Matthew 11:19 *Glad You Asked: Friend of Sinners*

***Hot-Button Issue***We are currently in a series called *Glad You Asked.* A couple of months ago, we created a link on our website where you could submit questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity. The idea is that we would have sermons on topics that are of interest to you. I think God wants us to be curious—He gave us brains with the ability to think and reason and question—and so I think it is good that we ask hard questions. Already, we’ve tackled questions about why God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and why God allows terrible things to happen.

And I will admit that when we decided to do this series I anticipated that there would be at least one question about human sexuality—specifically, homosexuality. And there was.

I anticipated such a question, not because I am eager to preach on this topic, but because there is a lot of debate around it in Christianity right now. The last several years have seen major votes in several of the largest denominations in America, as well as church splits at both the local and national levels prompted by this debate. Our own denomination—the Reformed Church in America—has had major discussions on homosexuality for at least the last 20 years (some would say 40) and is anticipating making some major decisions about our way forward in the year 2020. For the last three months our consistory has been working through some discussion guides provided by the denomination in anticipation of the possible decisions that will be made next year. It is also possible that our congregation will be asked to react to the denominational decisions that are made next year.

So I anticipated a question about homosexuality; and the consistory agrees that it would be good for us to talk about homosexuality in preparation for the conversations we may be asked to have.

But the questions that were submitted surprised me a little. The questions that I connected to this topic were less about the Biblical or theological position on same-sex activities as how to get along with people we disagree with. **Here’s the first question that came in:**

How are we to judge people in their sexual preferences but at the same time love them and be kind to them? This is a true question for a lot of sinful ways - how do we be Christian and not condone but still love them?

A second submission followed the same line of questioning. It doesn’t specifically mention sexuality, **but it seems to be in mind:**

How does a Christian balance standing firmly in belief against topics that seem to be black and white without walking in legalism or judgementalism? Where is the balance between loving someone to Christ and believing certain behaviors are wrong and being able to confidently stand in that belief?

To me, these submissions **boil down to this question:**

How do we love people we disagree with?

In particular, the question seems to be about how we love people who are engaged in activities that we believe to be sinful. Even more particularly, it seems to be about how we love people who are in the LGBTQ community if we believe same-sex activity is sinful.

I want to try to answer this question. And I want to try to answer this question in relation to the church’s treatment of people in the LGBTQ community. I know that it is a question that can be applied to a lot of issues—we could talk about how to love people on differing sides of the immigration issue, or gun-control, or health-care. Really, this is a good question for the whole political climate in our country right now. But if I am reading the submissions correctly, homosexuality is what prompted the question, and homosexuality is the hottest of hot-button issues in our denomination right now.

Also, because the question I am going to try to tackle is “How do we love people we disagree with?” I am not going to tackle the question of whether or not the Bible defines same-sex activity as a sin. Rather, I am going to tell you up-front that the current position of our denomination is that it is (though that is being hotly debated). The current position of our local church is that Christian marriage is reserved for one man, and one woman. And my personal conviction is that the Bible defines same-sex activity as sin.

I know that not all of you will necessarily agree with me on that. If so, I hope you will hang with me. My goal today is not to get into the debates about the Biblical texts or theology—rather, we are going to have a couple seminars the next two Thursday nights to look into the various arguments and ethical challenges. I hope that those seminars will provide a better setting than a Sunday morning sermon for looking at some of those things.

The question today, then, is: If we believe that same-sex activity is sinful, how do we love people who are engaged in it? And for an answer, I believe we need to look to Jesus, the friend of sinners.

***Scandalous Jesus***There is no Biblical record of Jesus addressing same sex relations. But what we do know is that Jesus had a radical love and scandalous friendships with people that His culture considered to be sinful. Consider **Matthew 11:19:**

**19**The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

This is Jesus talking about Himself. He’s quoting His critics here, the religious officials and Pharisees. And they’ve got serious questions about the company Jesus keeps. He’s a friend of tax collectors and sinners. They suspect He is a drunkard and glutton. Because Jesus spends so much time with people they consider to be unrighteous, they assume Jesus must be unrighteous as well.

And you know what? They kind of have a point. Not that Jesus was unrighteous. Not that Jesus was engaging in sinful activities. But Jesus did in fact spend a lot of time with people whose behavior He would not have endorsed.

