

Tolerance and Diversity

Sexual behavior is an aspect of God's law that we seem to have latched onto with particularly strong opinions. The very laws of our country (though some are now trying to change them) recognize marriage as being between one man and one woman: That is, the parties must be of the opposite sex, and there may be only one spouse per person. Some of us may look with disdain on those who depart from this norm.

It does seem that God tolerated some deviation from these practices, though he clearly stated from the beginning what he preferred in these matters.

Abraham, Isaac, David, and others of God's most faithful servants, had multiple wives. In David's case, he not only took the wife of a married man, but he proceeded to make sure the husband was not around to know his breach of trust: he effectively sent Uriah to his death.

Abraham was not only God's friend (James 2:23), but was selected to be the father of God's chosen nation, Israel. Yet he had more than one wife. So did Jacob, for whom Israel is named. We would not allow this in 2005 in the USA.

Are we more righteous than Abraham? In this one particular practice, perhaps. But maybe the people of Abraham's day would have been equally dismayed by our lack of hospitality, our greediness, or some other aspect of our behavior that does not meet God's standards.

Today, though we frown on polygamy, both adultery and homosexuality are considered acceptable by a large minority, if not a majority of people. Both are common and powerful temptations, and many would like to see them legitimized.

We seem to want not only unconditional love, but unconditional approval, and sometimes we look for it in God's own character. If God is tolerant, our reasoning goes, we should be too. But should we approve every kind of behavior? God doesn't. He offers his love to every sort of person, but his approval depends on how we respond to that love.

The real question is: can we, like God, love someone even while disapproving of his/her behavior? If you have raised children, you know that we can.

This is not so different from the way God describes his own feelings. "Israel is my son," God said. Yet he did not approve of their ways. "All day long have I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people..." Still, he did not turn his back on his children. "Hath God cast away his people?" Paul asked (Romans 11:1). The answer, in case we have any doubt, is given: "God hath not cast away his people."

How did Jesus show tolerance toward the woman at the well, whose weaknesses he well knew? Certainly, public opinion was against her. But Jesus put little stock in public opinion himself. If

Jesus approved of her living with numerous men out of marriage, or in serial marriages, surely he would have defended her behavior. Instead, he asked her to change her life.

We don't know whether the woman ever committed that sin again. She very well may have. Most of us fail again even when we try to change. For a person of the homosexual persuasion, as for the woman at the well, the question is not, has he sinned -- for "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). The question is instead, does he live for sin? Or, will he try to change? Hardness, not weakness, separates us from Christ.

Should we expect a homosexual to deny his own feelings and desires? We tend to approve of most self-expression these days. But what is wrong with self-denial? Jesus denied his very life for our benefit. And he advises such a frame of mind for the rest of us too: "Let [a man] deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

If, as many people think, homosexuality is an inborn tendency, we might understandably ask why God allows a person to be born this way, when it means he will have, apparently, an even greater burden of self-denial to bear. We don't know the answer to this, but sexuality is not the only aspect of our nature that must be brought under control. It is quite natural for us to dishonor our parents when we are mad at them. It is natural for us to steal time from our employer when we are bored with our work. It is natural to lie when we find ourselves in a tight spot. Yet God commands us not to do these things, however natural they may be.

Each of us has burdens we carry in our attempt to follow Christ. Each requires self-denial. Some people are driven to seek multiple sexual partners, when we are instructed to be devoted to one. Some suffer depression, when we are told to "count it all joy". Still others crave alcohol, though drunkenness is severely criticized. There are burdens of obsession, burdens of covetousness, burdens of idolatry. None of us is singled out to bear these burdens, we all bear them. They are the burdens of being human. Self-indulgence is not the way Jesus dealt with them. And he doesn't recommend it for us, either.

Can a homosexual change his/her desires? The prevailing wisdom says, No. Maybe this is correct. We can't change our basic human nature. Yet God calls us to a standard of behavior that often requires us to discipline our nature. Unhealthful foods we once craved stop being so tempting when we cease to cultivate the habit of eating them. An activity we once avoided becomes enjoyable once we begin to practice it. And wise counselors often advise us to treat those we dislike as though we loved them, because so often the change of behavior results in a change of heart.

But it's not that simple, you say. And you are right, it isn't. Life is complicated because we are. Temptation isn't going to go away any time soon. Sometimes it will even increase as we make an effort to resist it. God, not we, will prevail.

We have no right to say that it was okay for Abraham to have multiple wives, when God permitted only one. Nor do we have the right to say that same-sex partnerships are acceptable because we live in a different and complex culture. But we do need to look beyond these behaviors to the heart of things.

In our hearts, we know that we feel the greatest hope and reassurance not when we get unconditional approval, but when people know us for what we are, and love us anyway. This is how I see God's love, and that of many wise human beings. This is the love that I want you to have toward me, and that I will try to give you.

It is tolerance at its best.

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