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## The Sanctity of Judgment Leviticus 20:1-27

**Intro:** As we come to the conclusion of this section of Leviticus (18-20), a section that deals with moral purity as it relates to a careful adherence to the Lord's commands, we steel ourselves for more of the same. But, while ch18-19 deal specifically with personal purity in the area of human sexuality (18) and personal holiness in the area of real-life interactions between Israel's covenant King and the covenant community; the focus of ch20 is not so much to revisit the laws and commands that have already been stated but to explain the penalties that will result from disregarding those laws and commands. While some of these penalties may seem harsh, we must remember that the same Lord who declared the precepts also declared the penalties, so they are always righteous and just.

There are a couple of differences between ch20 and the previous 2 chapters. First, while ch18 is addressed to the individual offender of a divine precept and ch19 is focused on the holiness of individual Israelites; ch20 is addressed to the Israelite community as a whole. The entire covenant community was responsible for seeing that violations of the Law were not ignored and that the violators received their just punishments. Second, while ch19 seems to list its laws randomly, our text has a definite structure. There are 3 definite sections that deal with crime and punishment: 1) penalties for illicit worship and occult practices (1-6); 2) penalties for dishonoring parent and sexual immorality (9-21); 3) penalties against those practicing divination (27).

What is significant about this structure is that, inserted in the text between each section is an exhortation for Israel to be holy (7-8, 22-26) and it is these 2 exhortations that provide the rationale for the rest of the chapter. It's precisely because the Lord has called the Israelites to reflect His holy character in the world that they must walk in His ways. If they will do this, they will live out their privilege as a kingdom of priests; a kingdom that was meant to both minister to and minister on behalf of all the nations of the world.

1-6 – We saw the prohibition of the worship of Molech in 18:21; a horrific

practice in which parents sacrificed their children to this wicked idol as a way of dedicating them to it. It is mentioned again here and expanded to reflect not only the penalty for committing such a horrific crime but also the community's responsibility in bringing the offender or offenders to justice. To worship Molech was a capital offense, punishable by death and in the original Hebrew text this is a very emphatic construction meaning: dying, he shall die. There will be no last minute call from the Governor!

Molech worship was so terrible that the Lord declares His personal opposition towards such offenders, "I will set My face against that man, and will cut him off..." The verb cut off clearly refers to destruction. Some scholars believe it merely refers to death while others see it as a threat of the Lord's opposition in the afterlife. I think the differing opinions are unnecessary because a person who is cut off by the Lord in this life shouldn't hold out any good hope for what will happen in the life to come.

The primary focus of this passage is to establish that it's the responsibility of the community to report the crime and to execute the punishment. The execution was to be carried out by stoning, performed by the community itself. After all, Molech worship was a crime against the community and as such, it would be punished by the community. Of course, it would be very tempting not to do so (4). Families In Israel lived in close proximity so executing someone from the community often meant executing a close relative or friend. But here's the thing, loyalty to the redeeming, covenant King was to take precedent over any earthly loyalties.

Now, if the community does not carry out the death penalty, the Lord assures Israel that He Himself will see that justice is done, not just against the perpetrator, but against his family as well, which may very well be the majority of the "community" that refused to act against this sin. To ignore great evil is to allow it and that itself is evil. This call to mind the testimony of Deitrich Bonehoffer, a German pastor who ministered in Nazi Germany. Here was a pastor who was outspoken in his opposition to the Nazis, fearlessly speaking out against Hitler's dictatorship and the Jewish holocaust. He had many opportunities to escape Germany; but deliberately chose to continue his work until he was eventually arrested and later executed. Bonehoffer stood against evil and it cost him his life but his love for the Lord and for the truth was more important to him than his own life.

V6 describes the penalty for seeking out the services of occult practitioners. Mediums promoted themselves as ones who could speak with the dead. A “familiar spirit,” thought to be the spirit of the dearly departed was, in fact, just a demon, was supposed to be bound to appear at the call of the medium, by use of magical rites. It’s very likely that these sins were done secretly, so the Lord doesn’t hold the community responsible for executing judgment but He affirms His own personal opposition to those who commit this crime.

Involvement in such occultic practices will always separate someone from God. This truth was the driving force behind the Ephesian church’s dramatic rejection of magic and occultic materials in Acts 19:17-20. They were willing to destroy all of their expensive magic paraphernalia because their hearts were turned to God through Christ. Since their hearts were turned to God, they automatically turned away from dealing in the occult.

7-8 – Here again, for what seems like the 100<sup>th</sup> time, the Lord exhorts Israel to be holy. Are they really that dense? Or maybe holy living is really that important! We can readily see the importance of holy living just by comparing the results of keeping the law versus rejecting the law. In Num 6:24-26 we have the high priestly blessing, “May the Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord makes His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Contrast that with having the Lord set His face against you. Which would you rather? The correct choice is obviously clear. All Israel had to do was consecrate themselves; that is, to set themselves aside to follow the Lord and obey His commands. As they do this, the Lord will sanctify them.

This presents 2 important aspects of our own ongoing walk with the Lord. In His normal way of dealing with His people, whether it’s His chosen people Israel or His children, the Lord will not force His people to be separated unto Him. Yes, it is both our calling and our new nature but the Lord will not force it. He does the work of sanctifying His people, but He does it in and through our own cooperating efforts and yielded wills. The Holy Spirit is a gentleman. He will only work where He is allowed. He will not sanctify us in spite of us but only in cooperation with us.

9 – The following verses (9-21) list the penalties for various sins of immorality. V9 is the penalty for breaking the 5<sup>th</sup> command. This is not

describing the outburst of a small child, or even a teenager, against their parents. This sin deals with the cursing or dishonoring of parents by an adult child. Cursing equates to wishing the deity to bring harm on someone and dishonoring could simply be a total rejection of the parents' covenant instruction, which is tantamount to a rejection of the covenant King. Either way, this refers to an adult child, still living at home, openly rebelling against their parents and their Lord.

Such inter-generational warfare was not to be tolerated and was punishable by death. This was not just a crime against the Lord, it was also a crime against the family and the community. But, while the punishment for this crime was death, [Deut 21:19](#) tells us that in these instances, the parents didn't have the right to carry out the penalty. Instead, a court would decide the case, thus giving the son or daughter full access to the law. If they are convicted, they would bear the guilt of their own blood being shed, not those who carried out the due penalty.

**10** – The following verses all focus on sexual immorality and the penalties that result from them. Adultery was forbidden in the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment and its punishment makes it clear that it was a very egregious wrong, because it was both an act of treachery against one's spouse as well as a [sin](#) against God, who created and instituted marriage between man and woman as the cornerstone of a stable human society. Adultery murders marriage and the Lord commanded the ultimate penalty to discourage its practice.

The penalty makes it clear that this law addresses consensual sex as both parties were to be punished the same. In cases of rape, the woman is not held liable. As a practical matter, this penalty was rarely carried out because any capital crime required the testimony of 2 or 3 eye witnesses and these witnesses had to be so certain of what they saw that they that they would be willing to cast the first stone – initiate the execution ([Deut 17:6-7](#)). So, particularly in the case of adultery (or other sexual sins) there would rarely be 2 eyewitnesses, so the death penalty couldn't be carried out.

This also helps us to understand what Jesus did when He confronted the religious leaders who brought the woman taken in adultery before Him for judgment in John 8. The entire episode was predicated on the premise that they had caught the woman in the very act of adultery. The glaring problem was that, as we all know, it takes 2 to tango and they had failed to also

present the guilty man! So, right away, their request for a judgment didn't pass the smell test. When Jesus gave them the option of initiating the execution, no one was willing to identify themselves as a witness. In their attempt to catch Jesus in His words, they exposed their own sin and the hardness of their hearts.

**11-16** – These passages deal with the sins of incest, homosexuality and bestiality. The main reason they're grouped together here is because of their penalty – death. Incest, in all its various forms, is a sin that murders families and wasn't to be permitted. Homosexuality and bestiality were regarded as the same as these other family-killing sins. Notice the extreme words used to characterize these extreme sins: perversion, abomination and wickedness. These descriptions serve to underscore just how inappropriate these relationships were in light of God's revealed will.

While we may assume that the penalty will be death by stoning, v14 adds a twist, they shall be burned with fire... Now, rather than being burned at the stake, the guilty were most likely stoned to death and then their corpses were burned. This act would represent their complete removal from the community of the Lord's people: not even their bones are left. In today's vernacular, this would be the same as having no tombstone or being buried in an unmarked grave. The penalty's severity suggests that this type of incestuous relationship was particularly vile. As with adultery, the offenders would all be responsible for their own untimely deaths.

**17** – This verse marks a change. Not only are the crimes arranged in a purposeful order but so are the penalties. The penalties are listed in order from most severe to least severe: death, being cut off, and childless. This particular incestuous relationship carries the idea of disgrace or shame and is associated with evil behavior. In this case, the couple would publicly shame their respective families. Being cut off likely equates to be exiled from the covenant community of Israel and since the relationship was consensual, so the shame would be mutual.

**18-19** – We have discussed this scenario in a previous study and the distinction was made between knowingly and unknowingly engaging in sexual activity during menstruation. If it was accidental, it still rendered the man ritually impure and that impurity needed to be addressed. If, as in the present case, it was intentional then those knowingly engaging in this were



to be exiled from Israel, most likely because they have proven themselves to be unconcerned with increasing the risk of spreading ritual impurity throughout the camp. Their complete disregard for the ritual purity and continued safety of the covenant community rendered them unfit to continue to live in that blessed community. Though the penalty for v19 isn't given, we can assume it's the same as the previous: **exile**.

**20-21** – More incestuous relationships are presented here but the penalty for these is not death or even exile; the penalty is that the couple will die childless. This means that when the couple eventually dies, they will not have any descendants to carry on their name within the covenant community of Israel. In this society, dying childless was seen as a real tragedy. In a sense, dying childless was a form of death in itself because the guilty party knew that their name would become extinct.

