

Series: **HOT POTATOES!** November 4, 2007

**NOT THAT THERE'S ANYTHING *WRONG* WITH THAT!**  
**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**

**I. INTRO**

- A. I know you're thinking about it—given where we are this morning—so I'm just going to say the word: Homosexuality. Gay. Lesbian. Homophobic. For some of you, that term raises your anxiety level—especially in a church setting. You may be afraid because you are gay—and what you've seen so far in many churches looks **nothing** like Jesus.
- I want to say up front that I am ashamed of the way the church has sometimes hurt and alienated people who are gay—as if we've got life all figured out!
  - Others of you may feel hurt, confused or angry by some of the hostility that comes from the gay community toward those who disagree with their lifestyle.
  - Or, like a good friend of mine, you find yourself drawn to people of the same sex—and the fear the whole subject raises makes you want to run out of the room and keep running.
1. Why are we even addressing this issue? We've been studying an ancient letter that's recorded in the Bible. It's called **Corinthians**—because it was written to people who lived in Corinth—part of ancient Greece. And this letter quite matter-of-factly addresses the issue of homosexuality; not specifically, but in a list of past lifestyles these people had been a part of.
    - I wanted to talk about homosexuality in this context for two reasons. First, it's a **Hot Potato** in our culture. To never raise the issue and talk about it because it's uncomfortable is the chicken thing to do. -The second reason I want to talk about it in this context is because it's right in the middle of a list of other issues and lifestyles God takes issue with—some of which most of us can identify with--and I believe that's where it belongs.
  2. Let me simply read what the Bible says.

**Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. 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 (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 TNIV).**

I see myself in that list. I'm not going to tell you **where**—but I do. And my guess is that many of you do too.
- B. My most fervent prayer this morning is **not** that we will come to a brilliant understanding of homosexuality. Nope. It's that we as a Jesus-following community will treat **all** people the way He treated them. With dignity, grace and love. Cause, see, toward the end of his life, Jesus said to his closest followers, the way others will know that you're My people is by the extravagant love you show!
- Love and acceptance is the most beautiful—the most powerful gift that you can give to another person. It's a powerful thing when you say to someone else, I may disagree with you but I will **always** love you and I will **always** offer you my friendship! Love, as the Bible says later, never fails.
  - My prayer for my own life is that I can learn to love like that!

## II. WHAT'S THE DEAL ON THIS ISSUE?

- A. Bring up the issue of homosexuality, and it raises the temperature in almost any room. Why? Well, it's because of the history and personal experience behind it.
1. History proves that human beings can be unbelievably cruel. If you've ever been in public school—you have probably seen the incredible cruelty that can go on there. If you're even a **little** different than others—watch out! As strict as schools get on this stuff, it never goes away—it just flies under the radar.
  2. This is where the truly tragic, awful and shameful side of the church of Jesus comes in—that's nothing like him. And that is the people who seem to have no qualms about protesting issues like gay marriage—carrying signs that say, **God Hates Fags**.

-I am **totally** baffled how someone could twist the Bible and Jesus' message of love to hate! And I can thoroughly understand why the gay population would see something like and both fear and hate the church. It also makes me **really** angry because that's the kind of stuff that gets publicized in the media—as if they speak for all followers of Jesus. And they **don't!**

-No one likes rejection. No one will go **anywhere** that even presents that possibility. Can you understand why people who are same-sex attracted would ultimately figure out that the only safe place for them is in the greater gay community? And why they would be anxious that others don't experience the same hatred and discrimination and fear that they have? It makes sense to me!

- B. Now. What am I saying? Am I saying that actively practicing a gay or lesbian lifestyle is no big deal as far as God is concerned? That's not what I'm saying. The passage I read clearly calls it **wrongdoing**. When the Bible describes something that way, it's saying that this lifestyle, or any of the others in this list: idol worship, sexual immorality, adultery, greed, stealing, drunkenness and slander—are not part of God's plan for humans. The passage goes on to say, "This is how some of you **used** to live." Past tense. But now things are very different in your life.

