy that the fairy-tales feed us is that being married is a self-fulfilling relationship: it is all bound up with *my happiness*: and therefore the line that we are fed is that somehow being married will satisfy that longing in our hearts for happiness: and we have a right to that happiness, after all: we have a right to be fulfilled and to find our true happiness: and, accordingly, when we're fed that line, if marriage doesn't bring us that fulfilment, doesn't bring us that happiness, our contemporary society, fed that line by the fairy-tales, assumes we have the right, therefore, to go and try and find it somewhere else and in someone else. That also is a fallacy: being married is not about our fulfilment: when we subconsciously assume that somehow that's what it's meant to be, we've made a second major and potentially hugely damaging mistake.

**Fallacy 3 – staying married is a problem-free experience.**

The third fallacy that the fairy-tales feed us is that staying married is a problem-free experience: there's nothing more to report once you get married: after that, it's just the end basically, because they all lived happily ever after: no problem at all: no great dramas:

no great adventures: nothing particularly exciting: nothing particularly difficult: nothing really to report at all.

Staying married is a problem-free experience! Anything further from the truth, it's hard to imagine.

Some of you sitting here this morning know the trials for yourself that there have been in being single: either not being married or no longer being married: and you struggle, I'm sure, with that: and, therefore, perhaps you approach our thinking about marriage this morning with a measure of trepidation because it touches on raw areas of your heart.

From the outset we do need to be clear that marriage is not the ultimate blessing.

Some of you, too, know just how problematic married life can be: and it may well be that for some of you as you sit here behind the façade, you have a living hell as your daily experience and it is fraught with difficulty, fraught with tensions, fraught with all sorts of problems. Some of you understand that very well because you're divorced, and you know how little relation the fairly-tale line that staying married is problem-free actually is to reality.

So I recognise as we look at the whole issue here from the Scripture that there will be those who perhaps struggle against a feeling that somehow they've been deprived of something that others have: and they do struggle with that.

There will, I'm sure, be those who feel that somehow they have failed: they have not got it right: they've maybe made wrong decisions, wrong choices and things have not been what they had hoped and what they had aspired to, and so they really struggle with a sense of failure.

I recognise, too, that there will be those who struggle, not so much with a sense of failure, but with real despair: that there's no future: and it is at best just a bleak, bleak future that lies before us.

I want all of you to know from the outset that at the heart of the gospel is a God of grace, who knows us better than we understand ourselves, and who cares for us in all the complexity of our circumstances with a care so extensive we couldn't even begin to quantify it: but a God whose heart breaks with our hearts: a God who weeps with those who weep:

a God who feels the pain and a God who is able, in His mercy, to put us on our feet again: to give to us a new start: to open to us a new future: and a God whom we may know, even in the face of the darkest spells in our lives.

So it is important before we even begin to address this that we recognize that the perspective on marriage that most of us grow up with, in the society in which we live, is one that is almost the exact converse of the Scriptures' perspective on marriage. It's that perspective which the Scriptures give to us from the very outset.

I hope you will see how all of this has a bearing on the way in which we go on to address the wider issues that have caused such turmoil within the church at large. It is because so often our understanding of marriage is not as it should be that the confusion and error arise.

The Scriptures essentially underline, about marriage, that God's intention in marriage is twofold: marriage is intended by God to portray, first of all, the **glory of God** and then secondly to portray the **grace of the gospel**. That's what marriage is intended by God primarily to be. It is not primarily for us and for our benefit – although it does enrich, and is meant to enrich – but it is primarily for God's glory: that there may be displayed to the world in which live, something of the glory of God and something of the grace of the gospel. That's why the Scriptures start as they do by speaking to us in Genesis 1 & 2 about the way in which humanity has been made and created by God, and the way in which, in and through our humanity, we do indeed portray, and are called to portray, something of the glory of God.

## **THE GLORY OF GOD**

There are three distinct and specific ways in which God's glory is reflected in the way in which he has ordered our humanity: three distinct and specific ways in which God's glory is revealed supremely in the relationship of marriage.

### **'Complementarity'**

The first of these has to do with a word that I'm maybe inventing: and that is the noun from the adjective complementary: I'm calling it 'complementarity'.

*Let us make man in our image, says God – Genesis 1 – in our likeness*

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;*

You notice the repetition? That's the only way these folk had of underlining things and putting in big bold font a truth that God means to be highlighted. We are made in the image of God in his likeness and therefore *male and female he created them*.

You will see that two things are given stress here from the outset.

The first is that *humanity is made in the image of God*: that's to say, the creation of human beings was to be the visible expression – or the image – of who God is and what God is like.

In the same way as we recognise that the heavens declare the glory of God and the earth shows forth his handiwork; that is, as the whole of creation displays in a general fashion something of the splendour of God the Creator; and we understand that – we look around and marvel at that and we catch a glimpse of what the Creator himself must be like in the beauty and splendour of his creation; so humanity, as the culmination of God's creation, in a much more particular and specific way, sets forth, in visible form, God's glory. This is what God is like.