God's intention for sexual (ie: marital) relations was that they were supposed to be built on faithfulness and steadfast love but the illegitimate sexual relationships referred to in ch20 are instead, all characterized by shame and disgrace. They all represent as distortion of the covenantal love that should exist in marital relationships. God establish marriage for the benefit of humanity and has decreed sex to be enjoy within that relationship only. Sexuality that adheres to the parameters set by God is both an enjoyment and a blessing but any sexual activity that rejects God's design and purpose brings shame, disgrace and, eventually, destruction.

**22-26** – Here again, the importance of obeying the Lord's commands is emphasized and the text does so by focusing on the Lord's just response against those nations who had committed these great evils: they would be driven out of the land before Israel and by Israel. The Canaanites were deeply involved in these sins and because of that, the land was about to vomit them out. It was now in Israel's best interest to follow the Lord's commands so that the same fate would not happen to them.

The Lord was giving them a land flowing with milk and honey. This was a common description of Canaan in scripture. Milk came from the herds and flocks and was an important food source that provided essential nutrients. Honey refers to either the product of bees or the honey of certain fruits. A land flowing with these things was richly blessed, having everything necessary and desirable for abundant living. This was especially important

in the ancient world, where life didn't depend on the local grocery store but on the fruitfulness of the land right outside your door.

The importance of Israel's obedience is also emphasized by the fact that their God had specifically set them apart from the nations to be His own people. Of course, one aspect of how Israel lived out this divine calling was in the way they set apart clean animals from unclean animals. This line seems to be out of place since diet hasn't been an issue in any of the most recent chapters. But, it's probably mentioned here by way of analogy. Just as Israel showed they were the Lords by making distinctions between clean and unclean animals, so also were they to show that they were the Lords by making distinctions between morally clean and unclean actions in their everyday lives.

The Apostle Paul would apply this same rationale to the believer's life in [1 Cor 10:31](#) when he said, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." We, as NT believers, are called to uphold the same standard as Israel (be holy) for the same purpose as Israel (to reveal the character of Christ to the world). Israel was chosen because they had and still have an important role in God's unfolding plan for the ages. They were chosen to receive the covenant, to receive God's revealed Word and to bring forth the Messiah. They were **not** chosen for eternal salvation, in the sense that being an Israelite guaranteed their salvation. Our text begs to differ, clearly.

In [Acts 13](#), Paul and Barnabas were separated by the Holy Spirit for a special work He had planned for them to do. There is a real sense in which every believer is separated unto God for His purpose and plan; [Eph 2:10](#) says as much. Think of what an honor this is! To be for God Himself: to do His work, to fulfill His will – to bring Him pleasure!

[27](#) – v6 revealed the penalty for those who *seek the services* of mediums - exile; this verse identifies what's to happen to the mediums themselves – death. The greater penalty was because the medium or the one who dealt with familiar spirits (demons) in Israel led others into sin. It is a much more serious thing to lead others into sin than to sin ourselves and so the penalty is greater.

Israel, as a nation, had been redeemed out of slavery by the Lord and had

been separated from all the other nations of the world as the Lord's unique possession. They belonged to a holy God and as such, they were to show the world His holy character by following His just and holy commands. As we have seen, this was especially true in even the most basic matters of life: worship; sexuality and family relations. We've looked at the laws that were to be obeyed (18-90) and now we've seen the penalties that result when those laws are broken. These penalties, which are severe, were meant to teach the Israelites at least 3 spiritual principles. 1) sin is a serious matter. These laws came from the King of heaven, the one who created this world and its inhabitants to experience His kingdom of love, justice and goodness. That's why breaking His law is so serious; It's treason against the King and violence against the love, justice and goodness He intends for His creation.

2) sin among the Lord's people must be addressed. Whether in the OT or NT, believers are the King's ambassadors to the world. If an ambassador fails in their duties, the King's message is never heard, leaving the nations or your personal sphere of influence with little to no testimony of their gracious Creator.

3) those that continue in sin will experience the Lord's justice. Even if the covenant community failed to discipline the unfaithful covenant member, the Lord Himself would ensure that the discipline would happen. Moses would later warn Israel of this truth when he told them in Num 32:23, "Be sure your sins will find you out." This is not just an OT principle because Paul would later reiterate it for NT Christians in Gal 6:7, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."

Of course, these penalties were never God's intent for humanity. He created us to experience His favor and blessing as we walked in close fellowship with Him in His ways. Though sin has separated the majority of humanity from God, that same close fellowship and the divine favor and blessing that flows from it can still be experienced by those who answer Jesus' call to take up His yoke and learn from Him how to walk in God's ways and thus, find rest for their souls. If you come to Jesus and accept Him as your savior, He will not only immediately justify you before the Father but he will also continually sanctify you, transforming you more and more into His image. Eventually, He will also glorify you, when you stand before Him in eternity. 😊