

Leviticus 20v10-27

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

Sexual immorality has plagued mankind since the creation of male and female. Of all the sins man can do, immorality gnaws at the heart of society and destroys it from within. As a holy nation, the punishments for transgression into immorality were thus quite strict for Israel. Other ancient cultures also understood the social consequences of immorality and likewise imposed severe punishments.

Adultery in Israel and in Mesopotamia both ended in the death penalty. In terms of applying the practical retributions for immorality, literary history says the death penalty was actually rarely carried out. There were several reasons for this; the first was the requirement for two or three witnesses, not an easy legal obligation to fulfil in many cases. The second was a movement to monetary compensation, something that we see in our present day legal system. Though rarely carried out, the death penalty does convey the seriousness of immorality and the ideal of holiness required by the Lord for His people.

Sexual immorality is included in the four laws of Acts 15 given to Gentiles who are joining the commonwealth of Israel: the new Jesus movement. As a holy people, we too are held to a high ideal and immorality should have no place in our community. Adultery, incest, animal relations and homosexuality are grouped together to receive the same punishment, as they are in the pagan nations of the ancient Middle East. However, a unique aspect of biblical holiness is the category of promiscuity or harlotry. Consenting immorality by a woman while living in her father's house brings disgrace and shame upon the father. If the father is a priest then the punishment is most severe, the punishment of burning! The Lord condemns the Canaanite peoples for their immersion in all forms of immorality. Apparently, their society had reached a zenith of immorality at the time of the conquest by Joshua. The death penalty was thus enacted by the Israelites as God's agent in judgment. God admonishes Israel to heed the example of the Canaanites and obey Him, or the same fate would befall them.

Immorality connects to both the soul of man and also to the earth itself. Leviticus reminds us again of the connection between sin and the world. Should Israel forsake holiness and embrace immorality then the Land will react negatively and vomit them out. This is a deep spiritual principle so often overlooked by modern exegetes. Whatever territory mankind reigns over, it is affected by his character. One of the first commands given to Adam was to 'dominate' or 'subdue' the earth -- not in a harsh totalitarian way but in a controlled, concerned and caring way! If mankind becomes inwardly polluted and corrupt then the very ground itself will become polluted and corrupted. And it will react!

God declares again that He has called and separated Israel to be holy and different from the other nations. The people of God are to live by a code and that code is holiness. It is a light to the world and attractive to the Gentile peoples. Israel has an important role in the plans of Heaven, which includes more than simply preserving the Word of the Lord, keeping prophecies and guarding the lineage of Messiah. Israel is to present the call of holiness to a fallen world. Holiness is part of the relationship that we have with the Lord Himself, for as Paul reminds us, without holiness no one can see God. Other ancient nations had technology: they constructed monuments and empires, but Israel had morality.

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What should be our response then to instructions for holiness in Leviticus? A simple response would be to be readers and doers of the Word. Passivity is not holiness. Silence against evil is an affirmation of that evil.

In our discussions of the text we asked the question 'can you legislate morality?' We noted that laws in and of themselves do not inherently make people obey. Obedience is a learnt behaviour and ultimately is sourced from the heart of the worshipper. Do you or do you not want to follow the teachings and instructions of God? Yet this does not require us to be passive under a corrupt and immoral government. We can and should lobby for moral laws. We should endeavour to present the truths of the Word of God, even to secular government. The benefits of doing so far out weight the disadvantages. Secular laws over time continue to change and drift away from the ideal of God. They never drift towards the ideal of God, only away! When this inevitably happens, as it has happened in the past, how should we behave? The law of God, His Torah, should be on our hearts and put in practice through the help of the Spirit. This can be done under any regime and does distinguish (separate) us from the unbelievers. We do not walk in the ways of the world but as a holy people. Holiness is an inherent part of the process of salvation. Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes for a walk of holiness. It's a journey with many pitfalls. But it's a journey made in community, a journey of spiritual formation and discipleship. And it is a journey made with the Spirit of God.

Leviticus 20 ends once again with the prohibition against seeking oracles from necromancers and magicians. This reminds us that immorality is linked to the realm of the spirit world. At its essence, immorality is lawlessness. The spirit world is led by the 'Man of Lawlessness', the one who has thrown off the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and leads the whole world astray. Instead let us pursue all that makes for a holy, pure and righteous life!