So the Scriptures stress that we are made in the image of God.

Secondly and more specifically, *we're made therefore male and female*: in order adequately to display God's glory, he was 'obliged', in a sense, to create humanity male and female.

There is about God, in other words, as the rest of Scripture will increasingly reveal, this extraordinary mystery whereby, for all that he is emphatically *one* God, nevertheless there is a certain *plurality* to him. God is, in some ultimate sense, *community*: this one God, beyond our comprehension, is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: *one* God, yet three persons: each Person the same and yet different and able to be distinguished from the other.

(Theologians have torn their hair out and racked their brains and stretched their minds over long centuries as they've sought to comprehend this mystery.)

But that's why in Genesis 2, when we're given a closer look at what is going on – when

Genesis zooms in and gives us a kind of slow motion action replay of chapter 1 – the Lord declares *it is not good for the man to be alone*.

We have a very self-centred way of reading Scripture and we assume therefore that God looks on the man and thinks *poor thing, he needs someone to keep him right, to wash his dishes, to make sure he brushes his teeth: he'll feel so lonely!*

That's a very self-centred way of understanding the Scriptures: in the same way sometimes we read through Genesis 1 and think that God is the sort of 'advance party' which has gone on ahead, the great servant that we have who gets everything in order for us until eventually we're able to arrive and enjoy our new home. Thank you very much, God! That's what God is there for – in order to meet our needs and to make sure that everything is *hunky-dory* for us and when God has done his job we're pleased and we say *thank you* to him.

That is not what is going on in Genesis 1: God is not there at our beck and call to do whatever we like and to make things nice and pleasant and easy for us. When God says *it is not good for the man to be alone*, the 'not-good' thing is not so much in terms of the man feeling lonely, but rather because by himself he does not adequately reflect the glory of God: that's what is not good about it – by himself he does not adequately convey the glory of God.

So there is made for the man and from the man a helper or a partner, absolutely the same (*bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh*), and yet deliberately and distinctly different.

And it is, of course, in the context of marriage, as Genesis 2 goes on to reveal that this basic and foundational truth about God in his glory is displayed in its clearest form: the *spiritual* union of the hearts and lives of the couple, of which their *physical* union is the sign and seal and expression – that union of the man and the woman, *one* yet more than one, the same yet different, that complementary union of the man and the woman is intended to provide a picture, right at the centre of any society's life, of who God is and what God is like: and therefore why *community* matters so much: it is the complementary gifts and personalities of a whole range of different people being combined together and bringing thereby that enrichment and fulfilment; because that is what God is like.

### **'Creativity'**

The second central facet of God's glory which his making humanity in his own image is intended to display, is his creativity.

We're told again in chapter 1 of Genesis that *God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it ...'* Because if in a strange and wonderful sense, God is in himself *community*, he is also *creator*: he is the one who uniquely, supremely and marvellously generates life. That's who he is. Both his purpose for, and therefore his call to, humanity made in his image, is to be themselves those who generate life.

And, again there are in this regard, two important truths to note.

The first is their **dependence upon God** in order to be exactly that. God's call to them – *be fruitful* – is matched by, and preceded by, God's blessing: and it's that bestowal by God on them of his life-generating power – that's his blessing – it's that alone which enables them to fulfil their God-given mandate.

So, their dependence on God but also **their need of each other**. If they cannot generate life without God, neither can they do so without each other: and without each other being both the same and different. There is, in other words, a mutual interdependence between male and female which mirrors that mutual interdependence within the Creator God.

And again this feature of the glory of God in his creativity is displayed most clearly in marriage where the complementary nature of a man and a woman, physically and biologically different and yet nonetheless the same, combines in the mystery of their physical union to generate life.

Plainly, this does not always issue in children – for a whole variety of different reasons and with often a great deal of consequent heartache and pain: we understand that – indeed God himself understands that better than any.

But nonetheless it is in the way in which the relationship is set out for us in Scripture – in the complementary union of husband and wife in marriage, and in the consequent issue of children – it is thus that the great glory of God as the Author of all LIFE is most marvellously, and wonderfully displayed.

There, in marriage, not only do you have that *complementary* character that marks out God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, but you have the extraordinary *creativity* of God displayed in the most remarkable, wonderful and miraculous manner in the generating of life which issues from that relationship.

## **'Commitment'**

And so to the third great facet of the glory of God which humanity is created and called to express: namely the commitment which lies at the core of God's holy heart of love.

He is in other words not only in himself in an extraordinary sense *community*, he is not only the *creator*, he is also the *covenant* God.

God is love.

Those three words that are paraded through Scripture for us as the very core of God's being – God is love: and the nature of that love is that it is an absolutely committed love: it is a covenant love: a love that is pledged: a love that is sealed: a love that is absolute: a love that is enduring: a love that is without any condition at all: it is a love that is committed and covenanted.

This central, life-generating creativity which displays to the world the glory of God as Creator, as we've just seen, is bounded, and almost protected on the one side by the complementary nature of the man and the woman and on the other by their mutual *commitment* to one another.

