

Is Same-Sex Attraction Sinful?

Selected Scriptures

© Mike Riccardi

Introduction

Well, welcome to Sundays in July! A bit different than normal, but we'll take what we can get! It is a pleasure and a privilege to be together, even in this modified way. The title of our seminar this morning is: *Is Same-Sex Attraction Sinful?* And the necessity of the question reflects the increasing confusion within the church on the matter of biblical sexual ethics.

There continue to be mainline churches and denominations caving on the issue of homosexual *practice*. Not long ago, the United Methodist Church announced the potential for a split in the denomination over whether to ordain unrepentant homosexuals to the ministry. And while I'm sure there are churches who *call* themselves evangelical who would also call themselves "affirming" of homosexuality, there seems to be just enough sanity within the conservative evangelical church to hold the line on the sinfulness of homosexual *practice*, for which we thank God.

But there is not as much clarity within our circles of semi-conservative evangelicalism on the issue of whether same-sex *attraction* is in itself sinful. There is a growing movement afoot that believes that, while homosexual *practice* is incompatible with faithful Christian profession, homosexual *orientation* is not necessarily sinful. They say that those who experience sexual desires for or attraction to members of the same sex do not necessarily need to put off those desires; but they instead must redirect those desires in some sort of lawful expression.

The Spiritual Friendship movement, spearheaded by Wesley Hill, and the Revoice Conference, led by Nate Collins, would be examples of this position. At the 2018 Revoice Conference, followers of Jesus were encouraged to embrace their identity as "Gay Christians"—even to the point of saying that they are in a "mixed-orientation marriage" with a member of the opposite sex. They were encouraged to do these things, so long as their homosexual desires don't manifest in homosexual acts. Wesley Hill, who was a speaker at Revoice, counsels those who experience same-sex attraction to remain celibate, but to channel the energies of their homosexual orientation into what he calls spiritual friendships. He says, "My sexuality, my basic erotic orientation to the world, is inescapably intertwined with how I go about finding and keeping friends. ... I can harness and guide [my sexuality's] energies in the direction of sexually abstinent, yet intimate friendship." So, don't set about to change your orientation; that's virtually impossible and potentially unhealthy to do. Instead, find biblically-permissible ways to *express* that orientation; not sexually, but emotionally in friendships.

Sam Allberry, an evangelical Anglican minister who speaks of himself as one who experiences same-sex attraction, has criticized the Revoice Conference for defining oneself by their sexual desires. So against Hill and Collins, Allberry says that professing Christians who experience same-sex attraction should not identify themselves as “gay.” Christians don’t define themselves by their struggles with sin, but by their union to Christ. This is a move in the right direction. However, up until recently, Allberry has allied himself with a ministry called “Living Out,” which is now led by a man named Ed Shaw. (Now, Allberry’s recent departure from Living Out is an encouraging sign, and so I don’t want to impute to him the positions of a ministry he has distanced himself from. But it wasn’t long ago that Allberry was a member of this organization, which is also currently endorsed by Tim Keller, and is an organization that has put on events at churches associated with the 9Marks ministry. I say that only to explain that this is a trend that is taking hold in our circles of conservative evangelicalism. It’s not merely something that’s “out there” among the mainline liberals.)

But Living Out does not believe it is inherently sinful to experience attraction to the same sex. In fact, their website claims that “many same-sex attracted Christians are both happy in their sexuality and the Bible’s teaching on same-sex sexual relationships.” This obviously means that they don’t believe the Bible’s teaching on same-sex sexual relationships rules out same-sex attraction as sinful in itself. Same-sex attraction, they say, should not be mortified, and “attempting to change someone’s sexual orientation” can actually be “potentially damaging.” Such would be to “assume that being gay is somehow more problematic than being straight. We believe that heterosexuality as we encounter it in this world is just as fallen as homosexuality.” Interestingly enough, on the Living Out webpage there is a link in support of another partner ministry, which counsels folks who struggle with same-sex desires to channel those desires in a number of ways without acting on them. One suggestion from that website was to go to nude beaches, which, we ought to all agree, that that is *never* good advice. No matter what you’re feeling, don’t do that.

And so you see the camps that take shape. There is the out-and-out liberal view that recognizes Scripture prohibits homosexuality but that Scripture should be rejected (e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson). There the revisionist view that attempts to make a biblical case for the compatibility of homosexual practice and Christianity (e.g., Matthew Vines; James Brownson). And we sort of recognize that both of those views are “out there.” Conservative evangelicalism is not imminently tempted to embrace one of those clearly unbiblical options. But then, contrary to the traditional Christian position that would identify both homosexual acts and homosexual desires as sins to be repented of, there is the camp that accepts Scripture’s condemnation of same-sex behavior, but denies that such a condemnation extends to same-sex attraction. And this position isn’t just held by people who are “out there.” Wesley Hill is a graduate of Wheaton College. Nate Collins is a graduate of the PhD program at Southern Seminary. One advocate of the

neutrality of same-sex attraction is an elder at John Piper’s Bethlehem Baptist Church and a contributor to the blog at Desiring God. So this is an in-house issue for us. And I’d even be willing to bet that if we polled the members of Grace Church, we’d find more disagreement on this than some of us might expect.

