

Do not do as they do

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[0 : 00] What did you make of Leviticus 18 as you heard it read just then? Did you like it? Did you hate it? Did it make you feel uneasy?

! I think in our world today, for some of us maybe, this chapter might feel at first hearing or second or third like everything that is bad and awful about religion.

I mean would your friends think that if you showed it to them? First, it's all about sex. Unlawful sexual relations. And in the UK if there's one thing non-Christians my age reckon about Christians, it's that we're obsessed with and we've got outdated hang-ups about sex.

It's a chapter about sex, please no. Second, it is all do nots. Don't do this, don't do this, don't have sex with dot dot dot. Everything people suspect about the God of the Bible, right? That he wags his finger and he says, stop it!

Rule after rule that restricts our freedom. Who wants a God like that? Don't tell me what to do with my body. And I'd imagine that thirdly for a whole bunch of us, verse 22 will stand out.

[1 : 17] Do you not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman? That is detestable. And so do you see here that the Bible says that homosexual sex is detestable?

Which in the UK today is considered hate speech. Like quote this verse, as I'm doing now, and you may be shunned or sacked or arrested.

Because this verse looks so obviously damaging and discriminatory and hateful to gay friends and colleagues. To those of us who might be same-sex attracted. Or to those in our families whom we love.

Leviticus 18 at first hearing. Or second or third or fourth or fifth. Sex obsessed, finger wagging, homophobic Bible stuff that's not just outdated, but awful. Isn't it?

Or is it? As we explore these verses this morning, I would love us to hear truth and goodness from the God who made us.

[2 : 24] Who is himself true and good. And I would love us to hear the demanding and wonderful call of God on our lives. Because here is the message of Leviticus 18 this morning, as clearly as I can make it.

Do not do as they do. Be different. Be holy. That is with your body and sexually.

Don't follow the culture around you, people who do not know God. Instead, if you're someone who belongs to the Lord, keep his good laws. With your body.

Sexually. Be radically different and holy. Obey him, your God, with your body and you will live. And this is Leviticus 18.

It's set three and a half thousand years ago, you may recall. And these are words spoken by God through Moses to the people of Israel.

[3 : 26] The people of Israel who were gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai on their way from Egypt to Canaan, the land God had promised them. Before Easter we read Leviticus chapters 1 to 16, which taught us and them how to draw near to a holy God.

Wonderful chapters. But despite our sins, we can be forgiven and accepted by God through sacrifice. Through the wonderful death of Jesus on the cross for our sins.

In Leviticus 17 to 27 now and over these coming Sundays, God teaches both them then and us now how people who belong to a holy God should live.

Now if you want one verse that sums up the message of this second half of Leviticus, it would be chapter 19 verse 2, the last verse Tyler read.

Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. And that is what chapter 18 is about. Is it an awful chapter?

[4 : 32] I don't think it is. So follow through these verses with me with the points on the handout if you would like. First off, spoken to the people of Israel then and to Christian believers today.

Point one, you belong to the Lord your God. You belong to him. And that is so good. Did you notice how the chapter begins and ends?

In verses 1 and 2, the Lord said to Moses, I'm reading here, speak to the Israelites and say to them, I am the Lord your God. At the end of verse 30, I am the Lord your God.

So surrounding Leviticus 18, one shaping truth that he is the Lord our God. That is our God belongs to us and we belong to him.

And I am the Lord your God speaks of a committed covenant relationship. In which the God who made the universe freely chooses to set his love on people like us and bind us to him in a kind of tight, all in relationship with him as our God.

[5 : 50] Back in Genesis 17, verse 7, the Lord spoke to Abraham and said, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

Everlasting, loving commitment. I will be your God. And we don't talk much about covenants. Think of a wedding as a couple enters a marriage covenant.

Every time I go to a wedding or have the joy of standing in front of the couple as I take the wedding and I hear the declarations and the vows, I always just find them breathtaking. Because the vows are so all in.

Will you take her to be your wife and forsaking all others be faithful to her as long as you both shall live. And he vows, I will.

And later, as he gives the ring, all that I am, I give to you and all that I have, I share with you. And she says the same. Total loving commitment.

[7 : 01] We belong to one another. Here though, and for us, it's not a human to human covenant, but the almighty eternal God, the king of all creation, who stoops down and says to his people, I am yours and you are mine.

That's amazing. In his covenant love back then, God heard the groaning of his people in slavery in Egypt.

He remembered his covenant. They are my people. I will redeem them from slavery and bring them to myself. And that's what he did. He brought them to Mount Sinai to this moment here in Leviticus and said to them, I am the Lord your God.

And as it was for the people back then, so it is today. So it is today. For every person who turns to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith.

Earlier in the service, it's on the sheet, we read from Titus chapter 2 verse 14. About our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, our God, you see, who in total loving commitment gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness.

[8 : 17] And to purify for himself a people that are his very own. And to purify for himself, we belong to him, eager to do what is good. Do you see that? Do you sense that?

This is the real thing. This is real Christianity. A God who in his love says, I am yours and you are mine and we are covenanted together for all eternity.

You belong to the Lord your God now. I wonder if you need to hear that this morning before we get into the details.

First, I guess maybe a correction. We mustn't imagine that we can be part time, casual, come and go Christian believers. A little bit of God when we need him.

That's just not how it is. Won't do you any good. Won't save you. That kind of tinkering around with him. Now he is an all in God.

[9 : 20] All or nothing. Who binds himself to people. And the people who then go all in with him are people who are his very own. I wonder if you've come to him and said, I am yours.

Because secondly, it is so wonderfully good that he binds himself to us as our God, isn't it? Now the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for you.

He rescued you from your sins that you might be his very own for all eternity. You belong to him now, body and soul. He your King and Lord and he belongs to you.

I've hammered this, underlined this a little. Because it is so crucial this, if we're to understand Leviticus 18 rightly. Point one, wonderfully by his grace, you belong to the Lord your God.

Therefore, well secondly now, therefore be different. And keep his decrees and live.

[10:32] Let me read verses two to five. Speak to the Israelites and say to them, I am the Lord your God.

You belong to me now. So 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 am bringing you.

Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws.

For the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord. Do you feel the force of that? First here, to God's people, be different.

Which is verse three. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live. You must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. Which is such clear teaching.

[11:34] Do not do what they do. And people around you in Egypt back then, don't copy them. People around you in Canaan who do not know God, don't copy them.

People all around us in Cambridge, our school friends, our work colleagues, our close family who do not know God, do not do what they do with their bodies.

And this verse sets such clear expectations for the Christian life, right? That when you belong to Jesus, you must, you will live in a different way from those around you.

In all of life, for sure. And sexually, with your body. Do not do as they do. Which is hard for us.

It will be hard for you if you feel that you are the odd one out. It will be hard for you when others may seem so much more sexually free than you.

[12:42] It will be hard for you when every PSHE lesson and every movie produced in Canaan or Hollywood preaches to you that if people consent, then any sex is fine.

It's so hard that when every voice around says, come on, join in, it's okay. But we belong to the Lord who loves us.

And he's our God and our King who happens to also be the creator of our bodies and our desires. And that means that his is the one true voice to listen to.

And verse 4, you must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Such a clear call.

Will we then? Like, will we gladly obey his decrees and his laws as he tells us what we can and can't do sexually?

[13:43] Because, not only is he our God and we belong to him, but also because, verse 5, the person who obeys them will live by them. God says here that going his way will not bring misery and death to you.

It won't. Rather, there will be life for us as we use our bodies in the way that God has designed and intended. Blessing, God's favour, long-term happiness even, as we find joy in obedience to his commands.

Do these verses capture you in some kind of way? And really grasp these verses. And the good news of our God and Saviour to whom we belong to, and you and I should be ready and happy to obey any command.

Right? Like, whatever you say, my Lord and God, I will do it. Because you've saved me and you're good and you love me and my life is yours and my body is yours and you're good and you know what's best.

I will be different. I will follow your decrees, whatever they are. If you sense any of that or you understand that, now come to verses 6 to 23.

[15:09] Which just say so very clearly and straightforwardly, don't be sexually immoral then. Commands that say don't are important.

They form a kind of protective hedge around the things that God says, yes, live like this. In Genesis 1 and 2, in the beginning, you discover that God has created and designed us as sexual beings. God is for sex. He makes us male and female. He grants the gift of sexual intimacy to be enjoyed and enjoyed only within the lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.

That is God's yes to humanity. But if God is for sex and he says sex is for marriage and he says live this way, we mustn't disobey him, offend him, abuse his good gift to us.

And so God has to say to us, no, not that. And not that either.

[16:23] And we're going to move quite swiftly through this. But do you see, verses 6 to 23 don't cover every sexual practice outside of marriage. What they cover is the ancient accepted behaviour

of those in Egypt and Canaan, which the Israelites must not do or copy.

And some of these you will think are very straight and oh goodness, that's biting for me. Some of them you won't. And verses 6 to 18, big chunk is summarised in verse 6.

No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord. You ready for this?

No. God says no to sex within your extended family, with those who are flesh of your flesh.

That's the language used. The commands are directed to men and they run through different relatives. Your mother, your sister, your father's sister, your son's daughter, your son's wife and so on.

The only close relatives not mentioned here are daughters. Maybe because even in Egypt and Canaan that was considered utterly taboo. Of course you mustn't do that.

[17:36] Do not approach any close relations, relatives to have sexual relations. And what do you make of those don'ts?

Like I guess most of us in 21st century Britain, Christians or not, we would go absolutely. Of course not. That would be disgusting. It would be wrong. And we'd be right. And so you think, thank God that here in this area our society lines up with what God says.

And yet in ancient history, and still in places today, sex within the extended family does happen. I think it happens more often than not as men take advantage of vulnerable women who are close at hand.

Do not do that, says the Lord. It dishonours family life. It offends God. And maybe as some amongst us might know personally and very, very painfully, it is often an awful, awful abuse that damages so deeply and should not be.

It should not be. God's commands for sex are right. They are good. They are for our good. When he says do not, he says to men with vulnerable women in your close family around you, do not and we mustn't.

[19:05] I mean, verses 6 to 18 say no to sexual relations with close relatives. Verses 19 to 23 broaden out to mostly sexual relations outside the family.

And in these verses seems to me that UK society today clashes very strongly with what God says. I think verse 19, no sex during a woman's monthly period, fits with the ritual purity regulations that are particular to the time of Leviticus.

But verses 20 to 23, on the other hand, have very clear ongoing application. Am I right about this?

That 21st century society basically says, as long as you don't coerce someone, and as long as people involved consent, you should be free to do what you want with whomever you want.

I think that's right. I think that's what people say. God says no, no. And verse 20, do not have sexual relations with your neighbour's wife and defile yourself with her.

God says no to adultery. May feel so tempting, but don't do it. You not only offend God and destroy another family, you defile yourself and make yourself dirty.

[20:30] Verse 20. Verse 21, do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech for you must not profane the name of your God, I am the Lord.

It's hard to know quite how this fits. It's not sexual, but it does involve destroying family life. And maybe that's why the command is here. Is it relevant?

I'm going to say this very briefly in passing. For sure, we say today that our society says no to child sacrifice. And that is true. Unless the child is in the womb and is the unwanted fruit of sexual intercourse.

The Bible says do not do that. Don't sacrifice children. Verse 20, verse 21. And now verse 22.

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman. That is detestable. So in this verse, God says no to homosexual sex.

[21:40] To a male lying with a male in the way that a male lies with a woman. There's lots to say here.