-Now. Here's the question: Is it possible that there's a misunderstanding. Is there another way—a **better** way to interpret this?

1. Let me ask a question: Has anyone here ever in your whole life been greedy? In the movie, **Wall Street**, Mike Douglas says, "**Greed is good!**" Is it? Greed may serve the people who never have enough—and there have definitely been times when I've been greedy--but I **know** it was wrong. Greed has been a very destructive force in our world. The

-The same would be true for the other things called **wrongdoing**. Worshipping an idol, whether it's a job or a new car—or a new boyfriend is destructive. And it will let you down hard! Adultery? I don't think anyone here would say that one spouse cheating on the other is good. In fact, it will probably blow up a marriage. Slander? Verbal abuse? One of the gossip magazines recently said, "**Dirt is GOOD!**" For whom? The people it's about—or the people who feed on it?

-Here's my point. Male prostitution and homosexual acts—as they're specifically called here--are in the middle of a list of things most of us would agree are unhealthy lifestyles. Homosexuality is not written in bold letters or italics to make it stand out as worse than the rest. It's a list of past lifestyles among the people Paul is writing to. In fact the first two sexual issues listed as wrongdoing are heterosexual—not homosexual.

2. Now, if this is the only place where homosexuality is mentioned, maybe you could explain it away. But it's not. The place some religious people immediately turn to

is the ancient account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this account, two angels visit Lot, who lives in Sodom, to warn him about the imminent destruction of the city because of its overwhelming wickedness.

-The men of the city gather outside Lot's home, demanding that Lot send these visitors out so they can have sex with them. As they try to force their way into the house, the angels strike them with blindness—and the city of Sodom, along with several other cities, are totally destroyed the next day. There's another story in the book of Judges with the same general theme.

-These two stories aren't all that helpful in a discussion of homosexuality. Homosexuality is certainly part of the mix—I mean, these guys weren't the town welcoming committee. But the main issue is sexual violence—much like you'd expect to see in a maximum security prison.

3. The most specific and lengthy reference to homosexuality in the Bible is found in the first chapter of the book of Romans. Paul, the author, is talking about what happens when people rebel against what they know about God—and defiantly choose to do their own thing. Let me read what the Bible says:

**So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved (Romans 1:24-27 NLT).**

-In a world like Toronto, 2007, that sounds **very** harsh and, to some ears, very insulting, doesn't it? To be consistent with what I said earlier, the issues raised here are put with a much larger list of things that offend God and take people away from what He created them to be.

Here's **my** problem. I believe that what the Bible says about God, about us, and about life is absolutely true. I don't see any way to make these passages communicate a positive message about a gay or lesbian lifestyle—or even say, “Ah, it's okay. I wouldn't worry about it all that much.”

4. What about homosexual orientation? Someone who is same-gender attracted—but doesn't act on it? From what I can see from the Bible, it's a non-issue. It's an area of temptation in the same class as heterosexual temptation. Hebrews says that Jesus Himself was tempted in **every** way—just like us—but without sin. And that would include sexual temptation.

-Temptation is not sin—until you give into it. And if you fall--there's grace and forgiveness for all sin and wrong-doing. Whether it's of the hetero, homo, or 2% variety.

5. One of the issues that very sincere people raise is, “Well, if homosexual activity is wrong, wouldn't Jesus have said something about it?” And Jesus **didn't** say anything about it—which would've been common for a Rabbi who spent his life among Jewish people. In that culture, unlike the Greek and Roman culture, it was understood that homosexual activity was forbidden by God. Arguing from Jesus'

silence on this issue isn't all that helpful because he also doesn't mention incest, pedophilia, or slavery.

-In a positive sense, Jesus does speak at length about marriage between a man and a woman as being God's original design for humans.