I believe that this question—the sinfulness or permissibility of same-sex attraction—is a watershed issue for conservative evangelical conviction on sexuality. We get that the Bible unmistakably condemns homosexual practice. We get that it’s unwise and contrary to our regeneration in Christ to define ourselves by our sinful inclinations; and so we reject the terminology of “gay Christian,” and the like. But evangelicalism seems to be splitting—or at least, confused—over whether (a) sexual attraction to members of the same sex is sinful in itself, or (b) same-sex attraction is neutral until it is acted upon. This seminar aims to answer that question: Is same-sex attraction sinful?

And the way evangelicalism answers this question is going to have far-reaching effects—not only on our doctrine of sanctification in general, but also on our ability uphold a consistent biblical sexual ethic in the face of so many hostile opponents in the culture. It’s my conviction that (1) same-sex attraction is indeed sin that must be repented of, that (2) we have a pastoral responsibility to labor with those who struggle with such desires to mortify and forsake them, and that (3) legitimizing same-sex attraction in any sense would be the breach in the dam that will lead to full-scale compromise on biblical sexuality. I hope in the remainder of the seminar to make that case to you from Scripture.

Compassionate Concern

Now, what ultimately drives us to have this discussion is our desire to glorify God in Christ by being faithful to His Word, and to see His holy standard for human sexual ethics be upheld in the midst of virulent attacks from the culture. The glory of God and the Lordship of Christ has to be our ultimate concern. But we’re also driven to have this discussion out of sincere, compassionate concern for those who struggle with same-sex attraction. You see, part of the disagreement between faithful Christians on the sinfulness of same-sex attraction comes from a proper, compassionate desire to not place an undue burden on genuine followers of Christ, who, out of obedience to Him, discipline themselves to not engage in homosexual behavior, but who nevertheless experience enduring emotional and sexual attraction to members of the same sex.

In their immensely helpful book, *Transforming Homosexuality*, Denny Burk and Heath Lambert articulate this concern quite well: “These dear brothers and sisters struggle faithfully and practice chastity, but they sense that they cannot eliminate same-sex attractions that well up within them spontaneously and uninvited. So it seems cruel and unusual to call their unchosen and unwanted attractions sinful. To call their attractions sinful while they are otherwise living a life of

faithfulness and chastity ... seems to load these brothers and sisters up with burdens too heavy for them to bear. And no one wants to sin against them and fall under the censure that Jesus laid against the scribes and Pharisees” (40). That’s absolutely right.

Nevertheless, if same-sex attraction is itself sinful—if it is not merely homosexual behavior that is prohibited in Scripture, but also the desires and inclinations of the heart that lead to those behaviors—then making that case to our brothers and sisters struggling with same-sex attraction is not placing an undue burden on them. It’s making God’s will known to them, and bringing the standard of holiness that is laid out for them in Scripture—which God gives to them for their good and their blessing—it’s about bringing that standard to bear on their lives.

Which is exactly what I need my brothers and sisters to do for me as we all make progress together in sanctification! If I’m convinced that some sin I’m committing isn’t in fact a sin, I’m not likely to focus very much on repenting from that sin. Why repent of something if it’s not sinful? But if it is sinful, and I’m just convinced that it’s not, I’m going to continue in my unrepentant sin and cut myself off from the fellowship and communion with Christ that is enjoyed on the path of obedience, but which is hindered and obscured when sin is harbored and not confessed. So, by identifying sin as what it is, we aim not to place undue burdens on people, but rather to give people hope—that they do not have to be enslaved to their sinful desires all their lives, but can find freedom and wholeness in Christ through the Gospel, and in His resurrection power which He gives us to walk in newness of life.

Attraction, Desire, and Noticing

Another somewhat preliminary remark is to make sure that we know precisely what we mean when we speak of same-sex attraction. Someone who is same-sex attracted is someone who has enduring experiences of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual desires for members of the same sex. Those who have defended the neutrality of same-sex attraction have often argued for a distinction between attraction and desire. Matthew Anderson was a speaker at the Revoice Conference, and he puts it this way: “One thing which remains after the purification of same-sex sexual desires...is the complex set of noticings and attractions toward members of one’s own sex.” So, even though, according to Anderson, same-sex desires can be purified, same-sex noticings and attractions remain.

