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## The Sanctity of Sex Leviticus 18:1-30

**Intro:** In all the previous chapters (1-17), the majority of the laws and regulations have focused on matters directly related to the tabernacle: sacrifices made there; procedures for public worship there; procedures for addressing impurity so as not to pollute it; yearly ritual that cleansed it; necessity of performing sacrifices properly there. Now, ch 18-20 turn to matters related more generally to teaching the Israelites how to live as a kingdom of priests in the Promised Land. Ch 18 and 20 focus on the unholy practices of the current inhabitants of Canaan, practices that must be avoided; while ch 19 addresses unholy practices to be avoided and holy practices to perform. If the Israelites obey the Lord in these things, they will prove themselves to be His holy people (20:26) and will enjoy life under His favor and blessing (18:5).

As we will see, over and over, each chapter emphasizes that the Lord's people must reflect His holiness by closely following His commands. Doing this would benefit Israel in 3 important ways: 1) it would protect Israel from suffering the same judgment that would be coming on the current inhabitants of Canaan; 2) it would enable Israel to enjoy life under the Lord's favor and blessing; 3) it would allow Israel to reflect the Lord's holy character to the watching world. As for ch 18 and 20 in particular, both contain laws that address illicit sexual relationships and illicit worship practices but they present them in differing formats. Ch 18 frames the laws as outright prohibitions (you shall not do such and such) while ch 20 presents them as case laws that focus on the penalty (If someone does *x*, then *y* is the result).

Our text today (18) has a specific structure. It begins with the Lord reminding Israel that He is their God. It then lists the laws that forbid various illicit practices of the inhabitants of Canaan: sexual immorality and pagan worship. It then concludes with the Lord reminding Israel once again that He is their God. So the chapter begins and ends with the Lord's affirmation, I am the Lord your God (2, 30). This phrase is important in that it establishes Israel's obedience to the Lord in the context of their covenant relationship with the Lord, the One who not only redeemed them from a life of slavery

but also called them to reflect His holy character to the world (1-5).

1 – 20 of the 27 chapters of **Leviticus** begin with a similar statement. It occurs so often that we tend to just read over it without realizing the important implications it represents. It's appearance here at the beginning of **ch18** is especially important. This chapter's one of the most extensive and direct passages in the Bible that reflects God's clearly stated will and commands regarding the expression of human sexuality. Thus, we need to understand and never forget that these are the very words of God and as such, they have immeasurably more authority than the words, opinions, theories, desires, feelings, longings or wishes of any other person or organization. I realize that this is not a politically correct stance to take in our day and age but the truth is, politics and politicians are rarely correct and when it's all said and done, I think I will survive being canceled by modern society but I wouldn't survive being canceled by God.

We know that as a whole, Christians are no longer under the law (**Rom 6:14-15; Gal 5:18**). So, while obedience to God's law is not the basis of our right standing before Him, the principles of the law still remain useful. One important use of the law is that it serves as something of a guardrail for humanity, revealing to us the heart and desire of God for humanity in general and for His people in particular. This chapter appears in the middle of commands that were uniquely directed to Israel, the only nation or kingdom that recognized Yahweh as their King and covenant God. Yet, **ch18** still expresses the unwavering mind and heart of God regarding human sexuality. This is evident in the many NT commands to abstain from sexual immorality and uncleanness. When the NT authors wrote on these subjects, they did so from a context that understood the commands of **ch18** and one of the important passages that defined sexual immorality and moral impurity.

**2-5** – These verses accomplish 3 things. 1<sup>st</sup>, they establish that Israel is to obey the Lord because He rescued them to be His very own. Variation of the phrase I am the Lord your God are repeated 3 times (**2, 4, 5**), evoking a whole series of related ideas: I am the Lord your God, who has redeemed you; who has set you apart to be Mine; who has come to dwell in your midst as your God. The Israelites were no longer slaves of men; they were now children of the redeeming King; a King to whom they were now to respond to with loving and reverent obedience.

