



Study Guide: Leviticus – Chapter 20

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This study guide provides an educational overview of Leviticus Chapter 20 using a verse-by-verse structure, theological context, and application-oriented insights grounded in Scripture.

Introduction

Leviticus Chapter 20 serves as a critical section within the Holiness Code, emphasizing the serious consequences of violating God’s commandments, particularly those concerning moral purity and covenant faithfulness. This chapter contributes to the book’s flow by reinforcing the standards God expects from His people and outlining the penalties for various transgressions. Readers should watch for the connection between holiness, justice, and the preservation of the community’s sanctity as God’s chosen people.

Context

Leviticus 20 is situated within the broader Holiness Code (chapters 17–26), which provides detailed laws for Israel’s conduct to maintain covenant purity. The immediate literary context follows instructions on sacrificial laws and precedes further regulations on holiness. The chapter is addressed to the entire Israelite community, with God speaking through Moses as the mediator. Historically, these laws were given during Israel’s wilderness period, establishing a distinct identity separate from surrounding nations. The covenant framework emphasizes obedience to God’s statutes as essential for communal and individual well-being.

Outline

Leviticus 20 can be divided into three main movements. The first section (verses 1–5) deals with prohibitions against child sacrifice and idolatry, highlighting the severity of these offenses. The second section (verses 6–21) outlines various sexual prohibitions, including incest, adultery, and other forbidden relationships, with corresponding punishments. The final section (verses 22–27) reiterates the call to holiness and the necessity of separating Israel from the practices of other nations, emphasizing the role of the priests in maintaining purity.



Verse-by-Verse Study

Verses 1-5: These verses prohibit the sacrifice of children to Molech, a detestable practice among surrounding peoples. God commands that anyone who participates in this sin must be put to death by stoning, underscoring the gravity of idolatry and the defilement it brings to the community. The passage also warns that such sin defiles the land and invites divine judgment.

Verses 6-8: Here, the focus shifts to the importance of fearing God and keeping His commandments. The passage highlights the blessing of being set apart as holy and the consequences of turning away from God, including being cut off from the people. The priests are reminded of their role in upholding holiness and teaching the people.

Verses 9-16: This section lists specific sexual sins, including incestuous relationships and adultery. The text prescribes death as the penalty for these violations, reflecting the seriousness of maintaining purity within the community. The passage also addresses the defilement caused by these acts and the need for the land to be cleansed.

Verses 17-21: The prohibitions continue with additional forbidden sexual relationships, such as a man lying with his aunt or daughter-in-law. The chapter stresses that these acts are detestable and that those who commit them must be cut off from the people, reinforcing the theme of separation from sin.

Verses 22-27: The concluding verses reiterate the call for Israel to observe God's statutes and maintain holiness. The people are warned not to follow the customs of the nations around them, and the priests are charged with the responsibility to distinguish between the holy and the common. The chapter closes by emphasizing that holiness is essential for the community's identity and relationship with God.

Key Themes

One key theme is the absolute holiness required of God's people, which demands separation from idolatry and immoral practices. The chapter underscores the seriousness of covenant violations, especially those involving child sacrifice and sexual sins, linking these to communal defilement and divine judgment. Another theme is the role of the priesthood in upholding and teaching holiness, serving as mediators between God and Israel. The text also highlights the connection between individual behavior and the land's sanctity, illustrating how sin affects the entire community.



Cross-References

Deuteronomy 12:31 provides background on the prohibition of child sacrifice, clarifying why such practices are abhorrent to God. Leviticus 18 parallels chapter 20 by detailing forbidden sexual relationships, helping to deepen understanding of the moral framework. Ezekiel 22:26–31 discusses the consequences of priestly failure to uphold holiness, reinforcing the responsibility highlighted in Leviticus 20. Hebrews 12:14 echoes the call to holiness as essential for seeing God, connecting Old Testament law with New Testament faith. Finally, Romans 1:24–32 illustrates the destructive outcomes of turning away from God’s standards, providing a New Testament perspective on the chapter’s warnings.

Application

Modern discipleship can draw from Leviticus 20 the importance of pursuing holiness in everyday life, recognizing that God’s standards are not arbitrary but aimed at preserving life and community well-being. Believers are called to reject idolatry in all forms, including modern equivalents that compete with God’s authority. The chapter challenges Christians to consider how their actions impact not only themselves but also their communities and spiritual environments. Additionally, the role of spiritual leaders as guardians of truth and holiness remains vital today, encouraging accountability and teaching within the church. Finally, the call to be distinct from worldly practices invites believers to live counterculturally, embodying God’s holiness in a fallen world.

Summary

Leviticus 20 reinforces the covenantal call to holiness by detailing prohibitions against idolatry and sexual immorality, prescribing severe penalties to maintain the community’s purity. The chapter emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual behavior, communal sanctity, and divine presence, with priests playing a crucial role in upholding these standards. Through its clear commands and consequences, the chapter highlights the seriousness of covenant faithfulness and the necessity of living distinctively as God’s holy people.