6. The problem with using the argument from silence is that the Bible doesn't have a single positive thing to say about the practice of homosexuality. Not one. I have gay friends—and genuinely care about them. What the Bible says doesn't change how I feel about them as friends. And how I feel about them as friends doesn't change what the Bible says. Our truth-*du-jour* culture is wrong; you know if you don't like the truth—wait—it'll change. What the Bible has to say about life isn't like that. It can't be. Not if it's true.

### III. SO, ARE YOU SAYING THAT GOD IS HOMOPHOBIC?

- A. What I've just said this morning is very offensive to a lot of people in our culture. In fact, in an audience like this, I suspect that some of you may be angry with me—or just hurt. Maybe because this issue has caused *huge* pain for you—and maybe deep, deep fear and anxiety. If anything I have said has hurt *anyone* unnecessarily—I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart. What I *want* to communicate is the love and tenderness and compassion—and *healing* God offers to a world like ours; a world in pain and chaos.
  1. If you've never personally struggled with feelings of same sex attraction, it's difficult to even imagine the pain and fear of some of those who have. I have a good friend who wrote to me about how when he first started having these feelings in grade 6 or 7, he became *deeply* afraid. He said that whenever anyone would even mention the word *gay* or *homosexual*, he just wanted to hold his ears and run out of the room. His deepest fear was that he would be found out.
 

-Another person, now a pastor in the GTA, said that his secret feelings of same-sex attraction tormented him so deeply that, in grade 9, he finally told his best friend. This kid not only ended the friendship, he told several other friends—and then together they beat him up after school.
  2. So, let's talk about God. The first thing you need to know about Him is that He stepped out of a place of perfection and power and honor—to identify with people like me who have defied Him and hurt others with our sin and failure. In Jesus, any fuzziness about what God is like cleared right up. He is infinitely loving and compassionate and filled with grace.
 

-From everything I've learned about God over the past 50 years, I think I can say that it hurts him *deeply* to see the pain and mistreatment and ostracism inflicted on gay and lesbian people by anyone—especially Christians. There is not a *single* instance of Jesus verbally abusing people or calling them names because of moral choices. *In fact* He loved and accepted them just as they were—and changed them from the inside out.

    - a. By the way, the people Jesus encountered and got severely criticized for spending time with fit just about all the lifestyles described in these verses I read from 1 Corinthians. If we believe Jesus is God—and we do—why would we ever take it upon ourselves to treat people in a way He *never* treated them—and do it in His Name? Jesus *always* treated people with dignity and grace. In fact, he had his biggest problem with religious people who walked around judging everyone!
    - b. Jesus *clearly* called his followers to love their neighbors like themselves. To even love and bless our enemies and those who abuse us. When he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" there were no asterisks or footnotes.

I **think** that's what he meant! Love them. Treat them like **you** would want to be treated! Jesus love made people want to change. It's love—not judgment—that makes people want to change.

3. In last week's news, it was reported that the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas was ordered to pay \$10.9 million in damages to a man in York, PA. Know why? Because they disrupted the funeral of his son, killed in Iraq, as part of their, **terrorism is God's punishment on America because they tolerate homosexuality** campaign.

-I looked up this church, and right at the top of their website are the words, **God Hates Fags**. I thought to myself, "How **far** can a church get from Jesus?" This stuff **doesn't** come from God!

4. Question. If it grieves God when **any** person, no matter who they are, is mistreated, mocked, humiliated or ostracized—who **else** should it grieve? Those who love Him and follow God. There is not a person you've ever looked eyes with who does not **deeply** matter to God! That was clear through Jesus—and that should be clear through us, too.

-We have made it clear at The Olive Branch that this will be a **safe** community for undecided people—wherever they find themselves on any list. Jesus was safe for **anyone** to be around—and **we** are called to be like Him.

- B. The second insight I would offer you about God—one I take a lot of comfort from. He is way smarter than us when it comes to understanding **all** the dynamics that lead to same-sex attraction. It's a **very** puzzling phenomenon. How can brothers and sisters—same parents, same household, same upbringing--end up with very different sexual orientation?

