

Was Jesus Okay With Homosexuality? (3 of 6)

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If there is one thing that all Americans may agree on about Jesus, it is that he taught us to love. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” are two of our favorite Jesus quotes. “Judge not” and “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone” are often thrown in (or *at*) for good measure. **But how do love and homosexuality fit together for Jesus and his followers? Here there is far less agreement.**

In my last post I argued, based on evidence from Jewish history, that it is virtually certain that rabbi Jesus agreed homosexual behavior is wrong. This is true even if he never explicitly mentioned homosexuality. Overwhelming historical evidence demands that this must be our working hypothesis in any discussion of Jesus and homosexuality, virtually certain **unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary.** (And then we need to explain how this evidence was somehow missed by all his first listeners.)

Is Jesus’ teaching on love such evidence? Is Jesus’ emphasis on love proof that he approved of loving homosexual relationships? **Does “love your neighbor” mean Jesus affirmed “gay love”?**



An adaptation of an image I found online. The original message is true, but the question I added at the bottom must also be answered honestly.

Love and Homosexuality: What Did Ancient Jews and Christians Say?

Jesus’ life was marked by unusual compassion and love. He not only taught love of friend and enemy alike; he also modeled it by welcoming and honoring social “nobodies” of all sorts:

- He welcomed children: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them” ([Luke 18:16](#)).
- He had compassion on the crowds: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” ([Matt. 9:36](#)).
- He attracted women: “There were also many women there... who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him” ([Matt. 27:55](#)).
- He said nice things about prostitutes: “Truly, I say to you... the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” ([Matt. 21:31](#)).
- He protected a woman caught in adultery: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” ([John 8:7](#)).
- And he was accused of being a friend of the wrong crowd: “Look at him! ...A friend of tax collectors and sinners!” ([Matt. 11:19](#)).

Matthew Vines emphasizes Jesus’ example of love at the climax of his viral video “The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality”:

Jesus placed a particular focus on those others overlooked, on those who were outcast, on mistreated and marginalized minorities. And if we are working to emulate the life of Christ, then that’s where our focus needs to be, too... How fully have you absorbed, not just the existence of gay and lesbian Christians, but the depth of the pain and the hurt that their own brothers and sisters have inflicted on them? Does that pain grieve you as though it were your own?”¹

Vines’ words here about love are true and on point. This is a message that all Christians, myself included, need to consider and act on. As Preston Sprinkle reminds us, when we discuss homosexuality, we are discussing “people to be loved... not just an issue.”²

However, Vines makes these statements about Jesus’ love in the context of arguing that “the Bible never directly addresses, and it certainly does not condemn, loving, committed same-sex relationships.” He claims that those who use the Bible to speak against homosexual behavior are denying gay people love: “You are uniquely unworthy of loving and being loved by another person, and all because you’re different, because you’re gay.” Here, it seems to me, Vines is badly misunderstanding both the nature of love and the significance of Jesus’ example of love.

Jesus’ life of love was truly remarkable, yet it is virtually meaningless as evidence that Jesus approved of homosexual relationships. Here are three reasons, rooted in history, why I can make such a confident claim:

First, ancient Jews saw no contradiction between commanding neighbor-love and condemning homosexual activity. In the Law of Moses, the famous command to love one’s neighbor and the commands against homosexual behavior are found practically shoulder to shoulder:

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22).

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

“You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19:34).

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (Lev. 20:13).³

It is questionable, at best, to say that *because* Jesus quoted and affirmed “Love your neighbor” from Leviticus he *therefore* disagreed with “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman” from the same text. Instead, these passages demonstrate that **ancient Jews did not think that affirming homosexual relationships was a logical or necessary outworking of an ethic of love.**

Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits confirms this conclusion in his entry on “homosexuality” in the Encyclopaedia Judaica. He contrasts modern liberal Christian attitudes about love with the perspective found in Jewish law:

Whereas the more liberal attitude found in some modern Christian circles is possibly due to the exaggerated importance Christians have traditionally accorded to the term “love,” **Jewish law holds that no hedonistic ethic, even if called “love,” can justify the morality of homosexuality** any more than it can legitimize adultery, incest, or polygamy, however genuinely such acts may be performed out of love and by mutual consent.⁴

Second, the apostle Paul did not see any contradiction between urging neighbor love and warning against homosexual practice. Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth contains an entire chapter exalting love—the famous “Love Chapter” (1 Cor. 13). But it also includes this: “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral ... nor men who practice homosexuality... will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Similarly, Paul’s letter to the Roman church, which contains the New Testament’s longest passage critiquing homosexual activity (Rom. 1:24-27), also emphasizes that all the commandments “are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Rom. 13:9).

