

I want to begin by telling you about Lesli. Lesli was born female but from the time Lesli turned 4 years old would tell you they experienced life as a boy. Lesli felt like a boy. Thought like a boy. Played like a boy. Lesli once said, “When all of the other little girls wanted to play tea or house, I wanted to play football.”

Lesli also remembers growing up loving Jesus, saying that, “My earliest memories are of the church nursery and Sunday school. I have always known that I was a beloved child of God. I cannot remember a time when God’s truth was not an integral part of my life.”

As Lesli’s life unfolded, Lesli’s struggle increased with age, making it hard to fit in. Lesli would look at girls doing “girl” things—putting on makeup, styling their hair, talking about boys—and find no interest in any of those things at all.

Like most kids wrestling with gender identity, Lesli wrestled alone. No life group to go to. No trusted pastor. No family member who would be able to listen. No one.

Lesli sank into depression. Isolation quickly followed. And before Lesli knew it, suicidal thoughts started their worst work.

Finally, Lesli summoned up the courage to go to the church for help. Lesli explained to the pastor about the experience of gender dysphoria Lesli had, hoping for some guidance. But instead of guidance, Lesli said, “My pastor escorted me out the back door of his office and told me to never come back again. And I didn’t. I didn’t step foot in a church for the next eighteen years. I hated Christians, especially pastors, from that point on.”

Preston Sprinkle’s book, *Embodied*, where I read that story said this: “Lesli, desperate to follow Jesus, was ushered out of the church simply for struggling with gender dysphoria.”

As we continue in our 1 Corinthians series, we are in a sub-series talking about biblical sexuality. Two weeks ago, Dan kicked things off by offering us a holistic vision of sexuality. He talked about how a Christian view of sexuality is more challenging, more dignifying, and more satisfying than we usually give it credit for. Last week, he talked about the encompassing reach and depth of sexual brokenness because of sin, but how through Jesus God’s grace goes deeper still.

Today, we’re continuing the conversation on sexuality and talking about Jesus and the transgender community.

But before I go too much farther, I have a couple preambles. First, when we talk about this, I want us to know we’re not just talking about the issue, we’re talking about people, and that affects how we come to this conversation. These are brothers, sisters, family members, beloved co-workers, and cherished friends.

According to a Pew Research report released on June 7 this year, the number of adults who identify as transgender or non-binary is 1.6% of the population. That may not sound like much to you, but in the grand scheme of things that’s 5,280,000 people.

LGBTQ youth are experiencing great inner turmoil leading them to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

- According to Hedegaard, Curtin, & Warner, a 2018 study found that suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people aged 10 to 24 and that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are at significantly increased risk.
- According to two 2019 and 2020 studies, LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers.
- The Trevor Project estimates that more than 1.8 million LGBTQ youth (13-24) seriously consider suicide each year in the U.S.—and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds.

So, this is about people. Statistically speaking, this means that some in the trans community are here in this room right now, watching online, or at the very least are friends or family members with you all. This means this topic is important.

If you're wondering if you have a place here, hear me: you do. You matter. God loves you. As I walked into the building today and came up the ramp, I walked under a sign that said, "Welcome Home." If that's true for someone like me, then it's true for someone like you too—whether straight or not, whether trans or not. No matter what, God is saying to you, "Welcome home." We're going to cover a lot of ground today and you may disagree with some of it but hear me: this church loves you. We care about you. You are welcome here.

The second thing I want to say is that as a church, we do our best not to hold to right-wing or left-wing ideologies, but only to the person of Jesus. We attempt to not be beholden to any cultural creed, only God's Word. And so, whatever we say, whatever we do, whatever we preach, whatever we live out—we will align with Jesus and the Scriptures.

Ok, preambles over. Now, let's dive in to Jesus and the transgender community. To talk through this, I want to frame this talk with three questions we'll walk through: (1) Where are we? (2) What do the Scriptures say about this? (3) What does love require of us?

1. Where are we?

In January 2017, National Geographic put Avery Jackson, a nine-year-old transgender child on its cover with the headline "The Gender Revolution." In an interview, Avery said, "The best thing about being a girl is, now I don't have to pretend to be a boy."

In talking about where we are, it feels like National Geographic hit the nail on the head. It feels like we're experiencing a "Gender Revolution."

In 2015, Caitlyn Jenner "introduced herself" to the world on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine. Recently, Lia Thomas, a trans woman (a biological male who identifies as a woman), was in the running for Woman of the Year, narrowly losing out to Lia's female counterparts. And now our culture is changing language. Instead of "woman" people are proposing terminology like "birthing persons," "pregnant people," "cervix owners," and "people with eggs."

Today, kids are confronted with reading materials like "Toni the Tampon," a book that makes the case that biological males can menstruate, and Red: A Crayon Story, a book that makes the case that who you are on the inside can be different than who you are on the outside and that your inside should dictate your outside. Some kids in some areas are encountering things like the Genderbread person, which has actually given way to the Gender Unicorn, which teaches children that your sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation can all be different.

There is a wide range of opinions on this “Gender Revolution.” Educators are having to teach either an idea system that they vehemently oppose or one they celebrate. Doctors are faced with the ethical dilemma of deciding whether they’ll break the Hippocratic oath to not do harm by performing “gender-affirmation surgeries.” Employees are required to sit under gender inclusion training at work, which comes with varied responses, and therapists have to affirm a child’s gender confusion or risk losing their credentials.

As one example in the church, in 2021 Megan Rohrer was instated as a Bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, becoming the first openly transgender and non-binary bishop in any Christian denomination.

It does indeed feel like we’re living in a “Gender Revolution.”

Something is happening. Something is going on. People are experiencing an incongruence between who they are on the inside and who they are on the outside and if you’re like me, you’re a bit bewildered because it seemed like none of this existed 20 years ago.

If that’s where we are, how are Christians to think about this? What do the Scriptures say? Is being transgender wrong? Can a man be a woman? Or vice versa? If not, why not?

These are all great questions which inevitably lead me to question #2:

2. What do the Scriptures say about this?

To answer that question, I want to take us through three Scripture passages that should help us form some thoughts on this subject.

Passage 1: Genesis 2:7—“The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Right before this passage, we read that God created everything in Genesis 1. God creates day to pair with night, evening to pair with morning, land to pair with sea, and earth to pair with heaven, and God makes male to pair with female. God created male and female. Two sexes, a binary.

When God created male and female, Adam and Eve, he called the arrangement “very good.” This means that the difference is “very good” and that this duality is a part of the original created order—which is itself “very good.”

I’ll never forget though when I first met Lucy, a trans woman. I was new into ministry here, very green. We met at the Kroger Starbucks. We chatted. Lucy was a wonderful person. There was some tragic emotional abuse from churches in Lucy’s past. Lucy told me, “I’m not going to change who I am. If I tried to live as my biological sex, I’d die. You don’t understand what it’s like. I’d hate myself. It’s horrible the feeling. It makes my skin crawl. Why can’t I actually be a woman in a man’s body?”

That’s a great question, one that Genesis 1 doesn’t deal with precisely. This is where our first passage, Genesis 2, comes in.

Note what the text says: as humans, our identity is made of both material and spiritual components. We are simultaneously *both* “dust of the ground” and made from the “breath of life.” We are made up of matter, but we are also *more* than matter. We have an “inner” part—our consciousness, our mind, our

feelings, our desires—that’s the spiritual component. But we also have bodies—we are made up of cells, blood vessels, muscles, oxygen, calcium, and more.

Our identity is not *just* a dis-embodied soul like in the Disney movie “Soul.” But we are also not *just* a cadaver (a soul-less corpse) without the ability to think, reason, feel, and desire. We are both matter and spirit, body and soul, biology and psychology. We are one, psycho-somatic entity. We are embodied souls.

I like what writer Abigail Favale, a Christian professor at the University of Notre Dame with PhD in Gender Studies, says about this in her book *The Genesis of Gender*. She writes,

This imagery reveals an important truth about our nature: we are both earth and breath, matter and spirit. We are physical creatures; our bodies are integral to who we are. Yet we are not merely matter, because God’s breath enlivens each of us with an immortal soul. This is one of the foundational principles of a Christian anthropology: every human being is a unity of body and soul.

God created us male and female. Our bodies and spirits make up our identity, sure. But here’s the thing: when you’re experiencing gender dysphoria—easier said than done! Which leads me to passage #2.

Passage 2: Genesis 3:6-7—

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made covering for themselves.

