

Keeping Holy, what God has made Holy

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you could turn in your Bibles back to Leviticus chapter 18, which is page 117, page 117 in your Black Pew Bibles.

Well, imagine there were no rules in tennis. How would that work out? Or footy? Or any game, really? You wouldn't know how to play the game, would you?

In fact, you wouldn't even know if you had won or not. Actually, it would stop to be that game and it would stop being fun at all, wouldn't it? The point is, we need some rules for our good, don't we?

For example, imagine there were no road rules and everyone drove how they wanted. I mean, I know some people drive like that anyway, right? But it would be chaos, wouldn't it?

We need some rules for our good. Well, that's what we see when we come to our passage today. It's the same when it comes to God's laws for us in these areas of sex and worship.

[1 : 12] They're for our good. But firstly, let me briefly recap last week, in case you weren't here, because these chapters really go together. In fact, as I said, we started with chapter 19 last week, because it's the central chapter of these three chapters.

And so chapter 18 and 20 are talking about the same topics, and chapter 19 is talking about all of life. And so we started with that one last week, also because it has the central command in chapter 19, which is to be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Remember, holy means to be set apart, distinct, different from others. And so as I said to you last week, the word Bible just means book, but we put holy in front of it because it's set apart.

It's a different book to all other books. And God had saved Israel and set them apart to be different to all the nations, to be his special people.

He'd actually already made them holy in one sense. And so in response to him saving them and making them his special people, they are to live holy lives.

[2 : 29] Lives that reflect his holy character, especially when it comes to his moral goodness. They were to be, as I said last week, a living portrait that reflected his goodness to the nations.

So the nations would see and go, hey, that's pretty good. I want to find out more about this God. Come and join Israel and enjoy life with God.

But this week we come to the bread on the outside, as it was, of this sandwich, this three chapter sandwich, to the kind of slices of bread on the outside there.

Which speak of two specific areas that we are to be holy in, the areas of sex and worship. And these laws not only helped Israel to be holy, that is, distinct from the world.

They were also, as I said, for their good. And so point one, don't follow the nations, do follow good. Have a look at verse one in your Bibles or on the screen.

[3 : 33] It says, And the do is verse four.

You see, don't follow their practices, do follow my laws.

And you've got this repetition of, I am the Lord. The word Lord in capitals is God's personal name, literally, Yahweh.

And it's a reminder of how God had saved them and made them his special people with a special covenant relationship where they could call God by name.

In other words, it was meant to be a reminder of his grace towards them. And therefore, a motivation to live holy lives, to follow his laws.

[4 : 46] But there's one more motivation in verse five. It goes on to say, Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them.

I am the Lord. To live by these laws means that you will enjoy life because of these laws. That is, these commands are actually for their good, to help them live, to enjoy life.

They're not to earn them life. God has already rescued them from Egypt. But they're to help them enjoy life with God, just like us today. We don't follow God's ways to earn life with God. No, no. He saves us by grace through Christ. But in response to his grace, we seek to follow God's laws, which are also for our good, to help us to enjoy life as he's designed it to be lived. But with Israel, there was even more motivation. Because if they followed these laws, not only would they enjoy life with God, it would also prevent vomiting.

[5 : 58] We see this at the end of the chapter. You see, the editor of Leviticus loves sandwiches. Or maybe it's God. I'm not sure. Either way, this chapter is also like a sandwich.

So the chapter itself, in the first few verses, talks about don't follow the nations, do follow God. And the same ideas come at the end of our chapter. But it also adds a warning about vomiting. And so if you've got your Bibles, you can flick over the page or follow on the screen to verse 24. Verse 24.

Whether you're a foreigner who's joined God's people, you must do these laws. Verse 27. For these things were done by the people, the detestable things, who lived in the land before you. And the land became defiled. And so if you defile the land, it will vomit you out, as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

[7 : 20] You see, the same idea of don't follow their laws because it will defile things, make things unclean. Do follow my laws and decrees. But then there's this warning about vomiting added.

If you fill the land with moral uncleanness, then it will vomit you out. Just like it's going to vomit out the Canaanites as God brings Israel in to drive the Canaanites out because of their sin.

Our dog, Toby, is now six months old. And he insists on eating things that are unholy. That is things that are not set aside for him to eat.

Things like my wife's stockings. He grabbed a pair the other day and ate them before we could get them off him. And later that afternoon, I took him for a walk and he came back and vomited.

It was gross. You see, because he filled his stomach with unholy things, his stomach vomited it out. And that's the same here.

[8 : 25] If Israel fills the land with unholy behavior, it will vomit them out too. Now, I realize all this repetition and the language of vomiting is pretty gross.

But it's meant to highlight how serious this is. For their very life with God was at stake. If they do keep God's commands, then they'll enjoy life with God and all his blessings, verse 5.

All the blessings he longs to give them. But if they don't, then they won't. God will be forced to judge them instead.

He'll be forced to give them the judgment he so doesn't want to give them. And to help us, this also helps us to see why the punishments were so severe, verse 29.

He says, every person or everyone who does any of these detestable things, each person must be cut off from their people. Now, chapter 20 repeats these laws, but it adds punishments.

[9 : 28] We don't have the time to look at it today, except for one verse later. But chapter 20 will show us that to be cut off means to be exiled or, even worse, put to death.

I mean, that's pretty severe, isn't it? But that's because moral uncleanness can spread to others and even the land, which in turn will prevent the whole nation from enjoying life with God, but the whole nation being cut off from God, being vomited out.

It's like that story of Aaron Wollstone. Do you remember this story some years ago where his arm got caught in a rock? And so he could either cut off his arm to save the rest of his life or he could lose his whole life.

It would have been an incredibly difficult decision. I'm not sure I would have been able to do this. I guess you never know what you're capable of until you're in that situation. But he chose to cut off his arm so the rest of him could live.

And so also the nation of Israel would have cut off those people who disobeyed. So the rest of the nation could live. Very hard, no doubt. But the whole life of the nation was at stake.

[10 : 41] And so God reiterates the do and don't in verse 30. He says, Keep or do my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you.

You came and do not defy yourselves with them. I am the Lord your God. And so do you get the idea? Don't follow their ways.

Do follow my ways. Both for your good to enjoy life. Verse 5. And so you won't be vomited out at the end of the chapter. And so what are these rules for their good?

And what are these practices there to avoid? Well, they are the meat in the middle of the chapter. And they are split into two sets, two slices of meat, if you like.

And the first set are about not marrying close relatives. It's what we call incest. And so come with me back to verse 6, where it kind of summarizes it there.

[11 : 43] Verse 6 says, No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord.

Now, this was, as I said, a law about marrying close relatives. Israel were supposed to marry just within their country, but not too close a relative. And verses 7 to 17 gives examples.

It doesn't actually include cousins. People, including myself, know of cousins who have got married. That's not included in this list. Now, I don't think we have an issue with incest.

And because of time, and I'm a bit chicken, we're going to skip over point two. No, it's mainly because of time. But I am happy to answer any questions that you might have with it.

Instead, let's go to the second set of laws, which actually start in verse 18. So if you turn back over the page, this will be the last flick that you need to do. You can see at the end of verse 17, it finishes off talking about close relatives.

[12 : 46] And then verse 18 starts the new topic, which is point three. So verse 18, it says, These are all laws about sexual immorality.

Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living. In other words, this is about having two wives or two husbands.

It's a law against polygamy. And it actually still happens today, polygamy. In parts of the US, there are families that have more than one spouse at the same time. Now, this law is not what goes against God's creation design.

That's why it's here. A God's creation design in Genesis was a man, singular, leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, singular.

And they become one flesh. The two, not three, become one flesh. And God's design in creation is actually for our good.

[13 : 50] So do you notice in verse 18 how he calls the second wife a rival? Polygamy leads to rivalry. And remember Jacob, who married both Leah and Rachel?

It caused all sorts of conflict in the family, if you remember from Genesis. Leah was loved less. And in fact, at one point, Rachel even acts like a pimp and hires out her husband to Leah.

And Rachel said, he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes. So there's this bartering system. And then Leah says to Jacob, I have hired you. I mean, that's what the marriage relationship has come to.

That's not particularly healthy, is it? Or the two wives of Elkanah and 1 Samuel, who were Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah is described as Hannah's rival.

And would provoke Hannah until she wept and would no longer eat. I mean, that's not a happy marriage, is it? But God's creation design prevents this pain.

[14 : 56] In other words, it's for our good and helps us to love. And because it's part of creation, then it applies no matter the culture. In fact, it's why Jesus reiterated it in Matthew chapter 19.

And actually made it clear that the two, husband and wife, will become one flesh. And because Jesus reiterates it in the New Testament, then it still applies to us today for our good.

But verse 19 is one that's a bit different in terms of how it applies to us today. Because it's not based on God's design for man and woman in creation.

But it's based on God's laws in Leviticus 15. And those laws were about avoiding ceremonial uncleanness. Which was still for Israel's good.

Because it meant they could still live in God's presence with the tabernacle in their camp. But those laws about ceremonial cleanness were replaced by Jesus' teaching on moral cleanness.

[16 : 08] And so the way we practice this law is by being morally clean or good. Like loving our wife, who at that time of the month would probably prefer a hot water bottle than sex, to be frank.

I told you it was going to be full on today. Or like verse 20, which speaks about moral cleanness. Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife. And defile or literally make yourself unclean, morally unclean with her.

They become morally unclean by committing adultery. Which includes any sex outside of marriage. Unlike verse 19, this law is based on God's creation design.

I mean, it says in Genesis that the husband and wife will be united. And they will become one flesh. And this is reiterated in the New Testament.

And so it applies to us too. This is what Paul quoted in our second reading. And the thing that helps them become one flesh is sex. You see, sex is meant to help stick the couple together as one.

[17 : 20] Till death do us part, says the marriage service. And so it's a bit like glue. Which is why the Bible is all for sex in marriage. People think God is anti-sex, full stop.

No, no, no. He's all for sex in marriage. As the couple are able. Because it's like glue that helps them to stick together. But if you sleep around, like people do in our world, then it loses its stickiness.

It's like those yellow post-it notes. You know, when you kind of use it the first or second time, it sticks okay. But if you keep using it, it loses its stickiness, doesn't it? And so TV shows may make sleeping around look like fun.

But in the real world, sleeping around loses its stickiness. And so it becomes less meaningful, less relational, and more empty, more lonely.

So for our good, sex is meant to be kept in marriage to help the couple stick together as one flesh. And it works because if someone commits adultery, they actually tear that one flesh apart.

[18 : 28] It's why when people have affairs, there's so much pain and hurt. I mean, how much pain and hurt has been caused in our world by people who have affairs? And it doesn't just hurt the couple, it hurts the kids if there are kids involved.

And in fact, it actually hurts the wider circle of family and friends because they often have to take sides, don't they? The great news of the gospel, of course, is that there is forgiveness.

There is healing and reconciliation. But God's creation design is meant to prevent the hurt in the first place. It's for good.

Now, obviously, this law still applies to us today. In fact, Jesus actually amplifies it, you know, takes it up a notch. He says in Matthew's gospel, if anyone even looks lustfully at someone, that is, it doesn't matter if you're single or married, if they are not your spouse and you look lustfully at that person, Jesus says, it's like committing adultery with them in your heart.

And now this looking at them is more than just normal attraction. Oh, she's good looking or he's good looking. This is the second glance, the prolonged look, the daydreaming of, oh, if only that person were my husband or wife.

[19 : 55] For one guy I know, it means he's careful what he watches on TV or Netflix and refuses to watch some TV series because there's just too much of it.

There's in it. It'll just lead him into sin. For a single girl I know, it means she's careful about how much time she spends with certain married guys because, you know, she likes them, but she doesn't want to like them too much because they're not her husband.

Again, with Christ, there is forgiveness and help. But the point is this teaching is for our good. It's for the good of our kids and grandkids, our nieces and nephews, indeed for our society.

And so if you have Christian nieces, nephews, grandparents, pray for them in these things.

Encourage them. It's very hard to talk about. I get that. But if they ever come to you for advice, then direct them according to these things.

And if they're not Christian, pray they will become Christian. Not only so they can have eternal life, but they can follow God's way for their good. But then there's verse 21, which appears rather random.

[21 : 08] It says, Now, sadly, this was actually practiced amongst the nations of Israel's day.

But if Israel did this, they would profane God's name, which means treat God as unholy, which adds seriousness to this command, just in case murdering your own kids is not serious enough, right?

Of course, any false worship profanes God's name. It makes him or treats him as unholy. Because God is holy. He's set apart as the one true God.

And so if we worship any other God, then we're saying he's not the one true God. He's not set apart. He's not holy. And so this command is about worshipping God exclusively.

And it's still true for us today, isn't it? I mean, it's the first great commandment. We're to love God with, yeah, not just part of our heart, but our whole heart.

[22 : 18] Have God first in our heart. Not sharing him with other gods like money or your kids or grandkids, your career or health. But this law does seem to appear out of nowhere.

So why is it here? Well, because to worship other gods, verse 21, is like having an affair on God, verse 20. That is, to worship money or family or whatever it is, is like cheating on God. In other words, it's spiritual adultery. And so it does fit here just after the law about physical adultery. In fact, in chapter 20, where this topic is expanded, it actually calls it spiritual prostitution, worshipping this other god.

That's why it's amongst these laws about sexual immorality. But again, it's for our good. We were created to worship God alone.

Apart from the fact that you cannot serve two gods because they split you apart, lead you in different directions, our god doesn't demand we sacrifice our kids in the fire, does he?

[23 : 29] Actually, the reverse. Our god sent his son to be sacrificed for us. Now, is that not a god worth worshipping?

And in grateful response, he doesn't want us to be dead sacrifices. Romans 12, he wants us to be living sacrifices, people who are devoted to him in response to what he's done for us.

And people who worship him with our bodies, which includes the controversial verse 22. Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman.

That is detestable. Now, I need to point out a few things at this juncture. The first thing is, it is possible to love the person, but disagree with the behaviour.

Okay, we need to remember that because there are some churches in our world which, quite frankly, have done the wrong thing. They've been really unloving towards homosexuals.

[24 : 37] My kids, my daughters actually, barrack for Collingwood. And so it is possible to love the person, but not their behaviour, right?

The second thing I need to point out is, this law is talking about the act, not the temptation. And just like the law about adultery is talking about the act, not the temptation.

Of course, in both cases, we're not to give in to that temptation, either by acting on it or having that lustful look, as Jesus said. But if they're not Christians, we cannot expect them to suddenly live Christianly.

The first thing they need is the gospel. In fact, Jesus was called the friend of sinners. We need to love all people. We need to be their friends that they might hear the good news of Jesus and have life eternal.

And if they are Christians, we need to support them to live Christianly. Like we should support every Christian, actually. You see, it is possible to be a Christian and have a same-sex attraction, but not act on it, nor even try to look lustfully.

[25 : 52] In fact, these Christians know, and we have some of them in our church, these Christians know that even their attraction is not how God designed us to be.

And yet despite that, they seek to serve Christ faithfully, not giving into temptation to act on it or even look lustfully. And as a church, we need to support them by helping them to see, firstly, along with everyone who is single, actually, whether never married, widowed or divorced, that not being married doesn't somehow make you less of a person.

That message can sometimes be given by our society and even by our churches, but it doesn't make you less of a person. In fact, being single actually points us to glory in a way that married people cannot.

Because in glory, we'll all be married to Christ alone as his bride. And we need to support them in this also, secondly, by enabling them to still enjoy loving relationships, like with us, and sharing our lives with them.

But the point here in verse 22 is that homosexual relationships go against God's design in creation, where he created male and female to work together in a complementary way, where they're both equally made in God's image, so equal worth, but different bodies that kind of naturally fit together for good.

[27 : 27] What good? Well, like having children. I know children can sometimes be painful and grandkids and so on, but children are for our good. I mean, China's one-child policy has ended in 2015, I think it was, but they're still, they're now still suffering with the consequences of it.

Children are for good and you need male and female to create them. What's more, male and female reflect the union between Christ and the church, where Christ is different to the church, but we are united together as one body.

You need different male-female male to become one flesh to reflect that truth. And since it's based on God's creation design and it's for our good, Jesus reiterates it and the New Testament applies it to us today, as we saw in our second reading.

Now, there's a lot more I could say on that. I know it's very controversial. I feel like I haven't done it justice, but if you want to talk more, then I'm very happy to do so. As for verse 23, I'm not even going to go there.

It's pretty gross and I'm sure you can see it doesn't follow God's creation design for us, though the mind boggles that it was actually practiced in Israel's day. The big point, though, is these laws about sex and worship help us to be holy, different to our world, as God is holy.

[28 : 59] And they are for our good, just like they were for Israel's good. But unlike Israel, if we fail, we won't be vomited out of God's family or out of our promised land in the new creation.

For with Christ, there is forgiveness, which is fantastic, isn't it? But that doesn't mean then we just do what we want, knowing we'll just be forgiven anyway.

Rather, we still seek to obey because we know Christ's teaching on sex and worship is for our good. And there's even a bigger motivation to obey. And that is that our forgiveness cost God his only son to save us and to give us his spirit to help us.

In fact, we heard that in our second reading, that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. And so, whatever we do with our body, God's spirit is right there with us. That might cause us to think twice about lots of things, actually.

But the big motivation is we have been bought with a price, the blood of Christ. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

[30 : 11] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to acknowledge that we have all sinned in these areas of sex and worship, whether with our eyes or our hands or our hearts.

And so, we thank you so much that by your grace, we have forgiveness in Christ. But in response to buying us with your son's blood, help us, therefore, to honor you more and more with our bodies. For Jesus' sake, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.