

Leviticus 18:6-30

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The call to be holy is not limited to impacting our prayer life or improving the quality of our daily devotions. The principle of holiness is to impact every aspect of our lives, families and communities. Chapter 18 declares the holiness code of conduct in regards to sexual behaviour and how Israel is to act differently from the pagan nations. Talking about human sexuality can be a charged conversation in our modern world. What the Biblical text calls an abomination the current culture calls a sexual orientation. Many people today identify themselves by their sexual preference over and above any other identity marker. As these instructions are given to Israel the argument can be and has been made that they no longer apply to the Gentile Christian community. However, during the Acts 15 Council of Jerusalem, the summary instructions regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the messianic faith forbids sexual immorality.

What exactly is the definition of sexual immorality? None is provided in the Book of Acts and the leaders in Jerusalem were not waiting for the apostle Paul to pen the Epistle to the Corinthians to shed some light on the matter. The Jewish community already had a defined understanding of appropriate human sexual morality. Everything else was ‘immoral’. James reminds the Jewish and new Gentile believers that Moses continues to be read in the synagogues. Hence teachings on sexual purity will continue to be studied by the community and hopefully put into practice. When the New Testament writers wrote about sexual immorality and uncleanness, they did so from a context that understood Leviticus 18 as important in defining sexual purity.

Verse 6 begins in the Hebrew text by saying *אִישׁ אִישׁ* (literally *man man*), which the sages say has the meaning for both men and women. While much of the text is directed to the father of the family as head of the clan, the injunction to sexual holiness pertains also to the women. It takes two to tango, as they say! The Hebrew text literally says, ‘do not uncover the nakedness’ which occurs 17 times in this chapter. This is a biblical euphemism for some sort of sexual activity first appearing in Genesis 9 in which Ham sees the nakedness of his father Noah and informs his brothers. Upon awakening, Noah realizes what his son had ‘done’ to him and curses Canaan. Not Ham! The term ‘son’ in Hebrew can also mean grandson. Ham lacks the willpower or courage to stop Canaan from some immorality with either Noah or Noah’s wife. The Levitical text mentions both as uncovering the father’s nakedness, the nakedness of an individual belongs and is shared by the spouse. Instead of confronting Canaan, Ham informs his brothers. In Jewish exegesis beginnings and ends occur in the same pattern, on the same day and by the same groups of people. Canaan receives a curse and the final cleansing of this curse occurs in the land of Canaan where God will bring His people. Immorality will be replaced by a moral code and appropriate behaviour.

Much of the proceeding laws regarding human sexuality pertain to close relatives and incest. Family units are critical in the foundation and health of society. The Hebrew Bible contains many accounts where these instructions were not followed, and in all cases, tension arises. Verse 18 legislates against rival sisters as wives to the same husband. In the biblical narrative of Jacob, Jacob is pushed into a marriage with Leah and tension ensues when Rachel joins the family later. Despite this, the Lord always makes things right with Leah being the mother of the future Messiah and redeemer through the line of Judah.

Verse 20 suddenly introduces the prohibition of passing children ‘through fire’ to Molech. Who

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was Molech and why is he included in these sexual moral codes? The Book of Kings (1 Kings 11:7 and 2 Kings 16:3) notes that Molech is part of the Ammonite and Canaanite pantheon. Apparently, Molech is a fertility god, as Canaan lacked a major river or water tributary, fertility gods were held in high esteem. Worshipping this fertility god apparently involved the practice of child sacrifice, although there is also the suggestion that children were given over to the temples to be raised as temple prostitutes. Many of the fertility cults in the region included religious prostitutes and used sexual activity in pagan religious worship. This reinforces for us that there is a spiritual side to physical purity and morality. There is a demonic sense to sinful activity. There is a connection then between idolatry, sexual immorality, human sacrifice and demonic activity. None of these things is something that the people of God should be involved with. While sexual immorality should be far from us, this does not absolve us from having compassion for those engaged in such immorality. This is acutely highlighted in the context of homosexuality, which according to Leviticus is a forbidden human sexual relationship, while in our modern culture is celebrated as a normal expression of sexual activity. Jesus makes no comment on the issue of homosexuality in the Gospels. He does declare that He has not come to abolish the Torah, which includes Leviticus 18. Paul however asserts in Romans 1vs26-27 that same-sex activity is immoral and that such activity was at odds with the creation ideal. Conversations about appropriate human sexuality can get divisive amongst the body of Messiah. New dominations have been formed over these issues and the secular media delight in ridicule of those professing conservative values. What we have in Leviticus 18 is a holiness code of human sexuality. Disciples of Jesus are to follow His example of grace, mercy and forgiveness. This is not done by declaring immorality to now be moral, nor declaring sin to no longer exist since the resurrection. Rather we are called by the Messiah, and as Peter reaffirmed, to be a holy people. Paul would admonish us to not practice deeds of immorality and included in this is holiness in human sexuality.

The chapter concludes by noting that the earth itself reacts to the stain of sin on it. Some would argue that reference is solely to the land of Israel and does not pertain to other lands. However, the land is vomiting out the Canaanites before the people of Israel take possession of the land while it is known as the Land of Canaan. The first people the earth reacts to are Gentiles. And finally, Moses issues a harsh ruling for those who are in continual trespass of the moral code. To be 'cut off' or excommunicated from the community. This penalty is a last resort and not the first recourse. There are similar parallels in the New Testament. Jesus in Matthew 18vs15-17 says the final action against an unrepentant brother is to treat him as a tax collector (they were not well thought of at all). Paul in Corinthians describes such an ex-communication as a last resort while rebuking the Corinthians for tolerating incest. What we see is that holiness is transferable as is sin. The grace of God is not to tolerate sin but to redeem it, and the message of the prophets and the Church is a call to repentance from sin not acceptance of it. We are called to holiness and this includes purity in our sexual relationships.