



Leviticus - Chapter Twenty

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

Summary of Chapter Twenty

The rules in this chapter have much in common with those in Chapter 18. This chapter, however, sets forth and stresses the punishments for violating the rules. Special emphasis is laid on Molech worship and mediums and wizards. Almost all the crimes listed are punishable by the death penalty. Only a few are to receive a lesser sentence, such as in vv.17-18, in which the perpetrator is excommunicated.

VII.c Leviticus 20:1-27 - Penalties for Violations of Holiness

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death. ³ I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. ⁴ And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, ⁵ I myself will set my face against them and against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech.

Leviticus 20:1-5

Who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death. Worshippers of Molech ought to be stoned to death. If that is not implemented, the Lord himself punishes them and their followers directly by cutting them off, i.e. by bringing them to a premature death himself; refer to the comment made on 7:11-36.

The worship of the horrific idol Molech was mentioned in Leviticus 18:21. Molech was worshipped by heating a metal statue representing the god until it was red hot, then by placing a living infant on the outstretched hands of the statue, while beating drums drowned out the screams of the child until it burned to death.

I myself will set my face against them and against their family. The penalty for Molech worship was death and if the sentence was not carried out by Israel, God declared that would turn against any such man and against his family. God would prosecute if the legal system of Israel failed to.

Sadly, even a man as great as Solomon at least sanctioned the worship of Molech and built a temple to this idol: <<*Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem*>> (1 Kings 11:7). King Ahaz of Judah gave his own son to Molech: <<*but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even made his son pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel*>> (2 Kings 16:3). One of the great crimes of the northern tribes of Israel was their worship of Molech, leading to the Assyrian captivity: <<*They made their sons and their daughters pass through fire; they used divination and augury; and they sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger*>> (2 Kings 17:17). King Manasseh of Judah gave his son to Molech: <<*He made his son pass through fire; he practised soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger*>> (2 Kings 21:6). Up to the days of King Josiah of Judah, Molech worship continued, because he destroyed a place of worship to that idol: <<*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).

⁶ If any turn to mediums and wizards, prostituting themselves to them, I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people.

Leviticus 20:6

I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people. The Lord carries out the same punishment upon those who consult mediums and wizards. In

this specific passage, God gave nothing for Israel to do regarding the penalty. He simply said that he would execute the penalty. Involvement in such occultic practices invariably separates someone from God. King Saul consulted the medium of En-dor, with just such an anticipated outcome for him: <<*The woman said to him, 'Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?'*>> (1 Samuel 28:9). Saul, who had tried to conceal his identity when he visited the woman, and his sons died in battle not long after he used the services of this medium.

This was the driving force behind the Ephesian church's dramatic renunciation of magical and occultic materials: <<*When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices. A number of those who practised magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed*>> (Acts 19:17-20). Having seen the reality of spiritual warfare, they wanted to draw close to the Lord and remove anything that might hinder that drawing close. John makes it clear there are spirits who are not from God: <<*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world*>> (1 John 4:1-3); such occultic, Jesus-denying spirits must be rejected completely.

⁷ Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God. ⁸ Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am the Lord; I sanctify you.

Leviticus 20:7-8

This is the first time in Leviticus that the Lord is said to be the agent of sanctifying the people. The Lord sanctifies the Israelites by making them his holy people, set apart to be his own, giving them a holy status; now he calls on them to consecrate themselves and be holy, i.e. dedicate themselves to holiness in practice; refer to the comment made on 11:44-45.

The lesson here for Christians is that their walk with God is intended to be a two-way relationship with God. God has sanctified the people through the sacrifice of his Son; the people are consecrated by accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour: <<*It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all*

things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you'>> (Hebrews 2:10-12).

⁹ All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them.

Leviticus 20:9

All who curse father or mother. Cursing one's parents is not merely using condescending or abusive language toward them but refers to a serious breach of a child's duty to honour his or her parents. It means 'to make light of something,' and is the exact opposite of honouring one's parents: <<*Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Exodus 20:12), as also confirmed by Exodus 21:17.

Virtually all commentators agree this is not the outburst of a small child or even an adolescent against their parent, but the settled heart of an adult child against their parent. Such inter-generational warfare was not to be tolerated, and punishable by death. The moral revulsion of such disrespect is confirmed by: <<*If you curse father or mother, your lamp will go out in utter darkness*>> (Proverbs 20:20), and: <<*There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers*>> (Proverbs 30:11).

Shall be put to death. Even considering that this law applied to an adult child who threatened their parent, this was still a severe law. Yet as it was practiced in ancient Israel, it had a built-in protection for the rights of the child, according to: <<*If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid*>> (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). This passage states that the parent did not have the right to carry out this punishment, but they had to bring the accused child before the elders and judges of the city. This meant that the parent, against all contemporary custom, did not have the absolute power of life and death over their children. As a practical matter, the judges of Israel rarely if ever administered the death penalty in such cases, yet the child was held accountable.

Their blood is upon them. The responsibility for the death of the child is theirs alone. There is no blame attached to the parents for raising a disrespectful child.

Introduction to Leviticus 20:10-20

Each of these sexual activities has already been prohibited in Chapter 18. They are repeated here because this section includes the punishment for each of the crimes: capital punishment (vv.10-16), exile (vv.17-18), or barrenness (vv.19-21).

¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.

Leviticus 20:10

Both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. God commanded the death penalty for adultery in ancient Israel. As with previous laws and their penalties, this was because of the exceedingly great social consequences of this sin. God commanded the ultimate penalty to discourage it.