The God who is community, the God who is Creator, is only such by dint of the covenanted, committed, unconditional self-giving love which is the essence of his whole being.

And that's why having made the man and the woman, complementary to one another, he safeguards their creativity by insisting that it is set in the context of their mutual commitment to one another.

So the end of Genesis 2. Verse 24 – *for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

Let me highlight for you in this respect two things: first of all, the **sequence**.

Their physical union follows, first a clear and definite leaving of father and mother, and then, second a deliberate and definite 'cleaving' to one another [it's stronger than simply 'being united to'. It is a cleaving, it is a deliberate, definite, commitment of one another, absolutely to the other.]

That's what marriage, biblically, involves: it involves leaving your parents in such a manner that they are manifestly now no longer the *primary* tie that you have. It is a big step:

leaving your parents: that is, although it remains a continuing responsibility and commitment, it is no longer the primary tie that a couple will have.

It involves, secondly, cleaving to one another in a pledged, covenanted relationship of absolute, unconditional love.

And then (and only then), as the consummation and expression of that new and committed relationship, only then the physical union.

That's the sequence that the Scriptures spell out and they do so for that very deliberate reason: that it is only in that *committed* relationship that the complementary and creative character of the couple together is adequately showing forth the essence of God in his glory: and the significance of that is that the marriage of a man and a woman understood thus – two complementary individuals, the same yet different, one yet more than one; two individuals committed to one another in a covenanted, enduring and unconditional love: and expressing that love in a physical union with the capacity to generate life – marriage, when understood thus, is meant under God to display to the whole of creation just how glorious a God he is.

That's what marriage is meant to be: not so much for our gratification – although it is under God, by his grace, enriching, and ennobling in his purpose for us (although not necessarily so, in the experience of many, in terms of how it actually all works out: many have struggles – we appreciate that); but under God, it is primarily for his glory rather than our gratification.

We don't have time this morning to go on to the second aspect of this: the way in which marriage is intended not only to portray the glory of God but to portray the **grace of the gospel**.

The bottom line is this: our privilege and our calling is to display the glory of God:

Peter in his first letter says this: *'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'*

That's what God calls us and equips us to do and to be by the power of his Holy Spirit, each and every one of us.

In Isaiah 60 the Lord says, *'Arise and shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rests upon you.'*

So no matter who we are, no matter what the situation in which we may find ourselves set by God, this is our calling; this is our true destiny as men and women; it is to know that grace of God whereby he calls us out of darkness into his light, whereby he calls us out of a deadness into a newness of life; and to be called to proclaim the glory of the God who has done all that: to show forth and to display in every area of our lives the glory of God.

When Paul in Ephesians 5 speaks there about the different relationships, his concern is to say, simply, *make the most of every opportunity you have to display the glory of God.* Let the world know how glorious God is: make the most of every opportunity.

you may be married – well, in marriage, he says, you are able to portray the grace of God in uniting us with his son:

you come from a home: in your home, says Paul, we're able to portray the grace of God in bringing us into his family: demonstrate there in your home life what it is that God has done in the gospel:

you are a working person: in your work, then, you are able to portray the grace of God in calling us into his service:

Wherever you may be set, whatever your circumstances may be, this is our calling and our privilege, to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light, to show forth and display the glory of God.

To those of you who are not married or who are no longer married: that is no less a calling in Scripture: and it is for you, in that context, to learn how to show forth the glory of God: that God who has made you uniquely the person you are: to discover how in a far, far larger context and set against a far, far broader canvas you are able to complement those around you: your friends, your neighbours, your family, your colleagues: you learn how to complement them: and in that context how to generate life in a far fuller sense than any

merely physical way: and demonstrate the commitment that there is at the heart of God in your relationships.

We showed photos at the start of the service of Diana [Frost – a missionary in the Far East]. She's single. Her desire has been to display the glory of God: to use her particular gifts to complement the gifts of those amongst whom she lives and works: and she has shown commitment – we understand that. Over 30 years she has been among them, generating life in the experience of these folk. Being single has not, in any way, deprived her: it has simply been the context in which she has been called to show forth the glory of God.

The fairy-tales get it wrong when they suggest that being married is the ultimate blessing.

And to those of you who are still contemplating marriage: resolve from the start that this is the only sort of marriage you will countenance: one in which you and your chosen spouse will be able together to display the glory of God: and resolve that you will not settle for less than that: that your life and your relationship will be such that the glory of God is made known to those around you.

To those of you who are married but who feel that your marriage is drifting. Well, see that this is what it's all about: that whatever be the factors that have issued in the thing just beginning to drift; whatever are the factors that create the tensions and the difficulties; this is the purpose God has for you.

In that relationship, it is your very 'complementariness' that creates the tensions: you're not the same: and that brings you into tension from time to time. But it is that complementary character about you, and the way that you handle that, which is meant to show forth the glory of God. What grander purpose could there be to undergird your marriage than this: that together you show forth the glory and the praise of God?

