

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 20

Content & Intent

Broader Unit: Leviticus 20 sits within the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–27), the extended section of Leviticus devoted to the distinctiveness required of a people who dwell with the holy God. Within that code, chapters 18–20 form a coherent triad: chapter 18 prohibits the sexual and cultic abominations practiced by Egypt and Canaan; chapter 19 positively defines holiness as comprehensive covenant conformity across all of life; chapter 20 returns to many of the same prohibitions as chapter 18 but now attaches *penalties* to them. The movement from prohibition (ch. 18) to positive redefinition (ch. 19) to legal sanction (ch. 20) is deliberate: Israel is not merely told what not to do — she is told that these things are adjudicated, prosecuted, and punished, because they strike at the very fabric of the covenant community's identity before a holy God.

This Text — Content: Leviticus 20 opens with two capital offenses: Molech worship (vv. 1–5) and consulting mediums or necromancers (vv. 6, 27). The LORD declares that anyone who gives their children to Molech will be put to death by the community; if the community fails to act, God Himself will cut off the offender and all who “close their eyes” to the offense. The passage then pivots through a series of sexual sins — incest in multiple configurations, adultery, homosexual intercourse, bestiality — assigning death penalties or “cutting off” to each. Interspersed is the command to honor father and mother (v. 9). The chapter closes with a governing theological rationale stated three times with slight variation: “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine” (v. 26). Israel's holiness is not self-generated — it is constituted by God's own holy character and enacted through His act of separation.

This Text — Intent: God is seeking to accomplish two things simultaneously through this chapter. First, He intends to create a visceral sense of *consequence* — the death penalties and divine cutting-off are not rhetorical; they are designed to drive home that holiness is not aspirational and optional but covenantally constitutive and non-negotiable. Second, and underlying the first, God intends to ground Israel's entire moral-cultic identity in His own character: “*I am holy; therefore you shall be holy.*” The force is not bare legislative: it is relational and ontological. The penalties are the teeth of a love that will not share its beloved with Molech, with sexual disorder, or with the dead. God is summoning Israel to understand that being His people means *being like Him* — and that the alternative is not merely legal consequence but covenantal rupture.

Subject Sentence: God legislates covenant holiness with binding penalties because His people belong to Him and must reflect Him.

Primary Claim: God is confronting Israel — and every reader — with the absolute seriousness of covenant holiness: the penalties attached to these violations are not arbitrary severity but the measure of how completely God has claimed His people as His own, and how completely He refuses to share them with the corrupt patterns of the nations.

Interpretive Evaluation

The death penalties — abrogated, transferred, or still instructive? The most pressing interpretive question in Leviticus 20 for any tradition is the status of its capital sanctions. Theonomists (Reconstructionists) argue that these penalties remain binding on civil governments wherever possible, since the moral law undergirding them is perpetual. This reading is to be acknowledged as correctly resisting the tendency to treat Old Testament law as merely antiquarian, and as rightly insisting that these penalties reveal something about the *gravity* of the offenses. However, it overreads the applicability: the theocratic civil code of Israel was never universal legislation for all nations but was the specific covenant constitution of the nation-as-church, a typological entity that has been fulfilled in Christ and the new covenant community. The civil sanctions do not transfer directly to general equity without careful mediation through the New Testament's teaching on civil authority and the church's distinctly non-coercive form of discipline.

The Reformed tradition's standard distinction (following Calvin, Westminster Confession 19.4) is between the moral, ceremonial, and civil dimensions of Mosaic law. The moral core of Leviticus 20's prohibitions (e.g., against adultery, incest, idolatry) remains perpetually binding because it reflects God's holy character and is re-affirmed in the New Testament. The civil penalties as such are not binding on Gentile nations but carry *general equity* — they reveal the relative seriousness of different violations before God, which informs Christian moral reasoning even where capital punishment is not prescribed. This is the Reformed reading and it is best supported by the New Testament's pattern of affirming the moral substance of these prohibitions while reconfiguring the mode of enforcement from the community's sword to excommunication (1 Corinthians 5; Matthew 18:15–20).

