

Being Gay Is Not A Sin. **Period.**

The Bible and Sexuality: Believers Take a Fresh Look

- Pastor Jim O'Hanlon

Summary:

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been interpreted as a condemnation of homosexuality but it does not say that. The story is NOT about two men or two women who are lovers or who want to marry. It is about a mass rape of two wayfarers. Lot seeks to protect them and puts himself and his daughters at risk. (Genesis 19:1-11)

Leviticus 19 calls for the ultimate punishment for "*a man (who) lies with a male*" but it is part of a list of nearly 30 other rules many also insisting on the ultimate punishment of death. Looking at the list we realize these need to be studied and evaluated in light of

today's values. The same goes for portions of the Letter to the Romans and St. Paul's exhortations to morality. Let's read each of these.

Many people say our understanding of homosexuality can be dictated by the Bible. They start with the first book of the Bible and a truly horrendous story:

Genesis 19:1-11

The Depravity of Sodom

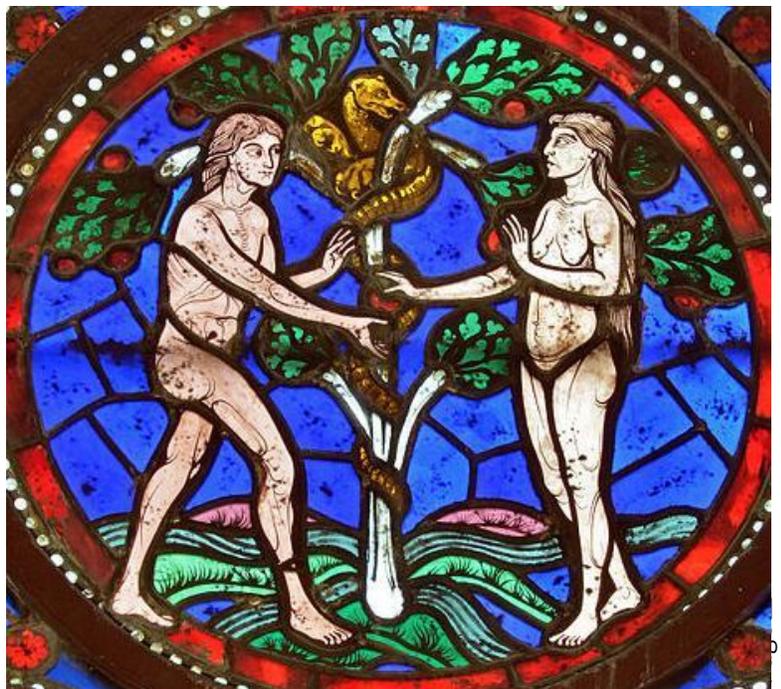
"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise *early and go on your way.*' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' ³But he urged them

strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house...⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house;⁵and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door."

Should we narrowly define this as a story about the evils of homosexuality? To be able to define this (narrowly or otherwise) we would have to look at the demand of the men of Sodom. We see the story is about rape -- mass rape -- and deserves to be noteworthy for the revulsion it creates in us but if the

story was instead about heterosexual mass rape would we be less appalled? Which is the more relevant aspect, sexuality or violence? How is the story relevant to the discussion about letting two consenting same sex adults get married? The Bible itself refers back to this story and defines it as being about hospitality. In Ezekiel 16:48-50 God compares Jerusalem to Sodom, saying "Sodom never did what you and your daughters have done." He explains that the sin of Sodom was that they "were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me." Jeremiah 23:14, Jeremiah 49:17-18, Jeremiah 50:39-40 and Lamentations 4:6 each associate Sodom and Gomorrah with adultery and lies.

Lot's response to the demands of the city is to protect the travelers at all costs, even to offer his daughters to the sociopathic lust of the entire city. Should we take this story as the definition of our values and accept its principles? If so we would start by removing ALL the rights of women and tell our daughters they are expendable. Daughters were sold into a marriage for the cost of livestock.



While the story of Sodom does not refer to sexual orientation by itself or make any statements about what is acceptable or not in that respect, other books of the Bible will explicitly condemn homosexual behavior among men. The Bible has less to say about lesbianism.

The Bible never uses the term “homosexual” because that term is a modern one. There are passages that discuss sexual behavior between the same gender but this may or may not be referring to homosexuality as we would understand it. One such reference is Leviticus 19:19 - 20:16:

Ritual and Moral Holiness

¹⁷ *"You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.*

¹⁸*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

¹⁹ *You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.*

²⁰ *If a man has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave, designated for another man but not ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, since she has not been freed; ²¹ but he shall bring a guilt-offering for himself to the LORD, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram as guilt-offering... ²³ When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall*

regard their fruit as forbidden; for three years it shall be forbidden to you; ...