Now, because the Revoice Conference was held at a PCA church, the Central Carolina Presbytery of the PCA formed a committee to investigate the conference and report any relevant findings. Kevin DeYoung was a member of that committee that is his presbytery. And in response to Anderson’s point about desire, noticings, and attractions, the committee wrote the following helpful assessment. They said, “While noticing is not the same as desire, it is hard to imagine how ‘attraction’ does not carry some sense of magnetic pull, arousal, or desire. By a

simple dictionary definition, to notice is to observe or perceive, while attraction suggests interest and allurement. A mother may recognize that her teenage son is quite handsome or that her daughter has grown into an objectively beautiful woman. These noticing can take place apart from any sexual longing. But if a mother were to experience any *attraction* to her son or daughter, surely we would describe this kind of noticing as illicit, as a perverse response—however unbidden—that should be mortified at all costs. In short, while we distinguish between noticing and attraction, we do not see how attraction and desire are fundamentally different moral categories.” I think that’s spot-on. To be attracted to someone is to desire that person in some way. To be same-sex attracted is to experience enduring emotional, romantic, and/or sexual desires for members of the same sex. And those desires—even if they arise in us somewhat unconsciously and are unwanted—are nevertheless sinful and must be mortified and repented of.

But why? Why is it that it’s not enough to abstain from homosexual behavior? Why are homosexual desires and attractions sinful, and why must we counsel those who struggle with such desires and attractions to repent of them?

I. The Internal Nature of Sin and Holiness

Well, ultimately, the answer to that question is: because of **the fundamentally internal nature of sin and holiness**. Sin and holiness are matters of the heart, and they cannot be reduced merely to external actions. Genuine, God-honoring, Christlike, Spirit-driven holiness is a matter of the thoughts, affections, and desires, *as well* as the actions. God does not merely command us to *behave* righteously, though He does that. He commands us to *be* holy.

And we need to be overwhelmed with this truth—that the believer’s growth in holiness is a fundamentally **internal** matter. The emphasis on the heart, throughout the entirety of Scripture, speaks to our need to forsake sin and pursue holiness at the level of the heart, and not merely at the hands.

Matthew 5:8, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in *heart*, for they shall see God.” It’s not enough, Matthew 23, to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside to be full of robbery and self-indulgence. It’s not enough to whitewash the tombs, but inside to be full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. What does Jesus say, “First clean the *inside* of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also” (Matt 23:25–27). In Matthew 18:35, at the close of the parable of the unforgiving slave, Jesus tells us that the Father is not satisfied with hypocritical forgiveness. He says that the Father will cast us into hell to be tortured, “if each of you does not forgive his brother *from your heart*.” The greatest commandment in the law, Matthew 22:37, is that we *love* the Lord our God with all our *heart*, with all our soul, and with all our mind. In Acts 8:22, when Simon seeks to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit with money, Peter rebukes him and tells him, “Therefore *repent* of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that,

if possible, *the intention of your heart* may be forgiven you.” Simon didn’t need forgiveness merely for his attempted bribery. He needed forgiveness even for the intention of his heart!

And so when the Gospel releases us from our slavery to sin, how does Paul speak of redeemed believers? Romans 6:17: “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became *obedient from the heart* to that form of teaching to which you were committed.” The slave of sin who has been made a slave of righteousness is one who becomes obedient from the *heart*. Internally! Obedient not just outwardly but from the heart! In Ephesians 6:5–6, Paul commands the slave to be obedient to their masters “*in the sincerity of your heart*, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God *from the heart*.” And that classic text on sanctification, Philippians 2:12–13, says, that God is working *in us*, *both* to will *and* to work for His good pleasure. So in progressive sanctification, God works *in us* not just to *work*, but also to *will*. He’s working even on our desires.

And so the desires of our flesh—the desires that characterized our old life of sin—they themselves are to be the object of our mortification. And the New Testament testifies to that, just as well. Galatians 5:24 says, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have *crucified* the flesh *with its passions and desires*.” The passions and the desires of the flesh must be crucified. Titus 2:11–12: The grace of God instructs us to deny ungodliness and *worldly desires*. 1 Peter 2:11: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts”—fleshly desires—“which wage war against the soul.” And Colossians 3:5 says we are to put to death what is earthly in us. Not merely the external actions of sexual immorality and impurity, which it mentions, but then also what it goes on to mention: the internal affections of *passion, evil desire, and covetousness*.

And so, friends, holiness is not merely a matter of bringing our outward behavior into conformity to an external standard. Holiness does require holy behavior, but that’s not all it requires. The great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, puts it very helpfully. He says, “sanctification . . . does not consist exclusively in a series of a new kind of acts. It is the making the tree good, in order that the fruit may be good. It involves an essential change of character. [Just] as regeneration is . . . a new birth, a new creation, a quickening or communicating a new life, . . . so sanctification in its essential nature is not holy acts, but such a change in the state of the soul, that sinful acts become more infrequent, and holy acts more and more habitual and controlling” (*Systematic Theology*, 3:226). Sanctification is not merely new acts, but an internal change in the soul of man.