The sexual ethics — “ancient Near Eastern context” diminishment: A common move in contemporary scholarship — particularly in progressive evangelical and mainline Protestant readings — is to argue that the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 20 (especially vv. 13 on homosexual intercourse) were contextually conditioned responses to specific cultic practices or exploitative relationships in the ancient Near East, not abiding moral norms. This reading must be refuted. The text itself provides its own rationale at both the chapter level (vv. 22–26: these things are prohibited because the nations practiced them and were vomited out; Israel must be different because the LORD is holy) and the canonical level (Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 re-affirm these prohibitions without cultic qualification; Jesus grounds sexual ethics in creation order in Matthew 19). The “cultic

context” argument imports a distinction the text does not make and which the New Testament does not endorse. The Reformed reading affirms that the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 20 express the Creator’s design for human sexuality, rooted in His own holy character and creation order, and are therefore morally binding across the canon.

Molech worship — merely historical or still diagnostic? Some traditions read the Molech warnings as strictly ancient-Near-Eastern and historically distant. This partial reading misses the theological intent: the text concerns child sacrifice as the extreme expression of misplaced ultimate allegiance — giving what belongs to God alone to a false god. Canonically and homiletically, this maps to the idol-diagnosis category (Keller): what modern equivalents involve surrendering children (or the next generation) to the consuming demands of false ultimates? The historical specificity is real; the theological pattern is transferable. The Reformed reading holds both: the specific practice of Molech worship is condemned as a concrete historical abomination, and the pattern of sacrificing covenant children to false gods remains a live diagnostic category.

Key Canonical Support

- **Leviticus 19:2** — *“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy”* — the positive governing principle that chapter 20 enforces negatively; holiness is not self-constituted but derived from and conformed to God’s own character.
 - **Deuteronomy 18:9–14** — Reiterates the prohibitions against child sacrifice and occult consultation in the context of Israel entering the land; grounds Israel’s distinctiveness in God’s possession of them, not in their moral superiority.
 - **1 Corinthians 5:1–13** — Paul applies the logic of Leviticus 20’s “cutting off” to the new covenant community: sexual immorality within the church requires removal of the offender — not by civil execution but by excommunication — demonstrating how the Leviticus 20 sanctions carry general equity into the new covenant without direct transference of civil penalty.
 - **Romans 1:18–32** — Provides the New Testament’s most extensive theological grounding for the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 20: sexual disorder (including same-sex intercourse) is the symptom of suppressed knowledge of God and is under His wrath — moving the same moral claim from Mosaic legislation into universal human accountability before the Creator.
 - **1 Peter 1:14–16** — *“As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct”* — quotes Leviticus 19:2 and applies the holiness rationale of the Holiness Code directly to the new covenant church; demonstrates that the governing logic of Leviticus 20 (be holy because I am holy; you are mine) is not abrogated but is applied to the whole people of God across both testaments.
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Aim: To expose the seriousness with which God guards the covenant community's holiness — grounded not in arbitrary law but in His own holy character and His claim upon His people — and to press that claim upon the reader as a living obligation that shapes worship, sexual ethics, and communal accountability.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Preamble: The LORD speaks to Moses; any Israelite or sojourner who gives children to Molech shall be put to death by stoning	Community responsibility to enforce holiness; sojourners included — holiness is not ethnically bounded
3–5	God Himself will cut off the Molech worshiper and all who close their eyes; the act defiles God's sanctuary and profanes His holy name	Two levels of sanction: communal (v. 2) and divine (vv. 3–5); “profanes my holy name” — holiness as identity
6	Turning to mediums or necromancers = spiritual prostitution; God will cut off that person	Paired with Molech: both are forms of false ultimacy — seeking life/power outside the covenant God
7–8	Positive imperative: consecrate yourselves and be holy, for I am the LORD your God who sanctifies you	Structural center of the holiness rationale; God is both the standard and the source of Israel's holiness
9	Cursing father or mother = death penalty	Honor of parents is covenant-structural; placed within capital offenses — family order is sacred order
10	Adultery: both parties put to death	Symmetrical judgment; marriage as covenant parallel
11	Intercourse with father's wife: both put to death; “uncovered his father's nakedness”	Incest violates the family as covenant community; nakedness language from Genesis 9
12	Intercourse with daughter-in-law: both put to death; “confusion” (tebel) — a disorder/mixing word	Structural language: these violations confuse God's ordered categories