2<sup>nd</sup>, these verses explain that such obedience meant being careful to follow the Lord's decrees, instead of following the wicked practices of Egypt (where they used to live) or of Canaan (where the Lord was bringing them to live [3-4]). There were certain practices in Egypt and Canaan that were forbidden to the Israelites and they fall into two main categories: illicit sexual activities and illicit worship practices. Israel, much like the modern Body of Christ, was constantly inundated with example after example of unacceptable behavior that was accepted as normal by the society they were rescued from and the societies they were moving towards. The Lord is providing them a beneficial alternative to the destructive practices they were all too familiar with.

3<sup>rd</sup>, v5 explains the benefit of keeping the Lord's laws: the person who does them shall live by them. This isn't saying that the person who does them will live in accordance with them, that's redundant. How could it be otherwise. No, what it's saying is that the person who obeys them will enjoy life under the Lord's favor and blessing by means of keeping them. The Bible regularly connects obeying the Lord's commands with living in the sphere of His favor. This is because His commands are like the borders of His kingdom; those who stay within those borders proclaim their allegiance to Him as King and remain within the sphere of His blessing. If you chose to step outside the borders of His kingdom, you forfeit the blessings associated with His laws. Ex-pats can no longer claim the rights of citizenship.

Having said this, it's crucial that we understand that v5 does not mean the Israelites could earn their relationship with the Lord by their obedience. The larger context of Leviticus makes it clear that the Lord gave Israel the law after He redeemed them. The law merely regulates this relationship, it doesn't create it! Just as in the NT, relationship with the Lord is always grounded in His gracious redemption. Naturally, as in any relationship, faithfulness to the other parties is necessary in order to continue in fellowship with them but faithfulness is never seen as a way to gain relationship with the Lord. It's always seen as a right response to the gracious Lord who has rescued His people and given them His law, that they might walk in fellowship with Him and reflect His good and holy character in all the earth.

**6-17** – While many modern societies have an aversion to marrying relatives, especially blood relatives, such was not the case for many ancient

societies, which were often clan based and encouraged marriage within the clan to strengthen it and protect its property. Still, even within the clan, there were certain relatives that were considered too close for sexual relations. Those who crossed these boundaries brought defilement upon themselves and the land. Such defilement was inappropriate for the Lord's holy people so the laws given here make it crystal clear to Israel which relatives were off limits for sexual relations. We're not going to go through each verse in detail because they all point to a prohibition on what is commonly known as incest, though it extends it further than even some modern societies do today.

The phrase in v6 to uncover...nakedness is a Hebrew idiom for engaging in sexual activity. There are a few idioms for sex in Hebrew but this one always refers specifically to illicit sexual relations or more generally, to a public exposing of nakedness resulting in shame on those exposed. Either way, the connotation is strongly negative and could be translated as shameful sexual relations. As such, this passage isn't limited to a prohibition against marriage in these instances but extends especially to any individual occurrence that might take place, whether consensual or coerced.

In these instances, the sexual relationship is shameful because the person is considered to be a close relative. The text doesn't explain why it is shameful but obedience to these laws provided at least 2 practical benefits: 1) they helped to protect the family's weakest members: children would be protected from their parents and women from their closets male relatives who may live in the same household or very close by. In Israelite society, several generations would have dwelt in close proximity with one another, with some estimates saying a household could contain 50-100 people; not in a single dwelling but grouped close together like what we would call a compound.

2) These laws helped to protect and preserve the larger family unit. Think about it: a divorce between a husband and wife is painful enough; divorce between a closely related husband and wife would be even more so. In this nightmare scenario, other close relatives would no doubt have to take opposite sides and the resulting rift would split the larger family group into splintered, opposing factions.

v7-17 identify who counts as a close relative: Mother or Step-mother; an

Aunt (paternal or maternal) and a paternal Uncle's wife; a Sister, Step-sister or fraternal sister-in-law; a Daughter, Daughter-in-law or a wife's daughter (step); and finally, a Granddaughter or wife's Granddaughter (step). The focus of the passage is that these relationships are off limits because the woman is a close relative. We will discuss the implications of just a few of these.

The first prohibition is in v7 that states a mother is off limits but v8 provides the rationale: it is your father's nakedness. The meaning behind this is not hard to track. Gen 2:24, the premier statement on God's intention for marriage says, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Your mother is the one to whom your father exposes his nakedness in sexual relations, so she now has become one flesh with him, his own flesh and blood, and thus, your own flesh and blood – she is off limits because she's a close relative.

The prohibition in v14 is against a paternal Uncle's wife. This is important because a father's brother was considered to be an especially close relative. In terms of inheritance, he came directly after the father's own children. A man was thus forbidden from committing a shameful act by having sexual relations with a woman who is his father's brother's flesh and blood – a close relative. V15 prohibits a man from having sexual relations with his daughter-in-law, which would have been a great mercy to her. It would effectively protect her from becoming a sexual slave to multiple men in the larger household.

Clearly, the prohibition of v16 only applied if the brother was still living, which would be the most common situation. But, if the brother were to die without having any children of his own, the law of levirate marriage would be instituted and the next brother would be expected to marry his brother's widow and the first son born to them would carry on the deceased brother's name in Israel. This was also a great benefit to the woman, who might otherwise be stuck in the financially precarious position of widowhood. Since she had not yet produced a son, most men might assume she couldn't and would thus be hesitant to marry her. This was just one way the Lord provided for widows in Israel.

**18-20** – These verses address other types of improper sexual relations. The 1<sup>st</sup>, on its face, prohibits a man from marrying his wife's sister while his wife



is living. Now, just from a rational stand point, no matter how much they love each other, sisters have, by definition, spent the earliest years of their lives engaged in sibling rivalry. Their love for each other is only matched by their mutual jealousy, annoyance and, in some cases, utter disgust for each other. And now you, Johnny-come-lately, want to insert yourself right smack in the middle of this ongoing skirmish without any clue as to the emotional maelstrom your stepping into. We wish you well, but they're going to eat you alive, Jacob.

Some scholars see this as a prohibition against polygamy in general. Their argument leans heavily on Hebrew idioms and definitions but a wise man would let common sense prevail. 2 women in a house don't need to have grown up together to become rivals – it's to be expected, not because they are women, mind you; it's because they are human. We see the complete chaos that existed in Jacob's home life because of polygamy and we can get a hint of it in the case of Elihu in [I Sam 1](#). We don't know his other wife's name but Hannah was clearly miserable because of her. Of course, Solomon is the classic cautionary tale on polygamy: if 1 wife won't satisfy, then neither will 700!

The prohibition of [v19](#) has been discussed. Sexual relations with a menstruating woman, who was ritually impure, would make the man equally ritually impure, thus increasing the chances of spreading ritual impurity in the camp. [V20](#) restates the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment and is not limited to someone who lives close by. The term neighbor refers to anyone within the covenant community of Israel. It also covers sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman. These types of relationships resulted in being defiled. So far in Leviticus, the impurities that are mentioned refer to ritual uncleanness. The word defiled refers to impurity that comes from moral wrongdoing. This type of impurity was forbidden, couldn't be removed by ritual means and leads to further penalty. Acts that caused such impurity ruptured one's relationship with the Lord and were to be avoided at all costs.

**21-25** – [v21](#) prohibits the illicit worship practice of child sacrifice. Like sexual immorality, idolatry was very defiling, both to the sinner and to the land. The worship of Molek involved giving him one's children; dedicating them to him as his possession. This was done by means of sacrifice, literally: causing to go into the fire. There's written evidence that confirm that the Canaanites regularly burned their children as sacrifices, whether to Molek or other false

gods. Often, this was done with children born illegitimately as a result of illicit sexual unions performed as part of pagan worship rituals. These poor children were then callously used to perpetuate the worship of a demonically cruel god. Worshiping Molek added murder to idolatry and the Lord strictly forbade Israel from practicing such horrors. Besides, if Israel were to sacrifice their children to Molek, they wouldn't just be sacrificing their children, they'd be sacrificing the Lord's children and the Lord is profaned when His children are sacrificed to other gods.