Here we must detour briefly to address a question about which whole chapters have been written: Was Paul really speaking against homosexual behaviors of all kinds in these passages? That is indeed how the church read Paul for nearly 2000 years, but a seemingly unending variety of revisionist readings have been appearing in recent decades. Are we wrong to understand Paul as speaking generally against homosexual behavior in these passages? (See also 1 Timothy 1:9-10.)

The first response to this question must be to remember that Paul was a Jew. He was trained as a Pharisee, and he stood in a longer religious tradition where “for a period of about 2000 years, all Jews everywhere taught that homosexual unions of any sort were sinful and against nature.”⁵ That historical context was our starting point in interpreting Jesus’ silence (see the last post), and it must also be our starting point in interpreting Paul’s teachings.

That Paul was standing in this Jewish tradition is reinforced by the fact that he apparently drew directly on the Law of Moses to coin an original term for a male homosexual. He apparently created the word *ἀρσενικοῖται* (“male-bedders,” found in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10) from two words found in the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13, *ἄρσενος* (“male”) and *κοίτη* (“bed”). This word, like its source text, appears to be a very general reference to males who practice same-sex relations.⁶

In this Jewish context, it is nearly meaningless to argue that Paul's statements *could be understood* to leave a *loophole* for *some positive forms* of homosexual behavior. In this historical context of prohibiting *all* same-sex sexual relations and preserving the male-female created order, it is somewhat beside the point to suggest that Paul "doesn't have *long-term, loving* same-sex relationships in view."² In this context, debates about the precise meanings of the terms Paul used to condemn homosexual behaviors become secondary. To counter centuries of consistent Jewish teaching against *all* forms of homosexual behavior, we would need to see clear *positive* endorsement of some sort of homosexual behavior by Paul, not merely a failure to explicitly condemn all forms.

But we don't see that. Instead, if we read Paul's statements about homosexuality within the context of previous Jewish writings on the topic, we see that his statements are right at home. Just like them, he builds his case on both Jewish law ("*ἀρσενοκοῖται*") and nature/creation ([Rom. 1:24-27](#)). And just like them, he speaks against the homosexual union itself ("*ἀρσενοκοῖται*," "male-bedders") and against unions that involved mutual desire ("passion for one another," [Rom. 1:27](#)). He even speaks against female-female unions ([Rom. 1:26](#)). ***In short, there is nothing in Paul's teaching on the ethics of homosexuality to indicate that he was carving a path contrary to Jewish predecessors.***

Kyle Harper, in a recent book published by Harvard University Press, warns against "any hermeneutic roundabout that tries to sanitize or soften Paul's words" about same-sex relationships:

For Paul, same-sex attraction symbolized the estrangement of men and women, at the very level of their inmost desires, from nature and from the creator of nature... [pg brk] For the historian, any hermeneutic roundabout that tries to sanitize or soften Paul's words is liable to obscure the inflection point around which attitudes toward same-sex erotics would be forever altered [within Roman culture]... Paul's overriding sense of gender—rather than age or status—as the prime determinant in the propriety of a sexual act was nurtured by contemporary Jewish attitudes... By reducing the sex act down to the most basic constituents of male and female, Paul was able to redescribe the sexual culture surrounding him in transformative terms."⁸

Despite Harper's warning, there are many current revisionist readings of Paul to consider, and also many interpretive questions to answer.⁹ For those who wish to dig deeper into Paul, I recommend [this transcript of an interview with Robert Gagnon](#) or, for a much more detailed discussion, the book [Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition](#), by Fortson and Grams (especially chapters 16-18).

With apologies, then, both for getting side-tracked with Paul and for giving him such cursory treatment, we return to Jesus.

Here, again, is our take-away point from Paul: Paul did not see any contradiction between urging neighbor love and warning against homosexual practice. Both the Jewish Scriptures (before Jesus) and Paul (after him) condemned homosexual behavior while also teaching the command "love your neighbor as yourself." On these ethical matters of love and homosexuality, Paul and Moses were in complete agreement.

Jesus was also a Jew. He taught neighbor love using the very same commandment from the Law of Moses that Paul used. This is no reason to conclude he disagreed with Moses and Paul on the ethics of homosexual behavior.



Third, rather than equating love with sexual freedom, the New Testament commonly *contrasts* love and sexual indulgence.

Don't miss how radically different this is from our culture! In fact, this is one of those times when the "culture" of the New Testament (or even just of ancient Jews) is so radically different from our own that it is mind-bending.

Modern Western culture, at least since the 1960's, typically equates love with sexual freedom. The language of love has been adopted by those promoting LGBTQ+ lifestyle choices, so that banners proclaiming messages such as "Love Wins" or "Love Is Love" are commonplace in Gay Pride marches and on social media. This use of "love" language is so ubiquitous that it is almost automatic for a person to feel they are being unloving if they speak against homosexual behavior.

To step from this mindset into the ethics of the New Testament is akin to jumping into a cold lake on a very hot day. The shock is great enough that most people complain that the water is too cold, rather than considering that the problem may be found in their own overheated bodies.

Rather than equating love with sexual freedom as our culture does, the New Testament *specifically contrasts* love and sexual immorality. **It is not just that the NT sees some "sexual freedom" as loving and some as not; rather, it sees them as polar opposites. You are asked to choose one or the other.**

Paul's letter to the Ephesians may contain the clearest example:

Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. **But sexual immorality** and all impurity or covetousness **must not even be named among you** (Eph. 5:2-3, emphasis added).

Paul's letter to the Colossians tells us to "put to death" what we might call "sexual freedom" and to "put on" love instead:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire... **Put on then**, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness... **And above all these put on love** (Col. 3:5, 12, 14, emphasis added).

Paul's letter to the Galatians also agrees, essentially saying, "Do not practice sexual immorality, impurity, or sensuality, but *instead* love each other":

“**Do not** use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, **but** through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”... Now **the works of the flesh are evident**: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality... **But the fruit of the Spirit is love**” (Gal. 5:13-14, 19, 22, emphasis added).

Peter agrees with Paul (see 1 Peter 4:3-8), as does the writer of Hebrews. Near the end of his letter he writes, “Let brotherly love continue.” Then he gives several examples of how to practice brotherly love, including this:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous (Heb. 13:4).¹⁰

Again, it is easy to miss how radical the New Testament ethic is. Remember that **these writers are all Jews who agree that homosexual activity of any sort is sinful** (see my last post). When they mention “sexual immorality,” they think that term includes homosexual practices (more on this in my next post). We should not imagine that they think some homosexual activity is immoral and some is loving. Rather, as Jewish Christians, **they all believe that all homosexual behavior is contrary to God’s will and, therefore, contrary to true love.**



An adaptation of an image found online.

Love and the “Most Important” Commandment

How can we explain this radical New Testament idea that sexual freedom and true love are at odds with each other?

One source of this thinking is the Jewish heritage of the New Testament writers. For example, the Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, complained about how some people abused the term *love* in his day:

Seduction is an offence which is similar and nearly related to adultery, as they are both sprung from one common mother, incontinence. But **some of those persons who are accustomed to dignify shameful actions by specious names, call this love**, blushing to confess the real truth concerning its character.¹¹

Remember also the statement of Rabbi Jakobovits as quoted above:

Jewish law holds that no hedonistic ethic, even if called “love,” can justify the morality of homosexuality.¹²

Another foundation for this New Testament perspective is Jesus' teaching on the two great commandments. In Jesus' view (also the historic Jewish view), **love for neighbor is properly understood as the "second" commandment, not the first.** It must always be defined in relation to the "most important" commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God":

One of the scribes... asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "**The most important** is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **The second** is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31, emphasis added)

Ben Witherington's helpful definition of neighbor love takes this priority into account: "**Love in the NT is not mainly or merely a warm, mushy feeling or sentiment but a decision of the will to do what God commands in regard to the neighbor.**"¹³ It is not ultimately loving to help your neighbor violate God's will.

In Jesus' and Paul's eyes, love for someone new was never a valid argument in favor of adultery or divorce—*not even if both marriage partners wanted the adultery or divorce to happen.* To the contrary, Paul said that the commandment "You shall not commit adultery" is "summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Rom. 13:9). In Paul's view, to *not* commit adultery is to love your neighbor. Since neighbor love was "a decision of the will to do what God commands in regard to the neighbor," this meant that even mutually-desired divorce was prohibited *because it violated God's creation pattern of male-female marriage for life.*

The same realities apply to "loving, committed same-sex relationships" (see Vines above). In the ethics of ancient Jews and Christians, **neither divorce** ("except on the ground of sexual immorality," Matt. 5:32) **nor homosexual activity were considered legitimate expressions of human love, for they both violated what Jesus called the "most important" commandment: love of God.**

It is important to keep the "most important" love commandment in mind when listening to perspectives like the following, from a lecture by Ted Grimsrud, Senior Professor of Peace Theology at Eastern Mennonite University:

In terms of their mission, **Christian churches should take as their starting point a general stance of welcome or invitation or hospitality toward all people...** Jesus' welcome to sinners included welcoming both people who had violated Torah (for example, the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus the tax collector, and the woman "of the city" who washed his feet) and people who were inappropriately labeled "unclean" (such as poor people, lepers, or menstruating women)...

The Bible *does* place a high priority on the need for the faith community to sustain a clear identity as God's people—so we should resist forces within the community that compromise that identity. Not everything goes, but we limit hospitality only in order to serve the vocation of welcome... **In relation to same-sex intimacy, same-sex marriage, and "homosexuality" in general,** the fundamental call to hospitality does not fully resolve the issues. However, **we should see the call to hospitality as the starting point.**¹⁴

This perspective takes something truly beautiful—"hospitality," or love of neighbor—and promotes it out of its

place as the second commandment to become “the *starting point*.” Given this beginning, it is little wonder that Grimsrud goes on to seek a “hermeneutic roundabout” for each biblical prohibition of same-sex relations.¹⁵

Making Jesus’ “most important” commandment the starting point for our discussion of love and homosexuality leads to different conclusions.

What Is Love? And Who Gets to Define It?

What, then, is love? What does it truly look like? Who gets to decide if a given action is actually loving? Is it possible to love a person while hating what they do?

It appears to me that it is impossible to agree on what *true love* is until we also agree in significant measure about what *truth* is.

What, for example, does it mean to love someone who experiences homosexual desires?

- Supporting a person in their goals of achieving whatever pleasures, rights, or freedoms they desire?
- Withholding support, even when it is asked for, if you disagree with their goals?
- Warning them of the dangers of their goals, based on truth as best you can see it?
- Withholding warning, even if it may mean their ultimate destruction?

Until we agree on truth, it is pretty much impossible to agree on which of the above (or any other alternative) is actually loving.

Love without truth is like cake batter without a mold. Fortson and Grams explain:

What happens with the criterion of “love” in a culture that highly values “freedom” is that “love” is defined in terms of “freedom.” The “loving thing to do” becomes letting people do what they want to do, as long as the rights of others are not infringed. **Like cake batter, love takes the shape of the mold into which it is poured.** In the West this mold consists of liberation and equality. No society will stand with so meager a basis for thinking through its great moral challenges. Citizens of Western culture lack a robust enough moral vocabulary and ethic to explain why they object to things their consciences feel are wrong. In the public square they are restricted to the language of freedom and equality in all moral matters.¹⁶

What “cake mold” did Jesus use to define true love? Clearly, the mold any ancient Jew used was the commands of God, including his commands about sexual immorality. Nothing could be truly loving unless it was in line with God’s law. As Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” ([John 14:15](#)).

Conclusion

Jesus’ teachings on love, then, do not in any way suggest that he was okay with homosexual relationships.

If we conclude this, then we (like Vines above) are importing our own “cake mold” into the first century. We are assuming that Jesus defined *love* according to *our* values and *our* concepts of truth, not by those of ancient Jews or the law of God.

As we have seen, ancient Jews and early Christians alike both taught that one can love one’s neighbor and disapprove of homosexual activity at the same time. In fact, the authors of the New Testament believed that sexual immorality in all forms was diametrically *opposed* to true love.

Jesus' emphasis on love is not proof that he approved of "loving homosexual relationships." If anything, in light of biblical ethics, it shows the opposite.

Thank you for reading. If you have a comment, please leave it below. And "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2).

