

Egyptians and Canaanites, Yahweh and Holiness  
Leviticus 18

Turn to Leviticus 18 please. Egyptians and Canaanites, Yahweh and holiness. Let's not ever think that sexuality is a problem out there in the world. God gave us all sexual urges, and at times they are very strong, and if we are going to live in God's ways, sexual desires sometimes take stern managing by us.

I went to high school in the late 60s and early 70s, and in those days the girls wore short skirts. All those lovely young legs! I discovered urges in me that I was not expecting, and hardly knew what to do. I was pretty determined in those days to live in God's ways, but it was a fight.

I remember out walking one evening when I was 16 or so, and telling God that if a young woman was there and available, I did not think I would be able to honour him. I would probably make full use of my chance. Just so God knew what was going on. And those girls were not evil either. That's just life in the world.

I was far too reserved to ever talk about this, but I have heard of young believing men who went to their Christian leaders and told them about their struggle, and they were told to get their minds out of the gutter. That's terrible! My mind was not in the gutter, I wanted to follow God. I was feeling exactly what God made me to feel in that situation.

I did not hear this in a conversation with the young men, I heard them from the leaders themselves, telling me over a lunch meal how they had responded to these honest young men. I spent the next 20 minutes urging these leaders to get their heads out of the sand. The discouraging thing is that they were really surprised by what I said, they had never heard anyone tell them that sexual urges among honourable young men and women can be very strong.

I did not marry for another ten years, and I was never sexually active during that time. It can be done, but we have to mean business. Jesus never said following him would be easy. God made us with sexual urges, he likes us that way, they are very good. He also told us what to do with them, and his ways are also very good. These things challenge us who want to live holy lives.

How do we become holy?

Our text is Leviticus 18, where God tells Moses which sexual relations they will avoid. The same part of Leviticus, chapters 20-22, tell us how we got to be holy. Listen to this in Lev 20:8: "Keep my decrees and follow them. I am Yahweh, who makes you holy."

Keeping God's decrees and following them is not what makes us holy. We live in his ways *because* he made us holy. How did God make us holy? God did two things to Israel to make them holy, and I will show you this with this cup of pens and pencils.

First, God separated Israel from the other nations. He did this by leading them out of Egypt. So I am going to take a few of these pens and pencils out of the cup, and hold them in my hand. I have separated these from the others in the cup, taken them away from the rest.

Then, God made Israel his own people. He did this when he covenanted with them, to be their God and they would be his people. From that point on, Israel was God's possession, his treasured possession. They belonged to him. So I will put the pens and pencil that are in my hand into my shirt pocket here, inside my vest. These pens and pencils are now mine. You all can have the rest.

At that point, Israel was holy. God separated Israel from the other nations, and then he made them his own possession, and once those two things had happened, God had made them holy.

In the New Testament, we are called "saints," "holy ones," about four times as often as we are called "believers." We are called "saints," "holy ones," because God made us holy in the same way that he made Israel holy. He separated us from the rest, and when we came to faith and were baptized, he made us his. We're in his pocket, and that makes us holy.

"Keep my decrees and laws. I am Yahweh, who makes you holy." Our response to God is to live holy lives, but that's not what makes us holy. We live in God's ways because he already put us in his pocket. Now to our Scripture text, Leviticus 18.

Egyptians and Canaanites - Leviticus 18:1-5

*"Moses," says God, "tell this to Israel: 'I am Yahweh your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. Obey my laws and follow my decrees. I am Yahweh your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the one who obeys them will find life in them. I am Yahweh.'"*

This paragraph is more than 3,000 years old. Societies full of sexual immorality were normal more than 3,000 years ago. God brought his people out of one of these, and into another. The Greeks in New Testament times were not better. Speaking biblically, we have no right to be surprised if our society is like this. It's the normal environment for God's people. God has always said: "don't live that way, live in my ways."

God never suggested that Israel should improve the Egyptians or the Canaanites. When the Old Testament prophets spoke against nations like this, they never condemned their sexual immorality. They were not God's people, so why should they live in God's ways? The best thing we can do for our society is to live in God's ways ourselves. Not an easy task.

