

Be Holy for I AM Holy Series
Holy Sexuality

Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus

Leviticus 18:1-30

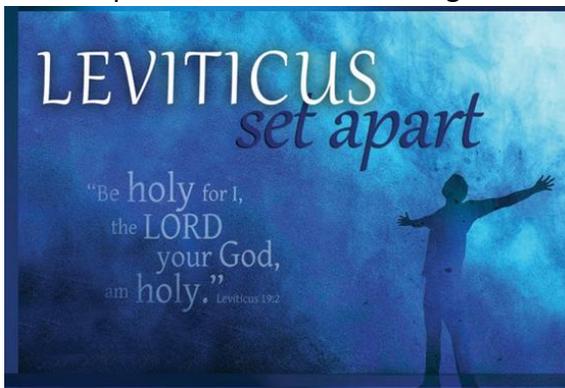
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

October 11, 2015

TEXTS: Leviticus 18:1-30

We continue this morning in our fall series on the Book of Leviticus: to be set apart for God. God speaks the same call throughout Leviticus eight times: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am



holy." We turn to the second half of Leviticus, which expands on holiness in the very practical aspects of our lives and our real living. We turn to the topic of our sexuality. This is the topic that God chooses first after the great Day of Atonement and blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. The Bible is not prudish about sexuality. It is a major topic in the earliest chapters of the Bible, and we have an entire chapter dedicated to it here. Leviticus 18 has much to teach us. We often have varying views on

sexuality from the earliest times until now. What I want to do together is follow this text carefully, and the text will give us first the controlling paradigm that reorients us for how we are to live in every area of our lives. Secondly, we will look at how the Bible describes a holy sexuality in terms of permitted and prohibited relationships. Finally, we will look together at specific practices that the Lord says are out of the scope of His vision for our lives.

This topic has tremendous relevance in our society, but actually that is nothing new, for the topics at stake here have been discussed and issues since the times of the Book of Genesis. So, let's look first at this controlling paradigm at the beginning of this chapter. The Lord says to Moses in Leviticus 18:2:

"Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'I am the LORD your God.'"

The Lord identifies Himself as *our God*. That is a covenant formula: If God is our God, then we are His people. He is a speaking God; He reveals His will to us. He says to His people in Leviticus 18:3a:

"You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived."

God is teaching us as His people that we are not bound and obligated to live in the ways that we lived as we were growing up. I find this tremendously freeing. Some of you, like me, did not grow up in a Christian family, and I am grateful to God that I am not obligated to live the way I used to live. We are not obligated, we don't have to live in the ways that we grew up thinking

were normal and right. Not only that, but God says in Leviticus 18:3b:

“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.”

In other words, where I am taking you, you are to live in a society that in some ways will be deeply hostile to My vision for your life, and you are not obligated to live by the controlling vision of the culture in which you are living now. Not only that, but God says you shall not walk in their statutes. So we should expect that there will be places that our society in which we live will pass legislation that stands diametrically opposed to the vision that God has for our lives. It should not surprise us or catch us off guard. The Lord says you are not obligated to where you come from; you are not obligated to just swim with the contemporary currents of culture. Instead, you are to be a people who follow My rules and keep My statutes. Both of these words are precious. The ESV translates them: *rules* and *statutes*. The Hebrew expression *mishpat* means these are God's judgments; these are God's recognition of right and wrong; these are God's vision. Secondly, the statutes of God are God's published decrees, so as God's people, His covenant people, we follow them. Instead of how we grew up or the pop culture in which we live, we follow God's vision of right and wrong. Praise God that He publishes this vision in decrees that we have in His Word. He doesn't keep His word, His will, a secret. He says in Leviticus 18:5:

“You shall therefore keep My statutes and My rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”

Notice that God does not hold back good from us by His vision of right and wrong, by His published will, but, in fact, opens up to us a path of life. Pope John Paul II said famously that the 20th century revealed modern culture to be a culture of death. God's vision is a vision of life. His commandments, as the psalmist said, are exceedingly broad.

