

Chapters 17-18 speak of regulations regarding two of the most basic human desires:
food and sex.

And just as chapter 17 regulates the proper approach to eating meat,
so chapter 18 regulates the proper approach to sexual relations.

Leviticus 18 was the center of a controversy in the Old School Presbyterian Church
in the early 1840s.

On January 5, 1842, the Rev. Archibald McQueen was suspended from the gospel ministry
and from the Lord’s Supper by the Fayetteville Presbytery in North Carolina.

The charge?

That he had married his deceased wife’s sister
–which was defined by the Westminster Confession as incest.

The case went all the way to the General Assembly,
where the Assembly agreed with the presbytery, after a fiery debate.

Forty years later the Confession was revised.

In other words, we wound up agreeing with McQueen
that the Bible does not prohibit such marriages.

But the controversy revealed the fact that the church
was having a hard time trying to figure out what the Levitical laws were about,
and how they applied to the church today.

Leviticus 18 is part of a whole section—chapters 17-20—
where God sets forth the meaning of holiness from an ethical standpoint.

Leviticus 11-15 explained ceremonial cleanness and uncleanness,
so that Israel would be prepared to enter the worship of God.

But ceremonial cleanness is only a part of the picture.

God also demands ethical holiness.

Leviticus 18 explicitly sets forth God’s commands for sexual purity
in the context of Egypt and Canaan.

Israel must be different,

and so the laws of Leviticus 18 address sexual matters
in terms that were quite familiar to the Israelites—but may seem strange to us.

Introduction: I Am the LORD (v1-5)

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules^[a] and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

Verses 1-5 state emphatically that the following laws are of the utmost importance to the life of Israel.

Three times in five verses, God declares “I am the LORD”—I am Yahweh.

Israel must not think of Yahweh as simply one god among many.

They must think that Yahweh is like the other gods.

This refrain, that “I am the LORD”

is repeated more than 40 times in the next 9 chapters.

It is an echo of the prologue to the Ten Commandments:

it is the statement of the indicative—the fact that Yahweh is their God,

the one who delivered them from slavery,

and who is giving them a home.

But Yahweh has unique requirements, and so they must pay attention to his commands.

This opening section concludes,

“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules;

if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”

Paul will quote this in Romans 10 when he speaks of the righteousness of the law.

Likewise, in Galatians 3:12, Paul says,

“But the law is not of faith, rather ‘the one who does them shall live by them.’”

Twice Paul cites this verse in making a sharp contrast between the law and faith.

Some have argued that when Paul refers to the “law” or the “works of the law,”

he is only referring to the ceremonial aspect.

But Leviticus 18:5 is not referring to ceremonial cleanness,

but to ethical holiness.

This is talking about the civil and moral law of Israel.

We’ll come back to Paul later,

but in the context of Leviticus 18,

verse 5 is saying that the one who obeys God’s moral law,

as expressed in the condemnation of incest,

will live long in the land.

Now let’s look at the particular cases.

1. “Uncovering Nakedness” – Incest Forbidden (v6-18)

⁶ “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. ⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ⁸ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness. ⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether brought up

in the family or in another home. ¹⁰ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. ¹¹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. ¹² You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. ¹³ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. ¹⁴ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. ¹⁵ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ¹⁶ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. ¹⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. ¹⁸ And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

The phrase “uncover the nakedness” does not refer to marriage,
but to any sexual relations (which would obviously include marriage).
The sexual practices of the Canaanites and Egyptians
allowed these sorts of things.
Marriages between brother and sister were rather common among the Pharaohs,
but God forbids Israel to follow them.

The general rule is stated in verse 6:

“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness.
I am Yahweh.”

Then this law is given more detail:

any close relative by blood is automatically excluded.
The father is excluded because it would uncover the nakedness of your mother.
The father’s wife is excluded because it would uncover the nakedness of your father.
Your sister or half-sister is in the same category.
Your granddaughter is excluded
because they are of the same blood as your own children.

Step-sisters, uncles, aunts, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law,
all are forbidden either because they *themselves*
are too close in their blood relation,
or because by sleeping with them
you would expose the nakedness of your blood relative.

This is the key to understanding these laws.

Adam and Eve covered their nakedness immediately after their sin.
You do not expose the nakedness of your close relatives,
rather you cover their nakedness.
When Noah allowed himself to fall asleep “uncovered,”
his son Ham did not cover his father’s nakedness,
but Shem and Japheth did.

Likewise, since sexual relations create a one-flesh relationship,
to sleep with a close relative dishonors the family.