In Genesis 3, sin enters the world. Satan, as a serpent, tempts Adam and Eve to eat of a forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and they do. Immediately, things change.

This moment causes them to have what I’d call a sense of alienation. Adam and Eve, as a result of sin entering the world, experienced alienation towards God (they ended up hiding from him), they experienced alienation from one another (they blamed each other), they experienced alienation from the land (they had to start working it), and they experienced alienation with their bodies (they viewed their bodies with shame).

In one sense, sin leads to alienation. I believe that word “alienation” has great explanatory power for people struggling with gender dysphoria, people who feel an incongruence between who they are on the inside and who they are on the outside, people who don’t feel at home in their bodies. Sometimes this incongruence is a small amount, sometimes a huge amount; for some they experience it as minimally as getting choked by that trick gum stick and for others it feels like being shocked by a lightning bolt.

For those of us who don’t wrestle with that in terms of our gender and sex, let’s practice empathy because in small ways, we all experience alienation from our bodies.

Think with me about how you view yourself as you age. As I get older, I’ve noticed wrinkles starting to develop around my eyes and I think to myself, “ALIENATION!” I think, “That’s not me! No way! I’m still a young, 21-year-old, capable of doing whatever, whenever!” Are those wrinkles? Is this body me? Yes...unfortunately.

More seriously, I've had friends who are moms share with me the disconnect they experience when they examine their appearance after giving birth. The combination of hormones, body changes, and the euphoria mixed with disorientation that comes with becoming a mom has them thinking, "This can't be me!" And yet it is.

Why do I bring this up? Two reasons: (1) to create compassion in those of us who do not experience gender dysphoria; and (2) to say that a feeling of alienation, whether intense or small, is a normal part of our experience of this fallen, broken, sinful world.

Until the 1960s, sex and gender were viewed as the same thing. Sex and gender were binary up until that time. Mark Yarhouse Professor of Psychology and overseer of Wheaton College's Sexual and Gender Identity Institute says, "Prior to the 1970s, sex and gender were synonyms. Since then, they have come to mean different things.

Today, sex and gender are viewed as being different. Today, sex is seen as the "physical and biological dimensions of being male or female" (Yarhouse). Your sex is identified by both primary and secondary traits, by what type of gamete or sex cell you produce (females produce large gametes, ova, eggs; males produce small gametes, aka sperm). Males are XY. Females are XX. Males have specific genitalia and women have specific genitalia.

It used to be that if you were male, you were a man. If you were female, you were a woman. Now, however, gender has been totally separated from sex. Today, gender refers to "the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female" (Yarhouse).

This is why people can feel like their "gender" is different than their "sex."

And at the heart of this conversation is a question: if someone experiences incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self (gender identity), which one determines who they are and why?

In other words, when people experience this alienation, to what should we give the most weight when it comes to our identity as persons? Should biology be prioritized, or should our psychology? Which matters more?

We've already answered this a bit in passages 1 and 2, but let me now take us to the third passage with the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians.

Passage 3: 1 Corinthians 6:19-20—"Do you now know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."

Here, the Apostle Paul teaches us to *honor* our bodies—to love them.

Here's the situation in Corinth: in Paul's day, the Corinthians had a form of thinking that had seeped into their midst called dualism. All that means is that the Corinthians split up their identity between material and spiritual elements like we tend to do. And as in our culture, the Corinthians prized the spiritual/internal/psychological aspect of themselves above their physical/material/bodily selves.

This wasn't a Christian teaching; it was a Greco-Roman one. This thinking, like dirt that gets under the fingernails, got into the Corinthians' hearts and minds and caused all kinds of trouble and sin. It's into

this kind of thinking that Paul says, “No, sir. Think again.” Paul tells the Corinthians, “Don’t negate your body! Honor your body!” He says, “Corinthians, God highly values your bodies!”

Generally speaking, our culture is at a place that places higher value on the “spiritual” and “psychological” aspects of this scale. They downplay the role of the body in a person’s identity. They say, “If you feel *inside* like a woman, then you are a woman” or vice versa. You should align your body to match what’s inside of you. As Dr. Nancy Pearcey states, “Today the accepted treatment is not to help persons change their inner feelings of gender identity to match their body but to change their body (through hormones and surgery) to match their feelings.