Let's look at this life-giving paradigm of God's vision for our living in particular reference to our sexuality. The first topic in Leviticus 18:6-18 describes a set of prohibited relationships. Leviticus 18:6 says:

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

We belong to God; He is our God, we are His people. The Lord says that our expression of sexual intimacy has limits. That is His driving line. There are limits to it. As this chapter unfolds, we see that Hebrew has a way of making emphatic points by repetition. As we read the text this morning, we notice certain refrains that come over and over: that we are to exercise sexuality in the context of great restraint; there are prohibited relationships. As the text unfolds with this cadence, we see ourselves, almost, as it were, standing in the center, and there are prohibited relationships all around us: prohibited relationships of mother and stepmother, of sister, granddaughter, half-sister, aunt, daughter-in-law, brother's wife. Generational marriages and polygamy are all blocked around us. As we see ourselves standing in the midst of this series of blocked relationships, we might be tempted to think God is against me. Often, when we first encounter the revealed will of God, and we see God placing stop signs, around us, we think we

are hemmed in. We think the will of God is like a prison, and we are barred in. Yet, these parameters around us are not a prison, but they define the only permitted relationship for me or for you in the center of this image, and the permitted relationship is that of a husband and wife in the middle.

God's will turns out not to be a prison. It turns out to define a sacred space. Leviticus 18:6-18 is not a cage that we buck against, but it defines an intimate union. The only safe place for the expression of our most intimate vulnerability is the union between a man and his wife, and God wisely blocks us from these other ways that we would seek to express this most intimate and vulnerable part of ourselves. In many ways, we see that the laws on sexual purity mirror Leviticus 11 as God describes the dietary laws. The dietary laws meant that the prohibited animals were largely those that were predatory. God's vision for our sexual lives is that we are not to be predators. We are not to make the people around us in close proximity nervous or unsafe, but God's people exercise restraint, and they manifest this part of who we are created to be as protectors and not predators. We see that Leviticus 18's vision of sexual purity is one of knowing another. It is a guarded, sacred space in which God allows us to know and be known. The ESV version of these verses retains this idiom in Hebrew *to uncover the nakedness*. Other translations obscure this and just translate this with the dynamic equivalent of *sexual relations*. But, the Hebrew idiom is *to uncover the nakedness* of these relationships close by, and every time in the Bible when this idiom is used, it is used in a negative way. The normal idiom for physical or sexual intimacy in the Bible is a different idiom. It is the idiom we find in Genesis 4. It is the idiom *to know another person*. In Genesis 4:1, we read:

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’”

To *know* someone is the Hebrew expression for physical sexual intimacy. To *uncover the nakedness* carries with it the sense of exposing another, of behaving towards another in a predatory way, and God's vision is something much more beautiful and lofty than this.

We might say that God's purpose for physical intimacy for our sexuality keeps the fire in the fireplace. Fire is a good thing, and I remember as a child learning to build my first fire with my father. He taught me how to build the teepee structure. It was a moment of manliness to see if the fire could be set ablaze with just one match. I remember one cold, wintry afternoon when the sun was setting early, and my father called me from work, and he said, “Son, could you start a fire in the fireplace?” I had seen my father build a campfire. I had also seen my father build a fire in the grill. I knew that you build the teepee structure with charcoal briquettes, and there was a critical phase where you saturate the charcoal briquettes with lighter fluid. That is the way you guarantee success with a single match. I thought: “I will build a fire and please my father. As he comes home from work, there will be a roaring fire going in the fireplace.” I stacked up the wood, and I just wanted to be sure that I could get this going with a single match. So I doused all of the wood inside the fireplace with lighter fluid. Sure enough, one match and there it went. And it went! The fireplace had a pipe chimney, and the residue of soot inside of the chimney, from the fires that had burned for months and months, was ignited by that blaze. As the roaring fire shot up into that black pipe, it became like molten metal. It was

hot and fiery, and I thought: "This could be it. This could be my last day in this house." I crossed that line, and I thought: "I think it's time to call the fire department." So my father did not come home to a calm, warming blaze in the fireplace. He came home to fire trucks in our driveway and a near disaster averted. The fiery desire for intimacy is created. It is satisfied in knowing God, and fire is best enjoyed when the fire is in the fireplace. God's vision in Leviticus 18:6-18 is a set of prohibited relationships, not to deny you of pleasure, but to guarantee the satisfaction and joy for which this has been designed.

Let's turn now to the second section beginning in Leviticus 18:19. God turns here to describe a set of prohibited unions, prohibited practices, and there are four of these. We see the first in Leviticus 18:19. The Lord says:

"You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness."

