

THE WAGES OF SIN

LEVITICUS 20:1-27

GOD TAKES SIN WAY MORE SERIOUS THAN WE DO.

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The Wages of Sin

Leviticus 20:1-27

So far in our study through Leviticus, we have seen a common thread throughout the whole book. That theme is that God is holy and that He expects us to be holy. We studied through His expectations for civil, religious, and personal conduct. We saw how He killed two misguided priests in the worship tent.

As we study through the rest of the Old Testament, we see how the Hebrews started to be very lackadaisical in regards to obeying God's commands. We also know that God punished them severely. I know that most of us modern day Christians take sin pretty lightly. We have come to believe that God will simply accept anything we think, say, or do. I know that I have taken sin much too lightly in my life. But every year that passes, I seem to understand more and more the damage sin does to individuals, to families, to communities, and to the church.

I know I have been gaining more insight to this all the time and I hope that this morning, you too may come to see how seriously God takes sin and its consequences.

In my opinion, the problem we face is that we think we are pretty good people. And the way we do that is we try and compare ourselves to other people. Let me give you an example. At one time I served a church with a deacon board that was a bunch of jokers. We had a deaconess who got a kidney stone and was able to pass it without surgery. About 6 months later, another deacon got a kidney stone. He had a lot of trouble passing it and actually needed help with that ultrasound treatment that helped to break it up.

At our very next board meeting, the deaconess said to the deacon, "You know deacon, the Bible says, 'Let she who is without sin cast the first stone.' I rest my case."

Look, I said that the problem with our coming to realize how sinful, dirty, and rotten we actually are is that we compare ourselves with others. And wouldn't you know it; we always pick people who are clearly more sinful and less religious than we are to compare ourselves with. I have never heard people compare themselves to Mother Teresa or some other missionaries who gave up everything, even their lives to serve the poor and the lost. But even that isn't the comparison to make. The only appropriate comparison the Bible tells us to make is to God and His standard of holiness. Again, we come back to God's statement, "I the LORD your God am holy. Be holy."

If we want to be true Christians, we must compare ourselves to God and His standard of holiness. When we do that, we will stop fooling ourselves into thinking that we are good in any way. That's important because as the main idea of this morning's text points out, **GOD TAKES SIN WAY MORE SERIOUS THAN WE DO.** And that becomes important because God does not tolerate sin. Making a mistake concerning this point may not only get us killed, it may cost us to be sent to hell for an eternity. This passage sets itself up nicely based on different degrees of punishment. As we will see they all have to do with death. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he said, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23 / NIV) and "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That means that each one of us deserves death.

If we are going to understand this passage and the devastating consequences of sin, we must understand the definition of death in the Bible. In the Bible death never means that something or someone ceases to exist. Death always means separation. In physical death, our souls are separated from our bodies. In hell, we are separated from God for an eternity. There are scholars that believe that the people who are sent to hell are ultimately annihilated. In other words, they view the "second death" as ceasing to exist forever. I'd like to believe that. However, listen to how Jesus describes hell:

"They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:42 / NIV).

"And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,

where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'" (Mark 9:47-48 / NIV).

I. IDOLATRY (VS 1-6 & 27)

Worshipping Idols Can Get You Both Killed And Sent To Hell.

Let's get into the text. Verses 1-6 and verse 27 describe the punishment for idolatry. **WORSHIPING IDOLS CAN GET YOU BOTH KILLED AND SENT TO HELL.** In other words, idol worship can bring double death. As we read through this chapter, we are reminded that a lot of these offences are described in chapter 18. This chapter prescribes the punishment that fits the crime.

A. SACRIFICING OUR CHILDREN (1-3)

Verses 1-3 remind us that God will not stand by while we sacrifice our children to idols. We described this particular offense when we studied through chapter 18. The picture here is of a parent placing their child into the arms of a statue that is in the middle of a fire. The arms of the statue are red-hot and when the child is placed in the arms of this statue, the child is burned up in the most horrible way.

Think about our society. The most common way babies are aborted in the United States is by injecting the amniotic sack with salt. The baby is burned up in the most horrible way. The other way babies are aborted is by sucking them out where their limbs are torn apart. We have sacrificed our children to the false gods of sexual promiscuity, or extravagant lifestyles, or convenience.

