Leviticus 18 & 20

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Date: 23 March 2025

Preacher: David Helm

[0:00] Well, if ever there was a word read on a Sunday morning in the act of worship that necessitated a prayer for God's grace and help.

! So it has come to us today. Our Heavenly Father, we've just heard very uncomfortable words. And so I pray that you would help us to understand them rightly with grace.
And that you would create here at Christ Church Chicago a family that joyfully submits to all that you say.
In Christ's name, amen. According to a recent, and I mean very recent, March 11, 2025 press release from prisonpolicy.org on mass incarceration in our country, there are presently 172,000 persons presently being held in state prisons across our country for sexual assault or rape.
[1:19] By percentage, these sex offenders outnumber each other violent crime category for which persons are incarcerated, including those in our state prisons that are housed for murder, robbery, or drug offenses.

Such is the world in which we live. Such are the people that we must not become. For a church should not mirror its culture.
In 2017, Mark Goldfeder published a book by Brandeis University Press titled Legalizing Plural Marriage.
He called it the next horizon in family law. When Gallup polls recently came out, including our thoughts as a culture on morally acceptable or unacceptable behavior in regard to polygamy, in 2003, only 7% thought that that was morally acceptable.
But over the past decade, the percentages reached 16% in 2015, gradually increasing to 20% this year, highest in our history.
[2:39] In short, there has been a fourfold increase in America's public acceptance of polygamy in about 15 years. Such is the world in which we live.

Such are the people we must not become. For the church should not mirror her culture. Such are the people we must not mirror her culture.
It needn't be. Drawing on feminist and queer theory, she makes the case for a form of human-animal love that isn't merely free from harm, but is governed by reciprocity, respect, and care.
Taking this seriously can, Bork thinks, help us understand what we owe our fellow non-human animals and the sex humans have with each other.
Such is the world in which we live. Such are the people we must not become. For the church shall not mirror the culture. Evidently, our day is eerily similar to ancient Israel's day.
[4:10] Our own culture has become like or akin to what Egypt or the cultures of Canaan were to them.

You can see it in the text. Interestingly, chapters 8, 3, and 20 form a seamless unit.
The outer chapters, 18 and 20, speaking of sexual ethics. With the inner chapter, for which you'll have to come back next week and find the positive side of the coin, as Pastor Pace will preach it, what a love for God and neighbor look like in the middle.
But on either end are these repetitive refrains on the sexual ethics of the cultures of both Egypt and Canaan. The place from which Israel had come.
The place into which Israel was going. Now, they're not simply repetitive in nature, although in the reading of it, it feels like that. I've had the advantage over you this week of looking at these chapters in further reflection and detail.
[5:28] And chapter 18, regarding sexual ethics, lists out all the prohibitions. While chapter 20 outlines all the penalties. So here they are.

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When it comes to the sexual ethics of Israel, God, having now spoken to his people at Mount Sinai, having saved them from Egypt, having plans for them to go into Canaan, says, let me talk to you about how you handle your body as you go along the way.
The prohibitions, the penalties, and of course, the purpose for God's people to stand apart from them, namely, because we belong to God and we revere his name.
So what is it, actually, that's prohibited? Chapter 18 outlines prohibitions and they're clear. What I'd like to do in just a few minutes with you this morning is to show you from chapter 18 that we are prohibited from sexual activity from those in certain ways that are closest to us as well as common practices in the culture surrounding us, all of which has a purpose of God's call upon us.
Those closest to us. Put your eyes on chapter 18. You don't need to read it all. But what you find from verses 6 through 18 are family matters or as verse 6 puts it, close relatives with this repetitive refrain on uncovering the nakedness of another.
[7:20] Simply a way of saying, a Hebrew idiom of saying having sexual relationships with the other. And notice the nature of them with words like father, wife, sister, son's daughter, father's wife, sister, father's brother, daughter-in-law, brother's wife, those closest to us.

