

The Sanctity of Justice

Leviticus 20:1-27

I. Introduction

- A. Chapter 20 resumes the subject of chapter 18, and the two chapters, on the surface seem virtually identical.
- B. However, there are important details that differentiate the two so that each compliments the other:
 - 1. Chapter 18 addresses the would-be offender, while chapter 20 addresses the Israelite community.
 - 2. Chapter 18 introduces sins, while chapter 20 covers their penalties.
 - 3. Chapter 18 is apodictic (“Do not...”, i.e., prohibitions), while chapter 20 is casuistic (“If a man...”, i.e., case law).
- C. Most importantly, chapters 18 and 20 tie together the close connection between idolatry and sexual immorality, and this is one of its most significant revelations.
- D. The chapter is organized into an inclusio:
 - 1. Punishment for idolatry (20:1-6)**
 - 2. *Call for allegiance (20:7-8)*
 - 3. Punishment for sexual sins (20:9-21)
 - 4. *Call for holiness (20:22-26)*
 - 5. Punishment for Spiritism (20:27)**
- E. This arrangement demonstrates a cause-effect relationship between false religion and sexual sin (see Jude and 2 Peter, where a close association exists between the doctrines of false teachers and their immorality).

II. Exposition

- A. Punishment for Idolatry (20:1-6)
 - 1. Cases of offering children to Molech (20:1-5)
 - a) For details on offering children to Molech, see notes on ch. 18.
 - b) Idolatry such as this constituted outright rebellion against God’s authority and a violation of his covenant, i.e., treason.
 - c) It also profaned God’s holy name and made the sanctuary unclean (20:3).
 - d) Thus, the punishment for idolatry was death by stoning.
 - e) It didn’t matter if the perpetrators were native Israelites or foreigners in the land, no idolatry would be tolerated.

- f) Notice how the responsibility for exacting justice was placed on the people. The use of stoning as a form a punishment may have been chosen in order to accentuate the community's intolerance of these practices (Rooker, 266).
 - g) In fact, the community is warned against failure to deal with cases of idolatry in the land (20:4).
 - h) To do so would result in that person and his whole clan being cut off from his people (20:5a).
 - i) The reason for this is that idolatry is infectious. To overlook such an offense would result in the spread of such practices to the people (20:5b).
2. Cases of spiritism (20:6)
- a) Likewise, using mediums and necromancers is forbidden (see notes on chapter 19).
 - b) This practice is described as "whoring," a word which is used of marital infidelity. In other words, paganism is a kind of infidelity against God.
 - c) The punishment for consulting spiritists was to be cut off from the people.
- B. Call to allegiance to God (20:7-8)
- 1. Israel is called to "consecrate" themselves, from the root word "holy".
 - 2. This is as much a call to moral purity as it is a call to separate from any and all pagan practices.
 - 3. Being holy involves keeping God's laws and doing them. For this reason, the text asserts that Yahweh is the one who "sanctifies" them, i.e., makes them holy.
 - 4. The call to holiness continues from chapter 19. There, the emphasis was on the horizontal dimension of holiness. Here, the vertical aspect is emphasized.
- C. Punishment for sexual sin (20:9-21)
- 1. Cursing parents (20:9)
 - a) This verse sets the context for the remaining punishments concerning sexual sin—every case that follows in vv. 10-21 relates to proper conduct within the family.
 - b) It reveals that sexual sin is a natural consequence of cursing one's parents, either through disobedience or disrespect.
 - c) Ephesians 6:1-3 emphasizes that obedience to parents results in blessing and long life. The opposite, then, is implied.
 - d) The punishment for cursing one's parents was death, and the text emphasizes that he bears full responsibility ("his blood is upon him").

The Sanctity of Justice

2. Sexual offenses (20:10-21)

a) The various sexual offenses that are discussed in chapter 18 return here, with their related punishments:

- (1) Adultery (20:10)
- (2) Incest (20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-21)
- (3) Homosexuality (20:13)
- (4) Bestiality (20:15-16)
- (5) Sexual intercourse during menstruation (20:18)

b) These sins are arranged according to their punishment:

- (1) Death (20:10-13)
 - (a) For some, the text only indicates that the guilty parties be put to death.
 - (b) We may assume that for such cases, stoning was the mode of execution. In the case of bestiality, both the offender and the animal were put to death.
- (2) Burning (20:14)
 - (a) For the case of a man who marries both a woman and her mother, all three were to be burned to death.
 - (b) The reason for this is unclear, but it was used in other cases of sexual sin (Gen 38:24; Lev 21:9).
 - (c) It is also unclear whether burning was the actual mode of punishment or whether the perpetrators were stoned and their bodies burned.
- (3) Cutting off (20:15-19)
 - (a) For cases where a man marries his sister, or lies with a woman during her menstrual period, the punishment was being cut off from their people.
 - (b) In such instances, particularly the latter, public knowledge may have been limited or nonexistent.
 - (c) Thus, God would deal personally with them, assumingly through premature death.
- (4) Childlessness (20:20-21)
 - (a) For cases where a man lies with his uncle's or his brother's wife, the punishment was childlessness.
 - (b) This was not as strong as death or cutting off, but still communicated God's disapproval.
 - (c) The term literally means "stripped," indicating being stripped of one's legacy and posterity.

- (d) This didn't necessarily mean a person would have no children—others in the OT who were deemed “stripped” had children (Jer 22:3; 1 Chron 3:17-18).
- (e) Rather, it seems to indicate that any children they had would be considered illegitimate in God's eyes and would not benefit the family.
- (f) The family would be stripped of honor by God and the community. It would be as if they had no children.

D. Call to holiness (20:22-26)

- 1. There is much similarity between this section and that of 18:24-30
- 2. Israel's possession of the land is linked to their obedience to God's commands
- 3. In this way, punishment is a means of motivation to obedience:
 - a) Disobedience will result in the land “vomiting” them out (20:22)
 - b) Conforming to the practices of the nations would make them detestable to God (20:23)
- 4. God purposed to give Israel the land and he had separated them from the peoples around (20:24)
- 5. Therefore, they were called to live out this divine separation:
 - a) Separate clean and unclean animals and remain unpolluted by them (20:25)
 - b) Be holy as Yahweh is holy, who separated them from the peoples to be his special possession (20:26; cf. Exod 19:5-6).

E. Punishment for spiritism (20:27)

- 1. The text returns to the topic with which it began in vv. 6-8.
- 2. Here, however, the focus is on those individuals who act as spiritists, whereas the former section dealt with those who consulted them.
- 3. Just as they were to remain distinct from the surrounding nations by observing the dietary laws (20:25), they were to remain separate and pure by refusing practice spiritism or tolerate such practices (20:27).
- 4. The punishment for engaging in such pagan practices was stoning
- 5. To further reinforce this prohibition, the text ends with the solemn statement, “their blood shall be upon them.”

III. Leviticus 20 and the Christian

- A. The Lord calls his church to be holy by remaining distinct from the practices of the world (Eph 4:17-24; Rom 12:1-2; James 1:22).

The Sanctity of Justice

- B. Believers must be aware of the close correlation between false teaching and immorality (1 Tim 4:16).
- C. Believers must also recognize the close connection between immorality and disrespect for parents (2 Tim 3:1-5).
- D. Even though capital punishment was part of the justice system of the old covenant law, it should stand as a sober warning of how serious God takes disobedience, idolatry, and immorality (Rom 6:23; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 John 5:16).