And to those for whom it's all gone dreadfully wrong. You are perhaps divorced; you are perhaps separated literally, legally; or perhaps you might as well be: for all that you live under the same roof and share the same address, that's about the extent of it. That's not easy when it has all gone so dreadfully and sometimes irreparably wrong.

Now the last thing I would want you to leave here this morning feeling, is all that pain and all that heartache being compounded by a sense of failure: because it is grace that lies at the heart of the gospel: and it is grace that God means you to know. No-one understands

better the pain, the despair, the bleakness, the sorrow, the disappointment, the heartache, than God: no-one cares more for you in that, than he does: no-one means to wrap their arms more closely and warmly around you than he does: no-one means to stand more steadfastly with you as you seek to put that past behind you and build something for the future from the ruins of the present, than God does: and he declares himself to be the God who walks amid the crumbled ruins of our lives and is both able and pleased to build something fresh out of that: and it will be for his glory.

So even in that context you are still able to be instrumental in the glory of God being known.

God means that our perspective is framed by his word; and his word gives to us this huge calling, and says go out and live in such a way that the glory of God is seen in the world in which we live.

Arise from here this morning: shine: whatever your context, shine: for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

May God bless his word to all our hearts.

# The beauty of holiness

## Leviticus 18.<sup>1</sup> – 19.<sup>2</sup>

### Leviticus 18

<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God.

<sup>3</sup> You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. <sup>4</sup> You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> 'No-one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD.

<sup>7</sup> 'Do not dishonour your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her. <sup>8</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonour your father. <sup>9</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere. <sup>10</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter; that would dishonour you. <sup>11</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father's wife, born to your father; she is your sister. <sup>12</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your father's sister; she is your father's close relative. <sup>13</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your mother's sister, because she is your mother's close relative. <sup>14</sup> 'Do not dishonour your father's brother by approaching his wife to have sexual relations; she is your aunt. <sup>15</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife; do not have relations with her. <sup>16</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife; that would dishonour your brother. <sup>17</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. Do not have sexual relations with either her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter; they are her close

relatives. That is wickedness. <sup>18</sup> 'Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.

<sup>19</sup> 'Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period.

<sup>20</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with your neighbour's wife and defile yourself with her.

<sup>21</sup> 'Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

<sup>22</sup> 'Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.

<sup>23</sup> 'Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion.

<sup>24</sup> 'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. <sup>25</sup> Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. <sup>26</sup> But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, <sup>27</sup> for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. <sup>28</sup> And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. <sup>29</sup> 'Everyone who does any of these detestable things— such persons must be cut off from their people. <sup>30</sup> Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practised before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God.'

## **Leviticus 19**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Plainly, this is not for the faint-hearted!

The subject is delicate and the issues clearly are sensitive issues, and we do well before we even begin to get into the passage to recognize that this does raise pastoral issues for many, perhaps for most of us, in one way or another.

There will be those here today who have failed: those who, even as we read the Scripture, were conscious of that, and those perhaps, as we ponder the truth of Scripture, will feel that acutely today.

To all such I say *join the club – we've all failed*. None of us measures up to the high calling of God.

What the Scripture do is to set out for us that which is to be our *aspiration*, even if in the case of us all, it does not match our *achievement* – that's what we aspire to be under God: and there is, in Jesus Christ, forgiveness: forgiveness that is free: forgiveness that is full: forgiveness that has been secured for us by God, through Christ: and we are to understand that and, particularly therefore if, as we read and reflect on the Word of God this morning, you are convicted of your failure – of your having fallen short – then remember, in Christ, there is forgiveness.

Alongside that awareness of failure there is also the fact that many of us, perhaps most of us, in this whole realm of our lives, struggle: and there will be those here today for whom the issues on which we touch are indeed ones where they face a daily battle to align their living with what the Scriptures enjoin upon us.

For our encouragement again we do well to be reminded that in Jesus Christ not only is there forgiveness, but there is afforded to us the help and the enabling of the power of the Spirit of God: to enable us to be what we could not be by ourselves: to enable us to live in a way that by ourselves we simply cannot, despite our best endeavours, ever live. He is given to be our enabling in the face of the very real struggles that we have.

The passage that we read is essentially a **call to pursue holiness**.

It is in Old Testament terms, the radical summons to genuine discipleship: to live our lives His way and for His glory. It is the call to be pure in every area of our lives: it is the call to be radiant: it is the call to shine with all the brightness of the glory of God resting upon us as

we seek to live out our lives for God and by God in the generation in which we live: the call to stand up and to stand out and to shine in the face of our generation.

Some of you, I know, are aware that my great-grandfather wrote a letter to my mother when she was 13 years old – the only letter that she ever retained in her possession to her dying day and in that letter her grandfather, my great-grandfather, wrote to her and he said to her *“I love you very much and am anxious that you live a rich and beautiful life.”* And he said that he was praying for her in those terms and alongside his praying for her in those terms, he presented her, in that letter, with the stark summons of the Gospel – *you must choose how you are going to live your life, but my prayer for you is that it will be a rich and a beautiful life.*

In many ways this is the call of the living God himself to each and every one of us: to live just such a rich and a beautiful life: it is essentially a positive thrust behind the summons of these verses: the call by God himself to live a rich and a beautiful life.

