

Elementary

*For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.
(Leviticus 11:44 ESV)*

*I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
(Leviticus 26:12 ESV)*

What Does The Law Teach Us About Human Sexuality?

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Leviticus 18:1-30

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Leviticus 18. This morning we are trying to answer the question: “What does the Law teach us about human sexuality?”

Now, moms and dads, I just want to let you know that we will be talking about sex today, but we won't be saying anything crude or inappropriate therefore I don't think there is any need for you to hustle little Jimmy and Susy off downstairs. In fact I think it would be helpful for them to hear what we're going to say this morning. We need to get better at having this conversation. Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison says here, in his introduction to Leviticus 18:

“The explicit nature of the passage reflects the unselfconscious attitude of the Hebrews, and indeed of all ancient Near Eastern peoples, towards sexual activity.”¹

People in Bible times did not blush and act all embarrassed whenever human sexuality was being discussed. They understood that it was part of life and therefore it was something that communities need to talk about if they were going to pass on their beliefs and values to the next generation.

¹ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 188.

Brothers and sisters we've spent the last 50 years allowing the world to teach our kids about sex - while we pretended to be too holy and too delicate to have that conversation in here – how's that working out for us?

Not very well, it would appear.

So we're going to speak frankly and honestly this morning about human sexuality and we're going to root our conversion in Leviticus 18. Leviticus 18 is part of the Old Testament Holiness Code. The Holiness Code starts in Leviticus 17 and runs through Leviticus 25 and it sets out how God's people – saved by God's grace – are to live within the boundaries that he provides. Chapter 18 has to do with human sexuality. So we'll read the chapter in full and then we'll attempt to draw out 3 elementary principles, we'll deal with 1 hermeneutical challenge and then we'll conclude with two personal and practical applications.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God.³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes.⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

⁶ “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD.⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.⁸ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home.¹⁰ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness.¹¹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister.¹² You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative.¹³ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative.¹⁴ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt.¹⁵ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is

your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness.¹⁶ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness.¹⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity.¹⁸ And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

¹⁹“You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.²⁰ And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her.²¹ You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.²³ And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion.

²⁴“Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean,²⁵ and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.²⁶ But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you²⁷ (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean),²⁸ lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.²⁹ For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.³⁰ So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 18:1–30 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

While some of the language and certain aspects of the style in this chapter can be a bit confusing and some of the detail in the chapter can be a bit overwhelming to the first-time reader, the basic elementary principles lie fairly close to the surface.

3 Elementary Principles:

The first one, and perhaps the most obvious one is this:

- 1. There are lines we mustn't cross with respect to human sexuality**

That's clearly the main idea here in the passage. Look at verse 6-18 – constituting the central portion of the chapter. In these verses we encounter a running list of a variety of prohibited sexual unions. Look at verse 6 for example:

“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 18:6 ESV)

To “uncover nakedness” is of course a euphemism for “to have sexual relations”. So these regulations are doing two things. They are most immediately defining the limits within which a man may seek a wife - and they are addressing prohibited forms of sexual activity in a general sense.

The law is saying here: “You mustn't seek a wife from among your close relatives. Cousins, aunts, sisters, mothers in law – these sorts of people are not to be thought of or approached in a sexual manner. Such a union would be out of bounds.” This is what we refer to in English legal tradition as “consanguinity”. We don't marry family members, and we don't have sex with family members. Some cultures did do that – these laws are framed in contra-distinction to the laws of Egypt and Canaan. So not everybody thought this way – but God says, these are the boundaries that I have established and you must respect them.

And then we also have lines here with respect to homosexuality. Look at verse 22:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22 ESV)

God underscores the significance of this boundary by referring to homosexual sex as an abomination. He uses the Hebrew word *to-ay-baw'* a word Robert Gagnon says refers to:

“A particularly revolting and conspicuous violation of boundaries established by God against the defiling behaviour characteristic of other peoples.”²

² Robert A.J. Gagnon, The Bible And Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 113.

So again, they may do this in Egypt, they may do this in Canaan, but my people will not do this. You are a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation – therefore you will respect the boundaries and the limitations that I have established.

Then in verse 23 we see a boundary having to do with interspeciality. Verse 23 says:

And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is **perversion**. (Leviticus 18:23 ESV)

This particular boundary is also underscored or emphasized with a special Hebrew word – the word *teh-bel*, translated in the ESV as “perversion”. It refers to that which is “unnatural” or that which represents “confusion”.³

So God is establishing some boundaries. He intends for these boundaries to be our authoritative guide over and above the example of our cultural neighbours. Sex with animals was actually not unheard of in Egyptian culture – in fact there is a reference to it in the previous chapter. In Leviticus 17:7 after giving some instructions about how worship will be conducted in the covenant community God says:

So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. (Leviticus 17:7 ESV)

So this new form of worship is being given so as to put a stop to something referred as “whoring after goat demons”. The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary says here:

“The allusion here is to the kind of goat worship practised in Lower Egypt, a form of idolatry with which the Israelites had evidently had some contact. The cult in question flourished in the eastern Delta region, and part of its abhorrent rituals involved goats copulating with women votaries.”⁴

Human beings will engage in just about any sort of depravity you can imagine when untethered from the fear and knowledge of the Lord. That wasn’t just true in the past, it is becoming true

³ *Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “paragraph 1.

