

Leviticus Bible Study #20

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 18:1-30

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. **3** You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. **4** You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. **5** You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

6 “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. **7** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. **8** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. **9** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. **10** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. **11** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. **12** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. **13** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. **14** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. **15** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. **16** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. **17** You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. **18** And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

19 “You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. **20** And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her. **21** You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. **22** You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. **23** And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion.

24 “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, **25** and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. **26** But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you **27** (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), **28** lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. **29** For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. **30** So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.”

Introduction

The pagan world around the Israelites did not have the Law explicitly laid out for them, so instead they found themselves stumbling about with morality according to the witness of the Law in

their hearts.¹ While various nations had laws against theft, at times murder was permitted if the right victim was selected (typically slaves). The civil code of Hammurabi penalized adultery, but permitted most forms of incest,²³ and sibling marriage was common in ancient Egypt. While the surrounding nations were not in a state of moral anarchy, they were certainly and dreadfully confused, with even the most ancient pagan laws being devoted chiefly to economic matters.⁴ In a word, humanity's corrupt nature became most obvious through its laws and behaviors.

The Israelites were called to be *different*. Having received the Law, they were able to stand as the example of purity and good conduct to everyone around them. In turn they would be blessed from on high, and their prosperity – living in the closest state one could get to Eden – would be an incentive for pagan peoples to learn the Law at their feet. Yet more importantly, the revelation of the Law is not just a matter of evangelism, but includes with it an expectation of obedience for its own sake. God holds the Israelites accountable for abstaining from sexual sin, for instance, because sexual sin is wrong in and of itself. Moses is not just giving the congregation good ideas, but a way of life that reflects reception of eternal life, as it was supposed to be from the beginning. Hence the refrain “I am the Lord” being repeated several times in this chapter; our Lord puts His own Name as the underlining for every command as a means of emphasis.

Vs.1-5

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. 3 You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. 4 You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. 5 You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

God makes a contrast between the lifestyles of pagans and the way He wants the Israelites to operate. Going further, He also condemns their “statutes,” or codes of law. It is not enough to simply hold to the existence of the true God instead of the false ones. The civic code, customs, culture and daily life of the Israelites must be entirely *other* to their neighbors, with everything about them being superior on account of having the Law from God Himself.

Special attention must be paid to the fifth verse. “If a person does them, he shall live by them,” is not an observation of habit, lest it be a circular statement. Moses is not recording a tautology which says that a man who lives in obedience to the Law lives according to the Law. St. Paul notes that this is a *soteriological* declaration. Both in Galatians and Romans, he presents the fifth verse as a kind of thesis statement for the Law itself; if a man would live eternally without being justified by faith, then he must perfectly obey every last command.⁵ Because we are sinful and thus incapable of fulfilling this Law, the verse invites us to see it as a pronouncement of curse upon us, so that we would seek God's mercy by faith in Christ. This is what the theologians refer to as the “Second Use” of the Law, wherein our sin is shown to us and our need for a Savior made clear.

The Law's thesis is not just a condemnation though. There is a logic to it which, though it be impossible for sinners to fulfill, is nonetheless beneficial in its instruction. The Decalogue is perfect morality taught to us all by God; to obey it is to live as man was always supposed to live. For the Israelites then, the expression of the Edenic ideal in the Levitical code is a proclamation of life for them

1 Romans 2:14-15

2 The “marriage regulations” found in Hammurabi's Code are laws #127-194

3 [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Code_of_Hammurabi_\(Harper_translation\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Code_of_Hammurabi_(Harper_translation))

4 The legal code of Lipit-Ishtar being an infamous example:

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Code_of_Lipit-I%C5%A1tar

5 Romans 10:5-9, Galatians 3:10-14

and towards all their neighbors. The Israelites were to live as though they were in a state of immortality, so that the nations would see it and be inspired to follow the Lord.

Note that the comparison between Israel and the other nations' laws is not brought up until this point. This is to say, contrast with other peoples is not the intent of the previous commands concerning sacrifices, diet, cleanliness, and childbirth. While many an exegete has pointed to the dietary habits of pagans (e.g., Canaanites eating pork) in explaining why the ceremonial code was in place, it is striking that the exhortation to be distinct from other peoples is not made until God commands Moses to start writing about interpersonal relations. Thus, while that distinction is certainly present in terms of comparing what Israelites ate or wore with their neighbors, it does not form the central hermeneutic for why those regulations were put there in the first place. It is for this reason that the Edenic ideal is so important for understanding Leviticus as a whole, for it forms a stronger emphasis point than the evangelistic result of the Levitical code.

Vs.6-18

6 “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. **7** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. **8** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. **9** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. **10** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. **11** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. **12** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. **13** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. **14** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. **15** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. **16** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. **17** You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. **18** And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

We arrive at the regulations concerning sexuality, written with explicit condemnation against the sexual practices of the pagans. These practices are wrong in and of themselves, as the Sixth Commandment has already prohibited them, but our Lord highlights the tolerance for such things in Canaan and Egypt as a way of expressing how evil they truly are. Men are forbidden from approaching their mothers, sisters, daughters, granddaughters, and aunts sexually, with “uncovering nakedness” being the euphemism employed for coitus. Going a step further, they are not allowed to approach their stepmothers, step-sisters, and in-laws either, as the uniting of flesh that results from marriage necessitates that these be treated as blood relations.⁶ A man's step-mother is, for all intents and purposes, as closely related to him as his actual biological mother. For that matter, a man cannot sleep with women who are related by blood as sisters or as mother and daughter; to engage in such a union would be grievous and destructive to say the least.

The prohibition against all forms of incest is an astounding matter, as it mars the reputations of many of the prior saints. Abraham, Lot, Jacob, and even Moses himself⁷ either engaged in or were products of such forbidden unions. Though it was permitted in the earliest days of humanity (as Adam and Eve were the only humans to begin with, their offspring would necessarily have sibling marriage), the corruption of man's nature rendered it an abominable practice before God. Here, despite the embarrassment of showing so many ancient fathers – and his *own* father – to have sinned in this

⁶ Genesis 2:24

⁷ Exodus 6:20

manner, Moses nonetheless laudably submits to God's command to record this part of the Law.

Vs.19-23

19 “You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. **20** And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her. **21** You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. **22** You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. **23** And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion.

The pagan nations did not just engage in incest, though that would have been bad enough to show their wickedness. They were known to sleep with each other during a woman's menstrual period, commit adultery, engage in homosexuality and perform coitus with animals. All of these things were already abominations to God, but made even more repugnant by the child sacrifice that attended them. The nations sacrificed infants and young children, including but not limited to molech worship.⁸ Indeed, marriage was further twisted into an economic practice whereby poor people would survive by selling their infants to priests who would slaughter them.⁹ Here the message is clear, that the cults of sexual sin are to be shunned by the children of Israel, lest they too commit similar abominations.

Vs.24-30

24 “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, **25** and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. **26** But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you **27** (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), **28** lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. **29** For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. **30** So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.”

Incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, child sacrifice, and other sexual sins are all connected in their inherent evil and uncleanness. Yet God did not destroy the Canaanites just because a few sinners here and there engaged in them – every society has had its perverts and depraved sinners. To the contrary, these nations were *militantly, religiously* devoted to these practices. Later in the Law, sinful movements such as cultic prostitution will be mentioned by name,¹⁰ with the existence of such being informed by its presence in the nations. In other words, Moses would not know that cultic prostitution and child sacrifice even existed if they were not institutional aspects of near eastern religion. Sexual depravity was *codified* into the civics of these countries and regulated, such that their laws and religions were an abomination to God just as much as the sexual sins themselves. On account of this, after having given them a number of centuries to repent, the Israelites are led forward to cleanse the land of its inhabitants.

8 <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2018/06/29/new-evidence-of-ancient-child-sacrifice-found-from-bronze-age-mesopotamia/>

9 <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1976/03/child-sacrifice-in-the-ancient-near-east>

10 Deuteronomy 23:17