God is at work in us both to will *and* to work. And so the sanctification that we must press after—and urge one another to press after—is both internal and external. We must have sanctified affections as well as sanctified actions—because God has not simply commanded us to carry out a series of external duties. He has also commanded us to have a particular frame of

heart as we do those external duties. Call them “internal duties,” if you like. And so Micah 6:8 commands us not merely to *do* justly, but also to *love* mercy. In 1 Peter 5:2, pastors and elders are commanded not merely to shepherd the flock of God, but to shepherd the flock of God *willingly* and *eagerly*. Not under compulsion! Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that God loves a *cheerful* giver. So if God loves a cheerful giver, and you faithfully put that envelope in the plate every week, but you do it begrudgingly without cheerfulness, have you obeyed? Well, you have obeyed the command to give, but you have not obeyed the command to give *cheerfully*.

So you see, God commands our affections as well as our actions. This means that the truly holy person doesn’t merely “do what God commands,” though he certainly does that. But it goes deeper than that. The holy person *loves* what God loves. He *desires* what God desires. He is *attracted* to what God is attracted to. And then he acts in keeping with that renewed heart.

Now, to suggest that homosexual desires or same-sex attraction is not itself a sin to be mortified, but that one faithfully follows Christ in holiness so long as he doesn’t act on those desires, is entirely out of accord with everything we have just read. It is not making the tree good, as Hodge says. It is simply chopping off the rotten fruit. It’s allowing—and in some sense even encouraging—sin to continue to draw life from the soil of corruption. But we are not to battle sin merely at the level of its fruit. We are to lay the axe at the root of the tree. We’re to cut sin out at the root level of the desires of our heart. What does Jesus say in Mark 7:21? “For from *within*, out of the *heart* of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,” and so on. Sinful acts are rooted in the sinful heart, in the affections, in the desires! It is the desires that produce the behaviors.

This is the Sermon on the Mount, isn’t it? In Matthew 5:27, Jesus quotes directly from the Greek translation of the Seventh Commandment in Exodus 20:14: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” There is a comment about sexually immoral behavior. But then in verse 28, Jesus immediately follows his quotation of the Seventh Commandment with a citation of the Tenth Commandment. “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her”—literally, to desire her—“has already committed adultery with her in his *heart*.” The term translated “lust” is *epithumeō*, from the Greek translation of Exodus 20:17, “You shall not covet”—*epithumeō*—“your neighbor’s wife.” Jesus is inextricably linking the pre-behavioral sexual desire for a woman with the sinful act of adultery. God’s law doesn’t merely prohibit the acts of adultery and stealing; it prohibits the covetous and lustful desires that lead to those acts.

And friends, the extent to which we disconnect same-sex attraction from same-sex behavior—by suggesting that the latter is prohibited but the former is permissible—is the same extent to which we will turn biblical sanctification into mere behavior modification (cf. Burk & Lambert, 79). It is the extent to which we wholly externalize the concepts of sin and holiness. And yet Scripture tells us that sin is not merely what we do. It’s not even merely what we feel. Brothers and sisters:

it's who we are. Sin is not merely our transgression of external laws; it the condition of our souls. We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners.

The fact that our sinful desires seem to spring from within us so naturally—the fact that we seem naturally oriented to be attracted to a particular set of sinful behaviors—only increases our culpability! It certainly doesn't absolve us from it! It only testifies to our corruption! "I'm *inclined* this way! This feels *natural*! This is *who I am*!" Yes, exactly! When I'm tempted, the fact that I find those temptations so enticing and attractive only means my sin problem is worse than I thought! It reaches deeper than my hands into my heart—into the very core of my being! And so because our sinful acts are rooted in and spring out from our sinful hearts, biblical sanctification requires more than repentance at the level of our behavior but at the level of the desires and the inclinations and the attractions that produce those behaviors.

And so John Murray, longtime Professor of Theology at Westminster Seminary, said, "The outward act of transgression ... [is] determined by inclination, propension, character. ... The character that produce[s] the act cannot be different as to its moral character from the act itself" (2:69). In other words, it is sin to be attracted to what is sinful. The desire for an illicit end is itself an illicit desire (CCP, 6). It is an indication that, whatever my actions may be, my affections are still sinful. I still want something which my Father has told me is not for me to have. I may know it's wrong to act on that desire, and by God's grace I may restrain myself from acting upon it. It's better to be angry than to murder! It's better to be lustful than to commit adultery! But I still want something—I'm still attracted to something—which does not give me more of my Father, which does not lead me to enjoy more of His glory, and therefore which cannot satisfy the longings of my soul, but can only deceive (Eph 4:22), can only corrupt (2 Pet 2:10), and can only plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim 6:9). Even to desire those things—to seek satisfaction in things which are not my God nor from my God—is evil desire. It is idolatry. It is sin. And it must be repented of.

II. Concupiscence

Now, I don't have time for this next point, but those of you interested in this issue should read all you can on the historical debate between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed doctrine of **concupiscence**. Concupiscence speaks of involuntary desires that have been disordered by sin—which is pretty much exactly this very discussion. They've been talking about this since the Reformation. And interestingly, Roman Catholic theology holds that concupiscence is not sinful, while Reformed theology has always held that it *is* sinful.

