

5. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - The body is for the Lord

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[0 : 00] And now, if we could have our Bibles open at Leviticus 18, but perhaps keep our finger in the Corinthians passage, and we'll pray together. Lord God, how urgent your word is. How close to home it comes. It is indeed quick and powerful, dividing the very thoughts of our hearts.

Lord, when your word speaks to us in ways we find strange, in ways we perhaps may find alien, open our eyes, open our hearts, and give us indeed the humility and the grace to listen to the voice of your Spirit as he leads us into the written word, and thus to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Thank you.

And that obviously could lead to a comedy. It could lead to a thriller, or it could lead to a disastrous piece of prose, as it often did. But it was a very interesting exercise to see how people really got into that saying and actually developed it.

Suppose the sentence that was given was the one in 1 Corinthians, the body is not meant for immorality. How would you continue that?

[1 : 54] How would you continue that? I suspect most of us would continue it something like this. The body is not for immorality. The body is for morality.

The body is for purity. The body is for holiness. That's not what Paul says. Paul says the body is not for immorality. The body is for the Lord.

And the Lord is for the body. In other words, lifting the whole thing out of the realm simply of rules into the realm of relationships.

And above all, relationships with the Lord. The Lord who has made his covenant. Put it in a sentence. God makes his covenant with his people. God enters into a marriage relationship with his people.

And he looks to his people on earth to carry out that covenant in their own relationships. That's why I've taken the title for this sermon this evening from Paul.

[2 : 53] The body is for the Lord. As we look at Leviticus 18, that's the way we're going to look at it. Now, this is, as I said, part of the holiness code which runs to the end of the book.

After the great day of atonement. After the, if you like, the annual spring cleaning, as I described it last week. When the sins of the year are covered.

When the sins of the year are brought into the open and accounted for. And placed on the goat that takes them away into the desert. Then there is need for continuing holiness of living.

And these chapters deal both with worship in the tabernacle. The great festivals. Next week we're going to look at the great day of Jubilee. Which is one of the great festivals.

But also about daily behavior. And here it is particularly sexual behavior. And especially the uniqueness and the holiness of the marriage bond.

[3 : 52] Look at verse 6. None of you shall uncover any one of his close relatives. To uncover nakedness. I am the Lord. We'll return to that.

But that's the basis on which Moses is teaching this. Because marriage has deeper implications. God's love for his people.

Read the prophet Hosea sometime. And see that wonderful, that wonderful and terrifying story. Of how the prophet dramatized in his own life. The love of God for his faithless people.

And then Paul tells us in Ephesians 5. That the mystery of marriage is an illustration of Christ loving the church. This is a great mystery, Paul says.

Times speaking of Christ and the church. So it's part of the holiness code. And the background of these relationships is the so-called father's house. Now that was the basic social unit in ancient Israel.

[4 : 49] In ancient Israel, three to five generations would live not exactly under the same roof. But in very close proximity. In the same establishment.

Now that's very relevant to our society. With multi-occupancy flats and all that sort of thing. Because very often it's argued by those who wish to deny the teaching of this passage.

That the sexual ethic put forward by conservatives is actually an invention of the nuclear family. And belongs to the intimacy of the nuclear family. That's not the case at all.

It belongs in the father's house. Where lots of people are living together. But the other thing I want to say before we really get into the passage is this. People who attack this chapter say.

You're dealing with a few obscure texts in Leviticus. You're dealing only with something on the fringes of Revelation. And that arises of course from the fact that people wish to deny the authorship of this book to Moses.

[5 : 53] They want to say it's a late and inferior kind of book which was cobbled together at the exile. But that's not the case.

The teaching here flows from the basic teaching of Genesis 1 and 2. Where Moses says, what is it to be human? To be human is male and female.

That's part of the image of God. And then we have that wonderful story in Genesis 2 of the marriage of Adam and Eve. Where God, as the father of the bride, so to speak, brings Eve to Adam.

And he shouts with joy at meeting his other. Is the person suitable for him? And Moses in commenting on that story says, for this reason, a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife.

So we're in the mainstream of Bible teaching here. This is not an obscure byway. See, the more I study the Bible, the more I become convinced that there are not obscure byways. It's all the mainstream of gospel teaching in the Old Testament flowing from Moses.

[6 : 59] The greatest and most powerful authority in the Old Testament whom all the other prophets and wisdom writers look. So as we look at this chapter, I want to ask two broad questions of it.

First of all, why are we to behave in this way? That's really verses 1 to 5. And then secondly, what kind of behavior is advocated here?

And that's verses 6 to 30. So first of all, why behave in this way? When God tells his people to obey him, he always gives reasons.

Look back at the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments in Exodus, and then repeat it again in Deuteronomy. God doesn't say, you know, you obeyed Pharaoh, I'm your boss now, so you've got to obey me.

God gives reasons. And the reasons are that he is the covenant Lord who has entered into a relationship with them and has redeemed them. Not only has he made them, he has redeemed them, he is their God.

[8 : 05] That's why they are to obey. And so here, this is a whole lifestyle. It's not just about sexual ethics, as you can see if you read on later on in the Holiness Code. It's a whole lifestyle that flows from the creation story itself, from us being male and female.

And this is enshrined in the Ten Commandments. And there are two basic principles, aren't there? One is the holiness of God, which is non-negotiable. God's commandments are not for rewriting and revamping and revising as we find fit.

But the second thing, surely, is the grace of God, who knows how weak and sinful we are, and who has already provided sacrifice and cleansing. That's why the sacrifices and this kind of material go together.

So, why behave in this way? And the first reason is God has called us into a relationship with him. God has made a covenant with us. I am the Lord.

Four times in the chapter. Verse 5, verse 6, verse 21, and verse 30. And often again in the following chapters. The Lord is the covenant name.

[9 : 19] The name of the one who rescued us, saved us, brought his people out of Egypt under the blood of the Passover lamb. Brought them through the sea and now has provided a way back to him.

Provided the tabernacle in the desert with its sacrifices and with its worship. And that is also the emphasis of 1 Corinthians 6, isn't it? But, once you were like this as well.

Paul lists those sins and said, and so were some of you. But, one of the great buts. But you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. The difference between the lifestyle that belongs to paganism and the lifestyle that belongs to the people of God.

For the Lord is primary. See, the first thing happened, not when Adam and Eve fell out, but when they conspire together against God. Read Genesis 3 again.

And you'll find that every relationship goes wrong. The relationship with each other. The relationship with creation. The relationship with God. All relationships go bad.

[10 : 26] And the relationship with the Lord goes bad. Which is why Paul insists that marriage must be in the Lord. In the covenant. That's the first reason why we have to live in this kind of way.

The second reason is given in verse 3. We have to be distinctive. The lifestyle is not to be that of Egypt or Canaan. Not to be that of Egypt from which they had come or Canaan to which they were going.

Now, Moses knew all about the worship of Egypt. After all, he had lived in Egypt at the very heart of the Egyptian court for many years. And he warns them that when they enter the land, they are not to worship the gods of the land.

They're not to worship Baal. Now, Baal is a name that simply means Lord. It was the name for a variety of gods. You remember at a later stage, Elijah is to confront the prophets of Baal on Carmel.

And the thing about Baal worship is it had two things which are always very appealing. And when you get them together in one package, they're always very popular. Baal worship appealed to that sense of God.

[11 : 38] That sense of the other. That sense of eternity that Ecclesiastes tells us is in every human heart. In other words, it appealed to an actual God-given desire. But satisfying that God-given desire in a pagan way.

It also appealed to the sense of unlimited enjoyment. Now, if you can have these two things together in the same package, that's always going to be popular.

Canaanite religion, we know a great deal about this from excavations and old documents that have been discovered. There are no Ten Commandments in the Canaanite text.

There are no calls to be holy. There are no calls to be distinctive. You see, God is saying, in the world of Egypt, in the world of Canaan, in the world of 21st century Britain or elsewhere, be distinctive.

Be object lessons of the life of holiness and of grace. That's what he's saying. He's not saying he'd be odd bods, look weirdos and so on.

[12 : 41] He's saying, be distinctive because you are God's people. You are living by a different set of values. And the third reason he gives is that it leads to life.

Verses 4 and 5. Verse 5, if a person does them, he shall live by them. Now, the first obvious meaning of that is life in this world.

Now, that obviously is not an absolute statement. But it does say that, obviously, a good and loving family is the best context for bringing up children.

The best context for young people to develop and to make a good adjustment to life. But there is an important point here.

It's not just about that. And that's why I read the Corinthians passage. You see, in chapter 20, many of the sins mentioned in chapter 18 are subject to the death penalty.

[13 : 43] Many people will say, well, if you disapprove of it now, why don't you obey the whole Bible? Why don't you stone people to death? And the point of that, surely, is that now we have the opportunity of repentance and forgiveness in Christ.

Or else, what's more terrifying than being stoned to death? Judgment on the last day. See what 1 Corinthians said? Those who do those things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Just as Jesus so often does. As he does in Matthew, he says, you have heard it said, but I say to you. And actually, very far from weakening the law, strengthens the law. So it is here.

The body is for the Lord. So why do we behave that way? Because we belong to the Lord, because it's distinctive, and because it leads to life.

Now, what kind of behavior then? And the key is verse 6. Any one of his close relatives. Now, that is a paraphrase.

[14 : 46] It's literally, it says, inner flesh of inner flesh. Now, the point is, that is clearly echoing Genesis 2, where the one flesh relationship belongs to marriage, and to marriage alone.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Now, that means an organic union is created, like that of parent and child.

Not just a piece of paper which is signed, a contract that two individuals enter into, but an organic relationship, which is the foundation of a stable society, and the foundation of all healthy family life, and all healthy life in society.

Now, last week, those of you who were here last Sunday morning will remember, looked at those curious chapters about skin diseases, about food laws, about clothing, about mildew, and so on, which were acted parables of holiness for believers at that time.

Now, I suggest at that time, after all, the nation is in its youth. God is teaching his people as the generations pass, teaching them about his holiness, teaching them by sacrifice, but also teaching them these kind of regulations applying to daily life.

[16 : 12] And we also read the passage in Romans, where these laws were set aside. The kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking. But you notice the 1 Corinthians passage doesn't say, well, Moses said you weren't to commit adultery, you weren't to indulge in homosexuality, but now we are free, now we are liberated.

The New Testament does exactly the opposite. The New Testament underwrites, reaffirms these. You see, food laws, clothing, mildew, are acted parables for a time.

Of the holiness of God. But marriage is an enacted parable to all eternity. Of the love of God for his people. Of the love of Christ for the church.

This is a great mystery, says Paul. I'm speaking of Christ and the church. That glorious passage we read from Revelation come. For the wedding of the Lamb is ready. And his bride has prepared herself in fine.

You notice it was white linen. And those of you who were here last Sunday evening will remember that was what the high priest wore on the day of atonement. Symbolizing purity. Symbolizing repentance. So, this chapter is full of negatives.

[17 : 30] But these negatives are there to provide for positive and joyful celebration of a godly lifestyle. So, let's look at what the chapter is saying.

Now, obviously, I'm not going to go through it verse by verse. What I'm going to try to do is to pick out briefly one or two principles. What kind of behavior. And the first thing that's said is, have an appropriate relationship with others.

This is very much what Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 5. Treat the older men as fathers.

The older women as mothers. The younger women as brothers and sisters. All the relationships mentioned here. Don't do, she is your mother. She is your sister.

And so on. Because the sexual relationship is for marriage. And for marriage alone. And Paul underlines that in Ephesians 5. There is an appropriate relationship between members of a family.

[18 : 31] Among friends and so on. But this unique relationship of one flesh belongs to one relationship only. That's the relationship of husband and wife. This is a great mystery.

But it is about Christ and the church. I think the second thing this passage is saying is avoid sexual idolatry. Now sex is a huge god in our culture.

Isn't it? And what happens when sex becomes a huge god? It leads to the exploitation of women, doesn't it? Simply as objects of desire for sinful men.

That's what happens when sex is glorified out of its right place. And made into the whole of life. The be all and the end all. You see that's the point of verse 21.

Which appears to be digression. That is being talking about illegitimate sexual relationships. And then says you shall not give any of your children to offer them to Moloch. And so profane the name of God.

[19 : 33] I am the Lord. Moloch. An evil god. To whom babies were sacrificed by being thrown into a furnace. Milton in Paradise Lost describes him as Moloch.

A horrid god besmeared with blood. Now surely in a world of marked so much by pedophilia and child abuse.

And indiscriminate abortion. There is something that this text is saying to us. When sexuality becomes a god. Instead of a gift of god.

Then dreadful things happen. Like those awful murders in Ipswich. By the lorry driver who was convicted last week. That's what.

You see. When we try to live our lives. In ways that are not according to the standards of God. Society deteriorates. Society degenerates. And we get exploitation of women.

[20 : 30] We get child abuse. We get pedophilia. All the rest of it. So that's the second thing. The third thing. Particularly verses 21 to 23. is avoid unnatural sex.

Now most people would react with disgust at child abuse and pedophilia. Indeed pedophilia is one thing that's beyond the pale in our society. Or best duality for that matter.

And 23 shall not lie with any animal. And so on. But it's verse 22. Which has become the storm center of contemporary debate on human rights.

Now notice one or two things. First of all. It is homosexual activity. Not homosexual tendencies. I know.

And probably you know. Many people. Who are gay. By tendency. But who by the grace of God. Are living holy lives. What it's talking about here.

[21 : 27] Is the activity. 20-30 years ago. People would say something like this. Homosexuality is not worse than other sins. Because after all. There are other sins.

And you'll notice of course. The Corinthians passage. Worryingly mentions things like gossip and slander as well. As homosexuality. That's not what's being said today.

What's being said today. By the pro-gay lobby. Is that homosexuality is not a sin at all. It's something to be affirmed. Something to be applauded. Something that is God given.

Something to be celebrated. That's what's being said. And you can see how that is cutting at the very root of the word of God. The authority of the word of God.

Or another way. It's basically saying. God the Holy Spirit. When he inspired the writers of scripture. When he inspired Moses and Paul. For example. Got it wrong.

[22 : 25] He didn't say. He wasn't aware of what conditions in the 20th and 21st centuries would be. And we've moved beyond that now. This is dangerous. This is setting ourselves up above God.

This is the sin of Genesis. Isn't it? You will be like God. Here it is. Here it is again. You see. As far as I'm aware. It's perfectly true to see. The Bible says more about greed and exploitation.

It does say about homosexuality. As far as I'm aware. There is no lobby. Called the Christian group for gossips. Or the Christian group for exploiters. Who are saying.

Oh these aren't sins at all. These are things to be affirmed and celebrated. Anyone accused of these sins. Will characteristically say. Oh no. That's not what I meant. I didn't mean it in that way.

This is different. You see. Genuine sexuality. Looks back to Eden. Looks back to the one flesh. And to the one perfect marriage. That ever happened in this world.

[23 : 24] Before the fall. And but it also looks forward to the new heaven. And the new earth. And God. That's what God is calling us to. The body is for the Lord.

So we have to avoid unnatural sex. And the fourth point I want to make. And this really is the point of verses 24 and following. And Moses is going to have more to say about this later on.

And particularly in Deuteronomy. Do not pollute the created order. Do not make yourselves unclean. He says. By any of these things.

For by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean. And the land became unclean. So that I punished its iniquity. And the land vomited out its inhabitants. It's fascinating that back in Genesis 15.

When God makes his covenant with Abraham. God says the people will be in Egypt for 400 years. Until the iniquity of the Amorites of the Canaanites is complete.

[24 : 26] And when that's complete. Then they'll be driven out of the land. But that's going to happen to God's people as well. And as we know sadly. It did happen to God's people.

You see. This kind of behavior pollutes society. The curse of Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve fell. That curse affected the whole of creation.

And resulted in the futility that grips the created order. Which we know about even as Christians. The futility. The fallenness. That makes us often suffer from despair or depression.

Makes us feel that there's no point in going on. Because of this curse. But the gospel points forward to the time when that futility will be removed.

When that curse will be removed. And the church will be perfect and like Christ. Now what it seems to me is being said here.

[25 : 27] Is that both marriage and for that matter the holy lives of those who are single. Anticipate the new heaven and the new earth. I think that's so important. Because Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 says not everyone is called to marriage.

Marriage and celibacy are both their charismata. Gifts of the spirit. And whatever gift we are given. The gift we are given. So we can live our lives in godliness and holiness.

But the important thing about these last verses is. Moses is saying God's people will be judged. If they indulge in that behavior. And you've only got to read the tragic collapse of the great Solomon in his final years.

And the terrible days of Manasseh. Son of good king Hezekiah. Where all these things are happening. As a result of this the people are taken into exile. Where all these things are going to be burned out of them.

A difficult passage isn't it? I would much much rather have spoken about something else. But this is part of the word of God. I want to say three things briefly as we finish.

[26 : 35] First of all there is mercy for those who fall. Sexual sin is not the unforgivable sin. There is forgiveness. Read 2 Samuel 11 and 12 about David's adultery.

And then read the passionate Psalm 51. Where he pours out his heart in repentance. And receives forgiveness. Second thing is. We must live our lives in the light of eternity.

The wedding of the Lamb that's to take place at the end of time. And the final thing is this. We need to help each other to live lives of holiness.

This is not something that we can do by retreating away into a ghetto. We've got to live lives of holiness together. And we've got to help one another.

We've got to help one another as Peter says. To declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness. Into his marvelous light. Amen.

[27 : 37] Let's pray. Only by grace can we enter.

Only by grace can we stand. We come to you Lord as those who have failed. Failed in the area of our sexuality as well as in other areas. Those who have run in paths that are not paths of your will.

Those who have failed you and who will fail again. And yet we know that when in your covenant grace. That when we find your word difficult to obey.

That you will give the needed grace. We ask that that may be the case in our lives from this day on. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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[28 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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