V22 seems to be the only text that modern society has a problem with but there's no other honest way to understand it than just as it is written. Again, [Gen 1:27-28](#) and [2:24](#) make it abundantly clear that sexual relations are meant to occur between a man and a woman, not between 2 men or, by implication, 2 women. The Lord's design was that sexuality was to only be expressed in marital, heterosexual relationships. Take away either of those qualifications and sex, the beautiful gift from God, becomes an ugly, defiling sin against God that rejects His purposes and will.

In fact, the text declares this to be an abomination, a detestable act. It is detestable because it goes the moral fiber of God's created world. Much like idolatry, which is a denial of humanity's Creator, or cheating others financially, which is a denial of the value of those created in God's image; homosexual practice is a denial of the Lord's very intent for sexuality; a point the NT underscores in many passages ([Rom 1:24-27](#); [I Cor 6:9-11](#); [I Tim 1:10](#); [Rev 22:15](#))

Of course, Christians must take care not to hate people because they regard their sin as especially ugly – no matter what the sin is because Jesus can forgive any sin and He will forgive every sin that is repented of. By the same token, Christians must also take equal care not to love or approve of sins because they regard those who practice these sins as especially good. Sadly, this is the response of too many "ministers" today. It's disappointing to see even normally solid Bible teachers contort their doctrines and exposition of the Word to accommodate the new reality in modern society. The answer for people enslaved by sexual perversion is not to tell them that they're OK; they're not. To tell someone that their homosexual behavior is approved by God and is compatible with the Christian life is nothing less than a serious and condemnable act of pastoral malpractice.

V23 is a prohibition against bestiality, which needs no explanation other than that it is called a perversion. The word refers to a mixing up or confusing of something; in this context it refers to mixing up/confusing of sexual relations. The Lord designed sexuality not just to be expressed in heterosexual relationships, but in human relationships. To deny this is to deny His intent for creation and thus, to deny His position as Creator.

V24-25 says failure to obey the Lord will result in defilement of both the people and the land. This was the condition of the Canaanite nations: they had defiled themselves with their sins and the Lord was going to drive them out before the Israelites, either by filling them with terror so they fled or delivering them into the hands of Israel to be destroyed in war. But their sins also defiled the land, which would vomit them out. Sexual perversions are like disease germs; they make a society and a nation sick. Then the land itself becomes sick and it must vomit out its filthy people the way a stomach vomits out poison. The sins prohibited in our text are not just family-killing sins; they are, in fact, civilization-killing sins. Tragically, Israel would discover later in her history just how devastating these sins are.

26-30 – Since all of these detestable sins would pollute the land, the laws forbidding them applied to all who dwelt in that land: native-born or resident alien. Anyone insisting on following the practices of the pagan nations would be cut off from Israel. This means that, like the nations they emulated, they would either be driven from the land or they would suffer premature death. This punishment is presented in stark contrast to the life of favor and blessing experienced by those who follow the Lord's decrees.

V30 ties together all the themes of this chapter: a life of loving and reverent obedience is the only appropriate response for those who have been redeemed by the holy King

Do you live in the kingdom of God? Do you walk within the borders of His kingdom, obeying His commands, submitting to His will, fulfilling His purposes for your life? If not, then you stand in direct opposition to and rebellion against the Lord that created you. You have to know that such a position cannot end well for you. You might say that you've never done any of the things mentioned in this text; that's fine, just understand that it only takes 1 sin to be classified as a sinner and every sin is an affront to the holiness of God.



Even if you have committed one of these sins, they all can be forgiven and you can become one of God's own children by repenting of your sin and inviting Jesus Christ to come into your life, appropriating His blood to cleanse you from all sin and then allowing His Holy Spirit to empower you to forsake your old lifestyle and walk in faith and obedience to His Word. If you've never done this, you can do it today! Would you like to trade certain judgment for the chance to enjoy a life under the favor and blessing of a loving and gracious God? 😊