The prohibition is clear just as the penalty will be severe. Let's talk about the prohibition of those who are closest to us.
I must say that while this text feels far away, it's quite near. I think of the early church.
Paul had planted a church in Corinth. it had a member who, according to chapter 5 and verse 9, had taken his father's wife.
The exact parallel that we find here in verse 8, you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife. That there were sexual perversions in the church that were violating a standard that God had built and planned.
[8:56] And so, for Paul, in Corinthians, the penalty was severe. If the prohibition was broken, the penalty was to cut that individual off from the fellowship of the church.

It's what you would call excommunication would be. It would say, until there's repentance, until there's a change of heart, until there's a return to God's plan and God's design in regard to the sexual ethics of the church family, well, that person needs to be considered, in a sense, as one who's not following God, not walking with us, that the name of God might not be defamed among us.
The reason is simple. When it comes to church, we don't do like the culture. We're called to walk in Paul's way.
Interestingly, then, church discipline serves and protects relationships. Laws exist so relationships can flourish.
Did you ever think of that? Laws exist so that love can flourish. Where there's lawlessness, there is inevitably an abuse of persons.
[10:13] In fact, the law came because the sin was present. And the sin being present first gives God reason to put out the law.

Sin came first, which required the law. So when you make rules for your family, whether it be what time someone gets in at night for a 15-year-old or otherwise, you're quite aware that those rules are governed by a heart inclination that is actually going to go away or astray.
So the law tries to contain, hold, protect. In fact, in this text, interestingly, you'll notice that all of these rules are actually protecting those that are most vulnerable, those that are in many respects under the authority of someone else.
Now, we would expect that in our own world. Why would we not expect to read it in the scriptures? You know, if you or I were fortunate enough in the coming year to be part of the incoming class of a world great university, let's just say, for instance, the one just outside our doors.
If we had gotten an acceptance letter, we would have time to read all the behavioral rules that protect and govern the community so that academic freedom can exist and persons aren't harmed.
[11:43] In fact, I went back and even looked this week at the policy and it reads this way at the University of Chicago, this policy therefore prohibits, as a word, sexual and or romantic relationships between, and then it lists a number of kinds of relationships.

And then it says, violations of this policy may result in discipline which can include but not be limited to written warnings, loss of privileges, mandatory training or counseling, probation, suspension, demotion, expulsion, and termination of employment.

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Disciplinary actions will be enforced at the appropriate administrative level. Policy last updated October 2nd, 2024. Hey, thank God for rules that prohibit particular behaviors that denigrate individuals who have come into the midst of a community for purposes to further their own life in ways that they would flourish.
As it is in the world, so it is in the church. God is saying to Israel, you came from Egypt, you can see it right there, chapter 18, verse 3, you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, and he will say, you shall not do in the way that into the land of Canaan where I'm going.
And so the church is to stand apart from the culture in which they exist, and that will have an effect on those that are closest to us. There is nothing worse, I don't think there's any level of hell that will be deeper than those who have been entrusted with spiritual leadership in the family of God, to sexually abuse those under their care.
[13:45] The same thing goes for a father and a child, an uncle and a niece. Think of what's happening behind the doors of our city, and it's enough to make you weep.

for those who have spiritual authority, not only in regard to those closest to them, but those who are most vulnerable around them, namely the children and the women, the penalty should be and must be severe.
Think of what's happened in the community of faith over the last 30 years. Think of what's happened in regard to what we read about from the Catholic Church to the Orthodox Church to the Protestant Church to priests and pastors, youth directors, volunteers, and you're not done reading about it.
And perhaps it's because we never pay attention to a chapter like this. Go to church to read about Leviticus 18 and the prohibitions and the penalties? You bet.
You bet we do at Christ Church Chicago. Because this is the world in which we live. This must not be the people that we become because the church cannot mirror the culture.
[15:24] There are other things here as well. What I'm trying to say is what's happening on the fringe is actually encroaching even closer to becoming the fabric of our lives.