1. That's a question that may never be resolved. I just need to tell you that I'm not an expert in this area who's done extensive personal research. Let me simply tell you what I've found.

2. Many people who are gay describe having feelings of same-sex attraction from puberty on. Even before. Even though there's no evidence of a 'gay gene,' there does seem to be a biological pre-disposition toward homosexuality

-Added to this predisposition, there are usually a number of other factors involved in same sex attraction. Sometimes dysfunctional family dynamics figure into this. Early same-sex encounters often play a huge part in how a person develops sexually. What most experts do agree on is this: **THERE IS NO ONE CAUSE!**

3. This addresses one of the biggest questions that I think comes up in this whole discussion of homosexuality. If someone is predisposed toward a gay or lesbian lifestyle, how could God ever hold them accountable for living that way?

-The problem we face is that we are also born with bents or predispositions toward other things the Bible says are wrong. Two examples of this are on this list I read from 1 Corinthians. As you know, some people are biologically predisposed toward alcoholism—or drunkenness as it's called here. I don't think anyone would want to just give in and say, "God must want me to be a drunk. He made me this way."

-**Time** magazine did a whole cover article a few years ago on how men, in particular, are bent toward multiple sexual partners. Imagine a man saying to his wife, "I can't help womanizing. It's **God's** fault!" I don't think **anyone** wants to go down the path of biological determinism!

-I used to think, naively, that being gay or lesbian was simply a choice people made. One pastor who struggled with same-sex attraction said, in an interview,

“It’s not like I woke up one day in grade 6 or 7 and said, ‘I think I’ll be homosexual. That will make everyone hate me and make my life a **lot** harder!’ No way! But I don’t buy into the genetic argument either. What it comes down to is this: I didn’t choose to have these attractions, but I do choose what to do with them. You get dealt a hand—and along with that, certain temptations. We’re responsible for what we do with what we have! All of us!

- C. There’s something else that is important for me and you to realize about God. He always tells the truth on everything—even when we want to hear something else. We believe that the Bible is true. This morning has been very focused. I haven’t read to you what God says about all the other forms of wrongdoing—mainly because it would take too long. Yes, it talks about destructive habits and lifestyles, and destructive ways of relating to God and others. **Everybody** hurts; **everybody** struggles.
- And it also includes things God calls us to do to spread his love and grace and peace in the world. Like living without blinders—**seeing** and **doing** something about the need all around us. Being gracious and patient and kind and gentle and pure and generous. Being a peacemaker.
1. My experience is that most people would say, **Yes! I want to live in a world like that!** But when it comes to sticky issues—like money, sex and power--people are quite quick to say, “That **has** to be a misunderstanding. Maybe the author had hang-ups!”

-And believing that is certainly an option. The problem is, if you rip the pages out of the Bible you don’t like—where do you stop? And if **we** can edit it down so that it’s politically correct and convenient—is it really true at all?

  2. Sometimes truth is incredibly reassuring and hopeful and happy. But sometimes it’s hard. Over the years I’ve found that I either lock—or unlock the door to my future. And it almost always deals with how I respond to the truth about me. Jesus said that knowing the truth—having a heart that receives the truth—can set you free.