This whole section is prefaced, you will see in the first 5 verses of chapter 18, by God giving three clear reasons for our living like this. This is a call addressed, you will remember, to the people of God who have been delivered by God from the slavery of Egypt with a view to their entering into a new land and a new life.

#### **a new Lord**

The first reason that God gives as to why they are to live like this is because they, and we, now, in Christ, belong to a new Lord – *“I am the Lord your God”* – not Pharaoh; not the popular opinion in Egypt; not the authorities in the land into which you are going; but *I am the Lord your God* – you belong to me.

#### **a new land**

The second reason that is given is that we reside now in a new land.

You’ll see that also in the opening verses here – *you must not do as they do in Egypt and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan where you used to live and where I am bringing you. You, now, are my people and you live in my realm – the Kingdom of God.*

We have changed our address, in other words, and we have effectively emigrated. God is saying to them you must learn, therefore, how to live out life in this new realm into which

you have come: you are a holy people: you are a people called to be different: you are a people who are set apart for God in order to display, to the people around, the nature and the character of God: you are indwelt by the Spirit of God who enables you and directs you to live in a particular sort of way and your calling is to proclaim to the surrounding nations of the world the glory of God. *So you are going to be different, says God.*

Whatever the media may feed you; whatever the teachers at school or at university may teach you; whatever your peers may feed you; whatever you may have bombarding you from all sides as being the line to take and the view to take; that's irrelevant, says God. You belong to the kingdom of God: and it's the perspective of the kingdom of God that is so crucial.

### **a new life**

The third reason that God gives is that we enter into a new life.

*"Keep my decrees and laws," says God, "for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord."*

This is not how you earn your salvation. It's not how the people of Israel earned their freedom: they had been delivered already by God, and through God's grace: by God's power they had already been delivered from the land and the slavery and the bondage of Egypt: they were now a free people: they were now a new people: that was not something that they had earned: that was the grace of God that had effected that for them. *Now, says God, because you are a free people, learn how to live that life.*

And what is at stake for the people of Israel here, and what is at stake for the followers of Jesus Christ in addressing these issues, is our enjoying that *abundance* of life: that fullness of life whereby we're conscious of the blessing and the grace of God resting upon us and flowing through us and effecting life in the lives of others around us.

That's the backdrop to it in verses 1-5: we belong to a new Lord; we reside in a new land; and we are entering into and to enjoy a new life.

In the following verses we then are given **six prohibitions** [18.<sup>6-23</sup>]

There are, just as we begin to look at these, a couple of points to note in this regard.

**These prohibitions are focused on sexual conduct.** This first section of what is called *the Holiness Code* is a particular part of the Scriptures which spells out for the people how they are to be a holy people; and this first section of that *Holiness Code* spells out what that means in relation to our sexual conduct.

Not because God has a hang-up about sex; and not because it is the only area of our lives where holiness is to manifest itself – because patently that’s not the case – but rather for these reasons:

First: this is where the fact that we are ‘made-in-the-image-of-God’, as male and female, finds its fullest reflection: it’s in this realm of our humanity that that image of God finds its fullest and most glorious expression:

Second: because this is where the drives that we have are often most potent, particularly, I suppose, the younger you are (but not by any means confined to teenage and young adult years); this is where the drives we have are most often potent and needing most firmly to be kept in check:

Third: this is the realm where, when we don’t get it right, the consequences can be most painful, most damaging, and most dishonouring to the Lord.

So these prohibitions are focused on sexual conduct. And you will see as well that –

**They are framed in negative terms.** God’s call to holiness is set out here in a set of prohibitions which are saying effectively *not this, not this, not this, not this*.

Again there are good reasons for that, none of which has to do with the fact that somehow God is essentially negative; because God is anything but that.

The reason it is set out like this is, first of all, because *God’s Word* has already set out the positive: that’s where the Bible starts – not with the negative but with the positive: God has already set out clearly in Genesis 1 & 2 what the positive is. He has already made it clear that it is one man, one woman in a life-long commitment to one another: that is the positive. So His word has already established the positive; and a wonderfully positive thing it is as well.

Secondly, *God's glory* demands that the negatives also are seen: in a similar sort of way to that which we saw in Genesis 2 where the Lord said it is not good that the man should be alone – meaning primarily that his being on his own doesn't adequately reflect the glory of God: so what God does is parade a whole range of animals before him and Adam is enabled to see that no, not this, not this, not this, not this; and the distinctive 'positive' God has in mind is surrounded first by all these negatives which enable Adam to recognize clearly when the woman is presented to him, that, at last, this is it; and the negatives – that it's not those animals, not those animals – those negatives serve to sharpen up his awareness of, and his appreciation of, that which is the positive: God's glory demands that.