Just think of the internet. Think of AI generative sources. I know there are positive uses for AI and the rest of it, but I want you to know what's going on. There's not a person in this church who couldn't find their way on their phone to the enticements and lures of a culture that would speak to you about men with mother-in-laws or daughters with fathers or polygamist relationships all the while wanting you to enter in, enter in, enter in.
Come, follow me. And the men do like a beast to their slaughter. Closer to home, not only those closest to us, most vulnerable around us, but even this chapter deals in verses 20 through 26 and 18, with the culture that's surrounding us, closer to home, the practice of a man lying with another man, a woman with another woman, it's not merely embraced in our society, it's increasingly advocated for and embraced in the family of the living God, such as the world we live in.
Which raises for me a question which is worth addressing, the church needs to address. Why would a Christian community hold that prohibition today when three weeks ago we weren't going to hold eating pork any longer in our midst?
Have you heard this? certainly this comes and it's my responsibility to help us think clear. Why are some morally acceptable, unacceptable behaviors in Leviticus trumpeted as ongoing, perpetual, and universal whereas others we think can rightly be set aside?
[17:40] Now you need to know how to answer this. Now when it's asked genuinely, it deserves a good answer. when it's asked perniciously, which it is sometimes, I'll be talking to an individual who doesn't really want to know what the scripture says about why pork but not homosexuality in praxis.

What they really want is neither a prohibition on either. So you've got to be able to read with wisdom the questions that are coming to you.
Now Jesus dealt with that kind of question one way in Matthew 19 when they said, can I get divorced for any old reason I want? When there was only one reason by Moses and Jesus, they try to trap him.
They try to say, you know, you got Genesis back there, what he did at creation, but you got what Moses did and he puts Genesis 3 against Exodus, whatever it is, 24.
I can't remember the chapter, but he's like, these are fighting and what the individuals were doing who were Pharisees were actually saying, I want to be able to get out of my marriage for any reason and I don't plan on advocating a stance where it's one man, one woman, one flesh, four life.

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[18:58] They didn't want either. So Jesus basically says to those people, I'm not going to give you an answer. I'm not going to put them apart. He goes, what God created, he takes the Genesis text, is what God intended.

And I'm not going to set it against mosaic exception. Therefore, what God said, he intended, what he intended, he means, and therefore, you know, I'm done with you, is kind of the way Jesus handles it.
But, but, what about the person who genuinely is interested? What about the person who says, look, I'm really interested in learning the Bible. why is it that you tell me I can't, I can eat pork, but not the other?
This is something you need to read about, think about, talk about. And I'm responsible to help you do that. Historically, there's some looking at the law of the Old Testament that begins to talk about the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments or even what we'll see next week, chapter 19, how you love God and your neighbor as yourself.
the moral law, which is ongoing and perpetual and universal, versus things in the Old Testament that were ceremonial in nature, washings, cleansings, and even the food laws, which were to point to a distinction and separation, are in the New Testament given up because they're fulfilled in Christ.
[20:30] Even Peter got a vision. He had to have a vision to say, now, now the food law on what you can eat, that's discarded because its purpose was temporal that I would have in the world, an understanding that there's distinctions between what God calls clean and unclean.

But now that Christ has come, now that the washing is internal, not external, now that Israel's plan to be God's people wasn't based on their ethnicity as though they were better than anyone else. Now this is all then gone, done away with, but Christ who fulfilled it nevertheless would have you obey him. We live under the word of Christ.
And so there's some sense here when we're reading things like this, when people are saying to you or you're saying to yourself, why this and not that?
First of all, demonstrate the humility of heart that says I want to understand God's word rightly. And if something is set apart as completed, as in food laws which were a distinction between clean and unclean that God now says there's no distinctions, well then those things can be set apart.
[21:51] But those things which are universal, moral, will they retain? Let me just put it this way.