Part of the reason for the complexity of these laws is because divorce was so easy –
and an early death was so common.

The result was that even a monogamous man might have several wives over time –
and some of those women might have had children from previous marriages.

As we know well, who live in a similar context,
it was quite possible for an Israelite home to be very mixed up!
It would be easy to argue that my father's third wife's daughter from a previous marriage
is fair game!

But God says, no.
If she was reared in the same house,
then she is off limits.

Some have said that *blood* is the key –
but verse 11 says that even your father's wife's daughter is your sister.
The key is not *blood* – but *seed*.
Your father's seed has been in his wife.
Therefore, his wife's daughter – although the child of another man –
is still your sister.

Verses 17-18 give us two additional cases:
verse 17 forbids a man to have both a mother and her daughter (or granddaughter),
labeling that “depravity” because they are close relatives.
Verse 18 forbids a man to have two sisters at the same time.
So any of your wife's kin is acceptable, except her sister, her mother, or her daughter.
And her sister is only forbidden while your wife is alive..

So why did the Presbyterian church have so much difficulty with this?
It seems quite obvious to us that verse 18
simply condemns marrying two sisters at the same time.

Polygamy is assumed here.

While God established the proper pattern of monogamy in the Garden,
he did not yet forbid polygamy.

But some could not bring themselves to admit that God ever sanctioned polygamy
Colin McIver, the prosecutor in the McQueen case in 1842,
went so far as to claim that the prohibition against marrying two “sisters”
simply meant any two women, and therefore that Lev. 18:18 forbade polygamy!
So Leviticus 18 not only permits a man to marry his *deceased* wife's sister,
it also permits a man to marry several wives–

so long as none of them are “close relations.”
God’s concern for Israel was to keep sexual purity intact,
by avoiding incest.
But why was incest so bad?
Sarah was Abraham’s half-sister after all.
Jacob married two sisters at the same time (Leah and Rachel).
The laws of the surrounding nations might forbid the father-daughter
or grandfather-granddaughter,
but most permitted brothers and sisters to marry.

Why did God now forbid it?

Israel must be different from the nations.
Israel must be holy.

The key to understanding these laws is to follow the seed.
The seed must be protected.
You are the seed of your father and mother.
Your seed should not get mixed up with his seed.
You shall not sow the same field with two different kinds of seed!
Therefore both your parents close kin are off limits.
All of your father’s wives are off limits (8)
Their children (and their spouses) are off limits (9, 11, 16)
Their siblings (and their spouses) are off limits (12-14)
Your grandchildren (and by implication children) are off limits (10),
as are their spouses (15)
Likewise, since your seed is in your wife, you may not mix with her mother or daughter.

Since you become one flesh with a woman when you lie with her,
you may not become one flesh with those
who have been one flesh with your family’s seed.

There is one exception to these laws—the law of Levirate marriage in Dt. 25.
Verse 16 had forbidden you to uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife,
but Dt. 25 commands you to marry your deceased brother’s wife
(in order to perpetuate the name of your brother).
The point of Levirate marriage was that the seed continue!

Leviticus 18 assumes that your brother is still alive.

2. Uncleaness, Abomination, and Perversion – the Varying Degrees of Depravity (v19-23)

¹⁹ “You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleaness. ²⁰ And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor’s wife and so make yourself

unclean with her. ²¹ You shall not give any of your children to offer them^[b] to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. ²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. ²³ And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion.

This focus on the seed helps us understand verses 19-23.

Verse 19 forbids sexual relations during a woman's period.

Verse 20 forbids sexual relations with your neighbor's wife (adultery in general).

Verse 21 forbids offering your children to Molech.

Most commentators think that this is talking about child sacrifice –
but some ancient commentators thought that it refers to dedicating them
to the service of Molech as temple prostitutes
(which would certainly fit the context of the chapter).

Verse 22 then forbids homosexuality.

And verse 23 forbids bestiality.

You can also see increasing degrees of depravity in these verses.

Sometimes people try to flatten the distinctions.

But chapter 18 makes careful distinctions about what things deserve what label.

Sexual relations during menstrual uncleanness renders you unclean.

For that matter, adultery renders you unclean.

You might say, "what?!"

Is that it?

We'll see in chapters 19 and 20 that there are moral penalties as well –

but here Moses is only interested in how these activities relate to the sanctuary.

To put it simply, adultery will receive the death penalty –

but if you don't get caught, you are still rendered unclean,
and unable to approach God's holy place.

But then offering your children to Molech – that profanes the name of your God.

He placed his name upon you – and on your children!

To offer your children to Molech (whether it means as a child sacrifice
or as temple prostitutes) – is to profane the name of your God!

And lying with a male as with a woman is an abomination.

It is seriously mixed up.

Your seed is not supposed to go in there!

That place is for waste to come out!

Not for seed to go in!!

What does it mean for it to be an abomination?

This is the first usage of this particular word in Leviticus.
It will be used a few times here, and then often in Deuteronomy
to refer to things that are entirely unacceptable.

In our distinctions that Moses is teaching us,
we have heard about the holy and the common;
within the common there is the clean and the unclean;
within the unclean there is the ordinary unclean and the detestable

So where does the abomination fit?

If the unclean is “unfit” for entering the presence of God,
and the detestable is never going to be fit –
the abomination is an important category of its own.

The abomination remains entirely unfit –
but only so long as it remains as it is.

In Dt 7:26 Moses warns Israel not to take idols into their homes –
not even to covet the silver and gold:

“You shall not bring an abominable thing into your house
and become devoted to destruction like it.
You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.”

The abomination must be destroyed.

So when an action is referred to as an abomination,
the abominable action must be destroyed.

It is abominable for two men to lie together sexually – or two women, for that matter.
(While Moses does not mention this here, Paul does in Romans 1).

And lying with an animal is perversion.

The root word is “to mix.”

So perversion is a fundamental mixing up of the natural order.

All three of these terms,

profaning the name of your God,
abomination,
and perversion,

all express different aspects of the “unclean” as passes over the boundary into death.

The LORD is holy.

To profane his name – to treat his name as common –

is to pass from life to death.
To embrace abomination is to depart from life.
To follow perversion is to cross the boundary into death.

The chapter concludes with the warning that these sorts of sins were the reasons why God was driving out the Canaanites before them.

Read v24-25

3. The Reason for God's Law – Defiling the Land/Incurring Wrath (v24-30)

²⁴ “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, ²⁵ and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

Notice that there are two basic categories of actions here:

the unclean (v24-25)
and the abominations (v26-28)

²⁶ But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you ²⁷ (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), ²⁸ lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.

Just to be clear, Moses is *not* saying that all the actions of chapter 18 are abominations.

Sexual relations between male and female remains in the order of creation.
Therefore while it will render you unclean (and in some cases may get you killed!),
it remains in the order of creation,
and so remains in the category of the “common”
(remember, there is the holy, the common, and now, the abominations).

Sexual relations between male and male, female and female,
or between human and animal,
are in the realm of abomination (or perversion).
It is outside the realm of the “common.”

And so the LORD concludes:

²⁹ For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. ³⁰ So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.”

If Israel falls into such sins, the land will “vomit you out.” (28)

These “abominable customs” are utterly forbidden to Israel.

So how do we understand these laws, and our relationship to them?

Many have taken the approach that since these laws are the only place where incest is condemned, therefore they must remain in force. But that logic runs into difficulty when you try to explain why Leviticus 18 is binding – but other particular statutes are not!

Others, like Benjamin Stanton at the 1842 General Assembly come closer. He argued that as part of the Levitical law, these laws were abrogated with the coming of Christ. Under this view, the reason we condemn incest is because the common moral sense of man is revolted by it– and because there is a long legal tradition that condemns it. This is something of a natural law argument, and while there is some truth to this, it doesn't go quite far enough.

Romans 10 gives us some help in understanding how to approach this.

Read 9:30-10:4

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness^[d] did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written,

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

10 Brothers,^[e] my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

And then Paul contrasts the righteousness based on the law and the righteousness based on faith.

(Literally, the righteousness which is of the law, and the righteousness which is of faith)

Israel tried to attain righteousness through law-keeping—and failed.

The Gentiles did not pursue righteousness at all, but have found it through faith in Jesus Christ.

In verses 5-8 Paul contrasts the mentality of these two righteousnesses:

(read)

⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

Verse 6 quotes Leviticus 18:5.

Some have taken this to mean that the Mosaic Covenant was a covenant of works.
The problem with that interpretation is that verses 7-8 also quote Moses,
from Deuteronomy 30!
But Paul interprets Deuteronomy 30 in a specifically Christ-centered way.

In other words, Paul reads the law in the light of Christ.

If you read Moses apart from Christ, then you will find a covenant of works.

If you read Moses in Christ, then you will find a covenant of grace.

It was never possible to find a righteousness that was of the law.

You have to miss the point even of Leviticus 18:5 to make it teach a works-righteousness.

But that is exactly what Israel has done.

Yes, Israel was called to be the Son of God.

They were supposed to be holy as God is holy.

Those were serious commands.

But the covenant that called Israel to perfect obedience contained at its own heart
the means of grace to deal with sin.

And as soon as Israel walked faithfully as the Son of God,

obedient to his Father in every way,

the kingdom of God—the age to come—the new creation would dawn.

But that would only happen in the fullness of time.

Therefore, ever since the days of Moses, the righteousness of faith has declared,
(Romans 10:7-9)

*⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”
(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus
is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For
with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For
the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no
distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all
who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

The law has always pointed people to Christ.

So then, what do we do with Leviticus 18?

The same thing that we do with the whole Mosaic Covenant.

We read it in Christ.

This means that first we must see that the judicial laws have expired.

Our Confession says:

“To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the
State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may
require.” (19.4)

The specific statutes of Leviticus 18,
together with the particular seed-based rationale,
are not binding on any other nation.
After all, verses 28-29 make it very clear
that these laws were designed specifically for Israel's situation
as the covenant people—a situation that no modern nation shares.

But secondly, we must see how the general equity of these laws remains in force.
Equity is a forgotten concept in modern America.
The basic idea of equity has to do with justice.
What are the principles of justice that underlie the statute?
All of you have no doubt encountered situations where a law didn't apply.
It may have been a good law,
but in this situation,
the enforcement of the law would actually produce injustice.
The speed limit says 35 MPH, but your wife is in transition,
and it's three o'clock in the morning!
The strictest of judges is not going to enforce that law!
No law has ever been designed to cover every conceivable exigency.
Therefore every judge, every elder, every parent
will be faced with situations where the execution of the law
will produce injustice.
In such cases, we must follow the equity of the law—the principles of justice—
rather than the letter of the law.

And our Confession rightly says that we should not enforce any of the statutes of Israel (19:4).
Leviticus 18 contains principles of justice.
Incest is wrong. Adultery is wrong. Homosexuality is wrong. Bestiality is wrong.

These things are not the way it is supposed to be!

The fulfillment of the law in Christ does not abolish the principles at the heart of the law!

And by the way, those principles clearly show that polygamy is not the way it is supposed to be!

Polygamy is akin to slaveholding.

It is plainly an evil that is a result of the fall—but it is never defined as inherently sinful.

1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 require that elders be monogamous,
but there is no passage that absolutely forbids polygamy.

Rather there is clear biblical teaching
that marriage was *designed* to be between one man and one woman.
(Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6)

Any man who desires to reflect the love of Christ and his church had better have only one wife!
Because Christ has only one bride.

Therefore no Christian man may *become* a polygamist.

So what is the point?

Why do the scriptures never condemn polygamy as a sin?

Because what do you do with the man who already has three wives?

If he becomes a Christian, must he divorce two of them?

No.

Certainly he may never be an elder—

but he must live faithfully in the condition in which he was called. (1 Cor 7)

In this respect the laws of the United States go beyond scripture.

And that is fine.

Our laws forbid first cousins to marry.

Our laws forbid polygamy entirely.

But since we do not believe that the statutes of Moses were designed for the United States, we should not complain that our statutes differ from Israel's.

The question is what is the equity of our laws?

What are the principles of justice upon which we operate?

This is why the Christian view of the civil law has always insisted

that Christian judges and legislators must train their consciences in the Word of God.

If you do not understand the biblical principles of justice, wisdom, and equity,

then you will neither be able to frame just laws, nor enforce them fairly.

And if a nation has foolish laws and unjust enforcement,

then we are back to the situation of Leviticus 18:24.

God says that he judged the nations because of their violation of the natural sexual order.

The nations were committing adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality.

The nations were offering child sacrifices to their gods.

And for this, God destroyed the nations who lived in Canaan,

“and the land vomited out its inhabitants.” (18:25)

Because of the wickedness of the Canaanites,

God brought a picture of the final judgment upon them.

While there is a uniqueness to the Conquest of Canaan.

God was using the Canaanites as an example for the whole world to see:

the Conquest under Joshua is a picture of the Conquest by Jesus.

But there is a universal lesson here:

every nation must bow the knee to Jesus Christ.

Every individual, every household, every nation must repent—or be destroyed.

Earthly judgments will come and go,

but there is a final judgment in which no one will stand

except those who have found the righteousness that comes by faith.