There’s a real issue with our identity being solely based on our internal sense of self. If the whole of your identity is *only* psychological, what is stopping any person from being, well, *anything*?

For example, back in 2015, a story came out about Rachel Dolezal, the former leader of the Spokane, Washington NAACP. Rachel was born to white parents and is herself “white.” Dolezal sat down for an interview with Matt Lauer of NBC’s “Today” show, and he asked, “Let me just ask you the question in simple terms again, because you’ve sent mixed signals over the years. Are you an African American woman?” “I identify as black,” Dolezal responded.

Similarly, if our identity is based solely on our internal sense of self what is to stop a human from saying that they are actually a dog?

Are we okay with white women being able to claim a different racial status based on how they feel? Are we okay with a human being able to claim that they are actually a dog—not *living* like a dog, but *actually* a dog? Are those things true?

In the same sense, because the logic is the same, why do we think that a man can be a woman and a woman can be a man? It doesn’t follow. The ideology doesn’t hold up when you put it under the microscope. I’d argue this is a denigration of our bodies. It’s saying to your body, “Body! You don’t matter as much as you ought to. Body, you have no say in my identity or in who I am!”

This is so interesting to me because our world seems to place such a high value on body positivity, does it not? We are told to treat our bodies right, to not shame other people’s bodies, and so on. But here, Paul says, “Dear church, you may think you have a high view of the body, but you don’t view it highly enough!” Christians, contrary to culture, hold a higher view of the body.

As Paul says, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?” Christianity believes that our bodies are gifts from God, that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are temples because our bodies are the place where God’s Spirit dwells, which means that our bodies are the places where people will see God moving and acting in this world and other people’s bodies are places we’ll see God, too. What more honorable a role could there be for the body than to image, not only your own spirit, but to image God’s Spirit? It’s amazing.

Another aspect to this text is the simple fact that, despite public opinion, for Christians (not non-Christians), your body does not belong to you. Paul says, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price; Therefore honor God with your bodies.” God is saying, “You can’t just treat your body like you want. You have to treat your body as I want you to!” Why? “Because I bought it with the blood of my Son.” Just as we steward our money, we are to steward our bodies.

Respectfully, because God calls us to honor our bodies, for Christians, transitioning is ideally not something we want to pursue. Instead, we want to pursue alignment with the sacred, *good*, image-bearing bodies that God has given to us, even if we feel out of place in them.

I see the value in encouraging individuals who experience gender dysphoria to resolve dysphoria in keeping with their birth sex. Where those strategies have been unsuccessful, there is potential value in managing dysphoria through the least invasive expressions (recognizing surgery as the most invasive step toward expression of one's internal sense of identity). Given the complexities associated with these issues and the potential for many and varied presentations, pastoral sensitivity should be a priority. (Mark Yarhouse)

From Genesis 2:7, we learned about our identities being comprised of both what's inside of us and of our physical bodies and that one should not be prioritized over another. In Genesis 3:6-7, we learned the reason for the alienation we have with our bodies. With Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, we see that God calls us to honor our bodies and glorify him with them.

With that theology now wrapped up, we are still left with one final question.

3. What does love require of us?

There are many medical considerations with transitioning that you should know about regarding how you enter this conversation. You should know that...

- Sweden and Finland have halted the use of puberty blockers on kids younger than 18 years old because of the medical side effects.
- “Puberty blockers stunt bone growth in children” (*The Times*).
- “The endocrine society warns that the treatment may compromise fertility later in life” (*Washington Post*).
- Many folks who have undergone this treatment have since “never experienced orgasm and likely never will” (Dr. Marci Bowers).
- “It is well-established, and uncontroversial, that LGBT+ youth are at higher risk for mental illness comorbidities and suicidality. What is not well-established, however, is that the medical pathway is a panacea...In fact, the only long-term, population-based study we have shows a 19-fold increase in suicidality after sex reassignment procedures—and that's from Sweden, a society that has been very ‘gender affirming.’”
- “According to the DSM-V, as many as 98% of gender-confused boys and 88% of gender-confused girls eventually accept their biological sex after naturally passing through puberty.”
- Historically, gender dysphoria affected 0.1% of the population and almost exclusively pertained to boys. Before 2012, there was no scientific literature on girls ages 11-21 having ever developed gender dysphoria at all. Today, we are seeing increases in kids stating they have gender dysphoria at rates that are thousands of times higher than just 20 years ago. Many psychologists have coined a phrase for this seemingly *social phenomenon*: it's called Rapid Onset-Gender Dysphoria.
- You should also know about the slew of people de-transitioning, people who experienced gender dysphoria, transitioned, and now regret it because it didn't solve the problem they thought it would. People like Chloe Cole, Ritchie Herron, and Scott (Kellie) Newgent, the latter of which once said in an interview through gritted, angry teeth, pulling up her sleeve, “We have five children's hospitals in the United States promoting ‘that.’” “That” is a

