

## LETTER FROM THE PASTOR – MARCH 2023

# God’s Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

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A little over a decade ago, English journalist Melanie Phillips, writing on the state of Western civilization, observed, “Society seems to be in the grip of a mass derangement.” There is, she writes, a “sense that the world has slipped off the axis of reason,” causing many to wonder, “How is anyone to work out who is right in such a babble of ‘experts’ and with so much conflicting information?”<sup>1</sup>

As I started to reread this book a few weeks ago, I was struck once again by what’s missing in her writing. Phillips writes as an agnostic but observant Jew, and many of the points she makes are profoundly helpful. But noticeably absent from her analysis, I find, is any recognition of the Bible’s account of how the world that God made in its entirety and perfection could have gone so haywire (à la [Gen. 3](#))—particularly, in our day, in the realm of human sexuality.

Sexuality as described and prescribed by Scripture is not just a difficult topic; to address it is also unpopular and in large measure offensive. I come to it somewhat fearful, with caution and, I hope, with a measure of compassion—but also with the conviction that God’s Word and way are absolutely perfect and that God knew exactly what He was doing when He put humanity together. And thankfully, one of the passages that speaks most pointedly to the way in which God’s wrath is revealed against sin, [Romans 1:16–28](#), is also preceded by and followed by the amazing offer of God’s grace.

### Living in a Runaway World

Paul’s argument in [Romans 1](#) unfolds from his great declaration in verse 16 that he is “not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Why, we might ask, is the gospel for “everyone”? Because, as Paul goes on to explain, everyone needs the gospel. Every one of us is born in the same hopeless

and helpless situation: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” ([Rom. 1:18](#)).

Mankind, in other words, lives in a runaway world. Some of us like to suggest that God is hiding, but we are the ones who have done the hiding since nearly the beginning of time ([Gen. 3:8–10](#)). We “suppress the truth”—the truth that He has shown us about Himself ([Rom. 1:19](#)). We deny the fact that He has made Himself known clearly in the universe in which we live—that “his eternal power and divine nature” ([Rom. 1:20](#)) are evident all around us—and as a result, we are absolutely “without excuse” (v. 20) when we choose not to worship Him or to thank Him. When we refuse to know God as He has made Himself known, we don’t give up on worship; we actually just worship something or someone else.

All of this brings us to the matter of human sexuality—not because it is some sort of hobby horse or because we get some (perverse) sense of satisfaction out of being controversial but because that’s what comes next in God’s Word. And if we simply choose the parts of the Bible we like and reject the parts that we don’t like, then we don’t believe the Bible; we believe ourselves. Why would we ever want to consider a passage like [Romans 1](#) unless we absolutely believe that the Bible is God’s Word, that it is unerring, and it speaks life-giving truth, even in our twenty-first-century Western world? We are not at liberty to rewrite the Bible to accommodate godless perspectives on abortion, on euthanasia, on same-sex marriage, on transgenderism, and more. We are not free to tamper with God’s Word.

And so, as we continue reading Paul’s inspired words, it is clear that having broken our connection with the Creator, who made us purposefully for Himself, we struggle to actually know who we are. As Paul goes on to explain, when men turned away from God and toward idols (including, as we do in our day, the idol of self),

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . . God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ([Rom. 1:24, 26–27](#))

It's important that we note here that the exchange of the normal, natural function of human sexuality for that which is contrary is not the first "exchange" mentioned by Paul. He has already described mankind as exchanging "the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" ([Rom. 1:23](#))—the exchange of the creator God for created idols. They have also "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" ([Rom. 1:25](#))—the exchange of knowledge for ignorance. And it is because they refuse to believe in Him, to worship Him, that God gives men and women up to their "dishonorable passions." He has given them up to something which contemporary society regards as an alternative lifestyle but which the Bible pronounces to be an abomination, to be a perversion. Idolatry, in other words, leads to all sorts of immorality—and the immorality gets deeper as it goes.

### From Idolatry to Immorality

Such is the state of our culture in the twenty-first century. But how did we get here? A brief reflection on the past several decades of Western culture makes it clear that there has been a strategy at play as it relates to those driving the revolution we have seen. First, there have been efforts to make sure that the broader society would sympathize with their struggles—both of a personal and societal nature. (And Christians surely ought to lead the world in sympathy, but only of the Christlike sort.) Secondly, there was and is a clear desire to normalize homosexuality, transgenderism, etc. through media and individuals' platforms. And thirdly, there has been and continues to be a concerted effort to demonize those who oppose the revolution. Dissenters will be canceled at nearly any cost.

The West as a whole, and America in particular, is not, I suggest, in the mess that Phillips describes because it is immoral—not ultimately. We are in such a mess because we worship modern-day Baals rather than the living God. The moral squalor, the brokenness of our culture, is merely the clearest evidence of "the wrath of God" being "revealed from heaven" ([Rom. 1:18](#)). The actual immorality is not the cause; it's the evidence. It's what happens when we turn in upon ourselves.