⁴ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 182-183.

again wherever the fear of the Lord is being cast off. Perhaps some of you will remember back in 2019 when a British woman, Elizabeth Hoad married her dog Logan on live TV.⁵

We live in a culture that celebrates the erosion of all these sexual boundaries. “Love is love”, we like to say and if that means man with man, or man with two women or woman with dog – then who are you to judge? But as we talked about last week crossing lines that God has established results in significant harm and dysfunction in this life - and judgment, exile and death in the life to come.

That’s the second elementary principle that I want you to see here.

2. Crossing those lines will lead to harm, dysfunction, judgment and death

We see this principle affirmed and illustrated all across the pages of Holy Scripture. Jacob married two sisters for example, and as a result his family life was characterized by profound dysfunction and constant conflict. David committed adultery and as a result, his family was plunged into civil war – as was in fact the nation as a whole. Crossing sexual boundaries established by God leads to tremendous personal, familial and social harm which is why these boundaries were treated as a matter of life and death in the Old Testament.

Flip over in your Bibles for just a moment to Leviticus chapter 20. The boundaries are established in chapter 18 and then the punishments are prescribed in chapter 20. So for example Leviticus 20:11-16 says:

If a man lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them....¹³ If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them....¹⁵ If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal.¹⁶ If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:11–16 ESV)

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jul/31/why-would-a-woman-marry-her-dog>

So incest, homosexuality and bestiality are all treated as capital crimes in the Old Testament. They represent conspicuous and egregious rebellion against the boundaries that God has established.

Now of course the way these matters are handled in the New Testament is different than the way they were handled in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the church and the nation were one and the same so sin could be punished by the state. But in the New Testament the church exists inside every tribe, tongue and nation in the world – and therefore capital punishment is ultimately deferred to the Final Judgment. But that isn't to say that these same boundaries don't exist – and it isn't to say that they aren't enforced – because they are.

The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 writes to one of his churches when he hears that a man in the church is committing incest. He is having sex with his father's wife, likely his step-mother. Listen to what he says – and notice that he alludes to Leviticus 18. He says:

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for **a man has his father's wife**.² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. (1 Corinthians 5:1–2 ESV)

So the Apostle Paul continues to define sexual immorality in terms of the boundaries established in Leviticus 18. He's alluding to Leviticus 18:8:

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife (Leviticus 18:8 ESV)

So that boundary is clearly still in effect in the church – but we don't execute people for violating that boundary. The church doesn't have the power of the sword in the present dispensation – so what does Paul say? He says:

“Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:13 ESV)

Are you seeing that? As we move from Old Testament to New Testament, execution becomes excommunication. But the boundaries remain precisely the same. And Paul says, when we

practice excommunication, the hope is actually that the person will take that as a warning with respect to the Final Judgment. So he says:

“deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:5 ESV)

The hope is that our excommunication will say to the man: “You are facing eternal death and damnation at the Final Judgment!! So you better repent! You better sort yourself out! You better become an obedient, line respecting follower of Jesus Christ – or you will perish on the Day of Final Judgment.”

The goal is repentance and restoration.

But the elementary principle being taught here is fairly obvious: crossing these lines that God has established with respect to human sexuality will result in chaos, harm and social dysfunction in the here and now and judgment, exile and death in the life hereafter.

The third principle I want you to see is far more positive. We are learning here that within the lines God has drawn there is happiness, health and blessing.

3. Within those lines there is happiness, health and blessing

Sex isn't a BAD thing that God is LIMITING, sex is a GOOD thing that God is DEFINING. Sex was designed by God for the comfort and increase of human beings and therefore within the boundaries that God has established it should no cause for embarrassment or shame. We see that clearly in Genesis 2:25 which says:

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:25 ESV)

Sex inside the lines is glorious! It is healthy and life giving. Remember, part of God's mandate to the man and woman involves filling the earth, he told them:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion
(Genesis 1:28 ESV)

So having and raising BABIES is an act of DOMINION! It is an act of leadership! We change this world by having and raising babies who love God and who respect the boundaries he has established for human life! And obviously, sex is an important part of that. We can't fill the earth – we can't be fruitful and multiply – without sex.

Listen, I mentioned last week that the devil is waging war on human sexuality. He wants young girls to make themselves infertile and to have “top surgery” so that they can never nurse a child. He wants men addicted to porn so that they never want or need to have actual sex and so that they so distort the nature of sex that no actual woman would ever want to have it with them.

The devil understands that human sexuality is his enemy. If we keep having babies and we teach those babies to trust God, love Jesus and walk in the way of life – then he loses. He loses influence, he loses operating space, he loses dominion.

So sex matters. Sex within the boundaries God has established IS a spiritual issue. Which is why the Apostle to the Hebrews says:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. (Hebrews 13:4 ESV)

This is serious business. Whether you like it or not human sexuality is a matter of COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE.