The third reason for it being framed in these terms is that *God's grace* teaches us to say 'No' to all ungodliness and worldly passions – that's what Paul underlines in Titus 2.<sup>12</sup>. God's grace instructs us and enables us to say NO to these things that are prohibited by God: to say no therefore to those drives within us that are not going to be reflective of the glory of God.

That's the way in which we are to understand the manner that these prohibitions are presented to us.

So there are, as I say, six prohibitions – a little bit like the sides of a hexagon – the *not this, not this, not this*, that serve to define more clearly the one particular context where sexual activity is to find its expression.

### **Sexual activity within the family**

First of all, vv 6–18, what is prohibited is sexual activity within the family: there is a long, detailed list specifying precisely what is meant by that, but essentially it is this common theme which encompasses all of these prohibitions:

Sexual activity within the family is prohibited by God. Why?

First, because they do not adequately reflect the 'complementarity' of God: such relationships are, in other words, too close, too much the *same*, the same family, the same

blood and so on – not enough *different* – and do not therefore adequately reflect the complementary character of God himself.

Moreover, they do not highlight adequately the radical, definite nature of the commitment that there is in God, insofar as, to some extent, we are already tied by family ties to those within that family circle, and therefore they don't adequately underline and highlight just how radical and how definite is that commitment that we make beyond the family ties to another: and it's that commitment in God that is so integral to the glory of God. Not only the complimentary character – the *same* but *different* – but also that commitment.

It's important to note that these are not time-bound prohibitions which maybe had application to the people of God in bygone days but don't really apply to us now: Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 5 to precisely this situation makes it clear that these are *enduring* prohibitions that we've been given by God.

### **Sexual activity without regard for God**

Then verse 19: which you may think strange as a second in the prohibition list. This relates to sexual activity without regard for God.

It is important to understand what's being said and why this prohibition is here.

*Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period.*

Back then, the loss of blood was one of the things which brought to a person, male or female, a *ritual* uncleanness: it wasn't *sin*: it wasn't understood as *sin*: but it did create a *ritual* uncleanness: it served, in other words, as a ritual reminder to God's people back then, of their constant need for 'cleansing'.

Now such *ritual* uncleanness has been addressed, of course, by the shed blood of Jesus – ritual uncleanness simply doesn't operate now: it's ceased to have any relevance: the whole system has been rendered redundant (as both Jesus, in general terms, and the letter to the Hebrews more particularly, has made clear).

Uncleanness now, according to the New Testament, is to be understood in purely *moral* terms – rather than the ritual as well – because the Lord Jesus Christ, by his death on the cross, has addressed the ritual dimension of this.

But uncleanness is still a consideration: our attitudes, our actions and our words: where they have been impure or unclean, and that flow of uncleanness has not been staunched by repentance and apology. *That* ‘uncleanness’ still matters!

What this particular prohibition is underlining is simply this: that sexual activity is to be seen as essentially a *sacred* thing. Far from being a rather smutty activity, engaged in by a couple in the shady back alleys of their lives, it is in fact nothing short of holy ground; for here, above all, a couple supremely reflect the very glory of God; and they must therefore understand themselves to be supremely, here more than ever, in the presence of God.

Spelling that out just a little bit: where there is sin and some moral uncleanness in your or your spouse’s life – and perhaps in your relationship – that needs first to be addressed. That’s what essentially this verse is on about: that uncleanness; that activity is a sacred thing.

Equally, it may perhaps be that where there are scars in your or your spouse’s heart through some wrong and abuse that’s been done in the past in this realm, and the flow of that uncleanness is still, somehow, present – there may well need to be in that sort of case some gracious and careful restraint.

### **Sexual activity with someone else’s spouse**

The third prohibition in v.20 involves sexual activity with someone else’s spouse. You may ask why this is not something to be countenanced.

If the couple find they love each other deeply: and they feel so very happy, that they believe their love must be from God: why should they not give expression to that love in their sexual activity together?

For this simple reason – it impinges on the notion of *commitment* which lies, as was previously underlined, at the heart of the glory of God. Where sexual activity before marriage involves the *absence* of a covenanted love, sexual activity like this involves in

addition a *breach* of that covenant of love. And, of course, this is enshrined in what we call the Ten Commandments.

### **Sexual activity without regard for your children**

Go on to v.21: *Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.*

This is a prohibition against sexual activity without regard for your children. Far from being an odd prohibition to throw in here in a section defining the parameters of sexual activity, this, in many ways is actually a direct follow-on from the previous prohibition.

For the religion of Molech involved both child sacrifice and temple prostitution: sex in a kind of worshipful context. Sex, for them, was a way of getting in touch with the gods: it was a way of finding fulfilment, as we might put it today, or enjoying the heights of spiritual experience: a wonderfully uplifting, exhilarating, spiritual experience.

You don't have to watch too many movies or read that far in the papers to see this modern day Molech religion alive and currently thriving: the sexual revolution of the sixties and the consequent sexual promiscuity, is Molech religion in modern day clothes.