Postscript: It is not the purpose of this series to address the important pastoral questions of how to love and bless those of you who have same-sex desires or live homosexual lifestyles. (If that is you, special thanks for reading.) I cannot sign off this post without emphasizing, however, that **Jesus' view of love as described above must never be used to justify violence of any sort (physical or psychological) toward homosexual people.** Quite the opposite. What does love look like when offered to a person with homosexual desires? Among other things, it looks like hospitality, as Rosaria Butterfield describes in her book *The Gospel Comes With a House Key*.

1. Matthew Vines, "The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality," originally a speech given at College Hill United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas, on March 8, 2012; video and transcript available at <https://matthewvines.tumblr.com/>, transcript accessed September 8, 2019. Vines advertises that his video, which has over 1,112,000 views, "dismantles every Bible-based argument against homosexuality." That is a bold claim for a speech produced by a 21-year-old. Vines makes a powerful emotional appeal, but I think he falls far short of his claim, though I don't have time here to respond to most of his arguments. ↵
2. Sprinkle has written a book with this title: *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue*. I have not read the book, only reviews, so this mention is not meant to be an endorsement (nor a critique). ↵
3. Compare also "Love the sojourner" and "A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God," both from Deuteronomy (10:19; 22:5). ↵
4. Immanuel Jakobovits, "Homosexuality," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 8 (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1971), 961-62, emphasis added. As quoted by Mark F. Rooker in *Leviticus*, Vol. 3A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2000), 247. ↵
5. S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 248. ↵
6. Fortson and Grams explain further: "*Arsenokoitai* is a word not found in Greek literature outside Christian circles... Significantly, the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13 offers the words needed to understand how the word *arsenokoitai* came into being... Not only are the words found together, but a Greek manuscript in Paul's day would not have separated them with spaces. While Paul would have known the two words were distinct, he would have seen them together in Leviticus 20:13 and apparently chose to keep them that way... Since the word *arsenokoitai* is not found elsewhere in Greek literature—except where Christian authors use it and usually in reference to 1 Corinthians 6:9—it is apparently a word Paul coined from Leviticus 20:13." *Ibid.*, 294-95. ↵
7. "A Brief Biblical Case for LGBTQ Inclusion," online article, The Reformation Project, founded by Matthew Vines, <https://www.reformationproject.org/biblical-case>, italics added, accessed September 9, 2019. ↵
8. Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 94-95. Harper is Professor of Classics and Letters and Senior Vice President and Provost at The University of Oklahoma. According to reviewer Kevin DeYoung "Harper's book is a work of academic history. For the most part, he doesn't comment on the history he presents either to approve it or condemn it." ↵
9. Was Paul aware of such a thing as homosexual orientation, or is using the word "homosexual" to translate Paul anachronistic? Was Paul thinking only of pederasty or promiscuity? What exactly does he mean by "contrary to nature" and "natural relations"? ↵

10. Gareth Lee Cockerill comments on [Hebrews 13:1-5](#): "These four pairs of exhortations are an expansion of the 'brotherly love' with which they begin. The first two pairs describe behavior that directly expresses this brotherly love—hospitality to strangers (v. 2), concern for the imprisoned, and aid for the persecuted (v. 3). The last two forbid conduct that violates brotherly love—sexual unfaithfulness (v. 4) and greed (v. 5)." *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 678. ↵
11. Philo, *The Special Laws*, Book 3, XI. (64) <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book29.html>, emphasis added. ↵
12. Immanuel Jakobovits, "Homosexuality," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 8 (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1971), 961-62, emphasis added. As quoted by Mark F. Rooker in *Leviticus*, Vol. 3A in The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2000), 247. ↵
13. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 316, emphasis added. ↵
14. Ted Grimsrud, "The Bible and Same-Sex Marriage," lecture presented at Oak Grove Mennonite Church (Smithville, Ohio), January 18, 2015, transcript posted at <https://peacetheology.net/2015/01/20/the-bible-and-same-sex-marriage/>, accessed September 14, 2019, bold added. ↵
15. It is beyond the scope of this series to respond to each of Grimsrud's interpretations in his lecture. However, virtually all of the arguments he uses and more are addressed in the recent book by Fortson and Grams recommended above. ↵
16. S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville, NT: B&H Academic, 2016), pp. 176, emphasis mine. ↵