

Dear Jerri, #5

Over the last few weeks I have written about the complex descriptions and contexts of marriage and sexuality in the Old Testament as part of my attempt to answer your question about my support of same-sex marriage. Thanks again for asking. I know you're trying to understand how I can embrace same-sex relationships when you and I were raised to reject them outright. So, let's turn to the New Testament.

By the New Testament era the social understanding of marriage was no longer King Solomon and his many, many wives, but looked much more like what we are accustomed to today: Typically, one man, one woman. And, just as polygamy had been common among Jews as well as their neighboring cultures back in an earlier era, by the New Testament era monogamy was common for Jews, Christians, as well as their pagan overlords, the Romans. In fact, Caesar Augustus instituted a program aimed at stamping out adultery among Romans. It only applied to out of marriage sex with citizens, not with slaves, and it was modified by the Senate about as often as it was violated by Augustus. In the end, Caesar's Family Values program failed, but it is reflective of how monogamous, heterosexual marriage was the norm of most of the peoples throughout the Roman Empire. Significantly, it was not a unique approach that had been introduced to their society by Jews or Christians. In fact, initially, a primary question among Christians was whether they should marry at all in light of their expectation of the immediate return of Christ. (More about that later.)

Whenever people speak of homosexuality and the New Testament, they typically go to four texts: Mark 10 (and the parallel text in Matthew 19); Romans 1; I Corinthians 6; and Jude 1. I would like to address each of these in order, but first I think it is important to recognize something about how we interpret the Scriptures.

Any faithful reading of the Scriptures – in my mind, anyway – requires an honest admission that we bring certain *prejudices* to the text. I am relying on Hans Gadamer's use of 'prejudice' as the assumptions that we bring when we read texts.¹ We are aware of some of them, but I suspect we are not aware of others until something challenges our assumptions and we have to recalculate. Gadamer also says that some of those prejudices enable us to read a text well, while others disable us and create blind spots when we read texts. For example, I once read a story about a king who was seeking a queen and had his courtiers gather eligible women put them into his harem, and after having sex with each of them he selected the one who pleased him the most. The others were not able to go back to their lives, since they were "ruined goods," so they stayed in the harem and lived a somewhat dignified life as one of the king's concubines. I suspect that story was based on the book of Esther, but it wasn't until I read that 'non-biblical' story that I was able to see all of these raw dynamics at play in the story of the Esther. Until then I was totally blind to the sexual implications of this story.

¹ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Ed, (London: Sheed and Ward), 1989.

Another example: Years ago I read someone who argued that Jonathan and David were lovers. I dismissed the argument, supposing that it was simply the writer's way of portraying a genuine model friendship as something it was not, in order to justify his opinion about homosexuality. Maybe it was; maybe it wasn't. I just remember that instead of questioning my own disposition toward the text, I only questioned the writer's disposition. Later, when I read about David's words as he mourned the death of Jonathan, I began to wonder if I was the presumptuous one in rejecting the possibility of a same-sex love. In II Samuel 1:26, David says, "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." I still don't know the exact nature of David and Jonathan's love, but after all these years I now think that the way we see these words is determined by what we want to see or do not want to see as much as what is written. That should give us pause as we continue looking at "biblical" views of same-sex relationships. Without humility and the willingness to be surprised by the text, we probably end up looking at the text and simply reading our assumptions.

Next week, let's look at Mark 10 and try to yield to it as much as possible.

~ The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis