

Leviticus 18:6-18

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God outlines a list of incestuous sexual sins and forbids His people to engage in them as was common in the lands of Egypt and Canaan. The phrase “uncover one’s nakedness” means to engage in sexual intimacy with a person (including but not limited to intercourse). Uncovering the nakedness of one’s spouse within the covenant of marriage produces oneness. However, having forbidden sexual relations is usually in order to exploit another for personal sexual gratification, and is forbidden. Here it is forbidden particularly within families.

God forbids incestuous sexual relations by saying, *None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD.* The phrase *uncover nakedness* refers to sexual intimacy, including but not limited to sexual intercourse. This is clear from context. As an example, in Leviticus 18:18 God commands men not to *marry a wife’s sister* and describes this as *uncovering her nakedness*.

One of the most intricate biological systems God created is the way genes are passed from parent to child through mitochondrial DNA and the Y chromosome. Many genetic defects occur when humans reproduce with *blood relatives*. The Egyptians and the Canaanites both practiced incest. In 2010, a DNA study on King Tutankhamen, whose mummified body exhibited several interesting defects, proved that he was the product of incest between Pharaoh Akhenaten and one of his *blood sisters*.

God continues to outline the nature of incest, apparently to eliminate any confusion, and close “loopholes” saying, *you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, that is, the nakedness of your mother. She is your mother; you are not to uncover her nakedness.* This makes clear that sexual intimacy including intercourse between *mother* and son was prohibited. This was apparently common practice in Egypt and Canaan. Since God made a husband and a *wife* “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) if someone has sexual relations with his *mother* or stepmother, it is as if he has had forbidden relations with his *father* as well. His *mother* and his *father* are one.

God adds that *you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness.* Here God adds *your father’s wife*, which could include a stepmother. It was common for men to have multiple wives during this era. But God prohibits sexual intercourse between any *wife* of a *father* and any of his *sons*. King David’s *son* Absalom made a public show of having sexual engagement with his *father’s* concubines in order to publicly make himself odious to his father, whom he sought to dethrone (2 Samuel 16:21-22). This indicates that this prohibition was largely adopted within Israel. The rationale given for avoiding sexual intercourse with a stepmother is that *it is your father’s nakedness*. When a man becomes one with a stepmother, he becomes sexually one with

his father (1 Corinthians 6:15-16). Neither is appropriate. Oneness is to be exclusive between husband and *wife*.

God continues to close loopholes in incestuous sexual relations by prohibiting the uncovering of *the nakedness of your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born outside, their nakedness you shall not uncover*. This outlaws sexual intimacy including intercourse between siblings. Whether half siblings or full siblings. God closes the loophole of saying, "She isn't my full *sister*, so I can do it" as well as a loophole of "she was born elsewhere, so it is not forbidden." As discussed at length in the commentary on Leviticus 18:5, Paul used that passage to illustrate what does not work; without a heart-change the human heart finds ways to rationalize behavior (there are always more loopholes) (Romans 10:5). Paul shows the need for a heart change based on faith in order to achieve real righteousness (Romans 10:6-13).

God continues, and pronounces, *the nakedness of your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter, their nakedness you shall not uncover; for their nakedness is yours*. Here God prohibits sexual intimacy between grandfather and granddaughter. The phrase *their nakedness is yours* might indicate that in exploiting one's grandchildren, you are actually exploiting yourself, for they come from your own body. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee immorality (sexual immorality). Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral (sexually immoral) man sins against his own body." Avoiding sexual immorality is a means to avoid self-induced destruction.

God adds: *The nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, born to your father, she is your sister, you shall not uncover her nakedness*. This is similar to verse 9, but adds *father's wife's daughter* in addition to verse 9's prohibition of sexual intercourse with your *father's daughter* or your *mother's daughter*. One's *father's wife's daughter* might not be your *mother's daughter*. Again, it seems there are loopholes being closed, and clarity about the intent of the general prohibition of verse 6 against sexual intercourse against *any blood relative*. God appears to be defining *blood relative* based on family connections, and not limiting it to direct bloodlines. This would protect the integrity of individual marriages, as well as creating a culture of protection rather than exploitation for women and children.

