Sex and Shell-fish
Leviticus 18:1-6; 19-30

So this is our second to last week in Leviticus. And if you type that word *Leviticus* into Google, then right at the top comes *Leviticus 18*, the chapter we're going to look at today. And the reason is that it's the chapter that deals with homosexuality. And because what this book has to say about same sex relationships has proved so controversial in the last few years, at least in our western culture, I want us to look at it together.

Reading: Leviticus 18:1-6; 19-30

Now as we start, I want to make a couple of general comments. Firstly, my aim today is *not* to give you all that the Bible has to say about homosexuality, or other sexual stuff for that matter. We *are* planning a teaching series on sex and sexuality, but this morning isn't it. So if what I say raises questions for you please come and talk to me afterwards.

But secondly, when it comes to sexual sin or the issue of same sex relationships, the track record of Christians speaking about these issues in love has not always been stellar. And so from the outset I want us to be clear that all of us, including me, are sexual sinners. Some of us have repeatedly used porn. Some of us have had sex outside of marriage. Some of us have committed adultery. Some of us experience same sex attraction or have engaged in same-sex sex. And virtually all of us know the daily battle against lust. At least you do if you're a guy. So we all stand on level ground before a holy God. And none of us can point the finger.

The Call to be Different
Now I don't know if you noticed it, but this chapter begins, and ends, with the Lord calling the Israelites to live distinctive lives to those around them. It's as if that call to be different acts as two book ends – and the book it's holding up, in the middle, is how God's people are going to behave sexually: you're going to be different, the Lord says, and here's how you're going to do it.

Look at v2-3, the Lord says to Moses, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived, and 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."

Now the truth is that everyone worships one god or another, don't they? It doesn't matter if you're an ancient Israelite, Egyptian or Canaanite, or whether you're a 21st Century whatever living in the West. Everyone worships something. That might be the God of Israel or the idols of Egypt, or it might be the 21st century gods of self, or image, or sex, or money, or whatever. We all give ourselves to some god or another. And in the language of Leviticus, we all walk in line with some statutes or other. We're all being shaped or moulded by some idea of what is or is not acceptable, of how we should or shouldn't live. We're all being influenced and guided by something that tells us this is ok, and this isn't. So that might be the Lord's statutes in Leviticus, or the rules of ancient Canaanite society, or the seemingly all prevalent statute of 21st Century western culture that anything is ok, provided it doesn't hurt anyone else. But whatever it is, we are all walking according to some statute or other.

And the Lord is telling Moses that He, the Lord, is to be Israel's God, and that they are to walk in his statutes. And he opens the chapter like that, and he ends it like that: v26 "You shall keep my statutes and my rules…" v30, "I am the Lord your God."

Now, next week Andy is going to unpack some of the implications of the Lord being our God from Leviticus 19. But for now, what I want you to see is that the Lord is saying that *if* he *is* Israel's God, that isn't just going to influence how they worship in public, which is what we've seen so far in Leviticus, it's also going to influence what they get up to in private. It's going to influence the most intimate and personal areas of their lives – their sex lives. So Leviticus is saying that the God you worship in your heart is going to profoundly affect how you use your body. And you know that's true, don't you. You see it in the world around you. If you worship the god of self, or of power, or of so-called personal freedom, that's going to influence how you see sex. But the same is also true if it's God that you're worshipping.

And it is explicitly in this area of sex that the Lord calls his people to live differently: v3, "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt… you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan."

Now imagine an Israelite coming up to Moses and saying, "Moses, I think this is all very repressive. These rules against not having sex with my sister – the Egyptians are allowed to do that, why can't I? Or all this stuff against having sex with animals – the Canaanites don't see anything wrong with it, I just think you're out of touch." How do you think Moses might respond? You see what the Egyptians or the Canaanites thought about it, or how they behaved, has nothing whatsoever to do with God's people, does it? The Lord is calling them, as he always calls his people, to live differently. And your God isn't their god, and His statutes aren't their statutes, and that is going to influence how the Israelites, and you and I, behave sexually.

And so just because others see zero problem with having sex with your girlfriend before marriage, God's people will see things differently. Just because the world thinks its ok to have a one-night stand with someone else's wife, you will see things differently. Just because in the West, society is in the process of executing a 180-degree turn on homosexuality, does not mean that God's people will follow. Why? Because you don't serve their god and you don't walk in their statutes. Something else is shaping how you see these things.

Now you might hear all that and think, 'but why this obsession with sex? Why does the Lord make such a big deal of it? I mean if I were thinking of all the ways believers should be different I could think of plenty of others I'd like him to address, like integrity, or social justice, or loving one another. Why doesn't he emphasise those?' Well, he does, and it all comes in chapter 19, and we'll get to those next week. But the reason sex was a big deal was because sex *was* a big deal. Incest was normalised in Egypt and Canaan. Homosexuality was accepted practice in Canaan and Mesopotamia, and so were some forms of sex with animals. And that was the culture these guys were living in. So the Lord addresses this precisely because it needed addressing. And nothing has changed

has it? You don't have to drive past many advertising hoardings, or watch much TV, or go on line for more than a few minutes, to see just how sexualised our culture has become. And so Leviticus speaks about sex because sex was, and is, a huge issue in all our lives.

And look how strongly the Lord speaks. Verse 22, 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.' Then v26, 'You shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations.' And that word, abomination is an incredibly strong word, isn't it? Some words retain their power and that's one of them. And it translates a word that's strong in Hebrew. It comes from the root word for hatred, or to abhor something. So why would God say that he hates sexual immorality? What is it about hetero- or homosexual immorality that God so strongly objects to?

Well, firstly, for what it does to people. A good part of this chapter has to do with various forms of incest. And God lays down certain rules to protect women and children against abuse. And he prohibits adultery to protect wives and husbands and children from the devastating fall out of infidelity. And so God speaks seriously about these sins because they are serious, and he hates these sins because he hates the way they destroy lives.

Secondly, he hates sexual immorality – hetero and homosexual - because of the way it undermines the creation design of marriage between one man and one woman, making a lifelong covenant together. Because that was the background that the Israelites would have heard this against. And so, by their very nature, same-sex relationships miss God's original intent both for sex and relationships. And in doing so they undermine the whole concept of marriage, which no amount of redefining of marriage can change. And when marriage is undermined the knock-on effects on society are significant. But it's not just wider society that suffers. As any of us who have experienced broken marriages, either of our parents or personally, know very well, the pain and the hurt that comes when marriages are destroyed is simply huge. And the Lord hates that.

But thirdly, God hates sexual immorality among his people because of the way it dishonours him. Now I don't want to trivialise this, but *the* shock game in last year's Rugby World Cup was when the mighty South Africans were beaten by Japan. And it was humiliating for South Africa. And their captain went on national television to apologise to the whole nation for letting them down. Now, if the English had to do that our captain would spend more time in the Television Studio than playing on the pitch. But why did he have to do that in the first place? Because the South African players were representing the nation, they were wearing the Springbok shirt. So their play on the pitch had reflected badly, not just on them, but on the whole nation. And it's the same with God's people. Then and now, we are God's representatives, we wear his shirt, and our behaviour on the pitch of life says something to the watching world about him. And because he is holy, God hates anything that dishonours that holiness. And sexual sin does that.

But to speak like this, especially about homosexual relationships, is increasingly unacceptable in our society. And, when it comes to Leviticus, it leads to a specific accusation.

The Charge of Inconsistency

Maybe you've seen a Facebook post, or heard a comedian joke about the seeming inconsistency of arguing from Leviticus that homosexuality is wrong, when we're ok about eating shell-fish. And the argument goes something like this: you Christians are inconsistent. You pick and choose what rules are still applicable. You say men aren't allowed to have sex with other men, because Leviticus says so, but the same book says we're not supposed to eat prawns and you don't go round banning them, and it says you're not supposed to wear clothing made of two different types of fabric, but you don't mind wearing poly-cotton shirts. So you're just a bunch of homophobes, you pick and choose and you're inconsistent.

Well, because that is such a common charge I want to give you a framework for how you can assess arguments like that.

It's all about Jesus

Now traditionally God's law in the Old Testament has been divided into three: the ceremonial law, the civil law and the moral law. Now you don't find that distinction made explicitly in the Bible, but as a starting point it's helpful.

The Ceremonial Laws are those laws that had to do with governing Israel's worship life. The laws about sacrifices and rituals and the priesthood and clean or unclean. And by teaching the people to distinguish between the holy and the common, and not to mix different categories of things, like fabric, they were a daily reminder to them that God was holy, and they were to live differently from those around them. And it's in this group of laws that the rules about eating shell-fish, or wearing mixed clothing, would fall.

But when you get to the New Testament, all these laws are fulfilled and set aside in Jesus. He is the perfect once and for all atoning sacrifice. He is the perfect high priest, so there simply is no need to offer any more sacrifices. In fact, if you did, you *would* be being profoundly inconsistent as a Christian. And the New Testament makes it clear, as Mark says in his gospel, that Jesus 'Declared all foods clean' (Mark 7:19). And if one reason for those food laws was to teach the people to distinguish the holy from the common, and that his people were to be holy, and different from the gentiles, then it's no surprise that when that division between Jew and Gentile was broken down in Jesus, that the food laws were abolished. They had done their job.

So it's not the failure to maintain a ban on eating shellfish, that's inconsistent – it would be deeply inconsistent to Jesus and the gospel if we did keep those laws.

Then there are the Civil Laws. And these are the laws that legislated Israelite society: laws to do with farming, or how you built the roof on your house, or that fixed certain penalties for certain offences, not least the death penalty for some sexual sins. But now, because of all that Jesus has done, the people of God are not one tiny nation state, living in one corner of the middle east, under one civil law;

He has won his people from multiple nations, living under multiple governments, in multiple cultures, and under multiple expressions of civil law. And the church is not the government. And so now, as you read the New Testament, sin remains sin, but the penalties change. And sin is no-longer a matter of civil law, it's dealt with by exhortation. And the penalty of last resort is not death, but exclusion from the community of the church.

So again, we're not being inconsistent to say that these civil laws of one nation state, no longer apply to the world-wide church. Rather, it *would* be inconsistent to all that Jesus has done if we said they did still apply.

But the third division of the law is what is called the Moral Law, and these rules about sexual behaviour fall into this group. And in the New Testament, far from God's moral law being abolished and now anything goes, we see Jesus intensifying it, and raising the bar even higher. Repeatedly he says, 'you have heard that it was said…' and then quotes from the law of Moses, 'but I say to you…' and he makes it even harder for us to achieve. So for example, Jesus goes beyond physical adultery, to the issue of the heart that lies under the act: Matt 5:27-28 – 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' And you hear that and you realise, 'man, I'm sunk… if that's the standard.'

And so the New Testament doesn't simply advocate the same standard of personal morality for God's people, it raises it. You see if God's moral law expresses his character, which is does, and if Jesus is revealing more of God to us even than Moses did, then you'd expect the bar to go higher. And so as the New Testament reaffirms or even strengthens a commandment or a law, then it doesn't simply apply to God's people in ancient Israel, it applies to all of God's people, the church. And to say anything else would be inconsistent with the character of God.

And if you look closely at Leviticus you'd expect that to be the case, because the Lord says it was precisely because of these sins that the land, v25, 'vomited out its [previous] inhabitants' – the Canaanites. So these things are not just inappropriate for God's ancient people, they're inappropriate for all people.

And so, the New Testament continues to forbid sexual immorality, in all its forms. In Romans 13:10 Paul writes that 'love is the fulfilling of the law' and he immediately follows that up with v13, 'let us walk… not in sexual immorality.' In other words, you cannot use 'love', in inverted commas, as an excuse for sexual sin. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul writes these sobering words, 'Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, not the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.' (1 Cor 6:9-10). So Leviticus 18 is restated and amplified, in the New Testament.

And so there is no inconsistency. What would be inconsistent would be to deny all that Christ has done for us and carry on trying to obey the civil and ceremonial laws.

But also, because God's character never changes, his moral law never changes. In fact, as Jesus reveals more of God to us, it intensifies and it becomes even more impossible to meet.

I mean just look at that list in 1 Corinthians 6, and consider how Jesus intensified what it means to be sexually immoral. And ask yourself, do any of us make the grade? All of us stand guilty. 'There is no distinction' Paul says, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:22-23).

And yet, it's precisely as you read that list in 1 Corinthians 6 of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God that you and I can find hope. Because look what comes next. '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.' (1 Cor 6:9-11).

In other words, it's not just that Jesus saves us from the ceremonial and the civil law, he also saves us from God's moral law.

Jesus the Perfect Israelite

You see, just before Jesus intensified all those laws against murder, adultery, divorce, lying, vengeance and love by saying 'you have heard that it was said… but I say to you', this is what he said: 'I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it' (Matt 5:17). Yes, he fulfilled it by becoming the perfect atoning sacrifice. Yes, he fulfilled it by being the perfect high priest. But he also fulfilled it by being the perfect law-keeper. By keeping the same moral law that you and I keep on failing.

And yet, at the cross, he swapped places with you, and he - the sinless Son of God - took your place. And took upon himself the penalty for all our sins, including all our sexual sins, including the death penalty, for all of us, hetero and homosexual sinners alike. And he stood condemned that we might be declared not guilty. And he was put to death that we might live. That as we repent, and turn away from our sin, and put our trust in him, we are united with him by faith, and his righteousness, his perfect law keeping, becomes ours, and we are washed and sanctified and justified, declared not guilty, because he was not guilty.

And so it's in Jesus, and only in him, that you and I can find safety and refuge from God's law, and our continual failure to keep it. That in turning away from sin and turning instead to him, you can find forgiveness and cleansing, whatever your sexual past has been. And whether we struggle with hetero-sexual lust or homosexual attractions, it's only in him and not in our sin, that we can all find the loving acceptance and safe embrace of our heavenly Father, who sees us, not stained by sin any longer, but wrapped in the robe of Jesus' blood-bought righteousness.