And like I said, I don't have time for this, and so I'm just going to read a summary paragraph of the historical debate from the Central Carolina Presbytery's report on the Revoice Conference. They write: "How we describe our involuntary, disordered desires is a major difference between

a Roman Catholic understanding of sin and a Reformed understanding of sin. According to the Catholic Catechism, the ‘inclination to sin that Tradition calls concupiscence’ is ‘left for us to wrestle with,’ but ‘it cannot harm those who do not consent’ [CCC, NY: Doubleday, 1995, 1264]. Elsewhere, the Catechism explains that ‘Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins’ [Ibid., 2515]. In other words, disordered desire, though a result of the Fall, does not become sin apart from a consenting act of the will. The Reformed tradition has uniformly disagreed with this understanding of concupiscence. ‘The Reformation,’ writes Bavinck, ‘spoke out against that position, asserting that also the impure thoughts and desires that arose in us prior to and apart from our will are sin’ [3:143]. Calvin explicitly teaches these ‘inordinate desires’ (*concupiscentiis*) should be called not merely ‘weakness’ but ‘sin.’ ‘We label “sin,”’ he writes, ‘that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort. We accordingly teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides the depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness’ [Institutes, 3.3.10]” (CCP, 7).

Now, history is not a hermeneutic. Truth is not established by whether our heroes taught it or whether heretics taught *against* it. But nevertheless, I do find it interesting that, historically speaking, proponents of the neutrality of same-sex attraction are basically practicing a fundamentally Romanist hamartiology, and an anti-Reformed hamartiology, explicitly in opposition to the Reformers whom they would regard as their own theological forbears.

III. Objection: Temptation Isn’t Sin, or Christ Sinned

Now, as I discuss the nature of temptation and the sinfulness of same-sex attraction, the principal objection I receive is that simply *experiencing* temptation cannot itself be sinful, because, Hebrews 4:15, the Lord Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. “To be attracted to sin,” they say, “is precisely what it means to be tempted to sin. By saying same-sex attraction is sinful, aren’t you saying, Mike, that people sin simply by virtue of being tempted? And in that case, do you not undermine the sinlessness of Christ, who *was* tempted?”

This is an important objection, and it must be answered. In fact, I think a proper understanding of sin and temptation is the crux of this debate. This objection conflates two kinds of temptation—or at least two ways the Scriptures speak about temptation; namely, what we might call *external* temptation and *internal* temptation. External temptation is temptation that is experienced entirely from without. It is an external solicitation to sin. External temptation is what Jesus experienced in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, when Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread, to fall down and worship Satan, and to throw Himself from the cliff to prove He was the Son of God. It was not sin for Jesus to be tempted in this way—to be the object of Satan’s temptations.

So for example, if someone comes up to me and says, “Mike! Look at that girl over there! She’s got barely anything on!” that person—external to me—is tempting me to sin. But if such an external temptation finds no place in my affections—if there are no “hooks” in my heart that dispose me to yield to that temptation in that instance, if, by God’s grace, I was so satisfied in Christ and the communion with Him that I enjoy on the path of obedience that the path of disobedience looks utterly repulsive to me and has no pull on my affections, and if my delight in the glory of the Lord was such that that kind of temptation is lost on me—I have not sinned. And so it is not my position that all temptation is sinful. To be tempted externally is not in itself sinful.

But to be tempted internally is what James talks about in James 1:14 when he says, “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust,” or his own desire. Internal temptation is a temptation that arises from within my own sinful heart, and is owing to the fact that my *affections* and desires and inclinations and attractions are still sinful—that I still want those things which my Father has told me are not for me to have, which, as we said before, do not lead me to enjoy His glory in greater measure, and therefore which cannot satisfy my soul. For me to desire those things—for me to find alluring and attractive and satisfying those things which exchange the truth of God for a lie—is to commit idolatry.

And so, in this same scenario where someone comes and urges me to look at an immodestly dressed woman, if there *were* hooks in my heart, if the external temptation combined with my own evil desires to gratify the lust of my eyes—even if I didn’t actually turn around and ogle that woman—I have still sinned in my heart. I have still desired that for which there is no lawful expression, that which the Lord has told me is not mine to have. And I need to repent of that desire and aim to mortify it in such a way that, if I were presented with that kind of external temptation again, my heart would be in such a frame as to have no “hooks” for that temptation.