Find your gods – find your fulfilment – after all, you have a right to be fulfilled and to find all your needs being wonderfully met – find your gods through sex. That's Molech religion.

And part of the deal then and now is this – you sacrificed your child. Doesn't that ring a few bells?

How many children have been sacrificed today on Molech's altars?

Sharpen it up a little bit:

How many children have been aborted after self-indulgent sex? How many children conceived in the womb, the rather awkward sequel to a night in Molech's temple, have been put to death and sacrificed in modern times?

How many children, walking around the streets of Edinburgh and our society today, have been left scarred and confused and condemned to a round of hurtful, destructive entanglements also themselves, on account of this sexual promiscuity?

*Sacrificed* there, on the self-indulgent altars of this modern-day Molech religion, while those who should really have known better, seek fulfilment in the temple of sex.

In other words, consider the *damage* that's part of the deal when your sexual activity is outside the bounds of God's truth.

God is marked by creativity – it's *life*, in other words, that he generates: and anything which is damaging to others, not least to the next generation, is not, and cannot ever be, reflective of the glory of God.

What is our sexual promiscuity doing to the next generation? We need to ask that question – and I think we know the answer.

### **Sexual activity with those of the same gender**

Then to v. 22 – sexual activity with those of the same gender. *Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman: that is detestable.*

It's worth underlining that homosexual activity is, of course, not the only thing prohibited here, by any means: but it's worth underlining, too, that it *is* prohibited.

It is the fifth of six areas of sexual activity which are declared '*unholy*' because they are not, and cannot be, reflective of the glory of God; and the prohibitions against them all are plainly enduring.

Leviticus 18.<sup>22</sup> appeals, at least implicitly, to nature: that is, to the natural order of things. *Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman.*

That is the natural order of things, **biologically**: men and women are made, physically, to fit together: and it is the natural order of things **theologically** as well: we are made in the image of God, male and female, and our sexual activity is, above all else, intended to display and reflect the complementarity, creativity and commitment of God.

That's what the Scriptures mean when they speak about '*nature*': they refer to the natural order of things – *biologically and theologically*: they don't mean at all what may now come 'naturally' to us as fallen and sinful creatures: in that sense we may indeed have a *naturally* homosexual orientation. But that is not the natural order of things of which the Scriptures

speak, whereby biologically and theologically it is between a man and a woman in the commitment of marriage that sexual activity alone displays both the complementarity and creativity of God in all his glory.

Homosexual activity is, as such, thus the *contradiction* of the glory of God: and that's why it is spoken of here – the *activity*, please note, not the *orientation* – that's why it's spoken of here, and elsewhere, in these clear and emphatic terms – '*that is detestable*': because it does not adequately reflect the glory of God and indeed is the contradiction of it. That's not only the natural order of things; it is the consistent teaching of Scripture. It is the clear, definitive teaching of Jesus and it is equally the clear, consistent teaching of Paul and the other New Testament writers [see Appendix – p.41].

### **Sexual activity with animals**

Finally at v. 23 the sixth prohibition: sexual activity with animals. Now we are certainly *different* from the animals – but, by the same token, we are plainly not the same: in other words, there is here no complementarity at all

You may think that verse 23 is rather a weak way to end: it doesn't really read like God somehow building things up to a great climax and a resounding final prohibition. But in truth, it is indeed climactic! This is simply where the logic of our disregarding Scripture actually ends: and, as a matter of fact, this is already the 'in' thing to do in certain progressive circles today.

And more than that, this is set here as the final prohibition to underline the fact that when we lose sight of our distinctiveness as creatures who are made in the image of God and who are called to show forth the glory of God, we are indeed reduced to the level of animals.

One writer says: "*Western culture is one of the grandest, most impressive civilizations to have ever existed, but our inability to put sexual impulse in its proper place may prove to be our undoing.*"

And so to the final verses from the passage, 18.<sup>24</sup>–19.<sup>2</sup>, which underline again why this actually matters so much. The passage rounds off with a re-statement, in reverse order this time, of the reasons for such holy living.

These six prohibitions, in other words, are hedged about, at their start and at their conclusion, with a clear and powerful statement of the reasons why they are there, just in case we haven't got the message as to how important they are. It matters massively.

First, because it is bound up with our enjoying life: living like this is bound up with our knowing the blessing and favour of God in our lives: and to scorn this way of living, to turn our back on these prohibitions, is to experience, God says, what the people of the land themselves have known – they were '*.. vomited out... and cut off*'.

One writer says this: *"What Leviticus 18 suggests is that God has created the world with a certain moral framework. And to live in that framework, according to those rules, will, on the whole, mean a better life for you. While living outside that framework, against those rules, will, on the whole, mean pain for you.*

*Satan understands this, which is why he offers the pleasure of sexual immorality as the bait, but he always hides the hook. He won't tell you that promiscuity can lead to disease, that adultery destroys families, that divorce hurts children, that homosexuality harms the body and does not allow for the creation of life, that incest can produce deformities, that abuse scars the victim and the perpetrator, that pornography enslaves its users. Sexual deviancy undermines the stability of the family, the welfare of society, and the proper development of children. God does not give us rules to keep us from joy, but to guard us from the lasting pain that comes on the other side of fleeting pleasure."*

It's life, then, the Lord means we should enjoy.

