

Session 6

LGBTQ+ & THE BIBLE



1 Corinthians 6:9-11 & 1 Timothy 9-10 —Arsenokoites and Malokoi



St. John's Discipleship Resources

© 2023 - 2026

© 2023-2026| May be shared with attribution for educational or ministry use.

LGBTQ+ AND THE BIBLE

Session 6: It's Greek to Me

Understanding *Arsenokoitai* and *Malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11

Primary Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 6:9–20; 1 Timothy 1:8–11

Additional Scriptures for Study: 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; Matthew 11:7–9; Luke 7:24–25; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13

INTRODUCTION: WHEN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS SHAPE OUR UNDERSTANDING

For many Christians, the question of homosexuality and the Bible appears to be settled by a few verses in the New Testament. Depending upon the translation being used, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11 may include the words *homosexuals*, *sodomites*, *male prostitutes*, or *men who have sex with men*.

When these expressions appear in an English Bible, it is understandable that readers assume the original Greek text speaks directly about homosexuality as we understand it today. After all, the words seem familiar, and most Christians trust that their Bible accurately communicates the meaning of the original text.

However, translation is not always as straightforward as replacing one word in one language with an equivalent word in another. Languages develop within particular cultures, and words carry meanings shaped by history, usage, and context. Sometimes a word in an ancient language has no exact equivalent in modern English.

This is especially important when examining two Greek terms found in Paul's letters: *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*.

Both words have been translated in different ways throughout Christian history. One is an unusually rare compound word whose precise meaning remains debated. The other is a common Greek adjective with a broad range of meanings, many of which have nothing to do with sexuality.

The question is not whether Paul condemns sexual immorality. He clearly does. The question is whether these particular Greek words were intended to describe homosexuality as a modern sexual orientation or whether they referred to particular behaviors, forms of exploitation, and moral failures within the ancient world.

To answer that question, we need to examine the original passages, the history of their translation, the meaning of the Greek terminology, and the circumstances Paul was addressing.

1. WHAT DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9–11 SAY?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11

Paul begins this passage by warning that those who persist in unrighteousness will not inherit the Kingdom of God. He then provides a list of behaviors and practices that are inconsistent with Christian life.

The list includes sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, abusive conduct, and dishonesty. Within this list appear the two Greek words that are central to our study.

The first is *malakoi* (μαλακοί). The second is *arsenokoitai* (ἀρσενικοῖται).

Depending upon the English translation, these words may be rendered separately or combined into a broader expression referring to homosexual behavior.

That variation should immediately raise an important question. If the meaning of these words is obvious and undisputed, why have translators represented them so differently?

Paul concludes this section by reminding the Corinthian believers that some of them had formerly participated in the behaviors he describes. But through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, they have been washed, sanctified, and justified.

The passage is therefore not simply a list of condemnations. It belongs to Paul's larger discussion of Christian identity, moral transformation, and the responsibilities of people who belong to Christ.

To understand the disputed words, we must examine both their linguistic history and their place within that discussion.

2. WHAT DOES 1 TIMOTHY 1:8–11 SAY?

Read 1 Timothy 1:8–11

The second New Testament passage containing *arsenokoitai* is found in 1 Timothy.

Here the writer discusses the proper use of the Law and describes behaviors contrary to sound teaching.

The list includes lawlessness, rebellion, ungodliness, murder, sexual immorality, kidnapping or slave trading, lying, and perjury.

Among these terms appears *arsenokoitai*.

The presence of the word in another vice list is significant because it provides an additional context in which to consider its meaning.

The surrounding behaviors involve serious violations of moral responsibility, including violence, dishonesty, and the exploitation of others.

The reference to kidnappers or slave traders is particularly important. In the ancient world, kidnapping and human trafficking could involve the exploitation of vulnerable people for labor, financial gain, and sexual purposes.

The placement of *arsenokoitai* near terms associated with sexual wrongdoing and human exploitation provides a possible clue about the kind of behavior being condemned.

However, the order of a vice list does not establish the precise definition of every word. It provides contextual evidence that must be considered alongside the word's broader linguistic history.

The essential question remains: What would these Greek expressions have communicated to the people who first heard them?

3. THE GREEK WORD *ARSENOKOITAI*

The Greek word *arsenokoitai* is the plural form of *arsenokoitēs* (ἀρσενοκοίτης).

It is a compound word formed from two elements.

The first, *arsēn*, refers to a male. The second, *koitē*, refers to a bed and can carry a sexual meaning.

Taken literally, the compound can be understood as something like “male-bedders.”

But that literal breakdown does not automatically tell us what the word meant when it was used.

The term is rare in surviving ancient Greek literature. Its appearances in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy are among the earliest known examples, and its precise meaning has been debated by translators and scholars.

Because the word appears so infrequently, we have less evidence for its meaning than we would have for a common Greek term used in many different settings.

This matters because translation depends heavily upon usage.

When a word appears hundreds of times across different texts, its range of meaning can often be established with considerable confidence. When a word is rare, determining its precise meaning becomes more difficult.

The rarity of *arsenokoitai* does not mean that the word is meaningless. It means that we should be cautious about claiming greater certainty than the surviving evidence supports.

4. WHY WE CANNOT SIMPLY COMBINE TWO WORDS

One of the central principles of this session is that a compound word cannot always be defined simply by combining the most familiar meanings of its parts.

English provides many examples.

A *butterfly* is not butter that flies. A *hallmark* is not necessarily a mark found in a hall. A *jackpot* is not a pot filled with people named Jack, and *hogwash* does not refer to washing pigs.

These words developed meanings through usage that cannot be determined simply by separating their components.

The same principle applies to ancient Greek.

Knowing that *arsēn* means male and *koitē* means bed provides useful information about the formation of *arsenokoitēs*. It suggests a connection with sexual behavior involving males.

But it does not, by itself, establish whether the word referred broadly to male same-sex intercourse, a particular form of sexual exploitation, prostitution, abusive conduct, or another practice recognized within the ancient world.

To determine the meaning of a compound word, we must examine how it was actually used.

That is why the historical evidence matters.

We should not assume that the literal components of *arsenokoitai* automatically produce the modern English word *homosexual*.

5. HOW HAS ARSENOKOITAI BEEN TRANSLATED?

The history of Bible translation demonstrates that Christians have not always used the same English or equivalent-language expression for *arsenokoitai*.

Early translations often emphasized particular sexual acts or forms of misconduct rather than describing a person's enduring sexual orientation.

The Latin Vulgate used language referring to males lying with males. Martin Luther's German translation employed *Knabenschänder*, a term associated with the sexual abuse or violation of boys.

The Geneva Bible used the term *buggerers*, while the King James Version used the expression *abusers of themselves with mankind*.

Other English translations used expressions such as *sodomites* or similar descriptions of sexual conduct.

These terms did not all carry identical meanings. They reflected the vocabulary, assumptions, and interpretive decisions of translators working within different historical settings.

A significant change occurred in the twentieth century when some English translations began using the word *homosexual*.

The 1946 Revised Standard Version is particularly important in this history because it introduced *homosexuals* into this passage.

Later translations continued to vary. Some used identity-related terminology, while others used expressions referring to particular sexual acts.

This history reveals that the English wording familiar to many modern Christians is not simply an unchanged expression handed down from the earliest biblical manuscripts.

It is the result of translation decisions made over many centuries.

6. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEHAVIOR AND IDENTITY

The introduction of the word *homosexual* into modern Bible translations created an important interpretive problem.

The modern concept of homosexuality refers to a person's enduring pattern of romantic or sexual attraction toward people of the same sex.

That understanding of sexual orientation was not part of the conceptual framework of the ancient biblical writers.

When an ancient term describing a particular form of behavior is translated with a modern identity category, readers may assume that the biblical writer was addressing an entire class of people.

That is a much broader claim than the original language may support.

For example, a word referring to sexual exploitation would condemn the exploitative conduct involved. It would not automatically describe every person who experiences same-sex attraction.

Likewise, a term referring to prostitution would identify a particular practice rather than establish that all gay or lesbian relationships are morally equivalent to prostitution.

This distinction between behavior and identity is essential.

Even when an ancient word clearly concerns sexual conduct, we must still determine what kind of conduct it describes.

We cannot responsibly move from a rare Greek term to a sweeping condemnation of modern sexual orientation without demonstrating that the ancient word actually carried that meaning.

7. WHAT CAN EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS TELL US?

Because *arsenokoitai* is rare, scholars have examined its appearances in writings outside the New Testament.

The term appears in early Christian moral discussions, including vice lists associated with the *Sibylline Oracles*, writings attributed to early Christian teachers, and later penitential literature.

These references help establish that the word belonged to the vocabulary of moral wrongdoing.

However, they do not always provide enough detail to identify precisely which sexual practices were intended.

Some contexts are compatible with interpretations involving sexual exploitation or abusive conduct. Others appear to use the term more broadly.

The surviving evidence therefore supports caution.

It would be inaccurate to claim that every early Christian writer clearly defined *arsenokoitai* as sexual exploitation. It would be equally problematic to assume that these writers were discussing modern homosexuality as an identity.

The word was used within ancient moral discussions, but its exact scope remains a matter of interpretation.

The important point is that historical usage does not justify treating a modern English translation as though it were a perfectly transparent equivalent of the original Greek.

We must continue to examine the context in which Paul uses the term.

8. THE CONTEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY: EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The vice list in 1 Timothy 1:9–10 provides one of the most important contextual clues.

The writer groups together several categories of wrongdoing.

There are references to lawless and rebellious people, the ungodly and sinful, and those who violate what is sacred. The list then identifies murderers, sexual offenders, kidnappers or slave traders, liars, and perjurers.

Many of these terms concern behavior that harms other people.

Murder violates another person's life. Kidnapping and slave trading violate personal freedom and dignity. Lying and perjury undermine truth and justice.

Within this context, *arsenokoitai* appears among forms of serious misconduct.

The proximity of sexual wrongdoing and human trafficking raises the possibility that the term referred to exploitative sexual practices.

In the ancient world, prostitution, slavery, and sexual exploitation could overlap. People without social power, including enslaved individuals and young people, could be subjected to sexual demands by those who possessed greater authority or wealth.

An interpretation connecting *arsenokoitai* with sexual exploitation is therefore consistent with important features of the historical setting.

It remains an interpretation rather than a universally established definition, but it deserves consideration because it takes the surrounding moral concerns seriously.

9. PAUL'S VICE LISTS AND RELATIONSHIPS OF HARM

Paul's letters contain several lists of behaviors that are inconsistent with Christian life.

These lists frequently identify actions that violate the responsibilities people have toward God and one another.

Theft and fraud involve taking advantage of others financially. Adultery violates the trust and faithfulness expected within a covenant relationship. Violence and abuse harm those who are vulnerable to another person's power.

In 1 Timothy, kidnapping and slave trading provide especially clear examples of exploitation.

These observations are important because Christian moral teaching is deeply concerned with the misuse of power and the harm inflicted upon others.

When examining a disputed term within such a list, it is reasonable to ask whether it identifies another form of exploitative conduct.

This does not mean that every item in a vice list must describe exploitation in precisely the same way. Nor does it prove that *arsenokoitai* has only one possible meaning.

It does mean that the surrounding emphasis upon harmful behavior should influence our interpretation.

A translation that turns an ancient description of wrongdoing into a modern identity category risks losing that moral context.

10. THE GREEK WORD *MALAKOI*

The second major term in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is *malakoi* (μαλακοί).

This is the plural form of *malakos*, an adjective whose basic meaning is *soft*.

Unlike *arsenokoitai*, *malakos* is not an exceptionally rare word.

It appears in Greek literature with a range of meanings, including softness, delicacy, luxury, weakness, and a lack of self-discipline.

The meaning depends upon the context.

When applied to clothing or materials, the word can refer quite literally to something soft.

When applied to human character, it may communicate weakness, excessive luxury, self-indulgence, or failure to exercise self-control.

In some ancient contexts, language of softness could also be associated with cultural judgments about masculinity and sexual roles.

The word therefore has a broader range of meaning than the modern English word *homosexual*.

To understand its use in 1 Corinthians 6, we must examine how the term was used elsewhere and consider the moral concerns Paul was addressing.

11. *MALAKOS* IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Read Matthew 11:7–9 and Luke 7:24–25

The Gospels provide a helpful example of the ordinary meaning of *malakos*.

When Jesus speaks about John the Baptist, He asks whether the people went into the wilderness expecting to see someone dressed in soft clothing.

The word used for soft is related to *malakoi*.

In this context, it clearly refers to the quality of clothing and the lifestyle associated with luxurious dress.

Jesus contrasts the simplicity of John the Baptist's life with the luxury associated with royal households.

The word has no necessary sexual meaning in this passage.

This is important because it demonstrates that *malakos* cannot automatically be translated as a term describing homosexuality.

Its basic meaning concerns softness, and its figurative meanings developed through cultural associations with luxury, weakness, and self-indulgence.

The context determines which meaning is appropriate.

12. MALAKOI IN ANCIENT MORAL LANGUAGE

Greek writers sometimes used the language of softness when criticizing people who lacked discipline or lived excessively indulgent lives.

A person described as soft might be considered unwilling to endure hardship, overly attached to luxury, or unable to control personal desires.

Such language reflected the moral and social expectations of the ancient world.

Greek and Roman cultures often valued self-control, endurance, and strength, particularly in men. The language of softness could therefore carry a negative judgment about someone who failed to meet those expectations.

At times, these judgments overlapped with cultural assumptions about masculinity and sexual behavior.

But the word itself did not function as a straightforward equivalent of the modern identity category *gay man*.

Its use in ancient literature was broader and more flexible.

Consequently, translating *malakoi* as *homosexuals* without further explanation can create a misleading impression.

The reader may assume that Paul is identifying a sexual orientation when the Greek word may instead describe a form of moral weakness, indulgence, or behavior associated with particular cultural expectations.

13. WHY WERE MALAKOI AND ARSENOKOITAI PLACED TOGETHER?

In 1 Corinthians 6:9, the two terms appear next to one another.

Their placement has led translators and interpreters to consider whether they describe related forms of behavior.

One possibility is that the terms referred to different participants within particular sexual practices or exploitative relationships.

Within the ancient world, sexual exploitation could involve men who possessed money or social power and others who were vulnerable because of poverty, enslavement, or their position within society.

Some interpreters have suggested that *arsenokoitai* referred to men who exploited others sexually, while *malakoi* described people associated with the other side of those sexual arrangements.

This interpretation is possible, but the text does not explicitly define the two words in this way.

We should therefore distinguish between what is established and what is proposed.

What is established is that Paul uses two different Greek terms within a list of conduct he condemns.

What remains uncertain is the precise relationship between those terms and the particular practices they identify.

That uncertainty should make us cautious about translations that combine the words into a single modern category without explaining the interpretive decision involved.

14. THE IMPORTANCE OF CORINTH'S CULTURAL SETTING

Corinth was a major commercial city within the Roman world.

Its location made it an important center of trade, travel, and cultural exchange. People from different regions and social backgrounds passed through the city, bringing a wide variety of religious practices and social customs.

Corinth also developed a reputation in ancient literature for luxury and sexual excess.

The Greek expression associated with living like a Corinthian could be used to suggest sexual immorality.

That reputation should not be exaggerated into the claim that every inhabitant of Corinth participated in prostitution or that all of its religious institutions were organized around sexual activity.

Nevertheless, the city's cultural setting provides important background for understanding the problems Paul addresses.

The Corinthian church existed within a society where prostitution, slavery, economic inequality, and permissive sexual practices were familiar realities.

Paul's letters reveal that the congregation struggled with a number of serious moral and relational problems.

These circumstances help explain why his teaching repeatedly addresses sexual conduct, the misuse of freedom, and the responsibility to honor God with one's body.

15. SEXUAL IMMORALITY WAS ALREADY A PROBLEM IN CORINTH

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

Before Paul reaches the disputed terms in chapter 6, he has already confronted a serious sexual scandal within the Corinthian congregation.

In chapter 5, Paul addresses a situation involving a man who has entered a sexual relationship with his father's wife.

Paul regards this conduct as unacceptable and challenges the congregation for failing to respond appropriately.

This context is important because it establishes that Paul is not discussing sexuality in the abstract.

He is addressing actual conduct within a Christian community.

The Corinthians are struggling to understand how their freedom in Christ should shape their moral responsibilities.

Some appear to have adopted attitudes that minimized the seriousness of sexual misconduct.

Paul responds by insisting that belonging to Christ requires a transformed way of life.

His concern is not simply whether particular behaviors are socially acceptable. It is whether the conduct of believers is consistent with their identity as people who belong to Jesus.

This discussion continues into chapter 6, where Paul addresses sexual immorality more directly.

16. PAUL'S DISCUSSION OF PROSTITUTION

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20

Immediately after the vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Paul turns toward the relationship between Christian freedom and sexual conduct.

He addresses the claim that believers are free to do anything, then explains that not everything is beneficial and that Christians should not allow themselves to become enslaved by their desires.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that their bodies belong to Christ.

