

Leviticus Bible Study #24

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

Leviticus 20:10-27

10 “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. **11** If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. **12** If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. **13** If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. **14** If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you. **15** If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal. **16** If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

17 “If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity. **18** If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual period and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people. **19** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister or of your father's sister, for that is to make naked one's relative; they shall bear their iniquity. **20** If a man lies with his uncle's wife, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness; they shall bear their sin; they shall die childless. **21** If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

22 “You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. **23** And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. **24** But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. **25** You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. **26** You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

27 “A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them.”

Introduction

Leviticus as a whole has been more concerned with purity in devotion more than civic conduct. This is to say, while it is a book of Law, it is chiefly about ceremonial observance which every Israelite was tasked with obeying. Later, in Deuteronomy, Moses will be given oracles that supplement the ceremonial laws with civil statutes which drive trade, punishment, property, etc.¹ But we ought not drive too deep a wedge between the ceremonial and civil codes in the Law, for the text of Scripture

¹ Example: the law concerning the minimum number of witnesses needed to discern fault for a crime committed, Deuteronomy 19:15-21

blurs these lines regularly. Civil code is couched in Divine terms, and ceremonial observances have the full weight of life and death behind them. The latter is observed in the conclusion to the Holiness Code for lay Israelites, wherein disobedience results in the same punishments one would expect for murderers.

Vs.10-21

10 “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. **11** If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. **12** If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. **13** If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. **14** If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you. **15** If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal. **16** If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

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The list of sexual sins here matches the previous list which identifies them as iniquity.² Here their severity is put on full display by the consistent requirement of severe punishment. The first seven include explicit calls for the death penalty, namely for adultery proper,³ bestiality, parental incest, and homosexuality are all punished with execution. The other five use more ambiguous language for punishment, but retain the same level of severity. They may be “cut off” from the people in terms of *exile* rather than cut off from life itself, but in the context in which Leviticus was written this may as well be a death sentence. As Moses writes, the congregation of Israel is in the desert wilderness, surrounded by hostile nations; anyone expelled from the safety in numbers they had would either die in short order by the desert environment or be captured by slavers. It is also unclear whether the term “die childless” is a command for the Israelites to destroy the offenders before they can have any children or whether it denotes that God Himself will curse the couple. Either way, the implication is the same.

The modern reader may be shocked to find such harsh punishments for what is often considered a “mistake” or indiscretion by the people who commit sexual sins. Yet all of these offenses are not just evil for what they are by themselves; by engaging in improper or unnatural sexual liaisons, more is happening than *just* the physical. To take a man's wife for one's own is to make a claim on all that is his, as the one-flesh union would put the adulterer on par with the offended party. This is the likeliest reason for bizarre sexual offenses recounted in Scripture, like Absalom's decision (informed by counselors) to sleep with his father David's concubines;⁴ by claiming David's *women*, Absalom claims David's *kingdom*. The prohibitions on bestiality and homosexuality maintain the strict categories placed by God in creation; sex is not just kept within the bounds of marriage, but also the *category* of human men and women. To sleep with an animal or someone of the same sex is to rebel against the way that God created the world and His creatures, thus violating the Edenic ideal which Israel is supposed to

² Leviticus 18

³ That is, sleeping with someone else's spouse

⁴ 2 Samuel 16:20-23

represent. To engage in that depravity thus invites the curse, which results in depravity – or more properly *pollution* – in the land. This is to say, since woman was created for man to be his spouse, man should not look to other men or to animals to fulfill his need for sexual companionship. As St. Paul comments, this is also true for women, who must avoid lesbian attractions and behavior lest they too merit punishment.⁵

Vs.22-27

22 “You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. **23** And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. **24** But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. **25** You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. **26** You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

27 “A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them.”

This passage concludes the arc of legislation which governs the behaviors, diet, and cleanliness of the people. It began in the tenth chapter with the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, from which event God tasked Aaron and his remaining sons to instruct the people on the standards of behavior He has for His people. They are to distinguish between clean and unclean, maintain proper relationships, conduct right sacrifices through the priesthood at the designated area, and avoid sorcery of any stripe. This is the holiness code as given to the average Israelite; the holiness code given to the priesthood comes after.⁶

The Children of Israel are once more called to be holy, for God has separated them from all other nations to be His emissaries on earth. Thus they are to embody the ideals and morals given to them in the commands, not least of which being that of Shalom, Shalom, and the Edenic ideal. Let us not suppose though that these principles are only applicable to the ancient Israelites; to the contrary, God states that He detested the Canaanites and had the land “vomit” them out, precisely because the Canaanites lived contrary to these principles. Their relationships were full of incest, they sacrificed their children to false gods, they ate whatever flesh they could obtain without distinction and they engaged in constant witchcraft. Thus they are judged by the universally applicable Law, and cast out by the conquering Israelites. Over the course of Israel's history, it will become evident why stringent punishments are enforced on those who violate these commandments. The more the people broke the Law, the more paganized they became, making them more like the Canaanites they had expelled. This culminates eventually in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, which reciprocated onto the Israelites that which they had done to Canaan.

The final verse in the chapter appears at first blush to be an oversight, as though Moses had to adjudicate an issue that resulted in the imposition of another case law. But the previous verses establish that killing mediums and necromancers is a necessity for their continued existence, lest they experience the decline and death which were to mark the end of the Canaanites. To slaughter the violators without mercy is *what it took* during this era to be in good standing with God, for they did not have the fullness of the Gospel which would later call these people to repentance rather than the gallows.

⁵ Romans 1:26-27

⁶ Typically, Leviticus 17-26 is summarized as “the holiness code” by commentaries, but we distinguish here between the rules given for the people and the *extra* rules given for the priests.