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13	Male-male intercourse: both put to death; “abomination” (tô’ēbāh)	Strongest categorical language in the chapter; applied to same-sex intercourse specifically
14	Man takes woman and her mother: burned with fire; “wickedness” (zimmāh)	Severest physical penalty in the chapter; multiple covenant violations compounded
15–16	Bestiality: both human and animal put to death	Violation of the human-animal boundary established in creation
17	Intercourse with sister: “cut off in the sight of their people”; “disgrace” (hesed — unusual negative use)	Lesser penalty than death but public shame; incest within nuclear family
18	Intercourse with a woman during menstruation: both “cut off from among their people”	Holiness extends to bodily/ceremonial boundaries
19–21	Various forms of incest: “bear their iniquity”; childlessness as judgment	Graded penalties; not all violations carry equal civil weight but all carry moral weight
22–23	Closing rationale: keep statutes/rules or the land will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations; do not walk in the customs of the nations	The land itself enforces holiness; environmental/covenantal judgment
24–26	Theological grounding: God has separated Israel from the peoples; Israel must distinguish between clean and unclean; “you shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine”	Climactic statement: holiness = belonging; separation = possession; the rationale is relational, not merely legislative
27	Appendix: mediums and necromancers to be stoned;	Returns to v. 6; bookends the chapter with false-

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	“their blood is upon them”	ultimacy prohibitions

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	False Ultimacy Prohibited: Molech and the Occult — Giving What Belongs to God to That Which Is Not God
2	7–8	Structural Center: Be Holy Because I Am Holy — The Rationale That Governs the Whole
3	9–21	Covenant Order Upheld: Capital Offenses and Graduated Sanctions for Sexual and Familial Disorder
4	22–26	Theological Grounding: The Land Will Vomit You Out — Holiness as Covenantal Possession
5	27	Appendix/Bookend: False Ultimacy Again — Mediums and Necromancers Condemned

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God legislates covenant holiness with binding penalties because His people belong to Him and must reflect Him.

Primary Claim: God is confronting Israel — and every reader — with the absolute seriousness of covenant holiness: the penalties attached to these violations are not arbitrary severity but the measure of how completely God has claimed His people as His own, and how completely He refuses to share them with the corrupt patterns of the nations.

Applications (Five)

1. The severity of these penalties is a measure of love, not merely of law. [Mind/Belief]

Contemporary readers instinctively read the death penalties of Leviticus 20 as evidence that the Old Testament God is harsh and the New Testament God is gracious — as if they were two different Gods operating on different principles. This is a failure of understanding, not a failure of God’s character. The severity of the sanctions corresponds to the intimacy of the relationship. The LORD has said to Israel: “*You are mine.*” He has separated them from the nations. He has taken up residence among them. When a covenant partner defects to Molech — sacrificing children to a devouring false god — or dismantles the sexual order that images His own faithful covenant love, the severity of the response is proportionate to what has been betrayed. A God who shrugged at these violations would not be more loving — He would be indifferent. Read the penalties not as evidence of divine harshness but as the measure of divine claim. He does not sanction what He does not care about.

2. The idol beneath the idol: you are always sacrificing to something.

[Affections/Worship] The Molech prohibition (vv. 1–5) is not merely about ancient child sacrifice. It names the pattern of false ultimacy in its most extreme and visible form — but the pattern runs everywhere. Molech demanded children because children are the most costly thing a parent possesses. False gods always demand ultimate things. The diagnostic question Leviticus 20 presses on the reader is: What are you giving your children — your time, your formation, your discipleship — to? What system, what aspiration, what fear is shaping the next generation in your household? Modern Molech-equivalents are not smoking idols; they are respectable and relentless: achievement culture, financial security, social belonging, ideological conformity. The community that “closes its eyes” to these sacrifices (v. 4) and allows them to go unnamed is not being tolerant — it is being complicit. Examine your household. Examine what your children are being formed toward.

3. The covenant community is responsible for its own holiness — and accountable for its silence. [Will/Behavior]

The command in verses 2–5 places the responsibility for enforcement on “the people of the land” — the community. This is not incidental. God is establishing that covenant holiness is not a private matter between individuals and the LORD; it is a communal obligation. The community that closes its eyes to flagrant covenant violation does not escape judgment — it shares in it (v. 4). The new covenant equivalent is Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5: the church is not permitted to look the other way when a member is living in patterns that contradict her identity as a holy people. This is not punitive in motivation — it is restorative and protective. Churches that have collapsed the category of church discipline have not become more loving; they have become communities that close their eyes, and Leviticus 20 says God will not close His.

4. You are holy because you are His — not because you are better. [Mind/Belief +

Affections/Worship] The theological rationale of verses 24–26 is stunning in what it does *not* say. It does not say: “Be holy because holiness is the rational and dignified way to live.” It does not say: “Be holy because the nations’ practices are demonstrably harmful.” It says:

“I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples... you shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy... that you should be mine.” Israel’s holiness is constituted entirely by God’s act of election and possession, not by any moral superiority of her own. This has massive pastoral force: the motivation for holy living is not self-improvement or ethical pride — it is a response to being claimed. The reader is not summoned to be holy in order to become God’s; she is summoned to be holy *because* she already is God’s. Let that reframe the entire project of sanctification: you are not working toward belonging; you are working *from* it.

5. Sexual order is not cultural convention — it is covenant structure. [Will/Behavior]

The length and specificity of the sexual ethics section (vv. 10–21) is not prudishness. The text assigns some form of sanction — death, cutting off, or bearing iniquity — to every violation catalogued. The common thread is not that these acts are socially inconvenient or personally harmful (though they are) but that they violate the ordered structure that images the covenant itself. Marriage between a man and a woman, fidelity within that covenant, and the honoring of the family structure are not negotiable social constructs in this framework — they are the human embodiment of covenant faithfulness. For the reader living in a cultural moment that treats sexual ethics as entirely a matter of personal authenticity and consent, Leviticus 20 is a direct confrontation: the boundaries of sexual life are not yours to draw. They belong to the God who created human sexuality to image His own covenant faithfulness. Specific applications include: refusing to treat pornography as a private matter, refusing to normalize within the church what the canon names as disordering, and actively disciplining younger generations in a positive vision of sexuality as covenant before they are formed by any other vision.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Leviticus 20 makes a claim that runs against every instinct of a morally therapeutic culture: the God who is holy is the God who judges, and His judgments are the expression of His love, not its contradiction. The chapter teaches that God’s holiness is not a moralizing footnote but a constitutive attribute — it is what He *is*, and therefore what He demands of those who bear His name and dwell in His presence. The graduated penalties reveal that not all violations carry equal weight before God, but every violation carries some weight — the category of moral indifference does not exist in this text. Theologically, Leviticus 20 also establishes that the created order — family structure, sexual differentiation, the boundary between human and divine — is not raw material for human creativity but the framework of God’s wise design, the violation of which carries inherent consequence. The “vomiting” of the land (v. 22) images creation itself as morally ordered and responsive to human covenant faithfulness or unfaithfulness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 20 is significant for Reformed theology at the precise point where Reformed theology most needs to be precise: the relationship between law and gospel, and the continuing relevance of Mosaic law for the new covenant community. The Reformed reading refuses both antinomianism (the law is simply abrogated) and theonomy (the civil penalties transfer directly). Instead, it holds that the moral substance of Leviticus 20 — rooted in God’s holy character and creation order — remains perpetually binding, that the civil penalties carry general equity illuminating the relative gravity of different violations, and that the mode of enforcement has been reconfigured by Christ’s redemptive work and the new covenant community’s non-coercive structure. More fundamentally, Leviticus 20 displays the Reformed insistence that grace and holiness are not in tension but are covenantally intertwined: God’s sovereign election of Israel (“I have separated you”) *produces* the holiness obligation (“you shall be holy”), not the reverse. This is the grammar of grace: indicative precedes imperative, possession precedes obligation, being claimed comes before being conformed.