With this verse. Which we don't have lots of time for this morning at all. You know, 50 to 100 years ago in the UK, homosexual sex was so clearly not approved of.

But now in our world today, it is so obviously okay, of course. Not just okay, but everybody must celebrate it with pride or else.

In our culture today, any same-sex attraction that we might experience is encouraged. Because you must be free to express your inner sexual identity or you'll be damaged.

We will have friends and family who are in committed gay relationships and we love them. And some of us may have very personally struggled with traditional Christian teaching here.

[22 : 43] Or we may have experienced hatred from Christians as we've asked questions of our own sexuality. All of that taken together, just to mention a few things, can make Leviticus 18.22 look so wrong.

But if you're a Christian believer this morning, you belong to the Lord your God. And he says to you and to me, be different.

You must not do what they do. See, at the end of the day, you mustn't follow the voices out there. In fact, you mustn't even follow the voice in here.

No, no, our God has spoken and he's good. And he knows and he knows and says what is right and good for us and the bodies we have which he has designed.

And very hard though it may be, all of us, all of us, are called to trust him and keep his decrees.

[23 : 48] Whatever you say, my Lord and God, I will do it. Why? Because my life is yours and my body is yours and with your help, I will obey your laws.

Lastly, verse 23. Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it. That is a perversion.

There's hidden parts of the internet that you mustn't go to and look at. But we would say, I guess, that is right. But verse 23 is right. And it really is.

Let me try to draw things together as best I can. Leviticus 18 this morning. It is not a bad chapter. But rather a clear and challenging call from the God who rules, the God who's good, the God who has set his covenant love on us.

Do not do as they do. Be different. Be holy. There's no mention in Leviticus 18 of lust or pornography or polyamory or casual hookups or sex before marriage.

[25 : 08] But all of that will be included in God's decrees. And the Lord says to his people, don't copy the world around. Don't follow the voices out there.

Don't follow the voice in here. Offer your body to God. Offer your sexual desires and your life. To God, do not let yourself fall into wicked, detestable sins.

In fact, as verse 24 onwards will say so powerfully, do not defile yourselves living like the world around, or you will be cut off. And so let me ask one final time, why would we live like this?

Why would we limit our options? Why would we tame our desires? Why would we say, I go your way, Lord? Why would we do it? We would only do it because we belong to the Lord our God.

If today you're a person who has turned to Jesus, if today you're a Christian believer, then the Lord God who made you and loves you says to you, I am yours and you are mine.

[26 : 20] Jesus Christ gave himself for you. And he has made you his very own. There is nothing greater in the world. There's no greater grace, there's no greater stability than having Jesus as our committed God and Saviour.

And so therefore, honour God with your body, obey your God, and find joy in obedience to his commands. And if, at the end of Leviticus 18, if in this past week or this past month or months, if you have not lived a sexually pure life, and if you have broken God's laws, then the wonder is that today you can come again and you must come again quickly to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, to the God whom you belong to.

You know, our God knows. He knows what we're like. He knows everything you've ever done. And yet this God is still all in with you.

And so therefore this morning, confess your sins in your heart and receive his mercy and take the Lord's Supper as we will do in a moment and then go out into your next week with your God and once again offer your body to the holy God who loves you.

Do not do as they do. Be different. Be holy. Be holy. Because you belong to the Lord your God. I'm going to give us a few moments just of quiet just to reflect on what we've heard in these verses.

[28 : 11] Then I'm going to lead us in a prayer and then we're going to sing together. So just a moment of quiet. Be holy.

Be holy. For I am holy. Says the Lord your God. We praise and thank you, our Lord and God, that through the work of Jesus Christ, you have bound us to yourself.

Thank you that you are our God and through faith in Jesus, we can be yours. Thank you for the joy and the privilege of belonging to you.

Would you help us, please, Father, and to know your mercy again to us today and would you make us those by your Spirit who give ourselves to living differently, sexually, because we belong to you. Help us to obey your commands and therefore to live, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.