At the end of 1 Cor 6, Paul writes, "What business is it of ours to judge those outside the church? God will judge those outside. You make sure you judge what's happening inside the church!" All God says to us is, "do not follow their practices."

## The List: What God's People Will Not Do - Leviticus 18:7-23

God gave Moses a list of 17 prohibitions. The first 12 of these are rules against incest. No sexual relations between mother and son, or between father and daughter, no sexual relations with your brother or sister, your aunt or uncle, your nephew or niece, and so on. 12 of these. Most of Leviticus 18 is about incest. Apparently it was much more acceptable in Egypt and in Canaan than it is in our society.

Then five more rules: (1) do not have sexual relations during a woman's monthly period.  
 (2) Do not have sexual relations with your neighbour's wife.  
 (3) Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek.  
 (4) Do not have sexual relations with a male as with a woman.  
 (5) Do not have sexual relations with an animal, neither a man nor a woman may do this.

We'll look at these five. (1) Sexual relations during a woman's menstrual flow. A woman was considered unclean before God during that time. The NT drops this kind of uncleanness in the same way that unclean animals are no longer unclean. In Leviticus even God seems less alarmed about this; the last four are all defiling or detestable, but this first one has no such word.

(2) No sexual relations with your neighbour's wife. Married men and women in the church have affairs. You know that. Do we think this is any less offensive to God than a same sex relationship? Do we think this is any less offensive to God than sexual relations with an animal? Think again. To God, it is no better.

I am a pastor. Pastors sometimes have affairs with married women in the church. This happened in my home church between the pastor and another member's wife. It was handled terribly, and the church slowly died. It took several years, good people during that time tried to bring about healing. But it never recovered, and my home church eventually just closed the doors.

Our church is the daughter church of another church, and after we began here, the pastor there took up with another man's wife in that church. Both couples those were both close to Marilyn and to me. That church handled it better, and is doing well now. But people, the collateral damage of just these two cases of adultery is huge, to families, to parents and children and siblings, to friends, and to churches, and sad effects last for years and years.

All believers need to read Leviticus 18 list. Stay away from your neighbour's wife or husband.

(3) Don't offer your children to Molek. This was the worst kind of idolatry the OT knows about, and Israelites did do this, but no one really knows how it gets on a list of sexual sins.

(4) No sexual relations with a male as with a woman. The translations say "with a *man* as with a woman," but in Hebrew it says "with a *male* as with a woman," which is probably to remind us about male and female in Genesis 1.

In any case, it is not complicated. Certain sexual behaviors are wrong. Doesn't matter how much you love your neighbour's wife, or your parent or your child or your sibling: no sexual relations.

(5) No sexual relations with an animal. I don't think that needs any clarification.

### Temptations and Desires

Moses assumes that the Israelites will want to do all these things. Nobody should be surprised that our desires take us to all these places. God seems to be saying, "Of course you are going to want to do all these things. If I thought you would not want to do these things, I would not have named these sins. You my people will certainly want to do all these things, especially when you see others doing them."

"Furthermore, if you do them, you may very well find them exciting and pleasing. Don't be surprised. You will want to do this again. Don't be surprised at that."

People, no one is corrupt because of their temptations. If we are condemned because we have dark temptations, we are all of us sunk. We all have some pretty dark pulls in us. That's only temptation. I am not perverted because I have a perverted temptation, even if it is strong and ongoing. I am only perverted if I act on it, if I stay there in my mind, or actually behave that way.

Jesus was made in every way as we are, and was tempted in every way as we are, and he experienced weakness in his temptations. He always did the right thing, but often it was a real fight. Our Lord certainly experienced a normal variety of sexual temptations. We're going to want all kinds of these things, we're just not going to do them.

### Why Not? I am Yahweh your God

Our God has a name. "God" is not a name, and "Lord" is not a name. My personal name is Edmund, Ed for short, and you all have personal names, and so does our God. An older pronunciation was "Jehovah," now it seems "Yahweh" [*Yah-vay*] is closer.

The first sentence of this speech is "I am Yahweh your God." Israel covenanted with God back in Exodus. God said, "if you will be my people, I will be your God," and Israel said, "we will be your people, and you will be our God." So God says, "Now I am Yahweh your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt." Why do we not do these things? Because our God is Yahweh.