Now before we get into our personal and practical application we do need to quickly deal with a particularly troublesome hermeneutical challenge.

1 Hermeneutical Challenge:

Hermeneutics simply means “how we interpret” and so the question I’m really asking here is:

1. What about verse 19? Or How do we separate ritual from moral principle?

This won't interest all of you, but in a room of this size, inevitably a few careful readers will notice that one of these verses in Leviticus 18 is not quite like all the others and they will want to know why. Look quickly at verse 19:

“You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.” (Leviticus 18:19 ESV)

That verse doesn't tend to be treated like all the others. Robert Gagnon for example says here, commenting on verses 6-23 as a whole:

“These prohibitions continue to have universal validity in contemporary society. Only the prohibition against having sexual intercourse with a woman “in her menstrual uncleanness” (18:19) does not.”⁶

Well why is that?

And the answer is that the law about menstruation was connected to the ritual purity system discussed in Leviticus 15. Leviticus 15 in my Bible has the heading “Laws About Bodily Discharges”. So in the ritual system, bodily fluids were associated with life and death. Inside the body – they were associated with life. Outside the body they were associated with death – so if a man had a bodily emission, or a woman had a bodily emission they were ceremonially unclean and that uncleanness was contagious until they dealt with it according to the ritual prescriptions. So since chapter 18 is dealing with prohibited sexual activity it is mentioned again here – but because it is a RITUAL CONCERN and not a MORAL CONCERN it doesn't transfer over into the New Testament. The ritual law was a tutelage – it was temporary and it expired completely at the coming of Jesus Christ – but the moral law continues on unchanged.

Does that make sense?

⁶ Robert A.J. Gagnon, The Bible And Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 113.

Now, as I said, many people probably don't care a great deal about those sorts of fine details – but we should care, to be honest with you – because we need to be able to explain to some of our well read unbelieving neighbours why we are interpreting the Bible the way we are. At some point in your life you will be asked: “Why do you Christians still care about homosexuality and adultery, but you have no problem with polyester pants and prawns?” And the answer is that the ritual laws expired. They did not transfer over into the New Testament, but the moral law is unchanged. You'd be surprised how often that does come up.

Now – with that hermeneutical speed bump out of the way, we'll turn our attention to some personal and practical application.

2 Practical Applications:

What are we to do with all of these sexual boundaries as contemporary Christians? How are we to relate to them? Well, I think the first thing that needs to be said is that we should look at these boundaries as an opportunity for us to demonstrate faith in a contrary and rebellious culture.

1. Sexual boundaries represent a significant test of faith in contemporary culture

We talked about this in a general sense last week. Boundaries represent an opportunity for us to demonstrate faith, love and trust in God. Boundaries tell the truth – sexual boundaries tell the truth about who we are and how we are relating to God!

So this will be THE TEST OF FAITH in our generation. In the same way we talked last week about women embracing the dignity and significance of child rearing functions AS A TEST OF FAITH – well right alongside of that – embracing the goodness, dignity and wisdom of God's design with respect to human sexuality functions as a TEST OF FAITH – more so NOW than at any point previous in North American culture.

50 years ago in North America there was enough culture pressure toward traditional sexual values that you might have lived your whole life inside these boundaries BY ACCIDENT! I bet you half our grandparents lived their lives inside these boundaries by accident. But today – if you

do this – it will not be by accident. It will be only by the grace and provision of the Lord. It will be EVIDENCE of saving faith.

So let's think very carefully about what we are communicating when we come to this boundary – because what we are saying will stand out vividly against the contrast of the culture.

And don't be surprised if that distinction with respect to the culture actually becomes an integral aspect of our witness in the culture.

2. Biblical sexuality will provide a significant witnessing opportunity in contemporary culture

That's the second application I'd like you to see. You see most people today have forgotten what sexuality was like before the widespread imposition of biblical morality. The Greek orator Demosthenes provides a useful reminder. In a speech to his contemporaries he said proudly: "We men have *heterai* (concubines, courtesans) for pleasure, female slaves for our daily care (a sexual euphemism) and wives to give us legitimate children and to be guardians of our households."⁷

Greek and Roman men had sex with everybody. They had sex with prostitutes for fun, slaves to take the edge off and their wives ONLY when they wanted to produce a child.

That was the world before Christianity. But then in the New Testament we have verses like 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 where Paul says:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Corinthians 7:3–4 ESV)

According to the Bible sex between a husband and wife was to be mutual and exclusive. The husband doesn't get to have sex with the slaves or with prostitutes – or with the neighbours – he needs to take care of his wife, just as she needs to take care of him.

⁷ Demosthenes as cited by Larry Hurtado in *Destroyer of the gods* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 157.

Mutuality and exclusivity – that is the essence of the Christian sexual ethic – and the Romans HATED IT and LOVED IT simultaneously. They found it odd, horrifying, offensive – and undeniably attractive and I suspect the same will be true again in our day as we begin to experience the horrific consequences of human sexuality untethered from all and every boundary.

So this is going to be a good place for us to make a stand – this is going to be a good place for us to shine and to show the wisdom, beauty and glory of our Creator.

Because the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord will stand forever. Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us.