He then raises the specific question of whether a believer should join his body to a prostitute.

Paul's answer is emphatic.

He argues that sexual conduct involves the body in a meaningful way and cannot be treated as morally insignificant.

This is the immediate context following the disputed Greek terms.

Paul is addressing a community in which sexual immorality, including involvement with prostitution, was a genuine pastoral concern.

That context makes it reasonable to consider whether the earlier vice list includes terminology associated with prostitution or sexual exploitation.

The passage does not provide a dictionary definition of *arsenokoitai* or *malakoi*, but it does reveal the sexual practices Paul is specifically confronting.

17. THE BODY BELONGS TO CHRIST

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6 is rooted in Christian identity.

He reminds believers that their bodies are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, sexual behavior cannot be separated from their relationship with God.

This teaching establishes an important principle of Christian sexual ethics.

Our bodies are not simply instruments for satisfying personal desire. They belong to God and should be treated with dignity and holiness.

That principle applies to every Christian, regardless of sexual orientation.

It challenges prostitution, exploitation, coercion, infidelity, and conduct that treats another person as an object rather than a human being created in God's image.

It also challenges the assumption that Christian freedom means the absence of moral responsibility.

Paul does not teach that believers may pursue any sexual desire without considering its consequences.

He teaches that belonging to Christ should transform the way they understand and use their bodies.

The central issue is whether sexual conduct honors God and reflects the responsibilities of Christian discipleship.

18. THE POSSIBILITY OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

When we bring the linguistic and historical evidence together, an interpretation of *arsenokoitai* involving sexual exploitation becomes understandable.

The word is rare and does not have a universally agreed-upon precise definition.

It appears within vice lists condemning serious wrongdoing.

In 1 Timothy, it is placed near terms associated with sexual immorality and human trafficking.

In 1 Corinthians, it appears within a discussion of sexual misconduct that leads directly into Paul's condemnation of prostitution.

The ancient world also contained systems in which sexual activity could involve significant inequalities of power, including slavery, prostitution, and the exploitation of vulnerable people.

These observations provide a reasonable basis for understanding the term as potentially referring to men who sexually exploit others.

However, the evidence does not establish that this is the only possible interpretation.

The responsible conclusion is that the precise meaning remains disputed and must be considered within its historical setting.

What we should not do is ignore that uncertainty and assume that the word provides a straightforward description of every gay man or every same-sex relationship.

The biblical text deserves more careful treatment than that.

19. WHAT THESE PASSAGES DO NOT DESCRIBE

Neither 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 nor 1 Timothy 1:8–11 contains a discussion of sexual orientation as understood today.

The passages do not describe a loving, committed same-sex relationship between Christians seeking to live faithfully before God.

They do not discuss the experience of a person who has consistently experienced same-sex attraction or the formation of a covenant relationship characterized by mutual care and fidelity.

Instead, they contain ancient moral terminology within lists of conduct considered inconsistent with righteousness.

The precise meaning of *arsenokoitai* remains debated, while *malakoi* has a range of meanings that cannot be reduced automatically to homosexuality.

This does not mean that Paul's moral teaching should be disregarded.

It means that we should not extend the meaning of his words beyond what the historical and linguistic evidence can reasonably establish.

The question of how Christians should understand faithful same-sex relationships requires careful consideration of the whole biblical witness rather than reliance upon uncertain English translations of rare Greek terms.

20. TRANSLATION IS AN ACT OF INTERPRETATION

Every Bible translation involves decisions.

Translators must consider grammar, vocabulary, historical usage, literary context, and the needs of contemporary readers.

When a Greek word has several possible meanings, a translator must choose the expression that seems most appropriate.

Sometimes that choice communicates the original meaning effectively. At other times, it may reflect an interpretation that remains open to debate.

This is why comparing translations can be helpful.

When one translation uses *homosexuals*, another uses *sodomites*, and another uses language referring to sexual acts, the differences reveal that interpretation is involved.

The English word printed on the page should not be confused with the original Greek word itself.

Christians who take Scripture seriously should be willing to investigate those differences.

Faith in the inspiration of Scripture does not require us to assume that every translation decision is equally precise or that modern terminology always captures the meaning of ancient language.

Careful study is one way we honor the authority of the biblical text.

21. CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS STILL MATTER

An affirming interpretation of these passages does not eliminate the Christian call to sexual holiness.