In the opening five verses of Leviticus 18, twice God says, "I am Yahweh your God" and twice he says "I am Yahweh." The very last words of Leviticus 18 are "I am Yahweh your God." We have a particular God, and he has a name, and he says, "my people don't do these things."

The trouble is that God's people still do these things. All of them. And God forgives sins and takes people back. None of these are the unforgiveable sin.

The trouble is that these sins also damage us, as do all sins. We wound our own souls and minds when we sin in any way, and wound those around us. But God works with us on that, and when there's confession we help restore each other.

We name these things and we avoid them because we have covenanted with a God named Yahweh. "This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Drink from it, all of you." And Yahweh our God says, "My people don't do these things."

Paul used OT covenant Scriptures to call Corinth, the Gentile NT church, to covenant faithfulness: *We are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Therefore, since we NT believers have these promises, let us purify ourselves. 2 Cor 6 – 7.*

This is God talking to NT Gentile believers like us. God moves toward us. *I will live with you and walk among you.* That's what it means to be his temple. But if God moves toward us, we shall also move toward him. *Come out from them, and be separate, and I will receive you.* The Corinthian believers did not need to move out of Corinth. But in actions, they needed to come out and be separate. Which they were not doing; that's why Paul writes this way.

Do These Old Testament Laws Apply to Us?

Let's talk about incest. Leviticus 18 has 12 incest laws. Jesus never says one word about incest, and I do not think there is one NT command against incest. Does that mean that incest laws no longer count? No, it does not.

The most severe individual judgement story in the NT is the story of the man in 1 Cor 5 who was living with his father's wife, his step-mother. This breaks the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12 rules in Lev 18. Paul comes down on that like a ton of bricks, and scolds the church for tolerating this in their midst.

The thing is, Paul does not quote Leviticus 18 at all, and does not teach them that incest is wrong. Why? Because they already know this. They've been taught Leviticus, and know very well that this is unacceptable to God. The last line of 1 Cor 5 reads, "expel the wicked person from among you." Paul is quoting Deuteronomy there, that very line occurs 6 times in Deuteronomy (17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7).

(Even Christians who don't think Leviticus 18 applies to us still agree with 15 of the 17 rules.)

I will tell you my story about the Old Testament. I am a New Testament teacher by training and by trade. By the time I had been teaching three years, I had taught pretty well every book in the New Testament.

And during those three years of going through the NT, I had this steadily growing discouragement that my biggest weakness in teaching the NT was that I did not know the OT.

From the beginning of Matthew to the end of Revelation, the NT writers were using the OT again and again to explain and support their message. Like Jesus when he used Genesis 1 and 2 to teach about marriage. But I did not know what they were talking about because I did not know the OT. The commentaries told me, they knew the OT, but that's the only way I found out.

So beginning in my fourth year as a NT teacher, I became on the side a diligent amateur student of the OT. It was professional development. That was 35 years ago, and it continues to this day. I did this then because reading the NT told me that I was not understanding the NT as well as I could because I did not know the OT.

While working on the OT, I found out that the things I liked about the NT were also in the OT. And after a while I also realized that that the things I did not like about the OT were in the NT as well, and I just needed to live with it.

I hear people say that they want to live by the NT and not the OT. If they would read the NT more carefully, they would not say that, because the NT writers think they are living by the OT. Some things have changed, that's certainly true. But when the NT teaches what has changed, it always quotes the OT to support this new teaching. Have you noticed that? Always. Check it out.

*I am Yahweh your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. Obey my laws and follow my decrees. I am Yahweh your God.*

*I will live with you and walk among you, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. So come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says Yahweh Almighty. Therefore, since we have these promises, let's purify ourselves. Amen.*

PRAYER: O God, Yahweh our God, you told us that we live in a world that does not live in your ways, and you told us to expect all kinds of temptations. You also told us to follow your ways and not the world's ways. So, here we are. You're our God, and we're your people. Lead us on the right path for your name's sake. And when we fall, please forgive us and get us back onto the right path. And God, you have separated us from the rest and put us in your pocket. You made us holy, your treasured possession. There's nothing better than that. We're so glad. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.