There are other ways we have sacrificed our children to the idols of this world. Most of our children today are not living with their birth parents. Many are living in single-family homes. Many children come home from school with no parents at home so both parents can work and live at a higher level. Further, those of us who can afford it send our children to all sorts of worldly activities and keep them so busy; they never take time to develop a deep relationship with Christ.

Let me just point this out in verse 3. These people didn't commit this crime at God's worship tent. Yet God says they defiled His sanctuary and profaned His holy name.

There are two things here. First of all, we sing the doxology at church each week. The word *doxa* in Greek means glory. And the definition of glory is reputation. The way you and I act either adds goodness and value to God's reputation in this world or we bring dishonor and disgrace to God's reputation. By killing their babies and worshipping false gods, Israel made God's name and reputation stink in the whole land.

The next time we sing the doxology here in church, in fact every time we sing the doxology here in church, we should reflect on how we made God look by our thoughts, words, and behavior during the week. Perhaps we may stop singing when we come to realize how we have dishonored God's name through our actions.

Secondly, the name for sanctuary is *miqdash*. It comes from the Hebrew root word *qadash* that means holy. In other words, when they did this, they polluted God's holy place. Now this could refer to the Tabernacle itself but more likely it refers to the Hebrew camp as a whole. God lived in the camp. God lives in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God lives in us as individuals. However, we are also part of the body that God calls the church. Again, when we sin, we pollute the church.

When we worship success, power, wealth, fame, self-indulgence and sexual immorality, we are worshipping idols. For the Hebrews, that meant death. The punishment for people, who worshiped an idol or sacrificed their children, was death. Usually, the entire community would have to stone the offender to death. And sometimes their bodies were burned as well.

B. IGNORING SIN IS NOT ACCEPTABLE (4-5)

I think that most of us have been guilty of ignoring sin and that is not acceptable as stated in verses 4-5. We have been taught that we should not be judgmental and that we should mind our own business. I'm not saying that we should enforce these rules as if we were living in a Theocratic society, but what we can see is what God will tolerate and what He will not. When we ignore or overlook immorality in the church, we become enemies of God. Look carefully how this is worded. God says, "I will set my face against that man and his family." That's not referring to the person who has committed idolatry, it is referring to the person who sees him committing the sin and not mentioning it.

God says He will turn His face against not only the man who failed to report the incident, but against his whole family as well. I know people have defined God in a way that He is kind and patient to the point He accepts anything. Let me just relate this story that happens within a year from the passage we are studying through this morning.

When the Hebrew community reached the land of Moab on their way to the Promised Land, some Moabite women came down to the camp, perhaps some were temple prostitutes, and they started having sex with the Hebrew men. Listen to how God responds:

"¹While the Israelites were camped at Acacia, some of the men defiled themselves by sleeping with the local Moabite women. ²These women invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods, and soon the Israelites were feasting with them and worshiping the gods of Moab. ³Before long Israel was joining in the worship of Baal of Peor, causing the LORD'S anger to blaze against his people.

⁴The LORD issued the following command to Moses: 'Seize all the ringleaders and execute them before the LORD in broad daylight, so his fierce anger will turn away from the people of Israel.' ⁵So Moses ordered Israel's judges to execute everyone who had joined in worshiping Baal of Peor.

⁶Just then one of the Israelite men brought a Midianite woman into the camp, right before the eyes of Moses and all the people, as they were weeping at the entrance of the Tabernacle. ⁷When Phinehas son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the priest saw this, he jumped up and left the assembly. Then he took a spear ⁸and rushed after the man into his tent. Phinehas thrust the spear all the way through the man's body and into the woman's stomach. So the plague against the Israelites was stopped, ⁹but not before 24,000 people had died" (Numbers 25:1-9 / NLT).

Does that sound like the tame and impotent God we have come to believe in? Look, not only are we responsible to live holy lives, we are responsible to keep the church holy. As uncomfortable as that is, we must be willing to confront immoral behavior or be held responsible ourselves. The Apostle Paul had to rebuke the church in Corinth for not taking action. He says:

"¹I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you, something so evil that even the pagans don't do it. I am told that you have a man in your church who is living in sin with his father's wife. ²And you are so proud of yourselves! Why aren't you mourning in sorrow and shame? And why haven't you removed this man from your fellowship?

³Even though I am not there with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. Concerning the one who has done this, I have already passed judgment ⁴in the name of the Lord Jesus. You are to call a meeting of the church, and I will be there in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus will be with you as you meet. ⁵Then you must cast this man out of the church and into Satan's hands, so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved when the Lord returns.

⁶How terrible that you should boast about your spirituality, and yet you let this sort of thing go on. Don't you realize that if even one person is allowed to go on sinning, soon all will be affected? ⁷Remove this wicked person from among you so that you can stay pure. ... ¹¹What I meant was that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to

be a Christian yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Don't even eat with such people.

¹²It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your job to judge those inside the church who are sinning in these ways. ¹³God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you" (I Corinthians 5:1-13 / NLT).

C. CONSULTING THE DEAD (6 & 27)

Verse 6 and verse 27 deal with consulting the dead. This has to do with people who go to fortunetellers, séances, or participate in anything else supernatural apart from the one true and living God. People who go to consult one of these people are to be cut off from God's people. This word cut off is the same root word that talks about cutting a covenant. In other words, the person who consults a spiritualist will be cut off from God's promises to His people. People who are actual channels for the supernatural are to be put to death.

Here is the interesting thing. It seems to me that people who turn away from God and worship idols experience two deaths. The first is to be executed. The second is to be separated from God for an eternity. I realize the interpretation of this verse is debatable, but listen to the plain sense of this verse in the book of Hebrews:

"⁴For it is impossible to restore to repentance those who were once enlightened—those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come—⁶and who then turn away from God. It is impossible to bring such people to repentance again because they are nailing the Son of God to the cross again by rejecting him, holding him up to public shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6 / NLT).

We are tempted to worship many idols in our culture. But we would do well to remember that **WORSHIPING IDOLS CAN GET YOU BOTH KILLED AND SENT TO HELL.**

II. ADULTERY (VS 9-21)

Sexual Sin Can Get You Killed.

The previous section described people who worship idols as prostituting themselves. It seems to me that God could not pick anything more passionately charged as a spouse cheating sexually on their partner. God views His relationship with us as a marriage. When we chase after worldly things for comfort or pleasure, God views us as having an affair. It is no accident that the Bible often categorizes the sin of idolatry with sexual sins. Verses 9-21 lay out the penalties for adultery. If we were living in the time of the Israelites, we may think twice about becoming sexually promiscuous because **SEXUAL SIN CAN GET YOU KILLED.** Actually, sexual sin could get us killed today.

Somehow sexually promiscuous people would be offended if you were to tell them they were totally untrustworthy. But the fact is that most people infected with a sexually transmitted disease don't tell their potential partner. If they are ungodly enough to be sexually immoral, there is no reason to think they would be noble or godly in any other area. The fact is that STD's are on the rise in the United States. If people were so honorable, there would be no transmission of the disease. Certainly no non-infected person would knowingly have unprotected sex with an infected person. AIDS will kill you.

But also, committing adultery could get you killed by a jealous husband or wife. But in these verses, we get a glimpse into God's view of sexual sin. Our society downplays sexual sin but God views it passionately, perhaps because it is the primary human experience He relates His relationship with us to.

A. CUT OFF FROM LIFE (9-16)

Verses 9-16 describe sins that would cut the Hebrew off from life. In other words, they carry the death sentence. Verse 9 talks about cursing one's mother or father. It doesn't mean just talking back to them. Curses would use God's Name and were meant to put supernatural affliction on them. To honor one's parents meant to take care of them physically and financially. There were obvious exceptions such as if the parents were involved in idolatry or abuse of any kind. The penalty for cursing one's parents was death.

Just by the way we care for the elderly in our country should demonstrate how evil we are as a society. But the rest of these verses deal with sexual immorality. They are similar to chapter 18. They cover adultery, homosexual acts, and sex with animals. There was no question. The sentence was death.

I am not advocating that we bring back the death sentence for sexual immorality. There wouldn't be many people left in the United States or Europe. What I do want to emphasize is this. God is extremely upset with sexual immorality. And what is even more sinister is that church people are just as sexually immoral as the pagan society in which we live. Listen to some New Testament assessment of sexual immorality. Jesus said:

"19For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all other sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander" (Matthew 15:19 / NLT).

The Apostle Paul said:

"9Don't you know that those who do wrong will have no share in the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, who are idol worshipers, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexuals, ¹⁰thieves, greedy people, drunkards, abusers, and swindlers—none of these will have a share in the Kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 6:9-10 / NLT).

I don't think I can make the argument any clearer. Sexual immorality was met with the death sentence in the society God designed.

B. CUT OFF FROM THE COMMUNITY (17-18)

Verses 17-18 approach the sexual sin in a different way. If brothers and sisters married whether they had the same parents or were stepbrothers or stepsisters, they were cut off from the community and the covenant of God. Further, if a couple was found out to be having sex during the woman's period, they were to be cut off as well. We said in chapter 18 that these sins demonstrated a lack of self-control and promoted chaos within the community. The penalty was to be excommunicated from the community. Being cut off from the Hebrew nation meant that they had no share in the inheritance and promises to live in the Promised Land.

I think that it is not too hard to see how self-indulgent and self-absorbed we are as a culture. We don't like people setting boundaries with us.

C. CUT OFF FROM THE FUTURE (19-21)

Verses 19-21 describe someone being cut off from their future. Someone marrying their aunt, uncle, nephew or niece was to be held responsible. That word held responsible is interesting. It is the same words used of the scapegoat in the Day of Atonement ceremony. The scapegoat would bear the sins of Israel and carry them away from the camp. In this case, the offenders would have to bear the burden of their sin. Verses 20-21 describe what some of that burden could be. Here the sin of a man taking his brother's wife and marrying her carries the same sentence. They would be childless. This is important because everything in Hebrew culture had to do with future inheritance. Without children, the family inheritance would die out. This really is death to the future.

Jesus and John the Baptist pointed out that King Herod was guilty of taking his brother's wife. Perhaps that is why Herod had John arrested and his wife had him beheaded:

¹⁸John kept telling Herod, "It is illegal for you to marry your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18 / NLT). The problem was that Judaism had become so perverted by the time Jesus was born, instead of Herod being punished, John was beheaded. I know that it is not politically correct to stand for sexual purity. And in fact, I'm not sure how much we should expect from our pagan society. However, it seems to me that again the Apostle Paul reminds us that this cannot be tolerated in the church. Let me quote this one more time adding the part about not expecting much out of our pagan culture:

⁹When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. ¹⁰But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or who are greedy or are swindlers or idol worshipers. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. ¹¹What I meant was that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a Christian yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Don't even eat with such people" (I Corinthians 5:9-11 / NLT).

And yet, Christians today not only tolerate sexual sin, many are actually sexually immoral. We should be frightened about our attitudes toward sexual sin because the Bible is clear **SEXUAL SIN CAN GET YOU KILLED.**

Before we leave this section and get into the next section, let me just make a couple of observations. First of all, it seems to me that the church has focused in on homosexual sin. However, if you read this passage carefully, there is more said about heterosexual sin than homosexual sin. The church is out there politically campaigning against homosexual marriage. And they talk about defending the sanctity of marriage. Marriage is not even holy in the church. The divorce rate is the same as society. Adultery, divorce, pornography, and all other perversion are as prevalent in the church as it is inside the church. Please, don't talk to me about the sanctity of marriage. God will judge our culture for our sexual perversity. But God will first judge the church and He will judge us more harshly. So please never get caught up in homosexual bashing.

Secondly, when talking about homosexuality, we must distinguish between homosexual attraction and homosexual behavior. For example, just like a heterosexual, the homosexual must be celibate if they want to be Christian. The Bible is clear that the only legitimate expression of sex is between a married man and woman. So if an unmarried man and woman are having sex, they are clearly violating God's commands. If a married man or woman is having sex outside the marriage they are clearly violating God's commands. And if a homosexual is having sex, they are violating God's commands.

III. HOLY LIVING (VS 7 & 22-26)

The Only Way to Remain in God's Love Is To Obey His Commands.

And that brings us to verse 7 and verses 22-26 where God calls His children to holy living. I know this may be unpopular and may go against everything you have come to believe about God. However, the truth is this. **THE ONLY WAY TO REMAIN IN GOD'S LOVE IS TO OBEY HIS COMMANDS.**

A. BE DEDICATED TO FOLLOWING GOD (7)

Verse 7 commands us to be dedicated to following God. I love the way this verse is written because it points out two truths. The first truth is that we are commanded to be holy. To think I play no part in my salvation experience is to misunderstand the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Let's take the verse phrase by phrase. God commands us in the first phrase, "Consecrate yourselves and be holy." I want you get the full force of this. In Hebrew, the word for consecrate is the same root word for holy. Literally it reads, "Holify yourselves and be holy." Whose responsibility is that? It is our responsibility to be holy. In other words, in the context of

this passage, it is our responsibility to be sexually pure. It is our responsibility to make sure we put no one or no thing before God. It is our responsibility to worship God alone and it is our responsibility to care for our parents. It is our responsibility to obey God's commands. So heterosexuals are to remain pure. They remain pure by abstaining from all sex outside of a Christian marriage. Homosexuals are to remain pure. That means they abstain from all sex, unless someday they enter a heterosexual marriage. I think of people who are homosexual, yet because they love God, want to please God, and be holy, they abstain from all sex and choose to remain celibate. What love God must feel from this person.

So the passage is clear that it is our responsibility to be holy. One could start to believe that I am preaching and teaching a works salvation. However, let's read the rest of the verse. God ends the verse by saying, "I am the LORD, Who makes you holy." In other words, God chose the Hebrew community. They were slaves in Egypt and just as immoral and lost as the Egyptians. However, God offered them a relationship. They entered this relationship by grace through faith. They were to demonstrate their faith by putting blood on the doorposts of their houses. They did. God set them apart and made them His chosen people.

The same is true with us. We were lost and just as evil as the world and culture into which we were born. There is nothing we could do to earn God's love. He approached us with the offer of relationship by placing our faith in the finished work of Christ. When we responded in faith, He set us apart. In fact that's what the word church in Greek means. It means to be called out. God called us out of the world, and made us His chosen people. God made us holy by grace through faith. We are now responsible to make ourselves holy by obeying His commands.

B. BE IN GOD'S WILL (22-24)

Verses 22-24 remind us to remain in God's will. I think all modern day nations should take these two verses seriously. God destroyed Egypt because of their immorality. God was about to drive all of the people out of Israel so the Hebrews could inherit the Promised Land. God made it clear that the reason He was going to destroy them and drive them out was because of their immoral lifestyles. Look at verse 23. God says that He abhorred them. The force of this is that God loathed them. This is a powerful word. They made Him so sick and disgusted that the land vomited them out. Right here God warned Israel to obey His commands lest one day He would loathe and abhor them and vomit them out of the land. We know from history that time did come for Israel. They became so immoral that God had the Babylonians come and destroy them.

Look at the last phrase in verse 23, "I am the LORD you God, Who has set you apart from the nations." There is that concept of holiness. God made the Israelites holy. He set them apart from all other nations. If we are true Christians, then God has set us apart from all the rest of humanity. The problem for the Israelites was that they became just like the rest of their neighbors so God treated them just like He treated their neighbors. He destroyed them.

If we insist on acting like the society and the world around us, God will indeed treat us just like them. He will destroy us as well.

I have come to believe that the church will go through part of the great tribulation at the end of time. I think the church has become so polluted with sexual immorality and other worldly ideas and behaviors, that God will allow us to suffer to the point that He cleans out the church of all the people who claim to be Christian but are actually not.

C. BE DILIGENT (25-26)

And that brings us to verses 25-26. God commands us to be diligent. Some scholars think these two verses are out of place because they go back and describe the command to eat kosher. But I think it is perfectly placed. We must pay attention to the things we perceive as little things because the way we act towards even the smallest command of God demonstrates the level of our love and commitment to God. I have to say that as I look at churches that call themselves Christian and as I look at people who call themselves Christian, I don't really see a passion to put Christ first and to take His commands seriously. I don't see a real desire for people and churches

to be holy. When I look at my life, I can see many areas where I haven't put Christ first. I am certainly committed to get right with God in all areas because **THE ONLY WAY TO REMAIN IN GOD'S LOVE IS TO OBEY HIS COMMANDS.**

The more I read and study through the book of Leviticus, the more I come to see how far I have to go to live up to God's standards of holiness. I can see that I have come a long way and that I am making progress every day. But I also can see that I have a long, long, long way to go. I have come to understand that **GOD TAKES SIN WAY MORE SERIOUS THAN WE DO.**

Our society has downplayed the consequences of sin. God will judge our culture, our society, and our country. But what is even more frightening is that the church has lost a sense of holiness and the seriousness of sin. Listen to what Henry Fairlie says:

"If the sins are deadly to us as individuals, they are no less deadly to our societies. The feebleness of our societies, the steady weakening of all social bonds, is in part a consequence of their own sinning."

That was his evaluation of society's attitude towards sin. But for me, even more frightening is that this evaluation can easily be applied to the church.