God has woven this cycle of life into a woman's body, and the Lord instructs us that we are to exercise restraint. In other words, sexuality is not an appetite. It is not a necessity for living, and God has woven into this design periods of restraint, that even within the permitted relationship there is restraint.

The second prohibited practice, the Lord tells us in Leviticus 18:20:

"And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor's wife and so make yourself unclean with her."

The idiom here changes. It describes relationships with a neighbor. The general word is used for neighbor and can mean someone that you know. It is not necessarily the person literally right next door to you just in case you're wondering then if you can sleep with a person the next door down. It is not just your neighbor on either side or directly across the street or even just your neighborhood. It is any of your close friendships. You can't sleep with his or her spouse. It is really not that difficult of a statement, and yet God again is protecting the sacredness of marital union. The idiom that is used in verse 10 means literally to *lie down*, to *impregnate* her. God guards us against adultery and warns of the danger, because adultery is not just something fun to do on the weekend. Spousal sharing is not something that energizes your own marriage. Adultery will inevitably lead to unwanted offspring and children, and that is where the next verse makes so much sense in the context of Leviticus 18's vision of intimacy. When we have unwanted children, when our sexuality is out of control, we naturally think today, just as ancient people thought: "I have a child I don't want. Let me just get rid of it." The Lord says in Leviticus 18:21:

"You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."

The offering of children to Molech was an act of infant sacrifice practiced in ancient times. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus describes the process: "There was in the city a bronze image of the deity extending its hands, palms up, and sloping toward the ground, so that each of the children, when placed thereupon, rolled down and fell into a gaping pit filled with fire." One of

my professors was the lead archaeologists who excavated the Tophet Cemetery in North Africa where child sacrifice to the god Molech was practiced. They discovered tens of thousands of urns of infants who had been burned alive because they were unwanted. I remember his describing to me their horror upon seeing this cemetery, nine layers high. What they found was that the number of child sacrifices actually increased as the city prospered. When we prosper economically, we are more tempted to think: "This is a child I don't want; this is a child that will interfere with my wealth." The logic is the same in modern times. Out of control sexuality leads to children, image bearers in the likeness of God, destroyed.

The third prohibited practice is in Leviticus 18:22:

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

This statement is not difficult to understand. The syntax is not unclear; the language *abomination* is very strong language in the Bible. It is confirmed in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, the apostle Paul says:

"Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Romans 1 likewise describes this as not God's design for intimacy.

The fourth of these practices is relationships of animals and people. God says it is a perversion. You and I live in a moment in society when we are tempted to think that our sexual identity or practice is merely a private matter, but the Bible says this is not the case. This is the most intimate part of ourselves, and not living by God's design hurts us and the people around us. Leviticus 18:24 says:

"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."

God says in Leviticus 18:30:

"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."

God's vision of our sexual identity and behavior is a beautiful one. God guards this sacred space of intimacy, husband and wife. In light of the cultural moment that we live in, I want to develop this vision and apply it to us now in five different ways as a community. We need each one of these. Some of us need all of these; some of us need just one in a particular way.

The first way I want to apply this to us is to challenge all of us at Kenwood Baptist Church from the Word of God to **honor God with your body**. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says:

"You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

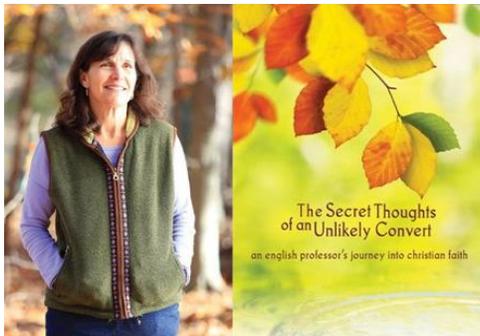
Before you look at anyone else, before you condemn your neighbor, before you get upset about where the culture is or anything else, look at your physical person and ask: "How am I honoring God with my body?" 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 says:

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.”

When we are out of control with our bodies, we are acting like people who don't know God. Honor God with your body. Never be perceived as a predator in your relationships nearby you. We are not obligated to the culture we have come from or the one in which we live, but we are bound to reflect this completely different Kingdom of God culture.

Number two: **Do not panic at recent cultural shifts.** Some of you, as I've talked with you, are in panic mode, and you are thinking: “Oh, my goodness, what are we going to do?” Let me just calm you. This has been an issue since Genesis; this has been an issue from throughout human history; this was a major issue in the first century. There is really nothing new about this, and as culture shifts, trust God enough that sometimes cultural darkness brings the light into bold relief. Trust God enough that He is still sovereign, that He uses the movements of culture, even culture that denies Him, to further His purposes.

Number three: **Don't be angry at people; view them with compassion.** There is a tremendous amount of sexual brokenness in the lives in this room and in our society: sexual brokenness; confusion; those who have experienced abuse; those who have abused; those who struggle with same-sex attraction; those who are addicted to pornography; those who lust for a neighbor's spouse. View those who struggle with compassion, not as perpetrators, but as victims of their own sin or as being swept up in a culture that is going against God's will. I have



mentioned Rosaria Butterfield before, and I strongly encourage you to read her books: *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* and her recent book of *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*, from the last words of the Book of Acts that we share in an open way about God's vision, taking the line from the last phrase of Acts that Paul proclaimed the Gospel openly and unhindered. Leviticus 18 presents a more beautiful image of our lives

than what we can get on the Internet. It presents a more beautiful vision for our lives than what we, in our brokenness, might be tempted to desire. View people with compassion and reach out.

Number four: **It's okay to speak.** I faced this in a very direct way in April when the *Cincinnati Enquirer* contacted me and said: “We are trying to interview religious leaders in the city on the issue of same-sex marriage. Are you willing to be interviewed?” I thought: “I don't know.” Then I thought about what I was preaching that Sunday. I was preaching in Acts 14 where early Christian leaders were dragged before the highest court of their society, and I thought, “I couldn't stand before my congregation and preach if I didn't say I would.” The journalist told me so many leaders had refused to comment. Big churches in the city said “no comment.” I said I would be happy to be interviewed. What I said in the newspaper that was printed on April 27

this year is: “Christians are bound in history and conscience to sacred texts which form their identity and understanding of social issues. For us, it is important to keep to the teaching of Scripture which calls on all people, not just one group, to obedience of faith and personal transformation.” The Bible is clear on this topic. God's design is for physical intimacy to be within the context of marriage. God is clear that it is to be within the context of a man and a woman made in His image and likeness. The Bible is clear on this, and if we want to be the people of God, then we must live by His decrees. We are not really free to reinvent a new religion and call it Christianity. We cannot change the Scripture.

Rosaria Butterfield's testimony is very powerful, how she came from being a tenured professor at Syracuse University in her department of Lesbian and Queer Studies. She came to know Christ in a very real and powerful way through the compassionate witness of a local church's pastor, and she grew in faith. Now she has written about it openly, describing her struggle and transformation by the power of the Gospel. She shares about a very real experience that she has had of people coming to her claiming to be Christians and yet wanting to present an alternate reality than the Word of God. Rosaria tells of this story she says:

“Did God really say? That was Satan's question to Eve. On face value, it seems simple enough. But nothing good comes of Satan. Nothing. Not even a question is innocent. The invitation to challenge God's authority calls out the covetous beast in us all. Identity in Christ depends on vigilance on this point: God's point of view must become mine, no matter how foreign such a concept is, how impossible our situation appears, or how deformed an anomaly we become to our friends.”

She goes on to say:

“I have met Satan more than once in the last two years disguised as a brother or sister seeking Christian unity and peace, often twisting God's truth with heartfelt personal experience. Recently the pastor of a well-respected church asked me to meet with a woman who was part of his counseling staff. When I entered her office, she directed me to a comfortable chair and made one simple request: ‘Rosaria, I want you to change your message.’ I found this a bold and disarming request, and so I told her that I come in the gospel of peace.

She said: ‘Change your message.’

I told her that I stand in the risen Christ.

She said: ‘Change your message.’

Finally, I asked her what I ought to change in my message.

She said, ‘Tell people that it is only in your opinion that homosexual practice is a sin.’

I responded that I am not smart enough to have this opinion, but that this is the position the inspired and inerrant Word of God upholds. It comes to me from the historic Christian church, from the Apostle's Creed, through the pages of Scripture, and so on down to me. I told her that changing my message would involve denying the plain meaning of Scripture, the testimony of the church, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the gospel. Claiming something that is a universal truth to be a mere matter of personal preference is a lie by omission.”

The Scripture is clear on this point: It is okay to speak.

Number five: **Tell the biblical story.** What are we to do? Are we to protest, organize, speak words of hatred? No! As believers in Christ, we do well to notice that God's statement about homosexuality is in Leviticus 18:22. It is not verse one. It is one line in the chapter. In the three large texts that address this issue in Scripture, it is one of many ways that we go vitally wrong with our sexual identity and practice. We cannot single this out, and neither can we validate it, but we must instead, as a church community, tell the biblical story. I mean this as no small thing. You see, what you hear as you listen today, often in the news in newspapers, blog posts, from friends, family members, maybe a son or daughter, you hear often told what I would call a counterfeit to the biblical story. It is a counterfeit testimony, if you will. It begins with some version like this: "I realize that I been made this way." This is a counterfeit account of creation. "In fact, God has made me this way." Whether you get this from Tim Cook, or you hear it in the newspaper, or on Friday afternoon from local basketball coach, it's a different story. It's a story that goes like this: "I've been made this way, and the problem in the world is I didn't know it." Or, "the problem in the world is that people told me I shouldn't be made this way." Then there is a counterfeit new birth experience when you say, "I discovered who I really am, and I am to love who I am and be who I am." This is a counterfeit celebration to this new birth. It is a counterfeit storyline that parodies Luke 15. It is a counterfeit storyline that says: "I have discovered who I really am, and I'm celebrating who I really am, and you have to celebrate with me for who I really am come. Come and celebrate with me. Kill the fatted calf and celebrate with me because I found who I truly am." That is not the biblical story. The biblical story is that you and I are made in the image and likeness of Almighty God.

Sigmund Freud introduced the category of sexual orientation as a way of describing and defining our identity. Freud introduced the concept of sexual orientation to suppress the biblical category of being made in God's image, male and female, and replacing it with a psychoanalytic category of sexual identity. The biblical story is not that we were made and we are primarily just sexual creatures. The biblical story is that we are made in the image and likeness of God and designed to reflect that glory in our lives. The biblical story continues and says that you and I are fallen in our sinfulness. One of the dangers of being so upset about homosexual practice or behavior is that you turn a blind eye to heterosexual sin. Sexual orientation is not our primary identity. The Bible's story of what is wrong in the world is that we have disobeyed God's commands, and we need redemption. We have all kinds of confused desires surging forth from our hearts. The Bible's vision is not that we are made in this way and what's wrong is that we didn't know it and are confused. The Bible's vision is that were made in God's image and likeness, male and female, and we are disordered because of our rebellion against God. The Bible has a more accurate diagnosis of our condition because the Bible offers a real solution to that condition. The new birth in the Bible is not a coming out party. New birth in the Bible is to recognize that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, died on the cross for my sins, including my sexual sins, including yours, and that His death on the cross remakes me, and I become what I was not. We see the glory of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 when Paul says:

"Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men

*who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you.** But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

In Jesus Christ, we are born again, and this new birth transforms us. Rosaria Butterfield says:

“When the Lord entered my world, I experienced that gospel-ignited ‘expulsive power of a new affection.’ That new affection was not heterosexuality, but Jesus, Jesus my friend and Savior. I was not converted out of homosexuality. I was converted out of unbelief. When we preach the gospel, we preach the promise of a new life, new mind, new hope, new purpose, new union with Christ, new company of the Holy Spirit, new pardon of sin, new affinity for repentance and closeness with God, new love of the law, new ability to obey, new understanding of why God demands chastity outside of marriage and fidelity inside of marriage, new patience with people who do not yet know Jesus, new perspectives on suffering and affliction, addiction and change, new hatred of our own sin and patience with the sin of others, new responsibilities, new heartaches, new friendships, a new family from within the body of Christ, new allegiances, new danger, and new grace, and new hope.”

That is the biblical story. That newness makes us love Jesus and sets us on a road together of change and transformation. That road will be marked for some of us by agonizing struggles precisely in this area, and that is totally fine. If you struggle in any of the realms described in Leviticus 18, then you need to be at Kenwood Baptist Church, because this a community of people being transformed, called to be holy, and being made holy, not by our will but by the transforming power of the Word of God and the indwelling Spirit in our lives. That is the biblical story, and that is what we must continue to tell and celebrate.

Amen