And so the reason that it was not sin for Jesus to be tempted in the wilderness is not merely because He never performed the acts that Satan urged Him to perform. It was because Christ never even desired to perform them. In other words, Satan’s external temptation never passed into internal temptation in Jesus’ heart. Because Jesus was sinless—because He had no sin nature, because, as He Himself said in John 14:30, “the ruler of this world ... has nothing in Me”—there was nothing in His sinless nature that could have produced even a desire for evil. And that means that whatever temptations Jesus faced were *external* temptations. If there were any “hooks” in Jesus’ heart onto which sin could latch—if in the wilderness He thought, “Oh, I would so love to demonstrate My power and glory as the eternal Son apart from My Father’s plan,”—He would have desired what His Father said was not for Him to have, and He would have become a transgressor. He would not have loved God with *all* His heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In our case, Galatians 5:17, the Spirit sets His desire against the flesh. There is a war being waged within our members, Romans 7:23. But with Jesus, who came in the *likeness* of sinful flesh, Romans 8:3, but who had no genuinely sinful flesh, there was no internal war. He not only performed righteousness; He loved and desired righteousness, at every moment. He never desired to do anything but the will of His Father. John 4:34: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.” John 5:19: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (John 5:19). Christ was holy in His affections as well as His actions. To not be so would have undermined His sinlessness. And so John Owen says, “There is something in...our temptations more than was in the temptation of Christ. There is something in ourselves to take part with every temptation; and there is enough in ourselves to tempt us, though nothing else should appear against us. With Christ it was not so, John 14:30”—“the ruler of this world has nothing in Me” (2:143).

But you say, “Wait a second. Doesn’t Hebrews 4:15 say that Jesus ‘has been tempted in *all* things as we are, yet without sin?’ Doesn’t that mean that He would have had to experience the temptation to same-sex attraction?” I gave a version of this message as a seminar at Shepherds’ Conference, and a few weeks later I got a letter asking me this very question. But the answer is: No, Hebrews 4:15 does not mean that Jesus experienced each and every trial—both external and internal, inducements from without and enticements from within—that each and every human has ever faced.

I mean, that ought to be self-evident. Jesus was never tempted with those temptations that are peculiar to being a husband or a father; He was neither. He was never tempted with those temptations and trials that are peculiar to growing old and feeling the infirmities of a mind and body decaying due to the curse of sin—for example, temptations that might be associated with forbearing arthritis or dementia. He died in His early 30s, and so never had to experience those. Nor was He ever tempted with those temptations and trials that are peculiar to being a woman, like enduring the physical pains of childbirth or the emotional trials of hormonal issues. So, that interpretation is false on its face.

But it also fails exegetically. The phrase “in all things” in Hebrews 4:15 ought not to be understood to have an absolutely universal sense. The phrase is used only one other time in Hebrews, in chapter 2 verse 17, where the author is also discussing Jesus’ temptations (2:18). There, he says that Jesus “had to be made like His brethren *in all things*, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Now, here in 2:17 we don’t even have the qualifying limitation that we have in 4:15: “yet without sin.” And even still, we recognize that “in all things” cannot be understood to have an absolutely universal sense. Jesus was not made like His brethren in absolutely all things without exception. His brethren were sinners; He was not. His brethren were

born according to natural generation; He was begotten by the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb. And so on. When we read Hebrews 2:17, we don't force a wooden universality upon the expression "in all things." No, we understand the author's point: Jesus had to be made like His brethren in all things that required Him to be a suitable substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf. But for the very same reason that He had to share our humanity—that is, to be our Mediator—He could not share our sin. And so we ought not to read "in all things" as absolutely universal. Our reading is tempered by the context as well as Scripture's unified insistence upon the sinlessness of Christ.

The same should be the case in our reading of "in all things" in 4:15—and all the more since we do have the qualifying and limiting phrase, "yet without sin." Jesus was tempted *without sin*. The point isn't merely that Jesus was tempted with the result that He never sinned. That's true, but it's not the whole point. It also means that sin was never the principle of His temptations. See, sinful people like you and me are often tempted to sin by the sin that is resident within us. External temptations combine with the indwelling sin of our flesh to induce us to outward acts of wickedness. This is what James means when he says, "Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust" (Jas 1:14). But Jesus could never have been tempted in that way, because He had no indwelling sin to cooperate with external allurements.

This is at least one way in which Jesus' temptations are different from ours. It is an example of what it means for His temptations to be "according to the likeness" of ours. That's actually the literal translation of the phrase, "as we are." He was tempted in all things *according to the likeness* of our temptations. But the difference was: His temptations were "without sin," and so unlike ours in that way. John Owen's explanation of this is so helpful. He says, "He was also like unto us in temptations, for the reason which the apostle gives in the last verse. But herein also some difference may be observed between him and us; for the most of our temptations arise from within us, from our own unbelief and lusts. Again, in those that are from without [what I've been calling "external temptations"], there is some[thing] in us to take part with them, which always makes us fail in our duty of resistance, and oftentimes leads to further miscarriages. But from these things he was absolutely free; for as he had no inward disposition or inclination unto the least evil [what I've been calling "internal temptations"], being perfect in all graces and all their operations at all times, so when the prince of this world came unto him, he had no part in him [John 14:30],—nothing to close with his suggestions or to entertain his terrors" (19:468). Elsewhere, Owen comments on the phrase "without sin." He writes, "And hereby the apostle preserves in us due apprehensions of the purity and holiness of Christ, that we may not imagine that he was liable unto any such temptations unto sin from within [internal temptations] as we find ourselves liable unto, which are never free from guilt and defilement" (20:427).