²⁶ *You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. ²⁷You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. ²⁸You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.*

²⁹ *Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, so that the land may not become prostituted and full of depravity. ³⁰You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.*

³¹ *Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.*

³² *You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.*

³³ *When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

³⁵ *You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity...*

²⁰ *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Say further to the people of Israel:*

Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death....

⁴*And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, ⁵I myself will set my face against them and*

against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech...

⁹All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them.

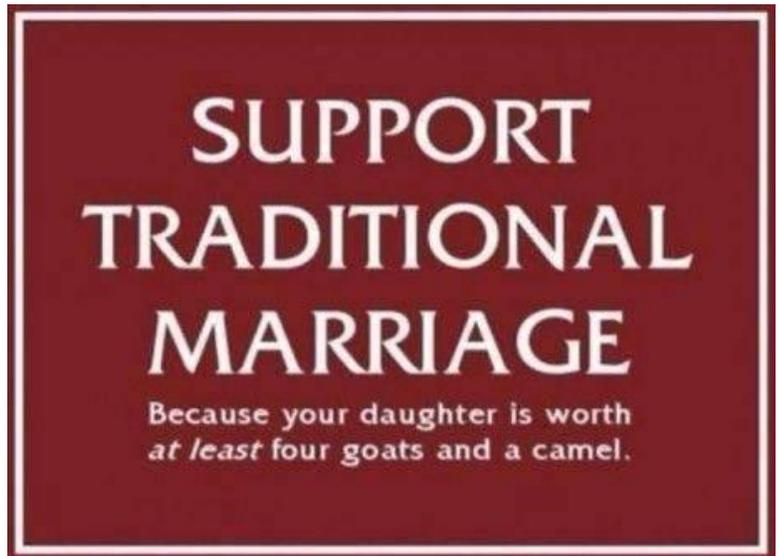
¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. ¹¹ The man

who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. ¹²If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. ¹³If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them"

Many of the rules and laws of Leviticus are otherwise considered common sense to us and others have long since been dismissed based on a rational view, reconsidered as no longer necessary or rejected as barbaric. Why have Bible verses about homosexuality been treated differently as if we cannot consider their wisdom? How do we insist on imposing Biblical judgment against homosexuality while ignoring many if not most others?

What did Jesus think about the book of Leviticus? When he was asked what the most important commandment was he gladly pared down the Bible's 600 commandments to one. Deuteronomy 6: "Love God with all your heart and mind and soul." He offered a second commandment to go with it and this one was from Leviticus 19: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

How do we pick and choose what is important in the Bible? Jesus already did it for us.



Romans 1:18-2:1 & 3:21-24

The Guilt of Humankind

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth... ²¹(F)or though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind

and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents,³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.³²They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

2 ¹ Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

3 ²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

A few questions regarding the letter to the Romans:

- * How many behaviors are condemned?
- * What do we think about the penalty for these behaviors?
- * Which of these behaviors do we continue to reject and which penalties would we apply?

Many people discuss these verses with an “all or nothing” mentality: They say you cannot disregard what the Bible says about homosexuality without offending God but we do not apply this rule to all other topics in the Bible. Why this one? Jesus makes no statement about sexuality but is clear about his feelings against divorce. Most of us are capable of putting comments about divorce into a context of 2000 years ago and can then make adjustments. After all, Jesus updated the understanding of divorce for his time to make it a decision available to women as well as men.

Didn't Jesus say that we his children are more important than the rules of the Bible? “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) Didn't he speak of forgiveness, love and compassion? While not saying anything about homosexuality, Jesus, and indeed the entire Bible, speaks volumes about help for the poor, the sick, the excluded. The Story of Sodom challenges us to welcome foreigners into our home, as do many other portions of the Bible. Lot stands alone against an entire community in affirming what he thinks is right. After reading that story should we make picket signs reading “God Hates Gays” or rather “God Loves Foreigners”?

There are many people who take the Bible seriously as the word of God but are able to interpret it and allow for varying individual lessons and insights. The Bible is an interesting place to begin a discussion and indeed is helpful in the moral and spiritual insights it inspires. The Bible is not helpful to close a conversation if you are looking for something to prove who is right. We can take the Bible seriously without taking it literally in every instance. Jesus himself showed how we don't just read the plain text, we interpret: “Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”²⁶ He said to him, ‘What is

written in the law? How do you read it?’ (Luke 10:25-26)

So then we don't just recite the words, we explain what it means to us. Jesus seldom gives a straight answer. When Jesus is questioned he replies with his own questions (over 300 of them) and he often tells a story which we then have to consider, discuss and apply. In different parts the Bible itself gives different answers. As we read it and seek to find prayerful consensus we can come to decisions which give us norms and rules for behavior, but as we return to the book again in a different day we can seek to apply the same principles in different ways at different times. We always fall short of its teachings.

In the New Testament, placing the letter of the law above the spirit is described as hypocrisy (Mark 2:3–28, 3:1–6). Paul's letter to the church in Rome explains the freedom we have in applying God's teachings so that we follow it “in the spirit, and not in the letter.” (Second Chapter) The Spirit is not such a fixed thing and we should not try to make it so. “The Spirit blows where it will...” (John 3) and we are cautioned by Paul, “Do not quench the Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 5)

The Bible is a source of guidance for many things but it does not have a single voice and it certainly does not have a single voice with regard to sexual ethics. There is no one version or view of marriage that is modeled. **Love is about more than sexual partners.** There are descriptions of loving committed relationships between two males (1 Samuel 20:4), between a woman and her mother-in-law (Ruth) and between people joined in common cause.

The Bible is a source of inspiration but it is not a one size fits all blueprint. It is not a book in the normal sense but rather an individual dialogue with God. We must take it up expecting to hear something new.

Acknowledgement

These Scripture portions and the questions that follow were developed in collegial discussions for a Bible Study in Port Chester conducted jointly between Lutheran, Presbyterian and Conservative Jewish congregations in the Autumn of 2013. It has subsequently been used for other groups including sensitivity training for Police Departments in Westchester County and the Lutheran Summer Conference. The first text, Genesis 19 has been used for a discussion with groups of 60 High School students annually at “PrideWorks”, a Conference for LGBTQ youth and allies in Westchester County.

Rabbi Jaymee Alpert served Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel in Port Chester, NY from 2005-2018. She is passionate about Jewish life and strives to create a warm, inviting atmosphere, where people from all backgrounds are welcome, and all questions are valid. In addition to serving as the spiritual leader of Congregation KTI, Rabbi Alpert is the immediate past president of the Westchester Board of Rabbis, a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, and serves as a chaplain for the Port Chester Fire Department. She has chaired several initiatives in partnership with UJA-Federation of Westchester, is currently a member of the Blind Brook Community Coalition and the Port Chester Board of Ethics, is a founding member of the Port Chester Interfaith Clergy Group, and has participated in a number of leadership programs.

Rev. Bruce Baker was pastor of the All Souls Parish Presbyterian Church in Port Chester for 15 years. He also served parishes in Philadelphia PA, Englewood NJ, Parkersburg WV, and Severna Park, MD. In his 37 years of ministry he has worked as a trainer for the Anti-Defamation League, with an anti-bias

program in Philadelphia, and with the Mediation Team in the Hudson Valley. Bruce is married to Julianne and they have two children, Clifton and Sarah, and two grandsons Lukas and Noah (who live too far away).

Jim O’Hanlon has been a Pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since 2000, of St. Paul’s since 2010 and is the current president of the Council of Community Services of Port Chester and Rye Brook. He has served Lutheran ministries in Manhattan, the Bronx and Westchester as well as one year on the staff of a congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Raised in a large, Irish, Roman Catholic family he has a keen interest in the liturgical, social and church reforms that began with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. After college he earned a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in NYC and subsequently a Master of Sacred Theology from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Jim was as an adjunct professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Bergen Community College in New Jersey for three years, teaching courses such as "World Religions." He completed several graduate courses in Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University and has actively collaborated with colleagues of various faiths.

johanlon.stpauls@gmail.com

Each of these congregations belong to traditions that have come to accept and affirm members of the LGBT community as equal members of our congregations. They came together for an Interfaith Pride Sabbath in 2017.

In 2017 the congregation council of St. Paul's adopted the following welcome statement and became a Reconciling in Christ Congregation. There are over 800 RIC congregations in the ELCA

Learn more

www.reconcilingworks.org



St. Paul's
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Diversity and Equality

God's Work. Our Hands.

About Us

Diversity and Equality

More

Statement of Welcome

We welcome all who are seeking God's love and grace.

We welcome all because God welcomes all.

We encourage young children to participate and make their presence known. We are many races and cultures, different sexual orientations, gender identities and families of various configurations and single people. We come from a wide variety of places on earth and individual spiritual journeys. We are various stages of life, differing abilities and health and economic circumstances. Our unity is in Christ who calls for us to reject division and discrimination.

Our scriptures affirm diversity:

²⁶ "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

- **Galatians** chapter three