

Getting to know your Bible:

How should we understand the mention of homosexual sex in Leviticus 18:22?

Prelude:

As a prelude to discussing homosexuality, given the social context of the discussion today, a number of things first need to be mentioned. Much of this is based on I Corinthians 6:9-11 (see below).

1. People who have homosexual desires and/or act out need to be treated like any other human being- with love, respect, justice, compassion (Matthew 5:34-40).
2. God loves people who have homosexual desires and/or act out.
3. Homosexual desire and action may be influenced by biological factors (it is still under debate), and may be considered “natural” in that some people just naturally lean toward them.
4. Nonetheless, homosexual desires and actions are not according to God’s design for sexuality (Gen. 1:27, 2:23-25), and should be considered sin. (Note: actions are explicitly mentioned as sin. Non-lustful desires are not, though one can infer it might be based on the idea that it is not according to God’s design of heterosexual sexuality. This is debated.)
5. This (#4) does not contradict the idea that homosexual desire and/or action is natural and even perhaps biological. Many sins could be categorized as “natural”- anger, jealousy, pride, gluttony, heterosexual lust, and so on. Furthermore, the Christian concept of sin is that it is like a disease that has somehow altered everything, including biological processes and entities (Romans 8:20-23). As such, it should not surprise us our bodies may be very well more susceptible to certain behaviors and feelings. However, the Bible describes our souls/wills as having the capability to act differently with God’s power (Romans 7:24-25).
6. Homosexual desire and action should be turned away from (repented of), and it may involve a process like any other sin one may have.
7. God can love us and still expect us to change. There is no contradiction with this.

9Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11And 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.

I Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV

The Prohibition and Condemnation in Leviticus 18:22

The above is crucial as we discuss how the Bible calls homosexuality a sin. Leviticus 18:22 (and 20:13) are typically seen as rather straightforward prohibitions and condemnations of homosexuality. However, homosexual theologians have proposed alternative interpretations in order to justify homosexual behavior from a Christian perspective. The following are *some* alternatives with their corresponding rebuttals:

Alternative #1: The sin mentioned should be understood as a violation of religious, sacrificial purity (like childbirth in Lev. 12). This is not a moral or ethical issue.

Rebuttal:

- The term translated “abomination” or “detestable” (v.22) is predominately an ethical word, not religious. Another word is used for religious purity (“unclean” in our translations). Examples of uses reveal this: murder (Jer. 7:9-10), oppressing the poor (Ez. 16:47-52), robbery (Ez 18:7-8), arrogance (Prov. 6:16), hypocritical religion (Isa. 1:13). The one place it may be used with purity- Deut. 14:3. However, note that it is used to describe the animals; eating them is not described with the adjective.
- If it were a matter of sacrificial purity, we would expect cleansing to be possible. However, the consequence is death (20:13).
- It is upheld in the NT rather clearly, aside from a sacrificial situation. Rom 1:26-32, 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10.

Alternative # 2: The prohibition is about homosexual idolatrous practices. This is seen because of 18:21 and Molech, and the context of Canaanite religion. Thus consensual sex outside of that setting is okay.

Rebuttal:

- Lev. 20:13 (the second condemnation) is not preceded by talk of idolatry.
- Link with Molech has to do with the giving over of seed. In the original language, v.20 and v.21 are linked by the same verb (giving over) and the item given (“seed,” translated “child” in v.21, untranslated in v.20).
- If the issue was really about homosexual idolatry, then the author could have used specific terminology for cult prostitutes (e.g. Deut. 23:17ff). However, they did not.

Alternative #3- The laws were given because homosexual sex did not lead to procreation. Today, given the modern day population and birth control, homosexual sex is ok.

Rebuttal:

- Failure to procreate is not central concern. You could procreate with relatives, but those are banned.

Alternative #4- This law is irrelevant for us today, especially since no Christian today thinks sex during a woman’s menstrual period is sin (18:19).

- The New Testament reiterates the same view on homosexuality, while it does not reiterate the command of sex during the menstrual period. See above.
- Sex during a woman’s menstrual period is understood as happening accidentally (which is capable of cleansing, Lev. 15:24) or deliberately (Lev. 18:19). Perhaps Christians, particularly men, need to rethink pursuing sex during a woman’s menstrual period and see it more seriously (instead of seeing homosexuality less seriously).

While there are more alternatives, most have a hard time escaping the “simple” meaning of the text, that homosexuality is something God does not want.

For Further Reading:

- *Welcoming but Not Affirming* by Stanley J. Grenz. Great general book worth having.
- *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* by Robert Gannon. One of the most thorough books on the Biblical Texts involved in the debate.