**When we refuse to know God as He has made Himself known, we don't give up on worship; we actually just worship something or someone else.**

And the evidence is all around us. When Paul describes both men and women giving up “natural relations” in favor of those that are “contrary to nature” ([Rom. 1:26–27](#)), he uses the word “natural” to describe the material order as God intended it. (In fact, the words that he uses for “women” and “men” are actually “female” and “male” in Greek—a deliberate echo, I think, of [Genesis 1:27](#): “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”) Anatomy, physiology, biology—all of them, even without theology—testify to God’s perfect plan, the violation of which leads to chaos, sadness, and despair.

Homosexuality, then, is not simply an alternative lifestyle. According to Scripture, it is an unnatural decision born of a preceding idolatry. It is an expression of rebellion against God: “I will decide who I am, what I am, what I’m doing, and with whom I am doing it.” It’s not the greatest sin, but it is perhaps the clearest evidence of a society’s defiance of God. When a culture finally reaches the place where even manhood and womanhood, gender itself, is deconstructed and reconstructed according to whatever agenda an individual has, whatever ethical set of norms they’ve decided to embrace, then that culture is in deep trouble.

We see this disintegration not only on a societal level but also on a personal level. When our longings are no longer filled by God, who has made us for Himself, the longings don’t go away. We still have to satisfy our questions about our identity. We still have to answer the yearnings of our heart for peace, for fulfillment, for joy, for satisfaction, for sexual gratification—whatever it might be. When we read Paul’s words about men and women “receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error” (v. 27), we can easily jump to conclusions about just what he meant. I find William G. T. Shedd’s observation helpful: “The recompense is the gnawing unsatisfied lust itself, together with the dreadful physical and moral consequences of debauchery”<sup>2</sup> (i.e., excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure). When we reject God as the answer to our longings, we don’t stand on morally neutral ground; we actually become, in Paul’s words, “consumed with passion.”

## A Gospel for the Whole World

For the Christian, all of this presents quite a challenge. We must, as John Stott did so masterfully, have one foot firmly planted in the world of the Bible and the other planted in our own context. On the one hand, we’re called to refute false, bad ideas in the awareness that Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” ([John 15:18](#))—even as we treat those who hate us with honor. On

the other hand, we have this good news to share: Jesus was delivered up to the cross so that men and women might be delivered from sin and born again to life everlasting. In Him, broken lives are made new.

So how do you honor God, obey His Word, and love your neighbors, friends, and family members who have decided to go on this path? Some people have decided the way to respond to our culture's broken understanding of human sexuality is by admonition—to simply stand up and keep declaring, "This is terrible," "This is terrible," "This is terrible." Others have decided they won't say anything at all. Neither is a possibility for a Bible-believing Christian.

In my experience, those who reject God's plan for their sexuality are either reviled or affirmed by the people around them. By contrast, Christians ought to say, "We will not treat you in either of those ways. We will not revile you, but we cannot affirm you. And the reason we won't revile you is the same reason we can't affirm you: because of the Bible, because of God's love, because of His grace, and because of His goodness." It isn't easy to speak about God's wrath. But I'm glad that when I do address it, I can do so knowing that it is wrapped in the amazing news of God's grace.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul urged them, "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" ([1 Cor. 6:9–10](#)). If we're clear-eyed and honest, we will all find ourselves described somewhere in this list. What's the answer? Look at the next sentence: "Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

The hope for the greedy, for the immoral, for all of us is the same hope. The answer is the same answer: the cross of Jesus Christ. He was given up on our behalf so that we might enjoy all the beauty and goodness that is found in Him. This is what we mean when we say that the gospel is for everyone. It's a gospel for atheists and agnostics, for Jews and gentiles, for Hindus and Muslims; for the lost and the lonely, for the happy and the successful; for the homosexual or transgender person; for those who experience gender dysphoria and those who don't—ultimately, for anyone who humbly casts any other identity aside and loses his or her life for Christ's sake ([Matt. 16:25](#)). It is a gospel for the whole world, for the whole world undoubtedly needs it.

# **ANNOUNCEMENTS: WHAT'S HAPPENING AT LBC**

**Wednesday Evening Bible Study** – There are four weeks left in our Discipleship Explored study. This series works through the book of Philippians and addresses what living life in Christ looks like. The study starts with a video lesson and is followed by small group discussion.

**Mission Sunday**- We are excited to announce that Steve and Tara Reignault will be with us and providing a mission update on Sunday March 19<sup>th</sup>. There will also be a potluck following the service.

**Evening Service** - Please join us on Sunday March 26th at 7pm for a time of worship, study and corporate prayer.

**LBC Book of the Month** – This month we are featuring John Bunyan's classic Pilgrim's Progress. There is both a children's and modern English version available. Pilgrim's Progress is a Christian allegory written in 1678 that continues to edify and benefit the church today.

**Baptism and Membership Classes** – Please note that these classes will be taking place in the spring. The Baptism class will be held in May and the Membership class will be held in June. If you are interested in learning more about these classes, please contact one of the Elders.

**Men's Breakfast** – Please join us on Saturday March 18<sup>th</sup> for food, fellowship and worship. The breakfast starts at 8:30 am. If you are interested in being involved in the preparation of breakfast, please let us know.

