



A Community of Love, Not Domination

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Brookside Community Church
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1 Corinthians 6:9-10

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From the perspective of the Beloved Community, our goal is not to define the type of relationships in which sexual intimacy can occur, but to establish principles of justice within all our relationships, especially those that are the most private and intimate.

Entering the Pearly Gates

When you hear the phrase “enter the kingdom of God,” what do you think of? From the way it is portrayed in popular Christianity, many of us likely think of stories about “the pearly gates”? Stories like this one.

A young couple was tragically killed in an accident on the day before their wedding. When they arrived at the pearly gates, St. Peter asked if there was anything he could do to make heaven more pleasant for them. So they explained to Peter about dying the day before their wedding and asked if it was possible to be married in heaven. “No problem,” Peter said. “Just leave it to me.”

Some time passed, a hundred years or so, and they met St. Peter again and asked about the wedding. “Everything is being arranged,” he said, “I assure you.”

Another hundred years passed, and so they went back to the gates. (Where else would you expect to find St. Peter.) The couple reminded him about the wedding: “We know that in heaven, time is of no consequence, but we have been waiting over two hundred years.” Peter replied, “I am sorry. All the arrangements were made the day after you arrived. There is only one thing preventing us from having the wedding..... There aren’t any ministers here yet!”

The question always comes up in Christian religious spaces: “How do we enter the kingdom of God?” People want to be sure that they have a place with God. Based on your theology or the church you attend, there are several different answers you might get: You need to join the right church, worship the right deity, believe the right doctrines, say the right prayers, or live the right kind of life. Even then, it feels hard to be sure. There still always seems to be some arbitrary list of traits or behaviors that might prevent you from entering.

It is as if, when the day arrives, and we line up to meet St. Peter at the gates of the kingdom, we will have to wade through long bureaucratic lines where we will be forced to submit to some administrative protocol. I imagine it is like going through boarder security at the airport. Let’s pray it’s at least that efficient, and not like waiting in line at the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission. Folks there are always frantically searching to see if they can prove all parts of the 6-point ID verification. Imagine the questions: Are you a card-carrying member of the right kind of church? Can you prove regular attendance and participation in church activities? Do you know the right answers to the most important questions? Did you say that one magical prayer in exactly the correct way? And then, theirs that moment—“Oh, wait... You’re not...uh...sorry, we have strict instructions not to let in people like you.”

The Context of First Corinthians

Today, we have arrived at our final two clobber passages. Like all of the other clobber passages we have read in this series, these two passages exist within a context. Today, I’m going to focus mostly on the context in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, but the language is almost the same in 1 Timothy 1:9-10. In the context of Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, we have the story of perceived sexual

misconduct within the community, and there has even been bragging about it. This brings Paul's most severe criticism. He doesn't just reprimand the wrongdoer, he rebukes the whole community. Then Paul asks the rhetorical question: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?"

The "kingdom of God," Paul says, is something to be inherited; that is of course, so long as you are not a "wrongdoer." So how do we make sure we enter this "kingdom of God"? That is a fundamental Christian question, and one we should regularly ask ourselves. This is the kind of question that reminds us of the importance of what we are doing. This "Kingdom" question is a reminder of our goals and values. It reminds us what kind of people we want to be.

So while our task today is to deal with this clobber passage from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, its wider context reminds us of the deeper, more fundamental question: How do we enter the kingdom?

"Entering the Kingdom" as "Becoming the Beloved Community"

Like Romans 1, First Corinthians 6:9-10 includes a list of exclusive standards that seems surely to be used to determine who can and cannot walk through those "pearly gates." We should look closely at this list, even if we mostly agree with it. But there is a specific question we are asking this morning: How can we be an "inclusive community" and still have a list of exclusive requirements like this about who can and who cannot enter?

The problem, I believe, is with how we understand what it means to "enter." Should we really imagine the "kingdom of God" like a modern nation-state, exclusive and territorial, with a regime that proves its "greatness" by exercising strong boarder security? Should we imagine St. Peter as a boarder guard, standing at the gates and deciding who can and cannot enter? I don't think that is the right image at all.

As you may have come to realize, I'm not fond of use the language of "kingdom" anyway. I think this language misses what Jesus meant when he talked about the *basilea of God*. In the past, I have challenged us, instead, to use phrases like the "kin-dom" of God...or to borrow from Martin Luther King, Jr., the Beloved Community. So rather than interpreting Paul as talking about a checklist of what is needed to "enter through the pearly gates," I hear him reminding the church of the kind of community God is calling us to become together. In other words, this question is not about who can and cannot enter, but about the the kind of people God is calling us to become together. If you think about it, what are some of the defining marks of the Beloved Community? If we were able to actually see it lived out, what are some characteristics of that community we might expect to find? What are some characteristics we are sure *we would not find* in the Beloved Community?

