

Holy Living Part 2

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[0 : 00] Okay, if you could turn your Bibles back to Leviticus chapter 18, that would be really helpful. There is an outline in the newsletters today. I am a bit sorry that there's not much space for you to take notes.

If you do take notes, you have to write down the margins. But it is filled with God's Word, so, you know, better than my notes. Now, if you are visiting us for the first time, as Ryan said at the start, we are going through the book of Leviticus.

We're starting where we left off last year. And so, whilst it may be sort of a bit of a strange passage tonight that we're looking at, we are merely going through God's Word because we believe that all of God's Word is inspired and authoritative for us and useful.

For us to apply today. Well, we don't like it, do we, when we're not told the reason for rules we are asked to obey.

Like a teacher on the first day of school reciting a long list of rules, but then not saying why they have to be followed. Or when you visit a foreign country and are told not to eat while walking or on the public transport.

[1 : 18] Some of you might know which country this is. Or, you know, not to wear certain things at certain places. You know, we wish to respect the culture, definitely, but we also want to know why we're made to follow these rules.

Well, as I said, when we come to chapter 18 today, we find a list of rules, and Grace only read some of it. The rest of it sort of follows in a similar vein. And while there might be hints of why they are there, we get hints of that with what God says, it's not entirely clear, is it, what the rationale for them are.

So what I'm going to do today is slightly different to our weekly diet, and that is, I'm not going to be looking at the verses one by one. Instead, I want to first understand, I want to help us to understand the biblical context for these verses.

That's what we sometimes call biblical theology, that is, understanding the context of these verses in the view of the entire Bible. And once we do that, and given that, you know, as we see some of these rules are rather repetitive, I think we'll be able to understand them, and then we'll be able to deal with them as a block.

Now, I have to say that even as I've been working through them, there are some details, some of the finer details, that remains inscrutable to me, inscrutable to me.

[2 : 41] And so you might be able to ask me some questions later, after the service, but there are still things that I don't understand about the passage. But I believe that the overall message, once we've understood the context, should be quite clear, which means that we will be able to apply it to ourselves today.

It's also worth saying that chapters 18 to 20 really go together as a single unit. They form a set of laws for holy living as God's people in the Promised Land.

And much of Leviticus up to this point has been focused on sacrifices that God provides so that the people can atone for their sins and be forgiven. But from now on, the focus turns more to how the people are to live as God's holy people in His Promised Land.

And so, as I said, these three chapters go together. Chapter 18 is primarily concerned with sexual conduct. And you might wonder why a whole chapter on it, and hopefully by the end you may understand why.

But that's chapter 18. Chapter 19, then, is a bit more general in scope. And then chapter 20 deals with the punishment, some of the punishment for disobedience.

[4 : 00] So what we're going to do is, as you can see from the title, part one, we'll leave chapter 19 and 20 for next week. That's part two. And what we'll do today is focus on chapter 18 as part of the first part.

So let's begin then, but as I said, not in the verses themselves, because where I want to turn to in your outline is to the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis, where creation is described and explained.

So, Genesis chapter 1, verse 27, we read this. God created mankind in His own image. In the image of God, He created them. Male and female, He created them.

God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

And so we can see from the very beginning, God's design for humanity, creating them both male and female, is for a purpose, isn't it? It's to enable humanity to fulfill its mandate of being fruitful and to multiply, to fill the earth through procreation.

[5 : 13] Humans are made male and female to actually allow for sexual relationships. And this is true generally for animals as well, but unlike animals, only humans are made in God's image.

And that means there comes added responsibility in how humans handle their sexuality. This we now see in the next chapter, chapter 2 of Genesis, where the proper context for these human sexual relationships are given within the confines of marriage.

So, chapter 2, verse 24, Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame.

Eve here is described as Adam's wife. So, what we have here is the permanent union of marriage, which the Bible describes as being in one flesh.

But the one flesh as well provides or implies sexual relationship. And in marriage, what is said here is the husband also leaves his father and mother to create a new family with his wife.

[6 : 30] Now, of course, Adam didn't need to leave his father and mother. There was none. Neither was there for Eve. But it foreshadows, doesn't it, that every marriage that occurs afterwards involves the leaving in order to create a new family.

Now, by me bringing these two passages in Genesis together, I'm merely doing what Jesus himself did in Matthew, chapter 19, verse 4 to 6, which Nathan read. For when he was asked whether divorce was allowed, Jesus replied to the teachers of the law by saying, Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. Now, some people have said that Jesus never said anything about marriage having to be only between a male and female, but if you look right here in Matthew 19, that's proof otherwise, isn't it?

Because what Jesus has done is he's taken actually two separate passages. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are not together these two passages, but he's brought them together in his teaching intentionally, hasn't he?

To connect them so that he makes it clear that God's design for creating humans, male and female, is, he said, for this reason, to facilitate marriage.

[8 : 07] Sex, then, is the means by which this union, this marriage, is consummated and the new family created so that it provides the most suitable environment for God to provide them with children to be raised and nurtured.

This is God's intent for his creation mandate. And although the husband and the wife do not sever all connection with their existing family, they are asked to leave their father and mother because what is needed is to create a new family, a new stable environment for which childbearing and childrearing can occur.

And this new family now, actually, husband and wife in their marriage, their relationship now takes precedent over all other pre-existing relationships, including that of parents and siblings.

And so what I'm beginning to try and show you is that sex, then, has a higher purpose than just the mere satisfaction of one's urges and desires. Or even the sex as an expression of intimacy and fondness to another.

Sex is not simply a physical interaction between two humans, but the powerful expression of the one flesh union in marriage. And that's why, if you look at the next verse, on the next bullet point,

Paul was so against the Corinthians when they used prostitutes.

[9 : 40] Because he said, do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? And then he uses these very words that are intended for marriage. It is said, the two will become one flesh.

These extramarital activities, sexual activities, Paul says, are tantamount to marital union, but not in a way that pleases God.

It's a misuse of sex, is what Paul is saying. Why? Because when you do it that way, there is no intention to create a new family. with the capacity to nurture children.

When sex is used this way, it's done for purely selfish reasons. And that's not what God has created sex for. And of course, as some of you will know when I've done marriage counseling or preached at your weddings, fundamentally, the fundamental building block of a stable society really is marriage, isn't it?

Because stable marriages provides the foundation for stable families and stable families provides the foundation for stable and cohesive and harmonious societies.

[10 : 56] That's God's plan. And you only have to see the breakdown in our society and you try and trace it back and more often than not, you can go back to broken families, which in turn stem from the lack of good and stable marriages as the cause.

And so, I say again, sex was given by God for more than just pleasure. It serves God's creation mandate. And of course, the pleasure that is enjoyed in marital union, that is not an end in itself either.

because God has provided that to the husband and the wife as a blessing to give them that means to strengthen their marriage for the sake of the family.

And we, as humans, I think, muck around with God's divine formula at our own peril and detriment. It's a bit like, I don't know whether you had this, but stitching on our garments, you know.

Sometimes I see a loose thread, it's been annoying, so I start pulling at it, right, and snipping it off. The shirt remains intact, so I think nothing of it.

[12 : 09] Another loose thread appears, and I do the same. And then before you know it, one day, the pieces of garment that used to be my shirt starts to unravel, right?

And I wonder why. Well, it all started with that first loose thread, didn't it? And you just have to look at, you know, what consumes our news nowadays, and even just this week.

I don't know how many of you were watching Justice Michael Lee with his judgment. But, you know, rape, sexual abuse, pornography. I mean, is this not all the unraveling of society playing fast and loose with God's purpose for sex?

If things are coming apart at the seams of our society, it's because we've ignored God's laws, thinking that, you know, no harm is being done.

What's the problem? Isn't it? So, that's the real biblical context within which Leviticus chapter 18 sits. And that, I think, brings us to the chapter itself, which I know some of you are itching to get into.

[13 : 17] So, let me start. But, thanks for your patience because I think it's important to understand this bigger picture because now that we do and we read through them, many of the prohibitions actually explain themselves, as we will see.

They're not arbitrary rules that God has put in place to spoil our fun, but really they're put there so as not to undermine God's good purpose for creation, marriage, and sex.

But, as we look into some of the verses, there are a few other additional things we need to consider that will help us better understand it. First, I think we need to notice that although not all the prohibitions are, many of them are focused on incestuous relationships.

That is, sexual relationships with a close relative. And this is summed up in verse 6, which is on your slide in your Bible. No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations.

I am the Lord. And what we then find in verses 7 to 17 are specific examples of these general prohibitions. So I think they're just examples, and therefore if they're examples, they are not comprehensive.

[14 : 32] That is, you can probably think of other situations, which are not mentioned there, that also infringes on this verse 6, this more general rule about having relations with close relatives.

Now, who constitutes a close relative is not really defined here, but I think in general we can see it as two people where one is either a direct descendant of the other, or they share direct descendants, so like siblings or something like that, or either that in the direct line, father and son

and father and daughter, that kind of stuff.

And as I said already, more than half the chapter is devoted to these relationships or prohibitions, and you might wonder why such a focus on all these relationships. Well, I think there are two reasons.

First, I think, firstly, it reflects the social structures of the day. That is, it was probably not unusual that if sons were married, that they would still live within the same village, that is, close to the extended family.

It's not like nowadays you get married and you try and move as far away as you can from your parents. They used to get married and stay together, right? Same village and all that kind of stuff.

And so the prospect of entering into these prohibited relationships was a real one.

[15:52] More so when we know that the nations around Israel, like Canaan and Egypt, they were all practicing these things. That we know directly from the verses themselves because verse 3 says, you must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I'm bringing you.

Do not follow their practices. And so these practices were prevalent among the nations. And the risk that Israel would follow after them and be tempted was a real one.

But more fundamentally, I think that God mentions these incestuous relationships because they go against the very things that God is trying to institute in Genesis.

They undermine God's creation mandate. And so God needs to warn them, particularly as the risks were real. And in particular, what incestuous relationships do is undermine the whole principle of a man leaving his family in marriage.

Because when you go and marry or have a sexual relationship with a close relative, you're sort of leaving and then reuniting with family again, isn't it? Because your close relative is part of family, which you're supposed to be leaving in marriage.

[17:09] And this can either happen when a man might be trying to seek a close relative for a wife, or as I said, having married already, they commit adultery with a close relative.

But either way, what God has tried to do, create good order by separating and having discrete families, gets all mucked around, isn't it? It's chaos being created when what God wants is good order in creation.

And worse than that, if a man does this with a woman who is already united in flesh, that is, married with another man who is also a close relative, like a father or uncle or brother, what he does is he brings added shame or dishonor into the family.

And we can see this in the way the laws are actually worded. So we've been looking at the NIV, the New International Version, and so for example, let's pick verse 8 on the next slide.

There in NIV it says, do not have sexual relations with your father's wife. That would dishonor your father. But if you go to a more literal translation, and I know some of you use these, like the ESV, English Standard Version, which is more literal, you get a better sense of the original words, which is, you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife, it is your father's nakedness.

[18:29] So the word nakedness there appears both in the first phrase and the second phrase, and that's because both sexual relations and dishonor come from the same Hebrew word for nakedness, as I put on the next slide.

There is a play on words here because to uncover someone's nakedness is to have sexual relations with them, but someone's nakedness is also their shame or dishonor.

both of these ideas actually, you get an echo of it back in Genesis chapter 2 and 25, which we read earlier because remember when Adam and Eve became one flesh, we read that they were both naked, but were not ashamed, that is, they felt no shame.

And if you go on to chapter 3 in Genesis, what happened when they sinned? They sold fig leaves, didn't they, to cover themselves and their shame.

So, covering of nakedness actually signifies hiding of sin. It's to avoid our shame, because of our sin, being exposed.

[19:41] And so, although literally to uncover another's nakedness is to have sexual relations with the person, it's also metaphoric for uncovering someone's shame. And that occurs when two people have sex outside marriage.

there is sin involved and therefore shame. Or when you enter into an incestuous relationship, there is also shame involved. And with incestuous relationship, it's not just the shame of the perpetrators,

the two people in the act, but also those related in marriage as well.

And depending on the situation, that could be the woman's husband or the woman's father, in addition to the two of them in the act. So, for example, if you sleep with your father's wife, you bring shame to your father as his son.

Or if you do it to your own daughter, it's shame on you as the father. Not just shame on you because you did it, but shame on you as the father. And the shame falls on the father, in some cases the mother, because these are positions of honor in the family.

And the heads of the house or marriage, when something is done to their household, they suffer the shame done to these people, even though they themselves are not directly engaged in them or impacted.

[21 : 02] Some of you will probably understand, you wonder why sometimes when you act up, your parents are so embarrassed by you. That's the reason.

Because what you do brings shame or honor to them. What happens to the body impacts the head as well. And actually that's the same with God and his people.

What's done to or among God's people also brings God shame or honor. When we sin, we dishonor God, even though he has not sinned.

So when Israel sins by performing these sexual perversions, they bring God dishonor, which then God has to respond. Thus, when we get to chapter 20, we will see that some of the punishments for these sins are very severe because it reflects the extent of dishonor to God as well as to the family that has occurred because of these sins.

So that's the whole idea of shame and nakedness. But the other idea that is in these sins is found in verse 20 and others as well. And that is the idea of defilement or making unclean.

[22 : 14] So if you look at verse 20, it says, Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her. So the idea here now is no longer about nakedness and shame but defiling.

And as we've seen in Leviticus, that's all about unholiness or being unclean. So back in chapter 11 to 15, there was a cleansing of a house because of mold, because it was defiled.

Well, that kind of cleaning is ceremonial in one sense, it's external. But here, when God describes these acts as defiling, these sexual acts are truly defiled inwardly, inside a person, not just external. We're not just talking about wiping away or washing away dirt or even avoiding certain unclean foods. We're talking about real inner defilement. And that's why Jesus will say in Mark chapter 7, on the next slide, nothing that enters a person, that is even unclean food, from the outside can defile them.

Instead, verse 20, it's what that comes out of a person, whether it's sexual acts or words or whatever, these are the things that defile a person.

[23 : 34] And back in Leviticus, so defiling are these sins that God declares that even the land is defiled by them. And the only way to cleanse the land is for the inhabitants to be vomited out.

So, verse 24, you don't believe me, well, verse 24, do not defile yourself in any of these ways because this is how the nations that I'm going to drive out before you became defiled.

Even the land was defiled, so I punished it for its sin and the land vomited out its inhabitants. And again, verse 28, and if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

It's a very graphic picture, but it shows how serious, isn't it? Vomiting is almost, you need to vomit to get all the poisons out of you, right?

When you're sick and all that, you vomit all the yucky food. That's the image there. And in the same way, it's sort of not too dissimilar to when Adam and Eve were cast out, weren't they?

[24 : 37] I know Genesis chapter 3 doesn't talk about vomiting, but they were cast out from the Garden of Eden because of their sin. And so here, in the same way, the promised land was God's way in a sense of recreating this little Garden of Eden for his people, where he will bless them.

Remember, this is a land of milk and honey, of plenty, of blessing, where God will dwell among them, be in relationship with them, so that then they can be fruitful and multiply, their creation mandate.

But just like in Eden, Israel was to live in accordance with God's good order for creation, which on the other slide, next slide, I'll say, is God ruling over humans who are made in his image, who then in turn rule over the animals and the rest of creation.

And what happens with sin, what happened with Adam and Eve, is that they inverted that order, didn't they? Instead of obeying God, were disobedient to God, didn't listen to him, but listened to an animal instead, in the serpent.

And so likewise, when you look through these prohibitions, even though some of them don't make a lot of sense initially, nearly all of them, once you understand God's creation order and good design for his creation, nearly all of them involve upturning this creation, this order, defiling God's garden of Eden, which he was giving to Israel.

[26 : 10] So that is the real, in one sense, the big rationale that lies behind all of these laws. Now, having understood all these laws, though, we have to then work out what it means for us.

What are the, as I say in point three, the practical and pastoral implications for us? Well, I think the first thing to say is that we probably recognize that incestuous relationships is not our big problem today.

I hope it's not, but I don't think it is. Nevertheless, I think that, as I said before, if you understand the rationale, God's intended purpose for creation hasn't changed either, has it?

That still applies. Now, I've heard some people say that, oh, these laws no longer apply because, you know, there's no incestuous relationships and that kind of stuff, or, as it says at the very start, because God gave it to them because he wanted Israel to be distinct from their nations and, you know, we don't live in that situation, we don't have to obey them anymore.

Well, I don't think that's true because Israel was asked to be distinct from the nations, not just to be different for different's sake. That wasn't the point. They were asked to be different because the nations around Israel were living contrary to God's purpose.

[27 : 30] And so, today, likewise, as God people, we are still called to live God's way. Now, our society may not be persuaded to do so increasingly, like with, for example, the legalization of same-sex marriage, but we're still called to uphold God's good created order, even in areas where society now deems permissible.

people. So, as I said, even though incestuous relationships may not be our issue today, I think, though, we are still living in a sexually permissive society where there's so much that undermines God's creation mandate, and in particular, God's good design for marriage.

And I'm not just talking about same-sex marriage alone. For a start, we, as a society, have idolized sex, haven't we? You only have to look at the marketing and the media, and sex is used, more often than not, to sell, to arouse lust in us, even us as Christians.

And so, even when we are not adulterous, we too, I have to say, we all have fallen short of God's standards, haven't we? By entertaining lustful thoughts, and for some, even succumbing to addictions like pornography.

pornography. Now, I do not say all these things to put an extra guilt or burden on people, although if that's your burden, please come and talk to me, because I want to help you to be free from that.

[29 : 07] But I'm saying this simply to recognize just how fallen we are, and how fallen it is that we live, the society that we live in. And, you know, people often accuse God of being obsessed with sex, you know, wanting to restrict our sexual freedoms.

But I tell you, the truth is, it's actually us that are fixated by sex. Let me just give you some statistics.

In 2010, so this is pretty old now, 13 years ago, the world spent \$100 US billion on prostitution.

Okay? That's bigger than the GDP of most nations, let me tell you. Likewise, the global sex toy market, just the toy market, is set to grow from the US 27 billion in 2019 to US 52 billion in 2026.

That's nearly doubling in seven years. All right? 35% of all internet downloads is pornography-related. 25% of all search engine requests is the same.

So you tell me, who's fixated about sex? I think we are, aren't we? Sadly, we've taken what is God's good gift to us, used to be used to serve his creation, landed, and we've turned it into something to satisfy our sinful desires.

[30 : 32] And when we do that, we are actually no better than the animals, are we? Because that's how animals behave. And when we do that, we are not made, although we are made in God's image, we are not acting as people made in God's image, are we?

And so I think the only reason God is making such a big deal out of it in the Bible is because we need all the warnings we can get, isn't it, to stop us in our tracks.

But let me be clear, though. The sexual desire itself is not sinful. All right? That's, God has given us sexuality. That in itself is not sinful.

Jesus himself had sexual desire. But although he did, because he remained single, he expressed his sexuality in his celibacy.

Rather than, as we all, the rest of us do, entertain it sinfully with our desires outside the bounds of marriage and through the lust of our eyes or whatever else.

[31 : 40] You see, we've been fooled, haven't we, by the mantra of our age that sexual expression is the highest form of love. You know, we see it in the movies that if you really love someone, you've got to sleep with them.

But that's patently false because Jesus himself taught, and those of you who went to the women's event on friendship will know this verse. What did Jesus say? That there is no greater love than this, for someone to lay down their lives for another.

That, my friends, is the greatest expression of love. Not sex. It's not sexual expression, but self-sacrifice that is the greatest love that one can show for another.

And Jesus was the best example of this because he died, he went all the way to the cross for us, laying down his life so that we can be saved.

And that, my friends, is true love. Ultimate way that you can show love for another is to lay down your life for them, not express it through sex.

[32 : 50] So, friends, as Christians, we need to hold on to this truth and not be fooled by the world. And then, having held on to this, we need to tell this to others as well.

That actually, the best way to love others is not through sexual expression. Because Jesus himself showed that to us. And because Jesus died for our sins, what's even better to remember is that even though we ourselves may fall in the area of sexual sin, we don't get vomited out of the land.

We find forgiveness when we come to the Lord Jesus and repent. How great is that? That he should love us so that we, in our own failure to express love in the best possible way, can claim upon his blood to find repentance and faith and finally salvation in the Lord Jesus.

So, friends, let's remember that. Let's hold on to that and live by it in God's strength. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us when we have strayed away from your view of sex and the good it's intended for your creation.

Help us to bring honor to you in how we conduct ourselves in this area. Whether we are married or single, whatever our sexuality, please give us the strength to glorify you by living holy lives because of Jesus' great love for us, laying down his life for us through his death on the cross.

[34 : 26] Help us to do likewise by laying down our lives, living sacrificially for others. And all this we pray in his wonderful name. Amen. Amen.