Paul clearly condemns sexual immorality and teaches that believers should honor God with their bodies.

The Church should continue to take those teachings seriously.

Christian sexual ethics should reject coercion, exploitation, prostitution, betrayal, and the misuse of power.

They should also affirm fidelity, self-control, honesty, mutual responsibility, and respect for the dignity of others.

These standards apply equally to heterosexual and LGBTQ+ Christians.

A heterosexual relationship is not automatically holy simply because it involves a man and a woman. It may still be characterized by dishonesty, exploitation, infidelity, or abuse.

Likewise, a same-sex relationship should not automatically be equated with the exploitative sexual practices of the ancient world simply because the people involved share the same gender.

The moral character of a relationship must be considered in light of the actual conduct, commitments, and responsibilities involved.

This approach does not weaken Christian holiness.

It calls Christians to apply biblical moral principles consistently rather than making assumptions based upon identity alone.

22. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LGBTQ+ CHRISTIANS?

For LGBTQ+ Christians, these passages have often been a source of fear and condemnation.

Many have been told that the Bible explicitly identifies them as people who cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, regardless of their faith, character, or relationship with Jesus Christ.

But a careful examination of the Greek terminology reveals that the matter is not nearly as straightforward as some English translations suggest.

The words used by Paul were written within an ancient cultural setting and carried meanings shaped by that world.

One is a rare compound whose precise scope remains debated. The other is a common adjective associated with softness, luxury, weakness, and various cultural judgments about conduct.

Neither word is a direct equivalent of the modern concept of sexual orientation.

The surrounding passages address sexual misconduct, moral failure, and the responsibilities of people who belong to Christ.

These observations should encourage LGBTQ+ Christians to study Scripture carefully rather than assuming that a particular English translation provides the final answer to every question about their identity or relationships.

The goal is not to dismiss Paul's teaching but to understand what he was actually condemning.

23. THE IMPORTANCE OF READING BEYOND THE VICE LIST

The discussion in 1 Corinthians 6 does not end with a warning about who will inherit the Kingdom of God.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have been washed, sanctified, and justified through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

He then calls them to live consistently with that new identity.

This is an important reminder of the purpose of Christian moral teaching.

Paul is not simply identifying people to exclude from the Church.

He is calling believers to recognize that their lives have been transformed through Christ and that their conduct should reflect that transformation.

The emphasis is upon the difference between a life governed by destructive desires and a life shaped by belonging to Jesus.

This teaching applies to the entire Christian community.

No one is exempt from the call to holiness, and no one should assume that possessing a particular sexual orientation automatically establishes righteousness or unrighteousness.

The Christian life is grounded in the grace of God and expressed through faithful discipleship.

24. WHY THE ORIGINAL GREEK MATTERS

The examination of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* demonstrates why studying the original languages can be essential for understanding difficult biblical passages.

English translations are valuable and necessary, but they cannot always communicate every nuance of an ancient word.

When a translation uses a modern term that did not exist in the same conceptual form during the biblical period, readers may misunderstand the subject being addressed.

That risk is especially serious when the translation becomes the basis for condemning an entire group of people.

The Greek evidence requires us to distinguish between ancient descriptions of conduct and modern categories of identity.

It also requires us to acknowledge uncertainty where the evidence is incomplete.

We should not manufacture certainty simply because a familiar interpretation feels comfortable.

The authority of Scripture is not strengthened by claiming that an ambiguous word has a meaning that cannot be demonstrated conclusively.

It is honored when we study the text carefully and allow its actual language and context to shape our understanding.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Before this study, how did you understand 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11?
2. Why is it important to examine the original Greek words rather than relying exclusively upon a modern English translation?
3. What are the two Greek terms at the center of this session?
4. What are the basic components of the word *arsenokoitai*?
5. Why does breaking a compound word into its individual parts not always establish its meaning?
6. How do English compound words such as *butterfly* and *hallmark* illustrate this principle?
7. Why does the rarity of *arsenokoitai* make its precise meaning difficult to establish?
8. How have different Bible translations rendered *arsenokoitai* throughout Christian history?
9. What is the significance of the word *homosexual* appearing in some English Bible translations during the twentieth century?