Let’s go backwards a few chapters in Matthew. Matthew 8. Immediately after Jesus preaches the most rigorous ethical sermon in history—the Sermon on the Mount, where He challenges us to have righteousness that surpasses that of the teachers of the law and He tells us that murder and adultery are defined not just by our actions but how we actually think about other people—immediately after that Jesus goes out and meets a series of people.

One of them is a Roman centurion. Now, I made brief mention of this last week: Israel was an occupied country. The Romans had conquered them about a century earlier and had left an occupying army there ever since. A Roman centurion was an officer of that occupying army.

The Roman army was known for debauchery, paganism, and oppressive violence. Roman soldiers did not believe in the God of Israel, they worshiped the Roman pantheon of gods. Some believe that centurions acted as virtual priests, leading the soldiers under their command in religious ceremonies to their Roman gods.

So Jesus and this centurion would have had a lot to disagree about. Jesus would have disagreed with this man’s politics, his use of violence, and his religious beliefs. But when Jesus meets him, there is no discussion of any of those things. Jesus does not begin His relationship with this man by giving him a list of things he’s doing wrong—He begins with love. **Matthew 8:5-7**:

**5**When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. **6**“Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

**7**Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

Preston Sprinkle says: “Jesus doesn’t lead with the law. He leads with love--love without footnotes…Jesus’ love comes without a background check.” (*People to be Loved*, p. 76)

The same goes for Matthew the tax collector. Skip ahead **to Matthew 9** and we read about Matthew’s calling:

**9**As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

As much as Roman soldiers would have been despised in Israel, tax collectors were hated even worse. The Roman soldiers were bad, but they were invaders. They had come from outside the country. The tax collectors, on the other hand, were Israelites who had sold out. Matthew was a Jew who decided to throw his lot in with the enemy.

More than that, since they were already considered traitors to their country, most tax collectors decided to go all out and embrace their role as a villain. The Romans set certain standards for what they expected in taxes, but allowed the tax collector to keep anything he could get above and beyond that. Tax collectors were known for upcharging and extorting their countrymen. They lived excessively materialistic lives.

In fact, without drawing a moral equivalency between tax collectors and the LGBTQ community, I think it is safe to say that if there was one group that could identify with the way many religious conservatives treat gay people today, it would have been tax collectors. They knew what it was like to be called names, gossiped about, and excluded from the life of the larger community.

And what does Jesus do? He builds a relationship with Matthew.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, you can attend our church service, but you first need to know where we stand on the issue of extortion.” He doesn’t say, “I can love you Matthew, but I hate your sin.” Jesus doesn’t lead with the law—and there were a lot of laws he could have fronted with a thug like Matthew. Instead, he fronts love. “Come follow me.” Jesus invites him to be his disciple without rubbing Matthew’s face in his sin. (Sprinkle, p. 77)

Does He approve of Matthew’s sin? I seriously doubt it. Does He desire for Matthew to stop robbing people? I think He does. In fact, look at what Jesus says to the religious officials when they get their robes all twisted about Jesus having dinner at Matthew’s house with a bunch of Matthew’s friends. **Matthew 9:12-13:**

**12**On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. **13**But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus does not agree with Matthew’s tax collecting behavior. To use Jesus’ own analogy, He thinks it is sick. He agreed with the religious officials’ assessment that Matthew and his friends are sinners. Jesus doesn’t say: “No, you misunderstand. There’s nothing sinful about what they are doing.” Jesus calls them sinners, He believes their behavior is sinful. But that doesn’t stop Him from loving them.

One more example. In John 8 Jesus is confronted by a mob of religious officials pushing a woman before them. The woman, they say, has been caught in the very act of adultery.

There are all kinds of problems with this situation. For one thing, where is the man? It takes two to commit adultery, but only the woman is being held up for public ridicule. For another thing, how did they manage to catch the woman in the act? Were they a bunch of peeping Toms? The whole thing smells like a set-up. And then there is the hypocrisy of their accusations—which Jesus calls attention to. If they’re so eager to stone a sinner, Jesus says, then the one without sin should throw the first stone.

