



Leviticus - Chapter Eighteen

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

The rules from Chapter 18 onwards aim to lead the people to holiness. Although the term holy or holiness is not mentioned in Chapter 18, avoiding such conduct as practiced in Egypt and particularly in Canaan is the minimal requirement for the people to become holy. In reading the laws, it is important to see both their original context and their underlying and abiding principles. From the latter viewpoint, the laws in this chapter can be seen as commanding the people to avoid any action that ignores the order that God revealed in his creation. In this sense, the prohibited acts in this chapter are representative examples, i.e. they are non-exhaustive.

VII Leviticus 18:1-22:33 - The Call to Holiness

This section applies the principle of holiness (19:1-2) to various aspects of Israelite life. Chapter 18 considers the realm of sexual behaviour and how Israel is to act differently from the pagan nations. Chapters 19-20 give a variety of applications of holiness to Israel's existence: the manner in which the people treat the land, their neighbours, their parents, and all other things is to be distinct. Holiness is to affect every area of Israelite life. Chapters 21-22 specifically deal with the regulations regarding the holiness of the priesthood.

VII.a Leviticus 18:1-30 - Sexual Relations

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ 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 follow their statutes. ⁴ My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you

shall keep, following them: I am the Lord your God. ⁵ You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 18:1-5

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt. The people are commanded not to imitate the customs of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, but to obey the Lord's rules and statutes.

Sadly, the Christians today often take their standard of sexual conduct from the world, and not from God and his word. Clearly, Christians should be different from the world in their sexual morality, and they should follow a biblical standard of sexual morality. In the early church, one argument for the truth of Christianity offered by Christians was 'You can know it's true by looking at our lives.' Today, the Christian world says, 'Do not look at me, look at Jesus.'

You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live. Two interrelated interpretative issues arise here. First, what is the meaning of live? Does it refer simply to retaining bodily life, or does it refer to life in God's pleasure, or does it refer to eternal life? Second, what is the connection between doing and living? In particular, does this verse imply that the doing earns the life, as the questioner in Luke 10:25 seems to imply: <<***Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'***>>. In answer to the first question, when the Pentateuch speaks of 'living' by keeping God's statutes and rules, it refers to enjoying life under God's pleasure, as confirmed by Deuteronomy 4:1 and 8:1. In answer to the second question, when the OT stresses 'doing,' it always sees this as the right response to God's grace that provides both covenant relationship and moral instruction; it never presents obedience as the way of gaining that grace. It is the same as the NT in this respect: as confirmed by: <<***For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love***>> (Galatians 5:6), and: <<***Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments***>> (1 John 2:3). Verse 5 is thus describing how the genuinely faithful guide their walk so that they can abide in God's love, as confirmed by: <<***If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love***>> (John 15:10). The echoes of this text in Deuteronomy 4:1 and 8:1, Nehemiah 9:29, and Ezekiel 20:11-21 all appear to assume this reading of the text. In Luke 10:25 the lawyer is taking the words of v.5 to describe the way of earning eternal life. Jesus has him summarise the law (you must love the Lord and your neighbour), and then urges him: <<***do this, and you will live***>> (Luke 10:28b). Since the man wanted to 'justify himself' (Luke 10:29), it is best to read this as Jesus' challenge to all who would use the law improperly as a means to earn life.

They must obligate themselves to unswerving loving obedience in order to gain their righteousness, or else give up in despair. On the question of how Paul uses the text in Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12, refer to the comments there.

Introduction to Leviticus 18:6-20

These laws prohibit a variety of sexual sins: incest (vv.6-18), intercourse during menstruation (v.19), and adultery (v.20).