-This, friends, is the linchpin in this whole discussion. Is what the Bible says about tough issues true? One of our core values here at The Olive Branch is that the Bible is the final authority and foundation for how we live. The Bible teaches unconditional love for others—that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. But God’s Word also teaches us the difference between right and wrong. Not for God’s good—for **our** good; for **our** life and freedom.
- D. One more insight about God. Jesus—God with skin on--showed that God is more accepting and more filled with grace than **any** human being you will ever meet on this planet. We all...**ALL**...need grace. That’s the deal. There is not a person in this room who doesn’t struggle with sexual brokenness of some form. And therefore, **no one** in this room can pretend, “Man have **I** got my stuff together!”
- Remember the list we read from? Just about everyone’s on that list—or one of the others. No one is exempt from sin—or the grace God offers to moral screw-ups. God doesn’t list sins in this passage in from little ‘s’ sin to **big ‘S’** sins. The point is, “What’s what you **were!** But that’s not where you **stayed!**” What happened?
1. **Jesus** happened! The **best** news in the world is that the God of this universe doesn’t just back the truth truck up, dump His load and say “Change!” and drive away. We come to Jesus just as we are, **wherever** we are—trusting in His power to change us—over time—and to give us grace and hope when we fall.
  2. In a world like ours, word on the street has it that people **don’t** change...that they **can’t** change. From everything I know about God and about truth—I don’t believe

God ever calls people toward a life that He will not give them power to live. That power comes in a **lot** of ways. And it usually comes in the middle of standing...then falling down. Standing...then falling down.

-But God pours out His grace and help and patience and love—and in the process, something deep inside grows really strong.

3. Know what we need in the middle of our struggle? The power of God...and people who will accept us and love us as we are--and walk with us. **Any** kind of change in life is tough. It's seldom a quick fix. It's usually a process. Many times our actions create ruts. When you travel for a long time in **any** rut—it gets deeper. Getting out—and staying out of those ruts can be very difficult. Traveling companions make a **world** of difference.
4. I guess what I'd really like to say this morning concerning all the stuff we've dealt with is--there **is** no "us" and "them." Just **us**. All stuck together on this planet in lives and circumstances that can be, at times, **very** tough, **very** disheartening. All caught in a struggle with sin. All needing that grace that comes through Jesus. All with more power than we'd ever realize to face the struggle. And life can work really well when we simply obey what Jesus said: **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

#### Q & A

#### IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. When I was in seminary and Lori was in college out West, we had a great friend who was a young music professor at the college. We grew close—and spent a fair amount of time together. He accompanied us when we sang, arranged music—he was a brilliant musician.
  - Ten years ago, I got a letter from him. In it, he outlined a brave, private struggle he'd had with same-sex attraction ever since he was in Grade 6 or 7. He talked about it—how it tormented him; stalked him. How he'd fasted and prayed that it would go away and he would meet a young woman he'd be attracted to and have a family.
  - He slipped into deep depression—and had close friends who walked with him and listened to him. The choices he made in that time ultimately led to his being dismissed from his position at the college. As I re-read his letter last week—my heart was wrenched inside over the torment he felt. He was **very** gracious—and said he'd be glad to talk about his journey.
  - I'm ashamed to say that I never had that conversation. I didn't know what to say—at least at the time. What I didn't know then—and know now—is that I didn't have to say anything, really. Just be a friend who loved him.
- B. My dream for The Olive Branch is that everyone here will do a much better job at being a good friend than me. That we will be an outrageously loving community—a **safe** community. The kind of people who can be **bravely** imperfect without pretending. Basically just a group of people who know what it's like to fail—and get back up; and then love people who fail—and help them get back up. The kind of community where others are accepted as they are. Where people would say, "You know, I don't **agree** with them—and they don't agree with me. But I feel loved and valued."
  - What if it was common among us for people to bravely talk about scandalous failures in any given week with a small community—and know God's grace, both from Him—and from the people around them? To talk about issues like bad tempers, and greed, and pornography—and anything else—and find grace and hope and accountability?

-What if no one got shocked by failure—but just helped each other up. What if there **really** was no **US** and **THEM**...just **us!** What if we just did what Jesus said to do; what if we just loved God with everything and loved our neighbors—**all** of our neighbors—like we love ourselves, and treated them with the grace we would like to be treated with? What if The Olive Branch were known as the best place in the GTA for a person—whatever they are—to be loved and accepted as they are? Just like Jesus?  
-I'd like to pray to that end...right now. And I'd like you to join me.