

LIVING WITH A HOLY LIFE PRODUCES HOLY PEOPLE: PART THREE Leviticus 20:1-27

INTRODUCTION

The fact that you are sitting here this morning tells me that you must have at least a passing interest in what the Bible has to say to you. Either that or someone whose approval you value (or disapproval you fear) thinks you should care about what the Bible says. But do you know that merely hearing the bible taught or reading it or studying the bible for yourself is not enough? Do you know that it is possible to read the bible or listen to a sermon about the bible in the wrong way? There are millions of people in the world who say they believe the Bible and who read it and listen to sermons about it but who are reading and listening in the wrong way, while there are millions of other people who are reading it and listening to it in the right way.

The right way to read and listen to the Bible is explained in 2 Timothy 3:14-15. Paul in his letter to his young apprentice, Timothy says this to him, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul says that Timothy from childhood has been taught the OT Scriptures. We know from 2 Timothy 1:5 that it was his Jewish mother and grandmother who taught him the Bible. They read it to him and they explained its meaning to him. The way they read the OT and heard it read in synagogue and taught it to their son/grandson was as a revelation of how God saves people through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the right way to read and teach and listen to the Bible; as God's story of how he saves people through faith in Jesus Christ.

The wrong way to read the Bible is the way that the majority of Jewish people living in the days of Jesus and of Paul and Timothy read it. As I said, millions of people read it this wrong way still today. Paul describes this wrong way of reading/hearing the Bible in Romans 10:1-4. I'd like you to open your Bibles to Romans 10. First he expresses his passionate desire that God would save his fellow Israelites and because of his concern he prays for this exact thing. Then notice how he describes the Jews of his day, "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." The Jewish people, just like billions of people today, were zealous for God. They read their Bibles. They talked about God's word and God's will. They scrupulously sought to obey what they read. They opposed all that opposed God's will. They prayed and worshipped with great fervency and regularity. But Paul says their zeal for God was not based on knowledge. What knowledge did they not possess? Obviously he isn't saying they didn't know the Bible. They did know the Bible. But they were not reading the Bible correctly. They did not see that the message of the OT is how God makes sinful people righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, they read the OT as a description of what humans had to do in order to be righteous, that is, in order to gain God's approval. They read the Bible as a manual for what God expects humans to do in order to be righteous rather than the revelation of how God does the impossible: he makes unrighteous people righteous through faith in Jesus Christ.

Here we have Jewish people who lived at the same time in history reading the same Scriptures, the OT, but some of these Jewish people, Lois, Eunice, Timothy and Paul are reading it correctly while other Jewish people, in fact, the majority of the Jewish people living at that time were reading it incorrectly. We are currently reading these same OT scriptures. The question is, are we reading them correctly or not? Do we see them as the revelation of God's plan of saving sinners through faith in Christ or are we viewing them as rules to be obeyed in order to please God? It is the most natural thing in the world to read the Bible as if it is explaining how to get God to love you by being good.

I have felt over the past couple of weeks that we needed to step back and consider this broader issue because we have been focusing our attention on these laws in Leviticus 18 & 19 as God's description of the holy life that he wants us as Christians to live. We've made the point that the obedience that God wants from us is not the ground of our being accepted by him but rather the fruit of our acceptance by him through Christ. But it seems to me, especially as this week we come to a chapter that highlights God's anger against disobedience that we should take a broader look at the function of these laws. It is my experience that whenever we spend time talking about the holy life God wants his children to live it is very easy for us to become fixated upon our obedience and not upon Christ. Usually when we think about our performance one of two things happen: We either become proud and complacent or we despair and feel like quitting. So the main point I want to make this morning is this: Jesus needs to be the central focus of our lives as Christians, not our obedience. He is the theme of the Bible, even of these passages and so I want to make sure that we do not lose him in the midst of our consideration of how these various laws describe the life we want to live as Christians.

MAIN POINT

Jesus Christ himself, not our obedience to God's law is the central focus of Christian living because...

I. The law only rewards perfect obedience (Lev. 18:5)

We skipped over this verse two weeks ago when we discussed Leviticus 18. The reason I skipped it is because the apostle Paul quotes it on two different occasions in his letter to the Romans and to the Galatians and I knew I wanted to give more attention to it than I could in that sermon. What this verse says in its original context and as Paul quotes it in the NT is that the person who perfectly keeps all God's laws, statutes and commands will live. The life that will be obtained by obedience is eternal life with God. What this verse is explicitly stating is the implied positive command of the negative command that God gave to Adam in the Garden of Eden when he told Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day he ate from it, he would die. In other words, if he broke God's command just once God would kill him. Necessarily that means that if he obeys that law perfectly, that is, he never eats from the tree, he will live by his obedience to that command. If Adam had obeyed God's one command he and his descendants would have never been kicked out of the Garden of Eden. We would still be living there to this day. Adam and all of his obedient descendants would never die but would always live. This is exactly what Lev. 18:5 says and what Paul says that it says when he quotes it.

Most people, including the Jewish people of Paul's day, when they read a statement like that give a hearty amen. Most people ignore who they really are and the broader context in which statements like this are embedded. Most people heartily agree that God rewards good people, obedient people with life. Billions of people in this world believe this exact thing. Because we believe this we naturally make lists of rules that we will keep to prove to God that we are good. We might even begin with reviewing the list in Leviticus 18 which most of us can look at and feel pretty good about ourselves. Most of us have probably not committed any of these sexually perverted acts. But the problem is the law is a unit. Lev. 18:5 does not say that if you keep some of God's laws you will live. It says that the man who keeps all of God's laws will live. That's why James in his letter says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all." This is the problem that the rich young ruler had who came to ask Jesus how to have eternal life. He claimed that he had kept the law but when Jesus showed him the full meaning of the law, that is, no greed in your heart, he failed the test. He had kept some of the law but not all of it and so as far as we know he perished. What the law demands is perfect obedience to all of God's laws without fail, every waking moment of every day.

The purpose of statements like Lev. 18:5 in the OT is not to assure us that we can gain God's favor by obeying the law. Rather, if you are reading the Bible the right way, when you see a statement like this, you are immediately filled with dread because you know that you do not and cannot obey all of God's laws. Sure, you might technically pass the test on Leviticus 18 but what about Leviticus 19, especially vv. 17-18? You've never hated another person in your heart? You've always confronted your brother when you see him sinning in order

to help him escape his sin? You've never taken revenge or held a grudge against anyone? You've always loved your neighbor as yourself?

When you read the Bible and think about your relationship to God based upon your performance of God's law you end up doing what the expert in the OT law did when he asked Jesus what he had to do to gain eternal life (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus responded to his question with a question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" This OT expert then answered by quoting the two great commandments: love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says an amazing thing to him at this point. He says to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." This is the exact same language as Leviticus 18:5. Jesus is simply saying what the OT says. If you perfectly obey the law of God you will live forever. Jesus says to the expert in the law, if you love God and man perfectly you will gain eternal life. This expert in the law knows that he has been painted into a corner. Luke 10:29 contains his response to Jesus' repetition of Lev. 18:5, "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbor?'" Do you see what he is doing? He is trying to make an adjustment to God's law because he knows that he does not love his neighbor and thus does not have a right to eternal life.

The only way he can keep that command is if he defines neighbor as those people whom he wants to love. But Jesus will have none of it. He goes on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. God's definition of a neighbor is anyone you see who is in need. The Samaritan loves a total stranger who is from a group of people that despise him and his fellow Samaritans. In other words, the Samaritan loves his enemy who is in need. The main point of the story of the Good Samaritan is to show us that we do not love our neighbor and thus we will not live, but die. If you plan on being accepted by God based upon your performance of the law then you must love every person you know who is in need exactly the way you would want to be loved if you were in their situation, even if that person is an enemy. Leviticus 18:5 and every other statement like it in the OT is not written to tell you how to get life but it is written to show you that the way back into the Garden of Eden is barred to you. There are still angels with flaming swords guarding the way to the tree of life and only those who perfectly obey can enter. You and I never have and never will perfectly obey the whole law, thus the way to life is shut to us on the basis of our performance. The law itself tells us that it cannot be the vehicle to life because it requires perfect obedience.

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- *The law only rewards perfect obedience*
- *And because...*

II. The law condemns to death everyone who disobeys (vv. 1-23, 27)

The law not only promises life to all who perfectly obey but it promises death to all who disobey. This is a major emphasis of this chapter. Leviticus 20 contains a list of sins that have already been mentioned prior to this, mostly in chapter 18. The difference is that this chapter states the punishments due to those who sin in these ways. After listing specific sins and their specific punishments God summarizes the consequences for those who break his laws. Verses 22-23 say, "Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them." Here is that very graphic metaphor that we saw at the end of chapter 18 that if Israel disobeys God's laws it will make the land sick to its stomach and the land will vomit them out. The reality that this metaphor points to is the annihilation of Israel by foreign armies and disease and famine. It is an annihilation sent by God because of their sins, just like he destroys the Canaanite nations through Israel because of their sins. This is a very graphic way of saying what Paul says in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." Notice that this is not dispassionate justice. Verse 23 says God will loath those who disobey like the Canaanites disobeyed. This is what every sin deserves; God's detesting and destroying the person who sins. Notice just as 18:5 requires perfect obedience to every law in order to get life so vv. 22-23 threatens God's hatred and death if we do not obey every decree and law.

This chapter commands that the community of Israel kill these lawbreakers. I want you to see how the NT understands this command to kill lawbreakers, that is, how it is fulfilled in Christ. You need to know there is a commonly held position regarding the OT law. There is a system of thought that is called “theonomy” or “reconstructionism” that asserts that these laws are universal laws. They teach that God’s goal is for the church, through the preaching of the gospel to take over all civil government and to enforce all of these laws just as they are written. In other words, they assert that God’s will would be for every country, every society to punish these sins in these ways. These laws are not just for national, ethnic Israel as they live in the land of Canaan. I just want to point out one of the ways that we know that this is an erroneous view and also to see how the NT applies these commands for Israel to kill the lawbreakers to the church. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul says that there is a professing Christian, a member of the Corinthian church who is breaking the law of God as stated in v. 11. A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. Now Paul’s response to this is not to tell the church to execute him, nor to petition the local government to kill him. Rather, Paul’s response is to tell the church to put him out of the church, to hand him “over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” So Paul views obedience to the command to kill him in Lev. 20:11 to be fulfilled by putting him out of the church so that living apart from Christ and his church will bring him to his senses and he will repent and return. To hand someone over to Satan is to separate a person from the place of life, the church and to put him in the realm of death, the world of men in rebellion to God. If he does not repent and return, then he will not be saved on the day of Christ and so he will experience that death that God threatens against those who practice such things.

These capital crimes in the OT teach us, the church, to take sin serious. We know that sin kills and so when we see a brother or sister sinning we don’t execute them but we go to them to help them to escape their sin. But if our brother or sister refuses our help and persists in their sin, then out of love for him or her and out of concern for the church we must hand them over to Satan with the prayer that they will come to their senses and return but also knowing that if they do not repent, then they do not belong to Christ and God will cut them off from their people which ultimately is referring to hell. If you are handed over to Satan and your sin nature is not destroyed then you will remain in his hands and suffer the same fate he does.

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III. Christ has fulfilled the law for all who trust him (vv. 8, 24-26 with Romans 10:1-13)

I want you to notice throughout this chapter how God describes himself. In v. 8 he describes himself as “the one who makes you holy.” In v. 24 he reminds Israel that he has made an unconditional promise to give to them, the descendants of Abraham, the land of Canaan. And it is, he reminds them, a land flowing with milk and honey. Then at the end of v. 24 he says that he has set them apart from all the other nations. In v. 26 he has set them apart from all the nations in order that they would be his, that is, they would belong to him. In the midst of this list of punishment for sins God reminds Israel over and over that they are his people by a work of grace. God is the one who makes them holy or sanctifies them. That is, God is the one who makes them fit for himself. They are able to live with him and he with them because he has made a way to make them holy, like him. They didn’t do anything to become his people. They didn’t do anything to be promised the land. God freely, contrary to all they deserve set them apart from the other nations to be his people.

What we see here is what the apostle Paul says that the Jewish people failed to see. In Romans 10:5-13 Paul says that the OT both declares the impossibility of humans becoming righteous on their own and that God grants righteousness to sinful humans on the basis of what Christ has done. In 10:5 he quotes Leviticus 18:5, which Moses wrote at God’s direction, to show that the Jews ought to have known, based on that verse that they could not gain life by obedience. Then, in vv. 6-10, he quotes several verses from Deuteronomy 30, again, a

passage written by Moses, which shows that the message of how God makes sinners righteous through Christ was not far away from the Jews or from anyone. It is a word that is near; a word that is in our hearts and in our mouths. It is the word of the NC, the word that God gives us new, eternal life and forgiveness and makes us holy and separates us from the world through Christ, not through our efforts. We partake of that word by faith. This word of faith, this gospel of Christ is all over the OT, including this passage that though threatening death for the disobedient also promises life by grace to these same disobedient ones.

This language of grace used in Leviticus 20 is also used throughout the NT to describe Christ and his work on our behalf. 1) In Hebrews 2:11 Jesus is called, "the one who sanctifies men" or "the one who makes men holy". This is the exact same Greek phrase as is used in Leviticus 20:8 to describe God. The means by which Christ makes us holy is stated in Hebrews 2:10, "...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The way in which God makes us fit to live with him is through the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. His once for all death makes us suitable for God. 2) This promise of the land of Canaan is taken up in the NT as the promise of gaining God's eternal kingdom through Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid little flock for your Father was pleased to give you the kingdom." Paul says at the end of his life that the Lord Jesus will "bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom." The author to the Hebrews says Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah were not waiting to inherit the land of Canaan but their eyes were looking for their own country, that is the heavenly country, the new Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. This is the culmination of John's revelation as he piles OT metaphors together in his enthusiasm to describe the glory of that eternal world to which those who trust in Christ will come. He sees a new heaven and a new earth, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem where God will dwell with his people.

3) Just as God separated Israel from among all the nations so now our Lord Jesus Christ tells us in John 15 that he has taken us out of the world. He has separated us from among the world of men who are living in hostility to God. We are no longer a part of this world just as he is not a part of this world. In his last prayer in John 17 Jesus repeatedly reminds his Father of his relationship to these disciples. He says, "I revealed your name to those you gave me out of the world.... They are not of the world even as I am not of the world." Yet Jesus says about us, just as God said about Israel, that though we have been separated from the world yet we still live in the world. Israel, though separated from the nations, yet lives among the nations. 4) This separation from the nations is for the purpose of making us into people who belong to God himself. This is everywhere stated in the NT. We are now the people of God through Christ. As Peter says in his letter, "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." We, like Israel before us, have been separated from among the peoples of the world in order to be God's treasured possession through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. 5) Finally, we have life, eternal life, not because we have obeyed all of God's laws but because Christ obeyed all of God's laws and died the death we deserve and we are united to him by our faith. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." John 6:39-40, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." So we find that life is gained, not by the obedient but by those who trust Jesus and death is avoided not by the obedient but by those who trust Jesus. This is because Jesus has done what we cannot do. He has obeyed the law perfectly so that his righteousness is now credited to the account of all who trust him. He has suffered the curse of the law, the death we deserve so that God pardons us and does not kill us because of him.

Now when you hear the word of the law demanding perfect obedience to gain life and promising death for even one infraction, then you and I despair of ourselves. Our sins overwhelm us as the Psalmist says. But then, we also hear the word of the gospel, that God is willing for the sake of Christ to pardon our sins and to count us righteous and to give us his riches for the sake of Christ. So then we trust in Christ and not ourselves. This same faith that trusts Christ to make us holy and to give us life also produces in us love for Christ. This love is what then motivates us to be like him. We do not obey God's law by looking at it but by looking at Christ. We are in love with him because we have by faith apprehended him as our great and glorious Savior.

I'm reading through 1 Samuel in the OT right now and this faith and love for Christ and its effect is clearly seen in the love of Jonathon for David. King David is one of the greatest foreshadowings of Jesus in the OT. Jonathon is the son of Saul, the first king of Israel. Jonathon is the next in line to be king of Israel. Saul is David's sworn enemy. So Jonathon is the son of David's enemy. When David kills Goliath and so delivers Israel from the oppression of the Philistines we are told that Jonathon's soul was knit to David's soul. He took off his royal robes and gave them to David, along with his sword and armor. Out of love for David he renounces his right to be king. He believes David is king and so he submits to David. In the following chapters we see Jonathon seeking to uphold the glory and honor of David to his father who is jealous of David and is seeking to kill him. What is interesting in this story is that no one told Jonathon that David was Israel's king. He simply saw David as Israel's deliverer, trusted in him, loved him and then sought to live to the honor and glory of David. Jonathon did not do what he did in submitting to David and living to his glory because of an external law but because of an internal affection. The greatness and glory of David filled his mind and heart and he responded in faith and love and thus submission to David as the rightful king of Israel. This is how we live the Christian life. Once you have see the glory of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, you trust him as the deliverer of God's people, you submit to his lordship over you, you love him as your friend and savior and king and so you live to his honor. Your chief desire in life becomes the honor and glory of the one you love, the one who has saved you and will deliver us finally from our enemies.

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