⁶ None of you shall approach anyone near of kin 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 the nakedness of your father. ⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born abroad. 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, begotten by your father, since she is your sister. ¹² You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's flesh. ¹³ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's flesh. 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 her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are your flesh; it is depravity. ¹⁸ And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

Leviticus 18:6-18

These laws prohibit sexual relations, i.e. approach to uncover nakedness, and therefore marriage, between people who are too closely related, either by blood: mother, sister, granddaughter, aunt; or by marriage: stepmother, stepsister, stepdaughter, step-granddaughter, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, aunt by marriage. Uncover nakedness can at times merely refer to voyeurism, as confirmed by Genesis 9:22-23, but in the OT it is most commonly a euphemism for

sexual intercourse. No mention is made of the daughter, probably because that needs no comment, as confirmed by Genesis 19:30-38, and this prohibition is already well known in the laws of other cultures. It is assumed that, generally speaking, Israelites will marry other Israelites, and these laws provide a boundary for how close such unions may be. There is some debate over just what motivates this system of requirements; certainly they enforce a distinction between family affection and erotic love as such, a distinction that protects the well-being of the community, and especially of its vulnerable members. In terms of blood relatives there is also the probability of genetic mutation. These concerns would not be limited to the Israelite theocracy and is therefore also applicable to Christians.

There was a time when such prohibitions seemed unnecessary, even gross. But in today's rapidly degenerate society it becomes more and more necessary to simply say that sex between people in these relationships is wrong and must be stopped immediately, and completely repented of by anyone guilty of such sin. Significantly, sex among people in these relationships is condemned even if they are adults. These are not merely commands against child-adult sexual relationships. For example, it is sin for a man to have sex with his step-mother, even if they are both adults; or it is wrong for a man to have sex with his adopted sister, even if they are consenting adults.

These commands would naturally prohibit the marriage between the parties mentioned, such as marriage between brother and sister or mother and son. Modern legal systems have the responsibility to continue to define marriage based on these commands and if marriage will not be between an unrelated man and woman, who is to say that marriage could not be between a brother and sister? Marriage as a social institution is regarded throughout Scripture as the cornerstone of all other structures, and hence its purity and integrity must be protected at all times. This applies equally to the debate over same sex marriage.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father. The idea is that a husband or wife's nakedness belongs to their spouse, and to no one else. The legal spouse is the one with whom God intends them to be naked and unashamed, in the Genesis 2:25 sense of restoring some of what the curse has taken away.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. In these verses, God condemns sexual relations between many different family relationships:

- Grandparents and grandchildren, either by blood or by marriage.
- Uncles, aunts, and nieces, nephews.
- Parents and the spouses of their children.

- Siblings and the spouses of their other siblings.
- The children of a spouse.
- The sibling of a spouse.

It is your brother's nakedness. The principle is related again. The nakedness of an individual belongs to their spouse and no one else, and it is a violation of God's law to give that nakedness to anyone else, or for anyone else to take it.

A rival to her sister. Some have taken this to be a general prohibition of bigamy, with **to her sister** in the sense of 'to another woman'. Bigamy is indeed outside the creation ideal or Genesis 2:24, but elsewhere in this chapter the Hebrew term for sister simply refers to a biological sister. Further, the laws of Israel do not always require the ethical ideal; often they simply set out the minimum level of civility that the Israelite theocracy can tolerate. Biblical narratives generally show polygamous marriages as unhappy ones, and allow the reader to draw the clear conclusion: e.g. Genesis 29:30-30:2 which shows the disharmony of Jacob's marriage to two sisters, at a time historically prior to this prohibition; and in 1 Samuel 1:2-7, where the two wives of Elkanah cause unhappiness.

¹⁹ You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.

Leviticus 18:19

In her menstrual uncleanness. Leviticus offers no explanation for what motivates this law. Unlike most of the other sexual laws of this chapter, such as the ones dealing with adultery and homosexuality, this law is not repeated as prohibitive in the NT. In view of 15:19-24, the concern is probably the ceremonial uncleanness that the man will contract. In other words, the man who touches a woman in her menstrual condition becomes ritually unclean himself.

²⁰ You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her.

Leviticus 18:20

You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife. This prohibition follows from the seventh commandment: <<*You shall not commit adultery*>> (Exodus 20:14), and is universally applicable.

Defile yourself with her. Although not all uncleanness is sin, all sin makes a person unclean.

²¹ You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 18:21

This refers to the cult of Molech: *<<He defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of Ben-hinnom, so that no one would make a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molech>> (2 Kings 23:10), and: <<They built the high places of Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin>> (Jeremiah 32:35).* The precise nature of the offering of children or offspring to this pagan god is uncertain. It may be that they are being given to the cult of Molech to train to be temple prostitutes, and that is why this passage is listed in a section dealing with sexual prohibitions. On the other hand, Roman authors describe the practice of sacrificing babies by fire in Carthage, a North African city founded by Phœnicians who were part of Canaan, and thus this may indeed refer to this horrific custom.

And so profane the name of your God. It is obvious God would condemn such an abomination. However, this command is here in this context of sexual sins because often, the worship of Molech was a method of infanticide to eliminate illegitimate children, eliminating the fruit of the immoral sexual conduct which God has commanded against.

²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

²³ You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.

Leviticus 18:22-23

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. This prohibited all male homosexual activity, as confirmed by 20:13 and the comments made on Romans 1:26-27. Homosexuality was part of the idolatrous perversions which were allowed in Israel at its times of backsliding: *<<For they also built for themselves high places, pillars, and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree; there were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel>> (1 Kings 14:23-24), <<He put away the male temple prostitutes out of the land, and removed all the idols that his ancestors had made>> (1 Kings 15:12), and: <<The remnant of the male temple prostitutes who were still in the land from the days of his father Asa, he exterminated>> (1 Kings 22:46).* In the larger picture, such activity is utterly at odds with the creation ideal; refer to the comment on Genesis 2:23-24.

It is an abomination. One common argument for overlooking the biblical teaching on homosexuality is for people to claim it is the way God made them. The bible teaches that every single person is a sinner: *<<For there is no distinction, since*

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus>> (Romans 3:22b-24), and that it is imputed from Adam and is not the way God made them. However, it is wrong for the church to focus on any particular sin for the Gospel message is that Jesus died to take away the guilt of sinners. It is not for the church to judge others, simply to teach the necessity for all people to repent of all their sins if they wish to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

You shall not have sexual relations with any animal. This command should surely speak for itself and yet sadly there are still reported cases of such depravity in the world today.

²⁴ Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. ²⁵ Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶ But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you ²⁷ (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); ²⁸ otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. ²⁹ For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. ³⁰ So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 18:24-30

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways. Modern culture often refuses to see any aspect of sexual conduct as defiling. The only measure is immediate pleasure, not right or wrong. However, sexual sin does defile and it does harm. God's laws are given for the good of mankind, not in an attempt to merely test them or subjugate them. Statistically speaking, married couples live longer, get more enjoyment out of sex, have more sex, and are more content than those who are not married, trends that show God's way is the best way!

All the above listed offenses are declared to be abominations to the Lord, and any one of them defiles not just the offender but also the land. God would again make his feelings clear to his people: <<*You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites*>> (Numbers 35:34), and: <<*You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession*>> (Deuteronomy 21:23b).

Otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. The statement is graphic, showing the depth of feeling God has for this issue: <<*You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out*>> (Leviticus 20:22), <<*And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, “The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness”*>> (Ezra 9:10-11), <<*Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her; the Lord has commanded against Jacob that his neighbours should become his foes; Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them*>> (Lamentations 1:17), and: <<*So because you are lukewarm (spiritually useless), and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of My mouth [rejecting you with disgust]*>> (Revelation 3:16 AMP).

For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. God commanded that in Israel, there should be a strong sense of social disapproval, amounting to exile, towards those who broke these laws of sexual morality. It is not that these things were never done in Israel; it is simply that it was clear that society said those things were wrong and should never be allowed. More and more, modern culture refuses to call almost any kind of sexual conduct sin and is willing to tolerate and even justify all sorts of behaviour.