David's *son* Ammon raped his *sister* Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. The Sadducees interpreted Tamar to be his stepsister because in 2 Samuel 13:13, Tamar tells Ammon, "Now therefore, please speak to the king (David), for he will not withhold me from you." They assumed that she would not have said this if she were his *blood sister* (Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 18:11). But as was just illustrated, many of these instructions appear to be based on family connections and were not limited to *blood relatives*. Perhaps Tamar was doing what she could in the moment to stop Ammon from raping her. We know that she saw the act as a disgraceful thing which should not be done in Israel (2 Samuel 13:12). Again, this indicates that these prohibitions were adopted to a substantial degree in Israel by the time of David's reign, which would have distinguished Israel from the practices

within Canaan. So at least to some degree, Israel did its job, to be a priestly nation showing a better way to the other nations (Exodus 19:6).

It is noteworthy to point out that Abraham's wife Sarah was also his half-sister, whom he married 500 years prior to these laws being given. Therefore, in addition to countering the rampant sexual practices in Egypt and Canaan, God is also introducing a new barrier. This could be in recognition of the degrading of the human gene pool after the human race started anew from three couples after Noah's flood, in addition to other considerations.

God forbids sexual intimacy with one's *aunt* by saying *you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's blood relative*. This was to be the case on the *mother's* side of the family, as well as the *father's*; as God adds *You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's blood relative*. Once again, the passage is founded on the Biblical principle that a husband and wife are one (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:32). God says, *you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother*. How does one *uncover the nakedness of your father's brother*? By becoming sexually intimate with *his wife*, *she is his aunt*, and they are one flesh. Again, God appears to be honoring the sanctity of the familial ties and marital oneness rather than mere genetic relationships.

God, knowing how humans will seek to justify their evil desires, continues to close loopholes by saying, *you shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness*. Uncovering *the nakedness of your daughter-in-law* would essentially be uncovering your own *son's nakedness*. This forbids a *father* from engaging in sexual intercourse with his *daughter-in-law*, which would dishonor and fracture relationship with the *father's son*. Each family unit is to be protected, and honored.

God also forbids one to *uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness*. This forbids sexual intercourse among brothers and their wives. Again, the oneness of each family unit is to be honored and held as sacred. This would create a culture of honor and protection for women and children, rather than a culture of exploitation, as was common in Egypt (where they had been) and Canaan (where they were going) (Leviticus 18:3).

God adds a prohibition for a man to take as *wife* a *mother* and *daughter*, saying, *You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter*. During this era, it was common for men to take multiple wives, which was still allowed. But a man was not to take a *mother/daughter* combination. Similarly, God adds, *nor shall you take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter, to uncover her nakedness; they are blood relatives*. In addition to prohibiting a man from marrying a *mother/daughter* pair, men were prohibited from taking a *mother/granddaughter* pair. The first reason given is because *they are blood relatives*, and this entire section is an explanation of the general prohibition of verse six, to prevent sexual intimacy (including but not limited to intercourse) among *blood relatives*.

God says of a man marrying a *woman and her daughter*, or a *woman* and her granddaughter, *It is lewdness*. The word translated *lewdness* can also be translated “wickedness.” It also appears in the next chapter, where it is prohibited to turn one’s *daughter* into a prostitute, in order to profiteer from her exploitation (Leviticus 19:29). By creating these boundaries, God seems to be elevating women, and making them something to care for and protect, rather than exploit.

There is also a practical reason to avoid marriage between close *relatives*. God says, *You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness*. This calls to mind the *sisters* Rachel and Leah whom the patriarch Jacob married due to Laban (Rachel and Leah’s *father*) wishing the older *sister* to *marry* first. In the story of Rachel and Leah we indeed see rivalry, which was intensified by Rachel being barren for a time. These guidelines also appear to be constructed in order to advance social harmony among family members, by avoiding natural rivalries among *sisters*. This could also apply to the previous prohibition of marriage between a man and a *mother/daughter* combination.

Biblical Text

⁶ ‘None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD. ⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, that is, the nakedness of your mother. She is your mother; you are not to uncover her nakedness. ⁸ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness. ⁹ The nakedness of your sister, *either* your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether born at home or born outside, their nakedness you shall not uncover. ¹⁰ The nakedness of your son’s daughter or your daughter’s daughter, their nakedness you shall not uncover; for their nakedness is yours. ¹¹ The nakedness of your father’s wife’s daughter, born to your father, she is your sister, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ¹² You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s sister; she is your father’s blood relative. ¹³ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister, for she is your mother’s blood relative. ¹⁴ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother; you shall not approach his wife, she is your aunt. ¹⁵ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son’s wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ¹⁶ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is your brother’s nakedness. ¹⁷ You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, nor shall you take her son’s daughter or her daughter’s daughter, to uncover her nakedness; they are blood relatives. It is lewdness. ¹⁸ You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness.