

Real I.D.: Looking Beyond the Labels to Define Our Identity!
Week 4: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity

I. Today we're going to talk about the very challenging topic of gender, sexuality, and how they relate to the topic we've been discussing overall, identity. There are many different layers and complexities to this conversation so just as a reminder our primary focus over this series is to see how topics that are saturating our culture at large should be viewed through a biblical lens of identity. There are so many different aspects that we could discuss when it comes to gender and sexuality, so I want to be upfront our aim is to see gender and sexuality through a biblical lens of identity.

A. A few disclaimers. These topics are creating sharp divisions in our culture that are now taking root in the church. Major denominations are splitting over these topics. I believe it grieves God to see the vitriol on both sides of these issues. If you consider yourself to be genderfluid or same sex attracted, I would love to hear your story. We don't have to agree on these issues to have a relationship. I'm entering this conversation today as a pastor with humility and grace. My intent isn't so much to point out error as it is to elevate God's design for gender, sexuality, and identity.

Secondly, I'm not a psychologist or a counselor. There are many angles to come at our topic today, but again, I'm a pastor so with that my request to God this week has been his enablement to present to us a biblical framework for thinking deeply about our gender, sexuality, and understanding of identity.

II. As we've done most Sundays recently, let's go back to the Garden of Eden as we get started and see what we can discover about God's original design for gender and sexuality in creation.

Genesis 1:27-28 (CSB) [Slide]: 27 So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it."

A. The creation account in Genesis 1 is vitally important as we start the discussion today because it reveals to us a few important aspects about identity, sexuality, and gender. So let's start with:

[Slide]: Identity

1. Three times in one verse God makes it abundantly clear that he is the Creator! The Supreme Being who stands outside of all creation has created mankind in his own image. Wow! We've talked about implications of being God's image bearers in week one of the series, but let's sum it up by acknowledging that our identity was never intended to be derived from creation but from the Creator! If God who is perfectly whole, perfectly sufficient, lacking nothing, took the initiative to form mankind out of the dust and stamp us with his own image, why do we doubt that his design is good and for our flourishing? Before they did anything God blessed them.

2. This is a bit of an aside, but what does it mean that God blessed them? Bless or blessing comes from the Hebrew word "Barak" meaning to bend the knee. It's metaphorical language, but the idea is that God seeing man and woman created in his image bent his knee in adoration. Whoever we are today let the thought sink in deeply that God adores you!

3. Part of the breakdown we're experiencing related to gender and sexuality may come from our projection of our earthly fathers on the Creator God. This is a general principle that I've observed, sons and daughters need to receive the adoration and delight of their fathers and when they don't Satan steps in and does all types of damage. God can redeem and does; no earthly father is perfect, and we all make mistakes, but don't forget that as an earthly father our primary role is to point our sons and daughters to God the Father and the reality that he delights in those who bear his image.

B. [Slide]: Gender

1. God distinguished as a part of his creative act the biological difference of male and female. We see that in Genesis 1:27. Both genders, although distinct, were set apart from the rest of creation as God's image bearers. Male and female express the image of God uniquely and fulfill their God given purpose differently, but both bear the image of God and are bestowed that honor directly from God! God didn't bless the woman through the man or bless the man through the woman, God blessed them! God isn't male or female; God is Spirit. Jesus was incarnated as a male but the N.T. acknowledges qualities of God that we would deem both male and female. Jesus refers to God for example as Abba, Father and also talks about the necessity of being born of God (1 John 3:9).

Genesis 2:18 (CSB) [Slide]: 18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him."

2. Genesis portrays distinction in gender as a key element to God's good design. The Hebrew wording almost sounds like an oxymoron. Ezer neged literally means opposing-assistant. It was the unified diversity of God through the difference of gender that would fully express the image of God over creation.

In response to God's creation of an opposing-assistant we read:

Genesis 3:23-25 (CSB) [Slide]: 23 And the man said: This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called "woman," for she was taken from man. 24 This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.

3. Just a few additional comments on gender, Adam is the name for mankind. It can be a general term for humanity. After God had given the man an opportunity to name and consider the animals, it was at that time when the man recognized his unique position to God distinct from the rest of creation that God created the "woman" and distinguished out of the Adam an "ish" and ishshah." It would be through the distinction of gender that their sexuality would be expressed, and they would become united in one flesh. Gender is both biological and psychological as physical bonding between the genders occurs through sex but also psychological as male and female mirror one another and help each other grow in fullness of what it means to express God's image.

C. [Slide]: Sexuality

1. Sexual or sexuality is different from the physical act of having sex. Regardless of life stage or sexual activity God has made mankind as sexual beings. Before the fall and after sin entered the world, God hardwired the desire for sex in creation with specific parameters. Sex is to be enjoyed within a bonding (covenant) relationship between a male and a female. If we've made mistakes, God is gracious and will forgive our sins. He even gives us a blank slate to start over. But God doesn't compromise his ideal no matter what the prevailing winds of culture might say. The reason God doesn't compromise is that he has our good intentions at heart. Sex is a powerful gift of God to bond two souls together. When we have sex with someone outside the covenant bond of marriage, it's like bonding two souls together and then ripping them apart. God can heal but he wants to spare us the pain.
2. We don't talk about identity, gender, and sexuality very often in the Church and when we do, we typically come from a negative perspective. We emphasize what is broken and wrong without taking the time to celebrate what's right and good! Before the fall, God's design was for humanity to derive their identity from their unique position as God's image bearers. Our identity was never intended to be

derived from the created, be it gender or sexuality. When we think correctly about our identity, we see our maleness or femaleness as distinct yet equal aspects of bearing God's image. When male and female express their sexuality in covenant relationship it fulfills God's mandate for procreation, but sex also gives a unique window into the intimacy and vulnerability that is expressed through God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God presents sex as a means to intimacy and being fully known. The world presents sex as an appetite to be quenched. Our sexuality has been distorted by our misunderstanding of sex and Satan has stepped in to wreak all kinds of havoc. When we place our identity within the created order it distorts and ultimately destroys.

D. As Christ followers, we recognize God's ideal from Genesis 1-2, but we also recognize that sin entered the world and when it did leaves nothing untainted. There's been a strong push recently to emphasize the nature vs. nurture debate, but the biblical view says that distortions of gender and sexuality can be a both/and. It's when we elevate any aspect of creation to be our core identity that will leave our souls depleted. This seems to be a major point in our culture that gender and sexuality are adequate foundations for core identities, and they are not. Our identity can only be derived from our Creator who has a design and purpose for our lives that includes but goes beyond our gender roles and sexuality. God has stepped into our broken world in the person of Jesus and reconciled us to God, while we were sinners. All of us are sinners and in need of Jesus's transforming love. In Christ, God calls us to bend our lives to God's better way and just because something feels natural or feels right doesn't mean that giving into those desires will bring satisfaction or life. Examples abound in all spheres of life. I do not say this flippantly, but I am posing the idea that perhaps God does know what he is doing, and we find life by submitting every aspect of our lives to his Lordship.

III. God has revealed himself most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ so let's see what the New Testament has to say about gender and sexuality.

A. [Slide:] What does Jesus say about gender or sexuality?

1. The bible doesn't play catch-up to the culture that it finds itself in. I personally find that extremely comforting and challenging. God is the Creator and has given us a guide that supersedes our culture. Something that I seem to hear more frequently though, is a disregard for the Bible and in that vacuum the belief that our main task as Christians is to "just be like Jesus." How do we know we're following the One True God and his Son Jesus rather than a Jesus I make in my own image if we disregard the inerrancy of Scripture?

2. Jesus does affirm God's ideal on gender and sexuality in Matthew 19. The context of the verse is a discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus regarding divorce. There are select instances in which divorce might be the only option, but it doesn't change God's ideal:

Matthew 19:4-6 (CSB) [Slide]: 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that he who created them in the beginning made them male and female, 5 and he also said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

3. Sometimes we can miss the principle of a passage because we don't first attempt to understand the context of the passage. Jesus covered a surprisingly small amount of territory during his earthly ministry about a 40 miles radius of his hometown. His ministry was almost exclusively aimed at Israel. The sexual perversion pervasive in Jesus' earthly context was males leveraging their religion to satisfy their sexual cravings. The Jewish extra-biblical law had all types of absurd reasons why a man could divorce his wife (like overcooking a meal) and Jesus uses this question of the Pharisees to re-establish God's original ideal for gender and sexuality and the covenant bond of marriage. For Jesus to have spoken on genderfluidity

or same-sex attraction would have been totally out of context in a Jewish world. To help us think about it, it would have been like a traveling preacher coming into Tab one Sunday and preaching on polygamy. It just wasn't a part of the Jewish culture in Jesus's day. But we can't disregard that Jesus upheld God's ideal verbatim from Genesis 2.

B. [Slide]: What does the New Testament say about gender and sexuality as it relates to identity?

1. The Apostle Paul on the other hand was a world traveler for his day and primarily focused his ministry on gentiles (non-Jews) throughout the Roman Empire. He has a lot to say about gender and sexuality because the Roman Empire with its mix of Greek culture had a very different take on gender and sexuality from a Jewish culture. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 deals with gender differentiation and I take that to be the primary purpose of 1 Corinthians 11 not the position of women in the church. It's one of the most difficult passages to wade through in all of Scripture so we'll tackle diving into it in detail for another time, but wrestle with it in the meantime.

I want to back up a bit to 1 Corinthians 6 and spend some time here. Let's start in verse 12:

1 Corinthians 6:12-14 (CSB) [Slide]: 12 "Everything is permissible for me," but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me," but I will not be mastered by anything. 13 "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will do away with both of them. However; the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 (CSB) [Slide]: 18 Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body. 19 Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.

2. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and he starts by using nomenclature of Corinthian culture. A Dualistic world view which many Greco-Romans held understood the physical and spirit realm to be totally separate from one another. You could do anything with your body and that was separate from your spiritual or emotional state. The culture that gave rise out of this makes Vegas look like a monastery. There's a lot of known history about Corinth and a lot of it revolves around the openness of any sexual experience a person could have wanted. Paul is writing to these new Christians coming out of a lifestyle of anything goes. And he pleads with them to:
[Slide]: Flee Sexual Immorality!

3. The Greek word is "pornia" which we get the word pornography from. The word encompasses more than just sex outside of marriage and refers to all types of sexual perversion. We can easily think of gender fluidity or same-sex attraction as new issues, but they aren't. Both Juvenal and Epictetus are extra biblical sources that overlapped with Paul's experiences in Corinth and both of these people wrote about genderfluidity and homosexuality.

A great resource if you're interested in this sort of thing is Jerome Murphy- O'Connor's work: St. Paul's Corinth which compiles many first century writings on the city of Corinth.

When Paul is writing about gender or about sexual immorality, we just can't make the jump to say that Paul didn't know about the dynamics of our modern society and therefore couldn't be speaking to these issues. When we read the ancients, the world really hasn't changed that much in 2000 years.

C. So where does this leave us all?

1. God has ransomed us with the price of his Son! Let's start with Christ followers. Paul instructs us to glorify God with our bodies! In Christ, we're all in the process of God restoring our distorted identity.

The call of the Christian life is to lay everything at the Lord's feet and find our true identity in him. We fail forward, but God calls us to submit our lives to him and in return he gives us life! We tend to focus on what's wrong and broken in our world without elevating what God is calling us to!

- a. If you're same sex attracted or struggling with gender issues, we're all more than our gender or sexuality. We're a person that bears the image of God and he delights in us. God loves you and has a good purpose and plan for all our lives. I'm sorry for the way some Christians have blasted these issues and pushed people with same sex attraction or gender issues away. You don't have to be heterosexual, married, with 2.5 kids to live a God honoring life. We honor God by bending our lives to the book which includes sex within the covenant bond of marriage between one man and one woman. Both Jesus and Paul were celibate people and honored God in every way. Connection and community are a human need and we've failed in large part within the Christian community to provide a space where people experiencing same sex attraction or gender struggles can be honest about their struggles and have people walk alongside them. We've turned people into "issues" and God forgive us for doing so. I am convinced that a same sex attracted person can submit those desires to God and through the Spirit's empowerment live a God honoring lifestyle. Celibacy is a God-honoring lifestyle and we don't celebrate or talk about that much.
2. If you're not a Christ follower and you identify as gay or genderfluid, a lot of the politicizing of these issues has probably turned you away from the Christian faith and that grieves me. We have a core value at Tab that says:
[Slide]: We inspire through grace
 - a. We believe God changes us from the inside out through grace. As we seek to grow in our understanding of God's love it deepens our devotion to Christ and compassion for others. God loves us as we are but doesn't leave us as we are. As we are changed, we invite others to join us on the journey.
 - b. Maybe today you're listening, and you're satisfied in the situation of life you're in. But maybe you've been running after the created in search of a core identity and the more you grasp after this or that, the emptier you feel. Could it be that we have a Creator that loves us and has a plan for our lives that's good, and while it may not be easy, is the Source of the abundant life we were all created for? There is no prerequisite for the Gospel, period! God takes us just as we are, but he loves us enough, to transform us into the likeness of his son Jesus. There is nothing easy for any of us in taking up our cross and following him, but paradoxically, it's a life full of blessing and abundance. I would love to help you get started on that journey today.