So, Christ was tempted by all kinds of temptations common to man, in a manner similar to us, yet without sin, and so never in such a way that His temptations arose from within. He was tempted, externally, like we are; yet without sin, and thus not tempted internally.

Owen explains this distinction between internal and external temptation very well in *The Nature and Power of Indwelling Sin*. He says, “Now, what is it to be tempted? It is to have that proposed to a man’s consideration which, if he close withal, it is evil, it is sin unto him. This is sin’s trade: *Epithumei*—‘It lusteth.’ It is raising up in the heart, and proposing unto the mind and affections, that which is evil; trying, as it were, whether the soul will close with its suggestions, or how far it will carry them on, though it do not wholly prevail.” And here’s the key: “Now, when such a temptation comes from *without*, it is unto the soul an indifferent thing, neither good nor evil, unless it be consented unto; but the very proposal from *within*, it being the soul’s own act, is its sin” (6:194). The proposal of temptation from within the heart of man is the soul’s own act, and therefore it is sin. The “temptation” of same-sex attraction is an *internal* temptation. It is to be carried away and enticed by one’s own desire. And therefore it is sin.

IV. Objection: Temptation Isn’t Sin, or James is Wrong

Now someone will say, “You quoted James 1 a couple of times. But doesn’t the progression of thought in James 1:13–15 *distinguish* sin from desire? James says, ‘Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust,’ or desire. ‘Then when [desire] has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.’ You’re saying the desire *is* sin, but James says the desire *leads* to sin.” This is another good objection, and one that needs to be answered.

And the answer comes in the New Testament usage of the term *hamartia*, the word for “sin,” which it uses in at least two distinct senses. Some texts speak of sin as a reference to particular sinful deeds or behaviors. The Prodigal Son comes home to his father and says, “Father, I have sinned” (Luke 15:18). But in other texts, sin refers to that principle of sin or condition of sin or inclination to sin that resides in the heart. This is that “law of sin” in the members of my body which wages war against the “law of my mind,” Romans 7:23. So the term can be used in both ways. Interestingly, of the seven times James uses the word *hamartia* in his letter, every other occurrence is a clear reference to sinful deeds. James 2:9: “But if you show partiality, you are *committing sin*.” Chapter 5 verse 16: “Confess your *sins* to one another,” and so on.

Given James’s usage of the word in the rest of the letter, coupled with the New Testament’s teaching on the fundamentally internal nature of sin and holiness that we saw earlier, I believe we are constrained to interpret “sin” in James 1:15 to refer to the commission of sinful acts (cf. Burk & Lambert, 54). In this particular verse, James is speaking of sin as the actual external act of committing sin. But he does not mean to define sin as wholly external rather than internal.

That would be clearly contradictory to all those passages which we read earlier about the fundamentally internal nature of sin and holiness.

Calvin agrees with that interpretation of James 1—always a good thing. In his commentary on this passage, he explicitly distinguishes his view from the Roman Catholic doctrine of concupiscence. He writes, “It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin [that is, the commission of external *acts* of sin]. And the Papists ignorantly lay hold on this passage, and seek to prove from it that vicious, yea, filthy, wicked, and the most abominable lusts are not sins, provided there is no assent; for James does not shew when sin *begins to be born*, so as to be sin, and so accounted by God, but when it *breaks forth*” (290). See what Calvin’s saying? He’s not telling us when sin begins; he’s telling us when sin breaks forth.

The Central Carolina Presbytery gives helpful comments on that passage in Calvin. They say, “For Calvin, there is *indwelling* sin (the temptations caused by desire in v. 14b), *actual* sin (the birth of sin in v. 15a), and...“*perfected*” sin (the deadly fully grown sin in v. 15b). When James talks about temptations leading to sin, he does not mean that the temptation (in this case) is itself morally neutral. ... The one who is experiencing temptation caused by his own desire (*epithumias*) is already experiencing the reality of indwelling sin, though that indwelling sin (in the Christian) can be resisted so as not to give birth to actual (i.e., acted upon) sin. ... [The] process [outlined in James 1:14–15] is not one that moves from innocence to sin, but rather one that sees indwelling sin move from the *mind* to the *affections* to the *will* and finally to the outward *working* of sin in the life (and death) of a person” (CCP, 8, 9).

James is simply saying that sinful desire gives birth to sinful acts. But it just doesn’t follow that the “desire” he speaks about is morally neutral. Look at the text. He says it lures and entices the sinner away from faithfulness and into disobedience. That’s why the NAS translates *epithumia* as “lust,” here: because it’s plain from the context that there is a sinful character to this desire. And so this objection from James 1, while initially plausible, turns out not only to fail to establish the neutrality of desire but upon closer examination actually establishes the sinfulness of desire.

That is what covetousness is: it is a desire for anything that you cannot righteously have—a desire that has no lawful expression. Sexual attraction to members of the same sex fits that very definition precisely. Some people will say, “Well hey, it’s not a sin for a man to find a woman attractive, so long as it doesn’t pass into lustful desire. Why can’t it be the same for a man finding men attractive?” Well, again, as we said at the beginning, same-sex attraction goes beyond noticing that someone is objectively pleasant-looking.