And moreover it is a new land into which we've come. That's '*...how the nations... became defiled*'. You are a different people: you live in a different realm: be different!

And, finally, you have a new Lord: chapter 19 verse 2 – '*...be holy*', says God, '*for I, the Lord your God, am holy.*' And you, I desire you to be my holy people.

None of us measure up.

The Psalmist said:

*Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart ..*

and we rule ourselves out and think, *that's not me*: clean hands and a pure heart – *none of us!*

But there is One who has clean hands and a pure heart – the Lord Jesus Christ: and He has gone up that hill: ascended into the very presence of his father on our behalf: and in Him there is forgiveness: in Him there is a purity: and in Him by the grace of his Holy Spirit He begins increasingly to work out that holy living in the manner in which we live our lives and says to us: this is what you are to aspire to be.

Shine. And if you are to shine, it will mean that you learn to say NO to all ungodliness, and instead shine in your generation.

May God then bless His word to that end, and enable us to be such people, to live such lives, and to see why this is indeed of such huge significance in the days in which we live.

God grant us clear understanding and grant us grace.

## Appendix

### What do Jesus and the New Testament writers teach about homosexual activity?

The claim is often made that Jesus is silent on the subject of homosexuality: and the conclusion which many have drawn from that claim is that, tacitly, Jesus, whose message is all about love, condoned and approved of homosexual activity, where that's in a context of a close and committed relationship.

Both the claim and the conclusion, though, are flawed. Jesus, and the New Testament more generally, plainly adopted the same stance in regard to homosexual activity as is evident in the teaching of the Old Testament.

#### Jesus

##### **He specifically upheld the teaching of the Old Testament**

As we saw (p.8) Jesus made it very clear, not least in the Sermon on the Mount, that far from dispensing with the Old Testament, he insisted on the abiding significance of its instruction and commands – see Matt.5.<sup>17-20</sup>.

Where he saw it necessary to correct wrong interpretations of certain Old Testament teaching he was quick to say so. Given the clarity of the Old Testament teaching on homosexuality, his so-called 'silence' on the subject of homosexual activity, if it points to anything at all, makes it clear that he saw no reason to challenge or change the current view which Judaism consistently took on homosexual activity.

##### **He made deliberate reference to Sodom and Gomorrah**

On more than one occasion Jesus used 'Sodom and Gomorrah' as illustrative of people whose sin was notorious – see, for instance, Matt.10.<sup>15</sup> and 11.<sup>23f</sup>. His point in so doing was plainly to point up the gravity of sin.

The notoriety of Sodom and Gomorrah stemmed from the account of the judgment of God upon these 'cities of the plain' recorded in Genesis 18 and 19: and it's clear from the

account given there that the particular sin which drew forth that terrible judgment was their homosexual activity (see Gen.19.<sup>5</sup>)

It has sometimes been argued that in point of fact the sin of which the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty was that of a lack of hospitality. But such an argument is no more than special pleading which takes no account of the specific statement of Jude in his letter that "*Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion*" (Jude 7)

### **He used a word for sexual immorality which included homosexual activity**

Jesus used the word porneia [πορνεία] (eg Matt.15.<sup>19</sup>) as a general word to describe all sexual immorality.

The word was current in New Testament times and familiar to his hearers, and referred to all sexual activity outside marriage, including homosexual.

## **Paul**

### **His teaching in Romans 1**

In his magisterial letter to the church in Rome, Paul gave expression at some length to the Old Testament teaching on homosexual activity.

He underlined that such activity is expressive of a society which has 'suppressed the truth' (1.<sup>18</sup>) and is shameful (1.<sup>26</sup>), un-natural (1.<sup>26f</sup>), a perversion (1.<sup>27</sup>), and deserving of death (1.<sup>32</sup>)

### **His use of the 'new' word arsenokoitai**

This compound word, arsenokoitai (αρσενοκοιται), used by Paul in 1 Cor.6.<sup>9</sup> and 1 Tim.1.<sup>10</sup>, does not appear in Greek literature prior to Paul: it seems it was a word he simply made up.

The most obvious source for this 'new' word is the Greek Old Testament, with which Paul would have been more than familiar, and in particular from the *Holiness Code* in Leviticus.

You don't need to know any Greek to see the point: compare the Greek of Leviticus –

Lev. 18.<sup>22</sup> *kai meta arsenos ou koimethese koiten gunaikos* (“you shall not lie with a male as with a woman)

Lev. 20.<sup>13</sup> *kai hos an koimethe meta arsenos koiten gunaikois* (“and whoever shall lie with a male as with a woman...”)

Paul, it seems, in speaking of the sin of homosexual activity, was deliberately using a word which was rooted in Levitical teaching: he was simply re-stating the Levitical principle that all sexual activity between members of the same gender are sinful and wrong.