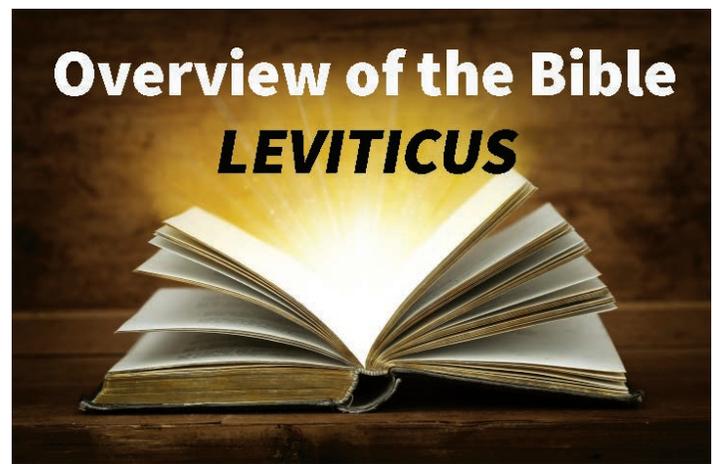


LEVITICUS:  
Sexual Purity  
*Leviticus 18-20 – Lesson 24*  
Wednesday, October 21, 2020



Chapter 18 is replete with the phrase *"you shall not."* Chapter 19 is equally filled with the phrase *"you shall,"* as well as *"you shall not"* and *"do not."* Thus, the idea of holiness is formulated both negatively and positively. Chapter 20 contains the penalties for the infringement of any of the illicit relationships covered in chapter 18 (sexual) and 19 (magical). These penalties include being put to death by the community, or by God as the community defaults, for worshiping of Molech (20:2-5), or being put to death by God for engaging in prohibited magical practices (20:6); for illicit sexual unions the penalty may be death at the hands of the community (*"they shall be put to death"* [20:10-16]), death brought by God (*"they shall be cut off"* [20:17-19]), or childlessness (*"they shall die childless"* [20:20-21]). It is possible that when the text says that God *"cuts off"* somebody (vv. 3, 5, 6), it is not referring to God terminating someone's life. This is especially true in verses 2 and 3 where after we read that *"the people of the land shall stone them to death"* (v. 2), and we find this, *"And I will cut them off from the people"* (v. 3). Hence, being cut off may be different from being *"put to death,"* the first being done by God, the second by humans. To be *"cut off"* then would either be (a) to lose one's posterity (Ps. 109:13) or (b) to be denied life in the hereafter and reunion with one's ancestors.

Once again, the emphasis is that the Israelites' conduct is to be morally superior to that of their pagan neighbors (18:3). Israel does not look to Egypt or Canaan for sexual standards. Unbelievers do not establish the moral criteria by which the believers live in community.

Most of ch.18 is devoted to a listing of incestuous relationships (vv. 6-18), but other sexual offenses are also included (vv.19-23): intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period (v. 19); adultery (v. 20); giving children as a sacrifice to Molech, a deity worshiped by some of Israel's neighbors (v. 21); male homosexuality (v. 22); bestiality (v. 23).

We note that at least two of the prohibited relationships in vv. 6-18 were not always prohibited. Leviticus 18:9 states, *"You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister."* Yet Abraham was married to Sarah, his half-sister (Gen. 20:12). Leviticus 18:18 states, *"You shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is yet alive."* Yet this is precisely what Jacob did (Gen. 29:16-30). Obviously, what was once legal has become illegal.

Leviticus moves without fanfare from its pronouncement against illicit sex (ch. 18) to a pronouncement about positive holiness (ch. 19). Basically, ch.19 is a collection of ethical and ritual laws, many of which conclude with the phrase *"I am the Lord your God."* This phrase is used fourteen times in this chapter (as opposed to five times in ch. 18 and only two in ch. 20). The repeated use of this phrase underscores the fact that these laws are rooted in God and in His holy character. They are not a product of some assembly or theological clique.

Holiness is defined in this chapter in terms of social holiness. That is to say, the demonstration of holiness will emerge most clearly in one's relationships. Little in this chapter is private and monastic. Holiness covers relationships to parents (v. 3), to children (v. 29), to God (vv. 4-8, 26-28, 30-31), to the poor and the stranger (vv. 9-10, 15, 33-34), to women (vv. 20-22), to one's neighbor or kin (vv. 11-18, 35-36), to the aged (v. 32), to animals (v. 19), to the soil (vv. 19, 23-25), and to the disabled (v. 14).

Each section denotes a different response from the holy life: obedience to parents and God; respect for the elderly; meeting the physical needs of the poor; telling the truth; rising above temptations of injustice.

The most memorable verse in this chapter is v. 18b, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" This is quoted nine times in the New Testament (Matt. 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mk. 12:31, 33; Lk. 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Ja. 2:8).