But the answer is: heterosexual desire and homosexual desire are different things. The morality of a desire is determined by its object. It's not a matter of intensity—"I like it, but only a little bit"—or a matter of chosenness—"Yes, I confess I want it, but I really don't *want* to want it." It's a matter of the thing desired. The object of heterosexual desire may be lawfully expressed within the covenant of marriage. But the object of homosexual desire cannot be lawfully expressed. And a desire which for which there is no lawful expression is the definition of covetousness. It is the very evil desire which Colossians 3:5 commands us to regard as dead to us, and which verse 6 says brings about the wrath of God upon unbelievers.

Conclusion

Now, I want you to hear me. I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not saying that anyone who struggles with same-sex attraction is excluded from salvation. I'm not saying they must not be a Christian. I'm not even saying that they must pursue experiencing opposite-sex sexual desires. But they must be exhorted to put off their sinful affections—just like someone who finds themselves particularly susceptible to the temptations of indulging desires for fornication, or adultery, or drunkenness, or acts of violence.

Phil Johnson tells a story that occurred in his early years at Grace to You that I think sheds some light on this issue. He says, "A man wrote our ministry looking for affirmation and encouragement. He wanted us to agree with his belief that mere *attraction* to a forbidden object is not inherently sinful. He gave a convincing testimony about his conversion from a life of sin and rebellion. He said he was now serving as an AWANA leader in his church. Then he got specific about what he was asking us to sanction. He said he felt sexually drawn to 'large farm animals.' (Those were his exact words.)" What do you tell that man? Do you tell him that his attraction to large farm animals is morally neutral, so long as he doesn't act on his desires? Should he hang out on the farm to be around the culture, so long as it does not issue in sexual expression? What about the man who, for as long as he can remember, has been marked by a sexual attraction to young children? Do we tell that man to *befriend* children for the purpose of finding an appropriate expression for his forbidden desires? No! We tell them both to put those evil desires to *death*, because those desires are themselves sinful!

What about Christians who struggle with anger to the point that they are tempted to physically arm others? We don't teach "violence-attracted Christians" to go to conferences where they learn to "be happy with" their orientation *and* Scripture's teaching on anger and violence. No, we teach them to confess such inclinations and attractions as sinful, to put them to death by the Spirit, and to walk in accordance with the Gospel by which they profess to be saved.

You see, instead of giving the hope of freedom from bondage to believers who struggle with same-sex attraction, the perspective endorsed by Collins and Revoice and *Living Out* *defines* the problem away. But friends, we have so much better news than, “You’re stuck. You’re going to have to learn to manage this.” We have a Gospel of sovereign grace that brings genuine, *reorienting* freedom in Christ through His Gospel.

Yes, we are constrained by Scripture to confess that same-sex attraction *is* itself sinful. But we are constrained by the same Scriptures to declare that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners! And not only to justify sinners on the basis of His own perfect obedience, but also to sanctify them by the exertion of the same power that raised Him from the dead! Resurrection power is at work for the sanctification of those who trust in Christ!

And so while it would be unwise to promise or to expect immediate change, or that one day Jesus is just going to *zap*-sanctify you from any trace of struggles with same-sex desires (or any other sinful desire), nevertheless, we can have great hope! We should not regard sexual “orientation” as immutable. We should regard it as an area of our lives over which Christ our King exerts His Lordship, and we should trust Him to do far more abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think through the means of grace which He has appointed for our sanctification.

And one last word. We ought to *worship* Jesus Christ, our great Captain of salvation, Our Champion of perfect righteousness, who never sinned by having sinful sexual desires! Think of it! A man like us! Tempted as we are! Yet *without* sin! Without sin in *hand* and without sin in *heart*! Perfectly pure! Your Lord walked as a man on this earth, and He never took advantage of anyone with a lustful glance! He never viewed others as an occasion for His own gratification! He always interacted with His neighbors in perfect purity! He always lived for their benefit! and never once sought to use anyone for His own illicit gain!

What a Man! What a Savior! And whether we struggle with same-sex attraction, or whether we struggle with attraction to any other sin, the cry of our heart ought to be: “O, how I want to be a man like Him! Dear Father, make me like the Lord Jesus! I want to so serve people that it doesn’t even enter into my mind to use someone for my own illicit gratification! I want to live in perfect purity as my Savior did! As the God-man did!

And praise God that where I have failed, He has succeeded! Where you have sinned, friend, He has obeyed! And He freely credits that real-life, lived-out, perfect life of obedience to me, to you, and to all who come to Him in repentant faith! The contemplation of *that* glory of Jesus by faith is what transforms us into the same image from glory to glory, from the inside out! And so may we look to Him, and may we point others to Him—no matter what their sin-struggle—so that Christ may get what He is worthy of, “‘til all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more.”