hideously long scar where her left arm was flayed to create a phalloplasty. Newgent suffers from regular vaginal infections, which she predicts will lead to a premature death.

It's important to have a holistic view on this topic, especially in the wake of an ever-evolving social phenomenon like the gender revolution. How can we, as Christ followers, provide long-term, loving support without accurate information?

With that being said, for me, the answer to the question, "What does love require of us?" is to look at Jesus. How did Jesus treat people?

Last week Dan talked about Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well, related in John 4. In that story Jesus meets a broken and hurting woman, a woman experiencing alienation from her society. He meets her in the heat of the day, right where she's at, talks with her, gets to know her story and then points her to living water—himself. Is our task any different?

Our call is to meet people where they're at, no matter the situation, and point them to living water—to Jesus himself.

What we need are people who aren't afraid of the mess, who aren't afraid of the emotion, who can create safe spaces for people to wrestle with their identities, to reject stereotypes, to pursue truth with humility, and to lavish grace on everyone who fails.

That's what people need. Yes, I think that holding to your biological sex is what God calls us to and that's what I'd counsel. Like any area where you and I need to surrender parts of ourselves on the path of discipleship to Jesus—be it in the area of generosity because we're greedy, be it in sacrificial service towards our spouse because we're selfish, be it in the area of yielding to God's plan for our lives because we like to control things—this is no different if you're a Christian trans person. I view living in accordance with your God-given biology as a process of discipleship, not because it's what conservative culture values but because it's what God speaks to us through Scripture.

We don't expect everyone to have it all figured out the moment they walk through these doors. It's a process of continually submitting in every area of our life to the Lordship of Jesus.

And again, this is for Christians, people who ascribe to a biblical worldview. If I'm talking to non-Christian trans people, the first sentence out of my mouth isn't, "Why are you not living according to your biological sex?" It's, "Hey, can I tell you about the person of Jesus Christ who has brought living water to my soul?"

I'll end with this. I'll never forget the time I was downtown at a coffee shop and ended up sitting next to a trans man who was talking with a friend. They were talking rather loudly so I couldn't help but overhear the conversation.

The one individual was an atheist lesbian who was considering if she was trans and was thinking of transitioning. The other was already on testosterone and had begun the process of going from a man into a woman.

At one point they started talking about their religious upbringing and how that impacted them. Both described their families and their churches as hateful, arrogant, vitriolic, and ostracizing. The trans man at one point even said, "It's so freeing to know that Jesus Christ doesn't know what the (expletive) I'm thinking or feeling and now I can think whatever the (expletive) I want."

And as I listened, I just grew sadder and sadder. For this person. For their journey. For how the church treated them. For the loneliness they experienced. For the mental health struggles they expressed. Because Jesus got roped in with hate. Because this person had to go to Starbucks to find a name that fit, meaning that this person would go to Starbucks, give them a name, and when it was called out because their drink was ready, would wait to see if that name felt “right.”

And listening, it just made me sad.

If you’ve visited my office, you know that other than hundreds of books, my main decoration is a painting (view the online sermon to see the painting, and other images from this sermon). I am confronted with it every day. I’m confronted with the disposition of the Father. I often reflect on the meaning of the painting, of the son welcomed into the father’s arms. I didn’t have the courage or the wherewithal back then, but I thought to myself, if that person from Starbucks had come to my office to share their experience, instead of ostracizing them, I would have pointed their gaze to the painting and said, “No matter where you’re at, what you’ve been through, God loves you, God cares for you. That’s the disposition of the Father towards you.”

How do I know? Because that’s been me.

And I know that for every single one of us in this room. That’s us—broken, weary, alienated from God/one another/ourselves because of sin, invited back into the arms of the Father through the redemption and reconciliation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus.