

April 3, 2022

“The Punishment for Sin” Leviticus 20:1-27

FCF: Confusion as to our greatest problem

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The Lord truly has called His people to holiness.
(magnet) And we see this in the punishment for sin.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

A recent Gallup poll asked, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” The top answers were dissatisfaction with government, COVID, the economy, and inflation. A more incisive question was asked by *The London Times* a century ago, “What’s wrong with the world?” They got their answer. “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton.”

Why is this important? Why is it worth asking? Because knowing what’s wrong will tell us what is deserving of our attention. And when it comes down to it, Chesterton was a lot closer to the truth than these recent poll results. What’s wrong with the world is something in us.

Our text is Leviticus 20. Here are the trail markers. Verses 1-6 are laws against illicit worship. Verses 7-8 an exhortation to holiness. Verses 9-21, laws against dishonoring parents and sexual immorality. Verses 22-26, an exhortation to holiness. Verse 27 against illicit worship.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Leviticus 20:1-27](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let’s admit our problem with the text. “This sounds a bit severe.” So what do you do when you come across offensive things in the Bible? Let me suggest three ideas. First, are you sure you understand what it’s saying? The Bible contains different genres of literature from an ancient historical context. Second, are you getting sidetracked in secondary issues? That is, is this tied to the essential creeds of the church or a side issue like free will, sacraments, or church government? Third, are you surprised that God would surprise you? Think with me. If this is His word, surely there will be things that will resonate but also offend. If it was completely agreeable at every point, that should make us suspicious. So it’s actually a mark of authenticity. Ask the questions. Do you understand? Are you getting sidetracked? Are you so surprised?

That brings us to our text. This section applies holiness to all of life. The focus of chapter 18 was commands. In chapter 20, we have penalties for violating those commands. The structure of the chapter makes clear the emphasis. We have a double exhortation to holiness, to be what we are - consecrated, separated, set apart. And that’s the message of the text. The Lord truly has called His people to holiness - to be what we are. We see this in the punishment for sin.

How so? In two ways. First, the penalties set forth. Second, the principles made clear.

I. THE PENALTIES SET FORTH

First, the penalties set forth. What were they? And how do we see such things today?

A) False Worship

There are three areas addressed here. Let’s start with false worship (vv.1-6, 27).

1. Examples

We read of the worship of Molech, the horrific practice of child sacrifice. Then we read of consulting mediums and necromancers, the horrific practice of seeking out spirits of the dead.

2. Rationale

The rationale behind the condemnation of such things has to do with the murder of innocents and trusting in false powers for guidance, provision, and protection - all things God has promised.

B) Dishonoring of Parents

Moving from false worship, we read of dishonoring of parents (v.9). How does this fit?

1. Explanation

Understand that this is not the normal regular disobedience from children. This refers to open rebellion of an adult child who is under your roof. It is a total rejection of parental instruction.

2. Rationale

What is the rationale to including this? Put yourself there. The family has a critical role in the community. It is the means by which history and instruction is passed down from one generation to another. To reject such parental authority is, by extension, really a rejection of God himself.

C) Sex as Never Intended

False worship, the dishonoring of parents, and then sex as never intended (vv.10-21).

1. Clarification

Let me remind you of something we saw last week. This much repeated phrase “to uncover the nakedness” is not a reference to voyeurism but an ancient euphemism for sexual intercourse.

2. Description

The acts set forth have to do with adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality. These are seen as a perversion (a twisting), an abomination (repulsive), depravity, disgrace, and impure. That is how God views all sexual intimacy outside the covenant of marriage between a man and woman.

These are the boundaries and the penalties set forth by the Lord for His people.

Application:

How do we see such things today? The classic forms of false worship are palm reading, fortune telling, and astrology. More recently, we see it in the blending of the true and false with New Age ideas. What of the dishonoring of parents? We see this in the exaltation of youth and the pressure upon parents to delegate their duties to other parties. What of sexual immorality? Let me mention just two from a long list. Pornography and the objectification and denigration of persons. And with that, the desensitization of the conscience. That would be one. The other is the hook-up culture and its implied messages. “I’m interested in sharing my body with you but not my life. You’re not worth that.” And I should add the short-sighted pursuit of thinking we can try on something intended for a lifelong commitment as though it were just a pair of pants.

The Lord truly has called His people to holiness. We see this in the punishment for sin.

II. THE PRINCIPLES MADE CLEAR

But what about these penalties? That brings us to the second point, the principles made clear. On this side of the cross, we adhere not to the penalties but to the principles they teach us, the priorities of the Lord. Put another way, we have to account for what has changed. Israel was a theocracy, a nation in which God was king. That no longer holds. But His character does.

A) *The Seriousness of Sin*

1. The Lord as King

So we learn something of the seriousness of sin. The Lord is King. Even when mortal kings were anointed and installed over the people, they were to serve as His agents and representatives.

2. Sin as treason

To sin against His law was to commit treason against the King. False worship was a rejection of His promises of guidance, provision, and protection. Acts undermining the family - dishonoring parents and sexual immorality - struck at the foundational structure of the covenant community.

B) *The Need to Address Sin*

So such sin was deemed to be a serious matter. And, as such, it had to be addressed.

1. The temptation

Of course, the temptation was to avoid this, to hope it would just go away. Think of the context of communal life. Justice was to be carried out locally, likely by and against a relative or friend.

2. The necessity

That would be terribly hard, painfully difficult. But the stakes were far-reaching ([Sklar](#)):

In short, breaking these laws amounted to serious acts of treason against the covenant King and his covenant people, and were to be dealt with swiftly and seriously, not only because this was the appropriate response to treason against a king and his kingdom, but also for the sake of Israel and the world. For the sake of Israel, because dealing seriously with sin both protected the Israelites from the dangers of rebelling against the King and kept them within the sphere of the Lord's blessing and favour. For the sake of the world, because Israel's mission was to show the world how to live in fellowship with her Creator, and this could happen only if the Israelites themselves walked in close fellowship with him. This means that the seriousness of these penalties was actually strongly humanitarian: the goal was to protect the people of God so they could be a kingdom of priests to the nations, loving them, praying for them and teaching them what it means to live in relationship with their Creator.

C) *The Danger of Continuing in Sin*

Such are the stakes. So it had to be addressed. And there is a danger in continuing in it.

1. Disintegration of life

What, after all is sin? Cornelius Plantinga describes it as a "culpable violation of shalom." Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace, wholeness, rightness - the way things ought to be. Sin brings a disintegration to that - a rupture of the creative design, a virus within the software.

2. Judgment of God

But sin does not simply bring disintegration of life. It also brings the judgment of God. In fact, He sets His face against the offender and even those called to address it but who fail to do so.

So those are the principles we learn from the punishments. And we need to heed them.

Application:

Many in our day see sin as outdated, as regressive. So sin is trivialized, marginalized. And if you speak of it, you are said to be foolish and naive. But the horrible reality is that sin is an act of rebellion against the God who is King. It is an acid that eats away at any justice, mercy, and truth in the world. It both stems from and results in a deep vandalism, like a cosmic arson.

But the Lord has called His people to holiness. And we see this in the punishment for sin.

CONCLUSION:

So what then is our hope? The Lord's amazing grace. The bold assurance we have of His rich mercy, a mercy not just to the undeserving but to the ill-deserving. Grace to you and to me. That grace is all over this passage as it stands in the midst of an eternal river of His favor.

How so? Think with me. The penalties set forth, are they not warnings given? And to whom do you give a warning? To those you care for. We have a God whose posture towards us is not that of silent indifference but deepest concern. "Turn back," He pleads. He cannot help it.

So we see His grace in the penalties set forth. But also in the forgiveness held forth. That is the message behind the sacrificial rites, rituals, rules, regulations. "You can be cleansed and ransomed from the filth and the guilt of your sin. You need be burdened by that no more."

But how? Through the One to whom all the rites, rituals, rules, and regulations pointed, the One for whom the tabernacle and priesthood was but a preparation. It comes through Jesus.

And God's grace is such that He wants us to know that, to remember and be reassured of it. We need this more than we know. What is the measure of our sin? How bad is it? It took the cross to save us. What is the measure of His love? How great is it? He took the cross to save us. He chose it. With who in mind? You. He chose this for you. And He wants you to know it.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The Lord truly has called His people to holiness.
(magnet) And we see this in the punishment for sin.