10. What is the difference between a word describing particular sexual behavior and a word describing sexual orientation?
11. Why should early Christian uses of *arsenokoitai* be examined carefully rather than treated as providing one universally certain definition?
12. How does the surrounding list of wrongdoing in 1 Timothy 1:9–10 provide possible clues about the meaning of *arsenokoitai*?
13. Why is the presence of kidnapping and slave trading in the same vice list significant?
14. What kinds of sexual exploitation were possible within the social and economic systems of the ancient world?
15. What is the basic meaning of *malakos*?
16. How does Jesus' use of the word in Matthew 11 and Luke 7 demonstrate that it does not always have a sexual meaning?
17. What moral qualities could ancient writers describe using the language of softness?
18. Why is it important not to assume that *malakoi* is equivalent to the modern English word *homosexuals*?
19. What possible relationship might exist between *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6?
20. Why must that proposed relationship be treated as an interpretation rather than an established definition?
21. What features of ancient Corinth's culture are relevant to Paul's discussion of sexual conduct?
22. What sexual misconduct does Paul address in 1 Corinthians 5?
23. Why is Paul's discussion of prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 important to understanding the surrounding passage?
24. What does Paul teach about the Christian's body and its relationship to Christ?
25. Why does affirming LGBTQ+ Christians not require abandoning the biblical call to sexual holiness?
26. How should Christian sexual ethics address exploitation, coercion, fidelity, and mutual responsibility?
27. Why is it dangerous to use a disputed translation as the basis for condemning an entire category of people?
28. What have you learned about the relationship between biblical inspiration and the work of translation?
29. How might you respond when someone quotes 1 Corinthians 6:9 as a straightforward condemnation of all gay and lesbian people?

30. How has this session changed your understanding of the importance of studying Scripture in its original language and context?

KEY TAKEAWAY

The words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* have played a significant role in the Christian debate about homosexuality because they appear in passages that some English translations render as condemnations of homosexual people.

However, the original Greek terminology requires careful examination.

Arsenokoitai is a rare compound word formed from elements meaning male and bed. Its precise meaning remains debated, and its literal components do not automatically establish that it refers to homosexuality as understood today.

Historical translations demonstrate considerable variation, with some emphasizing particular sexual acts or forms of misconduct and others introducing modern identity-related language.

Malakoi is a much more common Greek word whose basic meaning is soft. In ancient literature, it could describe soft clothing, luxury, weakness, self-indulgence, or behavior that violated cultural expectations about masculinity. It was not a technical term equivalent to the modern concept of homosexuality.

The contexts in which these words appear are also important.

In 1 Timothy, *arsenokoitai* appears among terms describing serious wrongdoing, including sexual misconduct and human trafficking.

In 1 Corinthians, the disputed terms appear within a larger discussion of sexual immorality that leads directly into Paul's teaching about prostitution and the responsibility to honor God with one's body.

These contexts support serious consideration of interpretations involving exploitative sexual behavior, although the precise meaning of the rare terminology cannot be established with complete certainty.

The central lesson is that ancient Greek words describing particular forms of wrongdoing should not automatically be translated into modern categories of sexual identity.

Paul's call to holiness remains important. Christians are responsible for rejecting exploitation, coercion, dishonesty, and sexual misconduct while pursuing lives characterized by faithfulness, self-control, and devotion to Christ.

But these passages do not provide a straightforward description of loving, committed same-sex relationships as understood today.

Faithful interpretation requires us to examine the original language, recognize the limits of our knowledge, and avoid imposing modern assumptions upon the biblical text.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of truth and wisdom, thank You for giving us Your Word and for inviting us to study it with care and humility. Help us recognize that understanding Scripture requires more than reading familiar English words. Give us patience to examine the language, history, and circumstances through which Your truth was communicated.

Forgive us for the times we have treated our interpretations as though they were beyond question or used passages we did not fully understand to condemn others.

Teach us to distinguish between what Scripture clearly establishes and what remains uncertain. Guard us against the temptation to claim certainty where the evidence does not support it.

As we reflect upon Paul's teaching, remind us that our bodies belong to You and that our relationships should honor Christ. Protect us from exploitation, dishonesty, coercion, and the misuse of power. Help us practice faithfulness, self-control, integrity, and mutual respect.

Bring healing to those who have experienced rejection because ancient words were translated or interpreted in ways that condemned their identity without careful consideration of their meaning.

May our study of Scripture lead us toward greater understanding, deeper holiness, and more faithful love. Let our lives reflect the transforming presence of Your Holy Spirit, and may our words and actions bear witness to the grace of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name, Amen.