The church is never going to recover her place in the world until she recovers a moral vision on the holiness of God and the fact that we are his and that we have to live according to his word.
I mean that's just where we're at today. When it comes to the sexual ethics of the church, we are called to walk in God's ways.
We are not to mirror the culture. Well, let me just bring this home. When it comes to sexual ethics, there are prohibitions for those that are close to us, those that are most vulnerable among us, and the penalties are as clear as the prohibitions, the penalties are as severe as the prohibitions are clear.
When it comes to the culture that surrounded us, invading us, let's get it real, coming up from within us, we need to be called back to the word and the holiness of God.
[23:27] We need to understand the call of God upon us. This is what's happening in these texts, so sit with me on it for just a few moments. Look back to chapter 18.

Why do we live this way? Look what he says in verse 4, I am the Lord your God. You shall follow my rules, keep my statutes, and walk in them. I am the Lord your God.
Again, repetition in verse 5, you shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules. If a person does them, he shall live by them. I am the Lord. Look at verse 21.
You do not do things so as to profane the name of the Lord your God. I am the Lord. You can look at the very end of chapter 18.
Last phrase, I am the Lord your God. You can look over at chapter 20 and verse 7. Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy for I am the Lord your God.
[24:29] Keep my statutes and do them. I am the Lord who sets you apart. You can see it down in verse 24 of the same chapter. I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the peoples.

You shall therefore separate the clean from the unclean. Verse 26, you shall be holy to me for I am the Lord and my holy and I have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine.

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Why? Why live in accordance with the sexual ethics that we find in the scriptures even in Leviticus 16 or 18 and 20? Simply this, because we belong to the Lord.
Our bodies are not our own. We belong to the Lord and his name we revere. Do you know what it means to profane something? What does it mean to profane God's name?
It's to disrespect his name. It's to indicate that his character and his person isn't an issue for you. So, what God is saying in this text is that his people would demonstrate a profane act toward his name as they go away from his design, his plan, his intention.
[25:52] So, what was his plan? Well, he did it in Genesis 1. And that design holds, according to Jesus' words, what God put together, nobody undoes.

And so, when that's actually the case, we need a vision in our church, not so much of just behavioral modification. What the contemporary church needs is a vision of a holy God who's absolutely separate.
You know what? Holiness and all of that, we normally think of holiness, I gotta be morally pure. But this text has been clear. Holiness fundamentally means separate, other, apart from, different.
God is saying, I'm different and you're mine. And when you're mine, you live according to the rules and laws and plans and purposes that I laid out.
and that means our bodies, our bodies, our bodies. These bodies which are loose in the cage because they're governed by these minds and these hearts which so easily stray.
[27:13] Oh, for the day when the church of the living God would understand clearly that when it comes to sexual ethics, such as the world in which we live, such are the people we must not become.

Because here we will not mirror the culture in which we are part. That will pertain to those that are closest to us. That will pertain to those that are most vulnerable among us.
That will pertain to the cultural practices that are surrounding us, invading us, and rising up within us. And we will do so because we have a call upon us.
He bought me. I'm his. I begin under the power of his spirit to live as he put it forward. Well, you never thought you'd come to church on any day in your life and have to hear a reading from Leviticus 18 or 20.
And then when you did hear a reading from it, you thought, what kind of church am I in? And hopefully now you're understanding why the church needs the book of Leviticus or things like it because we cannot be swallowed up by the culture.
[28:38] May the Lord help us, each one, to put to death that which so easily entangles us. Our Heavenly Father, uncomfortable chapters, but hopefully helpful words.

We give ourselves to you today in a fresh way. Lord, we want to hear what Israel of old heard. We know, each of us knows all too well the world we came from, and we know the world we're walking back into just as they knew both Egypt and Canaan.
Lord, help us to preserve our own salvation through the use of our bodies in conformity with your plans. that we might love you and our neighbor as ourself.
In Christ's name, amen. Well, let's stand. Let's arrive. to

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