As a practical matter, this death penalty was rarely carried out, as is the case in most of these situations where capital punishment is commanded. This is because any capital crime required two or three witnesses, and the witnesses had to be so sure of what they saw that they were willing to 'cast the first stone', that is, initiate the execution: *<<On the evidence of two or three witnesses the death sentence shall be executed; a person must not be put to death on the evidence of only one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterwards the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 17:6-7). So, particularly in a case of adultery or other sexual sins there would rarely be two eyewitnesses willing to initiate the execution, and so capital punishment would not be carried out. This also aids understanding as to what Jesus was doing when confronting the crowd who brought to him the woman taken in adultery. By their presence and words, they claimed to have caught the woman in the act, but why then did they not bring the guilty man as well? And who was willing to cast the first stone, that is, initiate the execution? (John 8:1-12). If the death penalty was carried out so rarely in ancient Israel, especially for these crimes, what good was it? It communicated loud and clear an ideal that Israel was to live up to, and it made people regard their sin much more seriously. Today, this ideal has been done away with, and people do not care about such sins. In ancient Israel, there was no stronger way to say simply: Adultery is wrong, cursing your parents is wrong, incest is wrong, and even if 'you get away with it,' it is wrong, God regards it as wrong, and society regards it as wrong.

¹¹ The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. ¹² If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them.

Leviticus 20:11-12

The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness. The passage seems most likely to refer to a woman who is the step-mother. However, it is still deemed a serious sin against God's familial requirements and both man and woman could be put to death. The same applies with a man who sleeps with his son's wife as noted in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis Chapter 38.

13 If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. Although God here commanded the death penalty for homosexual practice under the guidelines of evidence in a capital case as described in Deuteronomy 17:6-7, it should be noted this was not a more severe punishment than what was commanded for adultery or incest. Homosexuality is sin, but sin in the same sense other sexual sins are. This law can presumably also be applied same-sex relationships between women.

The church needs to remember that it must speak out against sin but that it is also called to help reconcile sinners to God. Jesus died so that all sinners could be brought back into the presence of God and he taught that it was not for the church to judge others.

¹⁴ If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you.

Leviticus 20:14

If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death. It would seem that the intent here is that a man also has a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law, which God finds abhorrent. It clearly defiles the relationship between a mother and her daughter, who is the man's wife, damaging that relationship as well.

¹⁵ If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. ¹⁶ If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

Leviticus 20:15-16

If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death. Perverse activity between humans and animals is not tolerated by God. The animal is killed not for any fault of its own but because it has been soiled as a creature of God and must be destroyed because of human sin. Creation has been a victim of the fall just as all humans have been: <<*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*>> (Romans 8:19-21).

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 their people; he has uncovered his sister's nakedness, he shall be subject to punishment.

¹⁸ If a man lies with a woman having her sickness and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people. ¹⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister or of your father's sister, for that is to lay bare one's own flesh; they shall be subject to punishment. ²⁰ If a man lies with his uncle's wife, he has uncovered his uncle's nakedness; they shall be subject to punishment; 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.

Leviticus 20:17-21

Sees her nakedness. Refer to the comment made on 18:6-18.

They shall be cut off in the sight of their people. The penalty for these sins does not death as in the previously mentioned sexual sins, but rather to be cut off, that is, exiled or sanctioned within Israel until the sin was atoned for or cleansed through a ceremonial cleansing.

They shall be subject to punishment; they shall die childless. Other aspects of the penalties here belong to God alone; they shall be childless is a penalty only God can apply. It does not imply children will be taken into care but barrenness.

Introduction to Leviticus 20:22-26

This section of exhortations toward holiness concludes Chapters 18-20, as confirmed by vv.22-24 with 18:3-5, and 18:24-28. Moreover, in light of its reference to clean and unclean creatures in v.25, introduced in Chapter 11, this section may conclude not only Chapters 18-20 but Chapters 11-20 as well.

²² 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. ²³ You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred 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; I have separated you from the peoples. ²⁵ You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. ²⁶ You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

Leviticus 20:22-26

So that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. God pleaded with Israel to obey him, that the same fate would not befall Israel. Unfortunately, eventually it did, and the land did cast out Israel, resulting in the exile both for the northern nation of Israel by the Assyrians and the southern nation of Judah by the Babylonians.

You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. The Canaanites who presently lived in the Promised Land were deeply involved in these sins, and because of that, God would use Israel to judge them and drive them out.

A land flowing with milk and honey is a common scriptural description of Canaan, for example: <<*When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month*>> (Exodus 13:5), <<*Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people*>> (Exodus 33:3), <<*And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this*

is its fruit>> (Numbers 13:27). Egyptian texts such as the Story of Sinuhe also characterise Canaan as a productive, fertile land.

These laws were not only given so that Israel could possess the land; they were given so that God could possess Israel: You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine. Sometimes it is thought that what God mostly wants is obedience; but there is a sense in which a believer can give God their obedience without giving him themselves, such as perhaps the Pharisees did. What God really wants is his people total love and worship, and if that is truly given, the obedience will follow.

²⁷ A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them.

Leviticus 20:27

In v.6, the one who consults a medium or a wizard was to be put to death. In this verse, the wizard or the medium is to be put to death. Why this verse appears in this place in the text is puzzling; it may be because the act receives capital punishment, as do most of the other activities of the section. However, it clearly contradicts the idea of total worship directed to God.

Their blood is upon them. This is a reminder that it is a much more serious thing to lead others into sin than for believers to sin themselves, and so the penalty is greater, just as Jesus said: *<<If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea>>* (Matthew 18:6).