Eventually, the accusers melt away, until it’s just Jesus and the woman. Here’s what their conversation looks like, **John 8:10-11:**

**10**Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

**11**“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus does not condemn the woman for her sin; but He does not condone it either. Instead He confronts her with love and He calls her to something different, something better.

***Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin?***Those of us who believe same-sex activity is sinful must face this undeniable truth: Jesus was a friend of sinners. In fact, people who were labeled as sinners and ostracized by the most religious people of the day were the people who seemed most drawn to Jesus. They followed Him around and made up the crowd for most of His public speeches (i.e. Luke 15:1-2). Jesus loved sinners.

There is a phrase that Christians like to use, and one that will come up quite often when we talk about gays and lesbians within the church. The phrase is **“Love the sinner, hate the sin.”** Sometimes people will use that phrase to describe Jesus. Jesus loves sinners, we’ll say, but He hates their sin.

I don’t know if that phrase is all that helpful, though. For one thing, it doesn’t come from the Bible. It sounds like a Bible verse, but it isn’t. The closest phrase we can find to it in the Bible is **Jude 23** which says:

**12**save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

There is something there about loving those who are in sin; even while hating the clothing stained by corrupted flesh, which seems to be about disliking their sinful behavior. But it is certainly not as short and pithy (and cliched) as “love the sinner, hate the sin.”

But more than that, I think this phrase is especially not helpful with regard to the LGBTQ community. The word “hate” has been used too many times where gays and lesbians are concerned. Think about it, if I say to someone who is gay: “I love you, but I hate your sin” which part of that sentence is going to come across the loudest? I might really want my friend to hear the love part; but he is far more likely to focus on the hate part. And I can’t blame him. When we use the word “but”, it has a tendency to cancel out everything that comes before it.

My point, where Jesus is concerned, is that He did not appear to feel compelled to use the second half of the sentence. **Jesus loved sinners**. Period. And we’re called to do the same.

If the question is: How do we love people we disagree with? Jesus’ answer seems to be: Love them. Just that: love them.

***What Traditionalist Christians Must Do***So with that as a foundation, I’d like to make five points of application. I am going to suggest five things those of us who believe same sex activity is sinful should do in order to love more like Jesus. (And please note, when I use the word “we” here I recognize not everyone agrees with me about same sex behavior. I am using the word “we” to refer to myself and other Christians who take a traditional position on this issue.)

**1. We must confess that Christianity has not responded well to the LGBTQ community.**

Historically, the Christian church has not handled this issue well. Almost from the beginning days of the church men and women and children who have experienced same sex attraction have been put to death. Pastors have preached insensitive and Biblically unfaithful sermons that have led people experiencing same sex attraction to commit suicide. Christian parents have pointed at their Bibles while kicking their gay children out of the house and leaving them homeless to live on the street. Bullying has been done in the name of Jesus. King James Version words like “abomination” have been used in a modern context not to describe homosexual behavior but to describe gays and lesbians themselves. (cf: Tim Breen, *The Cross and the Rainbow*, Oct. 22, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZl69BScXl8&t=3s>)

The way that the Christian church for most of its history—and much of the evangelical church still today—has responded to people with same sex attraction has not been good. Too often they are met with condemnation, not compassion.

In fact, according to the statisticians at Barna and the book *unChristian*, when young people outside of the church were asked what was the first thing that came to mind when they thought of evangelical Christianity, the number one response was “antihomosexual.” 91% said that’s the word that best describes evangelical Christians. Antihomosexual. 91%.

The next two perceptions were “judgmental” (87%) and “hypocritical” (85%). And most of the people surveyed had some personal contact with a Christian church, so their responses were based on first-hand experience. (quoted by Sprinkle, p. 79)

Think about that: we are people who follow the One known as the friend of sinners, and the first three words most often used to describe us outside of the church are antihomosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical.

A survey of those with same-sex attractions asked open-ended questions about their experiences in the Christian community. Responses included: “I was terrified that I would be judged and ostracized for something I didn’t want and something that wasn’t in my control.” Another said: “I didn’t feel like I would be understood…I thought that I would at least be rejected by peers and maybe even made fun of.” Another said: “I was terrified to tell close friends for this reason: I couldn’t bear to lose some of the most meaningful friendships in my life.” (Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality*, p. 163-164)

It is time for the Christian, evangelical church to be known more for what it is for than what it is against.

**2. We must insist on the human dignity of everyone.**

A central doctrine of Christian theology has always been that human beings—men and women—are made in the image of God (Gene. 1:27). This *imago Dei* is true for everyone on the planet: regardless of skin color, social status, mental or physical ability, or sexual preference. Everyone you meet is an image bearer of our Creator.

Christopher Yuan writes:

Regardless of anyone’s age, sex, or race; regardless of whether one is in submission to God or not; and regardless of whether a person experiences same-sex attraction or identifies as gay or lesbian—everyone is created in the *imago Dei*. It’s inherent to who we are and is never erased.

When we say that every person should be treated with dignity and respect, it’s not because of our commitment to human rights but because we’re all created in the image of God. Every person is endowed with inestimable worth and should be treated with dignity and respect. The *imago Dei* is the only true foundation of human rights.

This is an indictment of Christians who mock or demonize people identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Such hurtful actions and attitudes fail to honor the dignity and value of others created in the image of God. It also forsakes the believer’s calling to reflect the image of Christ and proclaim the good news to those who have yet to believe. (p. 19)

Preston Sprinkle writes this:

We cannot let our hearts become so callused over by fear-driven sermons about the evils of the “gay agenda” that we forget that homosexuality is about people, not an issue. (p. 83)

Sprinkle feels so strongly about this that his book on this subject is called *People to be Loved.* The subtitle is “Why homosexuality is not just an issue.” Elsewhere in his book he writes that as Christians we must put homophobia to death. Homophobia refers to prejudice or discrimination against LGBTQ people. It includes crude nicknames for people who identify as gay; using those kinds of slurs to refer to people or things we think are different; or making jokes at the expense of the LGBTQ community—as well as so much more. Sprinkle writes:

We need to destroy homophobia. If someone tells a gay joke, kill it. Blurt out that line that will make everyone feel awkward, “That’s actually not very funny. Do you worship Jesus with that mouth?” If people want to talk about some issue about “those people over there”—stop it. Don’t let them. Stand up and be bold. Destroy homophobia. Don’t squirm in your silent agreement. Take a stand for the truth. Take a stand for people. Kill homophobia.

Some people will think you are “pro-gay” if you stand up for gay people, and that’s fine. If people mistake your unconditional love for gay people as an affirmation of homosexual behavior, then don’t worry about it. You’re in good company. Religious people often thought that Jesus was a sinner because he had many friends who were sinners, yet he kept on befriending sinners. Don’t let religious pressure from your friends or family force you to cowardly embrace the pharisaic ethic of homophobia. Don’t buy the lie that if you love people too much, you must not care about sin. The gospel teaches us otherwise. Jesus cared so much about sin that he surrounded himself with sinners. Let us go and do likewise. (p. 181-182)

**3. We must recognize the sinfulness of everyone.**

While it is true that every one of us bears the image of God, it is also true that every one of us is a sinner affected by the Fall. This is the bad news of the gospel: we are all sinners in need of a Savior. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is that Savior, and He came to redeem all kinds of sins. Only in Jesus do any of us have any hope of forgiveness.

But the point I want to make here is that even in Jesus, all of us still wrestle with the effects of the fall. To use a Biblical image, we must still fight against our old nature.

There is a buzzword in the debate about homosexuality. The word is “affirm.” Do we affirm the same-sex activities of gays and lesbians or not? As I have said, I am on the non-affirming side.

But I want you to know this: there is not a single one of you that I could walk up to and say: “I affirm every one of your thoughts and deeds as holy, righteous and pleasing to God.” I cannot do that. Because all of you still wrestle with sin.

And you could not do that for me. Even though you have called and installed me as your pastor, you have to know that I am not free from sin. You cannot affirm my every thought and deed. We are all sinners.

Trevin Wax writes this in a blog post titled “Welcome everyone, affirm no one”:

The Bible teaches that God’s righteousness cuts us all down to size. If a church were to close its doors to sinners, it would be empty. And if a church were to empty itself of only *some*kinds of sinners, it would soon be full only of self-righteousness. Better then for the church to close its doors entirely…

It is because God loves us that he welcomes us. It is because God loves us that he refuses to affirm us in our sins. Because he longs for us to find joy in him, he will ruthlessly oppose self-righteous self-definitions, whether our pride shows up in a Sunday school roll or a city parade.

The cross levels us all, but in that dirt of our despair comes deliverance. The Father runs to the prodigal. He entreats the older brother to come inside. He doesn’t affirm the prodigal in the pigsty or the older brother in his pasture of pomposity, but he does open his arms to both his sons. And that’s why, just like our Father, the church should welcome everyone and affirm no one. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/welcome-everyone-affirm-no-one/>

**4. We must avoid the error of making heterosexual sins more “acceptable” than homosexual sins.**

Christopher Yuan is a professor at Moody Bible Institute. He grew up in a nonChristian home and came out to his parents as a teenager. His parents were traditional Chinese immigrants, and they did not respond well to Christopher’s announcement that he was gay. He moved to Atlanta, pursued same-sex relationships, got involved in drug use, and was eventually found to be HIV positive.

Meanwhile, his parents became Christians and began to pray for Christopher. Eventually, while serving a sentence in the Atlanta City Detention Center, Christopher began to read the Bible. He surrendered his life to Jesus and became convinced that pursuing same-sex relationships was not what Jesus wanted for him. He and his mother co-wrote a memoir called *Out of a Far Country* and they travel the world today speaking on issues of sexuality.

He tells a story about a woman he met after one of their speaking engagements. The woman came to him in tears and sobbed out this sentence: “I just…just want my son…to be normal.” As Christopher tells it:

Through sobs, this devastated mother recounted that her son had told her he was gay and was moving in with his boyfriend. She was crushed and hadn’t told anyone, including her husband. She continued to express deep disappointment, wondering why this son couldn’t be like her other son—*normal*—with a steady a girlfriend and even a baby on the way. (*Holy Sexuality*, p. 43-44)

The error that is too often made within evangelical Christianity is that God is calling people into heterosexuality, whatever form that may take. But God’s call is not to heterosexuality, but holy sexuality. God desires for us to be chaste in singleness and faithful in marriage.

Should this mother have loved her straight son any less because of the out-of-wedlock baby on the way? No, she should have loved both her sons the same. But she also should have been no more approving of her straight son’s sexual sins than she was of her gay son’s sexual sins. Not if she was truly concerned about being Biblically consistent.

**5. We must practice true Christian love.**

Finally, let me challenge us all, again, to love those we disagree with. Somehow, let’s follow the example of Jesus, the friend of sinners.

About a year ago, Tim Breen, the pastor of First Reformed Church in Orange City preached a sermon on homosexuality. Towards the end of his message, as he wrestled with what love looks like, he turned to 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians 13 is the Bible’s famous love chapter, it gives a definition of love that focuses on the way love acts. It is often read at weddings. Tim read 1 Corinthians 13 with an eye towards this topic:

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. 4Love is patient… *with people who are same-sex attracted*.  Love is kind…*to members of the transgender community*. It does not envy, it does not boast… *in being heterosexual*, it is not proud…*of its given orientation*. 5It does not dishonor…*homosexuals*, it is not self-seeking, Love is not easily angered… *at lesbians*, it keeps no record of the wrongs… *of bisexuals*. 7Love always protects…*the civil rights of legally married gay people*, always trusts…*the motives of homosexuals*, always hopes…*in the best future for queer persons*, always perseveres…*for justice for those who have been oppressed or victimized*. Love never fails… *to seek the best for people of all sexual expressions*.

That’s what it means to [love like Jesus.]

Do you hear that, LGBTQ friends? This is what the Bible says you should expect from Christians. The Bible is not a clobbering tool. It is a witness that makes a great ask of us all. This is the standard to which we in the church must be held to account.

But that passage has one more verse: “6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”LGBTQ friends, while we pray that we will grow to overflowing love for you, we cannot delight in what we consider wrong. We cannot share your pride in acts that disappoint our King. It would be much simpler for everyone if we could.  But our allegiance to Jesus Christ is too deep, too strong, too fundamental. *The Cross and the Rainbow*, Oct. 22, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZl69BScXl8&t=3s>)

This is an enormously divisive issues. Some of us feel very strongly about what we believe the Bible teaches. But we must admit that we have not loved the way our Savior loves. We have not done well. We must do better.