The Invention of Words

Depending on which version of the New Testament you use, when you read the list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in English, you might actually find the word "homosexual" or "homosexuality" as one of those excluded characteristics. (You'll find this is the case in the English Standard Version). In New

International Version, the most popular version in America, the passage reads “sex with other men.” Both of these versions are actually merging two words into one. The New Revised Standard Version, which is the most widely used among academics, does a relatively better job. It uses the two terms “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.” If you look up these two words in their original Greek, you would find that the first word, *malakoi*, actually means “soft,” and the second word, *arsenokoitai*, means “man bed.” So “soft” is supposed to be related to male prostitution, and “man bed” somehow means sodomite? Of course, no one wants to say that God will exclude you for having soft skin—or even being effeminate (which is how some other versions translate it). And as you probably already realized, this passage doesn’t make any real reference to the ancient city of Sodom. So “sodomy” or “sodomite” doesn’t quite do it either. So what’s actually going on here?

Well, first off, the terms homosexual or homosexuality didn’t exist at the time this letter was written, so they could not have been the words intended by Paul or the any of the writers of the New Testament. The modern terminology for “homosexual” and “heterosexual” was an invention in the late nineteenth-century. The word homosexual was actually invented during the time of the unification of Germany in the late 1860s by a man named Karl Kertbeny who was advocating for gay rights. In other words, the concept of homosexuality was invented by someone seeking equal rights and protection for minorities. Afterward, we find a shift in western societies where sexuality began to be talked about in psychological and physiological terms. We developed a language that was about more than just “sex acts,” and could begin to be used to describe the development of the self and its relationship with the world.¹

The word *arsenokoitai*, is especially interesting. It was likely invented by Paul. And after him, it appears mainly in the contexts of discussions about the relationship between sex, power, and exploitation.² In one sense, these words when used in their contexts make the argument that we should never use our bodies to manipulate others. In another sense, we should never misuse the bodies of others—even if they allow it. Rather than seeing these passages as arguments against homosexuality, or even as rules about what traits exclude people from the kingdom, I see them as standards about the kind of people we are, how we treat each other, what kind of expectations we have for each other, what kind of things we allow others to go through so we can benefit.

In short, I don’t believe that the most faithful way of following Jesus is to create a list of things that keep people from the kingdom. Instead, I believe the truth at the heart of the gospel here for us is found in the question Paul must really have been leading the church in Corinth to ask (or should have been leading them to ask): How do we become the Beloved Community together?

And let me be clear, I do think this has something to do with our understanding of sexuality and our use of the body. Reframing the language of Paul in our own context, we hear Paul’s rhetorical

¹ Robert D. Tobin, “Kertbeny’s ‘Homosexuality’ and the Language of Nationalism,” in *Genealogies of Identity: Interdisciplinary Readings on Sex and Sexuality* (New York : Rodopi, 2005), pp. 3-18.

² Dale Martin, “Arsenokoités and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, edited by Robert L. Brawley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. 117-136.

question anew: “Do you not know that you cannot be the Beloved Community together if you do not have relationships built on mutual trust, on honesty, on a shared vulnerability?”

Sex and the Sacred Within the Beloved Community

If there are lists we need, they will only be important if they help us see a vision for who we can be. Building the Beloved Community is about becoming a community where everyone’s Belovedness is recognized, emphasized, and never compromised. It is a place where our bodies are seen as sacred gifts from God. From this perspective, even legally married relationships that lack love, mutual respect, and freedom, that create space of domination rather than care and mutual vulnerability—this is what it looks like to “live in sin.” Unfortunately, this has not been what Christianity in the west has taught us. Christianity has historically taught that the body is bad and needs to be conquered. It has taught that women’s bodies exist for the sake of others, especially men. If anything, I think undoing the sexually oppressive tendencies found in religious communities is at the core of Paul’s argument. It is about creating a community where we can learn to be together what the world needs us to be together. The world is watching, and our relationships with each other should model what it means to be a community that recognizes each other’s belovedness—especially when it comes to the times when we are most vulnerable.

What to Expect from Loving Relationships

In the words of the ethicist Miguel De La Torre, by providing an ethical pattern for our private and most intimate human relationships, we are making attempts to remedy public injustices. That means we expect our most treasured relationships to be safe, consensual, faithful, mutually pleasing, and intimate.³ And our intimate spaces become places of power-sharing, of mutual care, and examples of what healthy self-expression can look like when we act out of love for each other rather than domination. From the perspective of the Beloved Community, our goal is not to so much to define the type of relationships in which sexual intimacy can occur, but to establish principles of justice within all our relationships, especially those that are the most private and intimate.

So, in conclusion, rather than discovering a list of characteristics that exclude us from entering the pearly gates, we find a profound question: how do we build a radically inclusive community where everyone’s worth and dignity is valued? And rather than deny that this has anything to do with sexuality, we are being challenged to explore the role our most private and intimate relationships play in shaping us to be the kind of people God is calling us to be together. I pray that we learn to talk more freely, openly, and regularly about what healthy sexual interactions look like. I pray we seek ways to have the conversations we need to have. I pray we begin doing the work that every family and every community needs to do. And I pray we can learn to be clear with each other about what loving relationships look like, about what to expect in our relationships with each other. I pray that in every relationship we are in, and every aspect of every relationship we are in, that we are able to model what the Beloved Community looks like. — Amen.

³ Miguel A. De La Torre, “Orthoeros: A Biblically-Based Sexual Ethic,” in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 87-97.