Main Takeaway

God has said to His people: “*You are mine.*” Leviticus 20 is the measure of how seriously He means it. The penalties are not arbitrary severity — they are the boundaries of a love that will not be shared with Molech, with sexual disorder, or with the dead. You are not called to holiness in order to earn His possession of you; you are called to holiness because His possession of you is already total. Stop living as if the boundaries are negotiable. Stop closing your eyes to what the community is tolerating. Be holy — because He is holy, and because you are His.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the death penalties as the main point and getting stuck there.** Many expositors of Leviticus 20 spend the bulk of their time defending or explaining the capital sanctions and never reach the theological rationale in verses 22–26. The penalties are the mechanism; the claim is “you shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.” The sanctions exist to enforce the relational claim — preach the claim, not the courtroom procedure.
- **Selective citation: preaching some prohibitions and avoiding others.** It is common in evangelical preaching to cite verse 13 (same-sex intercourse) while passing over the equally severe sanctions for adultery (v. 10), incest (vv. 11–12), and

other violations. This selective handling produces a distorted impression: that the passage is primarily about one issue rather than about a comprehensive account of sexual and cultic order. The text treats all these violations together as violations of the same underlying covenant structure. Preach the whole pattern, not a selected verse.

- **Collapsing the passage into mere moralizing.** The Clowney anti-moralism warning applies here: a sermon on Leviticus 20 that is simply “don’t do these things or God will be angry” has missed the gospel motivation entirely. The governing rationale is not *threat* but *identity*: “you shall be holy to me... that you should be mine.” The motivation for covenant holiness is the indicative of election and possession. Preach the imperative from the indicative, not in isolation from it.
- **Assuming the Molech section is historically irrelevant.** The idol-diagnostic force of the Molech prohibition is easily lost if the preacher treats it as nothing more than ancient-Near-Eastern background material. The pattern — giving what is most precious (children; the next generation) to a consuming false ultimate — is not historically contained. Press the diagnostic question: What is consuming your children’s formation? What are your household’s functional Molechs?
- **Mishandling the relationship between Old Testament law and the new covenant.** Preachers will face two predictable errors in both their own exposition and congregational response: (a) “This doesn’t apply to us because we’re under grace, not law” — which misunderstands the Reformed doctrine of the law’s continuing moral force; and (b) “These penalties should be enforced by civil government today” — which misunderstands the theocratic specificity of Israel’s civil code. Neither antinomianism nor theonomy does justice to the text. Explain clearly: the moral substance is perpetually binding; the civil mechanism has been reconfigured; the general equity of the penalties (these violations are gravely serious before God) remains instructive.
- **Preaching the sexual ethics negatively without a positive vision.** Application 5 above points to this: a sermon that only catalogues prohibited acts without articulating *why* sexual order is beautiful — because it images the covenant faithfulness of God — leaves the congregation with prohibition but no motivation. The positive vision must be present: marriage as covenant, fidelity as Gospel-imaging, sexual order as creaturely participation in the faithfulness of God. The prohibition makes sense only within that positive framework.