

Lesson 17: Leviticus 18-20 Moral Purity

Introduction

Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements						
Key Passage: 19:2						
1-7 Ritual	8-10 Priesthood	11-15 Purity	16-17 Atonement	18-20 Purity	21-22 Priesthood	23-27 Ritual
Sacrifices	Consecration	Ceremonial cleanliness	Substitution	Moral cleanliness	Standards	Festivals, etc...

The book of Leviticus dedicates two major sections to purity laws. The first set of purity laws come in 11-15. These are symbolic or ceremonial laws designed primarily to highlight the holiness of God and help set the Israelites off from the peoples that surround them. The second section on purity laws in chapters 18-20 shifts from ceremonial purity laws, symbolic laws, to moral purity laws. The key verse in this section is Leviticus 19:2, "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'"

The holy character of God is both to set the standard and the motivation for the behavior of his people. How should we live? "Holy like our God." Why should we live this way? "Because we want to live in a way that reflects who God is and who we are as bearers of his image." Both the ceremonial purity laws and the moral purity laws are intended to create an awareness among the Israelites that they are a people set apart for holy service.

At the beginning of the sermon on the mount, Jesus described this reality of being set apart as being salt in society. That's a stronger metaphor than we tend to realize in our day. Salt was much more than just a flavoring. Driving down to Dubrovnik on the Croatia coast you pass what looks to be another large Croatian island. But then you see it is not a true island. It is connected to the mainland by a peninsula. And along that peninsula, you see a stone wall, five and a half kilometers long (that's about three and a half miles) cutting across the entire peninsula. You think, why is a wall here? The wall is there to protect ancient salt flats that produced 500 tons of salt annually for the Republic of Dubrovnik, bringing in an estimated 15,000 in gold coin. As late as the Civil War in the United States battles have regularly been fought through history over salt supply. Why? It is not just about the flavor. Salt is an essential nutrient for the body. But more importantly, salt preserves. Salt preserves food. Days before refrigeration salt is what kept things from rotting. In Jesus day, to say that you are the salt of the world is not simply to say you add flavor, hopefully that's true. It is to say that you preserve what is healthy, what is good, in society for the benefit of the whole.

Jesus added, "You are light." Salt preserves what is good and healthy. Light reveals. Your life is to be set apart so as to reveal the way of life to other people. Would you say that you have set apart yourself to be salt and light in your society?

Matthew 5 concludes with these words from Jesus, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." You can hear Leviticus 19:2 in that command. "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." If you think perfection is an awfully high standard, you are correct. It is. And Jesus means be perfect. That is no different than the command to be holy. True holiness requires perfection. We cannot and should not water down this command. It means be perfect. If we were to go back through the laws that Jesus has addressed here in Matthew 5, we would see that his standard does not just include action. Jesus requires perfection in our words, even more than that, he requires perfection in our thoughts. Jesus' standard of holiness is perfection. When he says, "Be salt and light, truly set apart," he means it.

How are we supposed to take that? What do we do with such an impossible standard? I think Jesus gave this command for two reasons. First, God's standard of holiness is perfection. If you do not

understand that, then you do not understand why you so desperately need the grace of God. One of the things Jesus is doing in this sermon is challenging the weak position of the religious person who would claim that he is acceptable based on his faith plus his moral behavior plus his religious ceremony. “It is in faith and what I do. That’s what makes me acceptable to God.” And Jesus is calling that out. He is calling out the most rigorous, law-abiding Jews in his society when he says in verse 20, “I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” If we are going to answer the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?” with some mixture of faith and good works, we need to understand what we are really claiming. The Pharisees knew the righteous would enter the kingdom of heaven. They debated about who truly attained to the necessary level of righteousness. Jesus is telling them here what that level of righteousness is that makes you acceptable – perfection in thought, in word, and in action.

But here then is the second purpose for declaring, “be perfect as your God as perfect.” When despair drives us to mourn our own sinfulness, and moves us to truly seek after righteousness, when we realize there is no way into the kingdom by works of the law, then we can receive the gift of grace. God declares us perfect, acceptable, by the blood of Jesus. The first question of covenant is answered decisively, “You are made acceptable by grace alone.” Now the call to perfection becomes a vision to strive towards, not a standard by which you attain your own worth. Perfection is the vision of the good and the beautiful and the true. If you think you need to attain perfection in order to receive love or to have value, then you are missing the good news of the gospel. When you let go of the requirement of perfection, you are able to pursue the vision of perfection. You are valued without perfection. You are safe. You are secure in Jesus. You are loved. You are being transformed. So now, as Paul says, “Press on to lay hold of that for which also you were laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” Be righteous not because you have to attain a standard, that you can’t attain but because you are called to be truly whole. You have been set apart to become who God created you to be, a man, a woman created in his holy image, noble and good and kind and loving and pure. Seek perfection, knowing that Jesus Christ has already declared you perfect and will complete his perfection of you in glory. In the grace of God, “Be perfect as I am perfect. Be holy as I am holy,” is transformed from an impossible standard, to a vision we pursue, even though we know we will not attain it until God completes us in heaven. We are not surprised when we fail. We know we are not perfect. We know we are in process. We know we can’t attain it here. The strength of grace enables us to confess our sin, get back up, and keep going in our walk with him, striving after his righteousness as the definition of true life. So, be perfect as the Lord your God is perfect.

Now I am ready to get back to Leviticus 18-20. Starting with Jesus Sermon on the Mount allows us to recognize that the Law of Moses functions on two different levels at the same time. The law of Moses is both a code to govern a civil society and a standard for moral behavior. And we need to keep these two functions in mind as we study mosaic law. Jesus calls us to the higher standard. We also need to consider law as a civil code. And that’s a lower standard. These are our two big topics for this lesson. We will start with consideration of the law as a civil code for society. Then we will consider the law as a standard for moral behavior, with more of a focus on Leviticus 18-20.

Mosaic Law: a code to govern civil society

The function of Mosaic law as a legal code for a society stands out in the way the 10 Commandments are formulated. “Do not murder.” “Do not commit adultery.” When you think about it, those are very low bars for behavior. Do we really think God is happy with us if we make it all the way through the day without killing anybody or cheating on our wife? “Great job! You really wanted to kill that guy who jumped the line and got the last chocolate croissant. I am amazed at how you held back and let him live. You get a special, oh and no adultery, you get two stars today.” Is that really such a high bar? Apply that same line of thought to Leviticus 18. Is this really the highest bar that God expects? “Great job! In the last year, you did not offer up any of your children for child sacrifice, you never had sex with an animal, and you did not commit incest of any kind. Way to be holy! Good job!”

Is this the standard God expects of believers? No. This is the law serving as a code for civil society. A low bar is set to promote just basic decent behavior and to minimize the effect of sin on society. The extreme behaviors of murder, of adultery, theft, of standing up and being false witness in a court of law, those are all enforceable, criminal behaviors. It is clear when people break these laws. They can get caught. And we can have witnesses. And this is on the outside of what's allowed in society. When people break these laws, they are punished for the good of the whole. We are going to require this of everybody. The principle that some laws are given to minimize the effect of sin comes out in Jesus' answer to the Pharisees about why the Mosaic Law provides for divorce. This is Matthew 19:3-8.

³ Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful *for a man* to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" ⁴ And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, ⁵ and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

That is a really interesting conversation. Jesus is saying that Moses was instructed by God to provide in the legal code a certificate of divorce, even though that is not God's will for marriage. There are times, then, when God gave laws to Israel, not intended to require the standard of his perfect will for human behavior. This is not how he wants believers to behave. He wants much more. But instead he gives a standard to hold a non-believing society in check, because of their hardness of heart, because they are going to do evil. So, one of the purposes of law is to minimize the effect of sin in society.

If we wanted to go on and study the whole law as a code for civil society, here are two further characteristics we would need to recognize.

First, we would need to become experts on all five of the books of Moses, not just Leviticus. A little bit of the Torah is poetry, under 5%. Almost 60% is narrative. The rest, about 37%, contains the stipulations of law. So, 37%, just over a third, of Torah is law, dos and don'ts. Where do you think you would find most of that law? If you say Leviticus, you are right for a big chunk of it. 38% of the law is found in Leviticus. But you find the rest interwoven with covenant narrative through the other books of Torah.

The least amount of command is given in the book of Genesis, less than one percent of the commands. And that makes sense. The commands of Genesis came in connection with older covenants. Adam was told not to eat from the one tree. Noah was told that murder was a capital offense. And Abraham was told to circumcise all males. We get a minimal report on the laws that came before Moses.

Torah is the law for Israel. So, that is the law we get specified, the law given after the people have become a nation and have been rescued from Egypt. That law comes almost equally in the next four books of Moses. So, as I have said, Leviticus provides the most. It is still less than 40%. We get about 20% of the law in Exodus, 20% in Numbers, and 20% in Deuteronomy. The amount contained in Numbers is probably the most surprising. It is, in fact, slightly higher than Exodus and Deuteronomy. But we tend to think of Numbers as primarily narrative, the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years. But this is a characteristic of Torah law. Torah law is given in the context of narrative and is spread through the books of Moses.

The second characteristic to recognize is that Torah law covers a variety of legal categories. The abstract categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial help us as Christians to think broadly about the Torah law, which meets our need to understand how these laws might apply to us who live under New Covenant. And we are primarily concerned with moral law. But if we want to dig in and try to appreciate how these mosaic laws provided order for Israel and how they mitigated the effects of

evil in society and how they worked in the Ancient Near East, then we have to get more academic and more pragmatic at the same time.

We would need to consider the law in these categories.

1. Criminal law: A crime is a law against the state. For Israel, as a theocracy, a crime is an offence against God. And criminal law describes such offences and includes required punishments.
2. Case law: Case law provides an example to serve as a principle. Case law was often used in regard to personal injury or property law. For example, if a man's ox gores and kills a human being, but that ox has never acted in such a way before, then the man is not liable of a crime. The ox must be killed, so as not to gore another person. If an ox has gored a man, and does so again, then the owner, who did not kill the ox the first time, is liable for the murder of the man gored. So, this is an example of case law. And it is not just about oxen. It applies to the case of an ox. But it gives a specific case which can be used by judges to also determine other similar cases.
3. Family law: Family law applies to marriage, divorce, children, certain aspects of slavery, inheritance laws, and redemption laws.
4. Cultic law: Cultic law is the term used for ceremonial laws, such as, sacrificial laws, calendar laws, and symbolic cleanliness laws.
5. Compassionate law: Compassionate law requires citizens to act in a way that takes into consideration the needs of the poor. These laws include the prompt payment of wages, the law allowing poor people to glean in a field, and not keeping a coat overnight as pledge. Some compassionate laws were applied to the care of animals.

So, to consider the law of Moses as a civil code, we have to consider how laws operated over a range of legal issues, and we have to consider the whole of Torah to make sure we do not miss any of the relevant material pertaining to a particular issue.

A study of Mosaic law as a civil code also requires investigation into the principles of law. So, not just the dos and don'ts, but the principles behind the dos and don'ts which were given by Moses. Let's consider just one principle of law, which is probably the most famous and also one of the most misunderstood. It is the eye for an eye principle, stated three times in the Torah, in Exodus, in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:17-20; Deuteronomy 19:21). This is from Exodus 21:23-25.

²³ But if there is *any further* injury, then you shall appoint *as a penalty* life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

That's the principle. Now, we have to consider how the principle was to be worked out in Israel according to Torah law. Here is a specific law. What book do you think this comes from? Listen carefully.

If a free-born man strikes a free-born woman, and thereby causes her to miscarry her fetus, he will weigh and deliver 10 shekels of silver for her fetus. And if that woman should die, then they shall kill his daughter.

Do you know where that law is located? It is not in the Bible. It is from the Law of Hammurabi, a 19th century Babylonian law code. It is an example of how eye for an eye might be applied. Did you catch what was really wrong with it? So, if the man ends up killing the woman, then the man's own daughter is taken from him and killed, so not the man who did the killing but the daughter of the man. And that in a sense is an eye for an eye. He kills a woman, so his daughter is killed. We don't see that kind of application anywhere in the Bible. That's not there. To go along with eye for eye, the Torah also has this principle in Deuteronomy 24:16,

¹⁶ Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* sons, nor shall sons be put to death for *their* fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.

So, what does “eye for an eye” mean in the Torah? It is an interesting question. Are you familiar with any instance from Torah law or any instance from biblical narrative where a person injures a person’s eye and then has his own eye injured, or when a broken bone is legally recompensed with a broken bone or when a cut hand with the cutting of a hand? Just off the top of your head, can you think of any instance, anywhere in the Bible, where that is the application of the law? If you do ever come up with one, I am still looking. I would really like to know. So, please let me know.

The one case where the eye for eye principle is applied literally is murder. A life is required for a life. That case is clear. But for personal injury the idea of eye for eye seems to focus on a principle of justice not a literal wounding of the perpetrator. The principle of eye for an eye seems to be that the one who committed the injury must make a just and fair payment to the one injured. Consider what the Torah requires from a perpetrator of personal injury. This is from the personal injury section in Exodus 21. This is verses 18-19.

¹⁸ If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with *his* fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, ¹⁹ if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed.

So, what is the punishment required of the man who committed the injury? Is he repaid bruise for bruise or wound for wound in the literal sense of hurting him in the same way he hurt the victim? No, he is not. He is held accountable for the wounds of the victim. But he himself is not wounded. He is to pay for the victim’s loss of time and provide for his care until he is completely healed. There is no hitting or wounding or cutting of the perpetrator. No eye is removed. The penalty sounds like what the good Samaritan did when he stepped in and found the injured man on the side of the road. The good Samaritan did what the perpetrator of the crime should have done. He covered the cost of the man’s injury. The perpetrator would also have to pay for loss of salary. The eye for eye principle seems to be a principle requiring just recompense from the one who committed the act of violence. This is the kind of careful study we need to engage to more deeply appreciate the law as a working code for a real society. When we understand the law at work, we can see principles that apply even to our own society.

The law functioned as more than a civil code. It is a civil code, but it is more than a civil code. The Mosaic law also provides a standard for moral behavior. God expected more out of his people than submission to the law. A person who is satisfied with not committing murder, adultery, or theft is not a person seeking after the heart of God. Those are minimal standards to minimize the effect of evil and to provide order. God calls us further up and further in to his heart. Let’s consider the moral call of the Mosaic law by taking a closer look at Leviticus 18-20.

Mosaic law: a standard for moral behavior

If you have a Bible with you, I recommend that you pause the audio and skim your eyes over Leviticus 19. What phrase do you see repeating? I will pause for a second. What phrase repeats through Leviticus 19? We see it first in verse 2 which has the longer phrase, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Then the shorter phrase begins to repeat: verse 4, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 10, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 12, “I am the Lord,” verse 14, “I am the Lord,” verse 16, “I am the Lord,” verse 18, “I am the Lord,” verse 25, “I am the Lord,” verse 28, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 30, “I am the Lord,” verse 31, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 32, “I am the Lord,” verse 34, “I am the Lord.”

Why do we pursue a moral life? We could come up with a number of reasons. This is the most basic. We pursue moral holiness because God is holy. And because he is God. He is the lord. That’s the ground for our moral action. We owe him allegiance and that allegiance must be exercised in accordance with who he is, his character. And this is the basis of the statement I made in the previous lesson. Moral law flows out of the nature of God. That’s the answer to an old question,

which goes like this, “Is the moral law over God or is God over the moral law?” If God must act in a certain way, then it might be inferred there is a standard over God to which he is accountable. If that is not true then we might ask, is murder only immoral because God has said it is immoral. If God is over the moral law, can’t God change any law? God could call adultery good. With that line of thought God could call rape good, if he chose to do so. Some religions actually teach that. So, which one do we affirm? Is God over the moral law or is the moral law over God?

We affirm neither. There is no moral standard over God. And God cannot arbitrarily call good evil or evil good. God is the standard. God is true to his own nature. The definition for all goodness, all beauty, all truth is grounded in the nature of who God is. “I am the Lord.” He is the ground for moral truth, moral goodness. So, we say it this way, “The moral law is an expression of the nature of God and God will always be true to his own nature.”

For human beings, the ground for morality begins with the nature of God. And he has given us two first principles of moral law to help us understand his nature. This is how God wants us to act. All the moral law is summed up in this, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” And then there is a second law that goes with that law. To love God is to love those God loves, so the second principle goes like this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And who gave us those two principles? Where does that come from in the Bible? We usually connect this with Jesus, right? He sums up the law with these two commands in Matthew 22:37 and 39. But these commands are not new with the New Covenant. Jesus is quoting. And he is quoting Moses. The command to, “Love the Lord your God” is Deuteronomy 6:5 and the command to “Love your neighbor” is right here in Leviticus 19:18. In fact, it is paired with “Love the foreigner among you.” “Love your neighbor.” “Love the foreigner.” “Love your God.”

God himself is the ground, the standard for all morality. And he has given us these two base principles. Love God. Love your neighbor. A problem for us in our fallen sinful state is that neither loving God nor loving our neighbor comes naturally. We do a terrible job at guessing the moral will of God. We get some things right. Some moral principles work with our nature in our culture. And we get those right. But we miss a lot of the details, a lot of what this would really look like. And that has to do with our fallen nature. Something has been twisted or corrupted in us, that makes it impossible for us on our own to figure out what is the moral will of God. So, for us to know the moral will of God, he has to reveal it to us. And he has done that in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant. In the covenants we receive revelation regarding what it really looks like to live a life of love to God and love to neighbor. The ten commandments, for example, are the basic or general stipulations of the Old Covenant. And the first half of those focus on loving God and the second half focusing on loving our neighbor. And then the moral component of Torah law helps fill out for us in more specific detail what it looks like to love God and love neighbor.

The laws of Leviticus 18-20 are part of that moral law. It gives us more definition by giving us more specific stipulations on how to live a life of love. I am not going to take time in this lesson to go through the commands of Leviticus 18-20. My desire has been more for us to take the opportunity to understand better law in the mosaic code. I do want to point out a couple of principles that come from Leviticus 18-20, and I will mention two specific commands for the sake of helping us think about the whole.

Leviticus 18-20 is loosely chiasmic in organization. And when you see the structure, it brings about a couple of principles. Leviticus 18 starts and Leviticus 20 ends, this is our chiasm, with the phrase, “I am the Lord.” That is the first frame, starting with “I am the Lord,” ending with “I am the Lord.” Then moving in we have the command to separate out from other nations. Then moving in again we have laws regarding sexuality. Then towards the end of 18 and the beginning of 20 we have a command against child sacrifice to Molech. In the center, we have all of chapter 19, that is the center of the chiasm. So, 18 and 20 are pointing us towards 19. And along with this chiasmic structure over the whole there is some structuring within each chapter. For example, chapter 18 begins and ends with

the command to separate from the surrounding nations while chapter 20 repeats near the beginning and at the end the command against mediums and spiritists. The repetition in chapters 18 and 20 of the laws against incest and other forbidden sexual practices emphasizes how powerful the draw to copy sexual practices in pagan societies is going to be on the people of Israel and continues to be for believers today.

Both chapters include a short command against idolatry and spiritism in the context of forbidding sinful sexual practices. Paul makes the same connection between idolatry and perverted sexual practice in Romans 1:18-32. Here is a fundamental truth. Turning from worship of God as he truly is leads to a further corruption of our hearts and minds. When we give ourselves over to ungodly practices, we redefine who God is to justify our desired behavior. Immoral behavior corrupts our view of God. False worship corrupts our behavior. We cannot turn away from God without a moral effect. And we cannot pursue immorality without a theological effect. Our belief in God and our behavior go hand in hand. So, idolatry and perverted sexuality go hand in hand. When we turn away from the true vision of who God is, our minds and our hearts are darkened.

There are two commands in the sexual code that I want to address briefly. Leviticus 18:19 forbids having sex with a woman during her menstrual period. Almost all the laws in this section forbid behaviors that Jews and Christians have traditionally agreed are examples of sexual immorality. But is that really the case with this law? It does not seem clear to me. It seems to me to have more to do with the ceremonial sanctity of blood in the mosaic code. And I am not arguing here whether it is a good idea or a bad idea. I am bringing up the question of whether it is a moral issue versus a ceremonial issue.

My point is that even in this section of laws, which I am calling moral purity laws, we seem to have an example here of ceremonial purity. And that indicates some difficulty in separating out which laws in the mosaic code are moral, and which are ceremonial, and which are civil laws. We may have a good sense of which laws are morally, and which are ceremonial and which are civil, but sometimes there is overlap which is not clear. And, in the end, we who are New Covenant believers, take our marching orders from the New Covenant. The Levitical code may inform us morally, but if we are unsure, we go with our understanding of the New Covenant.

The second law I want to point out is the prohibition against homosexuality in 18:22, “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.” The perspective of much of western society regarding the morality of homosexuality makes this a useful prohibition to consider. The repeated commands about being set apart from the nations that occur at the beginning of chapter 18 and at the end of chapter 20 are critical to our consideration of moral law. Here is that beginning section in 18:1-5,

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. ⁵ So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.

We have these three moral principles here. First, you are to define your morality based on the character of God. “I am the Lord your God.” Second, you know the moral will of God by the revelation you have received. “So you shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man may live if he does them.” Third, you do not define morality according to the reasoning of your society. “You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes.”

Modern western society is telling us that homosexuality is a good, acceptable moral choice. And a lot of Western Christians are accepting that moral vision. Western Christians who support homosexuality sometimes argue that the prohibition we see in the Bible is against promiscuous

homosexual behavior, not against monogamous, homosexual behavior. That may be an interesting point to check, but once we check it, we discover that the Bible is quite clear in its rejection of homosexual sex. "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." That is not about promiscuity.

Someone else might make the observation I just brought up concerning the prohibition against sex during a woman's period. If that is a ceremonial prohibition, could homosexuality also be a ceremonial prohibition? That's a decent observation. The answer is, "No." The case of a woman in her period was already mentioned in the ceremonial code, not homosexuality. And the case of homosexuality has that extra word, "abomination" with it. The case for rejecting homosexual sex begins in Genesis 1-2 with God's original creation of humankind as male and female with man leaving father and mother to become one flesh with woman in order to be fruitful and multiply. You can't multiply through homosexual sex. The original intent of sex had a strong procreation component. The Old Testament view of homosexuality in Leviticus is in agreement with the presentation we get in the Old Testament, homosexual behavior is immoral.

And if I need to, I can go to the New Testament to make the decisive argument. Homosexual behavior is clearly forbidden by Paul in Romans 1:18-32. I am not going to go through that argument right now. I give a longer argument for that in lesson 4 of my previous podcast on Romans. It starts about halfway through the podcast. If you want to see the text, you can find the transcript at observetheword.com, so, Romans lesson 4. The Scripture is very straightforward on this point.

Before moving on, I do want to add that we are talking about immoral behavior. And that is different from desire. There is an important distinction to be made. I have a sin nature. And I cannot do anything about that. Walking with God over time has affected my desires for the good. But I still have sinful desires. Having a sin nature is not the same thing as committing sin. I am not sinning the moment I recognize a sinful desire rise up within me. When I begin to play out sinful desires in my mind then I have begun to sin. I have compassion for any other brother or sister who struggles with sinful desire, including homosexual desire. That may be who you are now, that struggle, that is your reality.

You have to decide what you are going to do with that reality. Who is going to define for you when your desires are in line with what is moral and good and when your desires are calling you to do what is immoral or evil? Our desires are not accurate moral compasses. Who defines which desires are leading to sinful action or not? If you are a Christian, your answer should be, "God does. God defines what desire I should follow." And those sinful desires will not be part of you forever. Neither will my lustful, sinful desires. We are born again now, but we are not yet whole. As Paul says, in Romans 8:23, "We, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." Each one of us groans with sinful desires. I certainly hope we are not condemning one another for the reality of that struggle. Though we are pointing out what is sin, according to God's definition of what is sin. Each one of us is called by God to not act on desires which he has defined as immoral. Our desires are not accurate compasses, and neither is the moral reasoning of our culture. We do not walk in the way of Egypt or the way of Canaan. We walk in the way of God, trusting his definition of what is morally beautiful, good, and true.

Conclusion

So, Torah law establishes a code for civil society. That was for all members of Israelite society. Torah law also calls the members of society to a higher law, to the law of God's heart, a much higher standard, the standard of perfection. The mosaic law challenged the Israelites to consider themselves set apart for holy service. And the New Covenant challenges us to the same. Do you consider yourself set apart from your culture? Do you accept the identity Christian, which is little Christ? Do you own the challenge to be salt and light? Do you trust God to define for you what is morally beautiful, good, and true, even when that definition runs counter to your culture?

We are a people of the book. We proclaim that truth does not come from within. Moral truth must come from God. And it must be communicated objectively by God, and it is through his Word. If we do not live life in line with God, then we lose the sense of what it means to be his, to be Christian, to be set apart. So, let's close with the full challenge to be set apart as salt and light that comes from Jesus in Matthew 5:13-17,

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. ¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Reflection Questions

1. Read Leviticus 18 and then Leviticus 20. What stands out to you as similar and what stands out as different between the two chapters.
2. Read Romans 1:18-35. What connection do you see in Paul regarding idolatry and immoral behavior? How does that connect back to Leviticus 18 and 20? How would you summarize the principle that Paul is communicating? Write it out in your own words.
3. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 19? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. The law of Moses functions on two levels. The law of Moses acts a civil law for all members of the whole society. These laws set a low bar meant to curb the effects of sin and produce basic order. The law of Moses also acts as a moral standard, calling believers in God to pursue holiness. Is this a helpful distinction for you to consider as you study the mosaic law or is it not so helpful to you? Do you see examples of both in chapter 19?
5. Being set apart as holy sometimes leads to behavior that is commendable by society. What are some examples of behaviors listed in chapter 19 that non-Christians would probably find commendable or even support you in doing?
6. Being set apart as holy sometimes leads to behavior that is ridiculed, mocked, or opposed by society. What are examples you see in Leviticus 18-20 that would probably bring ridicule or opposition if you set yourself apart from society and took a stand for those moral principles?