



Lev. 19:1-2, 15-18

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And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. . . . ¹⁵“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in

righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord. ¹⁷ “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

I’ve been a pastor for *exactly* 486 weeks. That’s 486 Sunday sermons that I have delivered in my ministry, minus a few absences. And that’s 486 times that I have *not* preached from the book of Leviticus. I looked through my sermon file when this text came up, because I thought to myself, “I don’t think I’ve ever preached from the book of Leviticus.” I was right. It’s a book that only comes up twice in the three-year lectionary reading schedule that I use, both times it’s the same text—it’s *this* text. The other times it came up during these past 9 years, I guess I opted to preach on one of the other readings.

That’s probably not a surprise to you. When you read through the book of Leviticus, it’s full of these unrelatable and *crazy* sounding rules. Listen to some of the rules included in *just this very* chapter:

“You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind.” And, **“You shall not. . . wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.”** (Leviticus 19:19) Ok. How about this one, **“You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.”** (Leviticus 19:27) Or, **“You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves.”** (Leviticus 19:28) No tattoos!

Obviously, none of this is very familiar to us. That’s largely because it was spoken to a *specific* people at a *specific* time—and that people is not us and that time is not today. The book of Leviticus describes a way of life and a way of worship for the *Old Testament* people of *Israel*, the people who were to be preparing for the Messiah’s arrival. And so, if we spend time reading the book of Leviticus, we tend to read it as interesting, historical reference material, rather than as guidelines for our lives today.

But we are familiar with *this* verse: **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”** That’s actually the theme for the entire book of Leviticus. The word “holy” is used some 90 times in this book. And all of the laws, all of the statutes, all of the regulations and rituals in this book are to remind God’s people that they had been set apart from the world. That’s what “holy” means, “set apart.” They were to be *holy* people because they were *God’s* people.

He had delivered them from slavery in the land of Egypt. On the way to the promised land, they paused at Mount Sinai where God made His covenant with them. The glory of the Lord came down upon the mountaintop and the Lord called Moses up. He instructed Moses to tell the people that they were His treasured possession in *all* the world. They were set apart. They were a *holy* nation. And then God said, **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** (Exodus 20:2) And what followed were 10 commands, which defined for them what life as God’s people was to look like.

But when the people saw the lightning and heard the thunder and felt the mountain shake, they were terrified. They wanted nothing to do with a *holy* God, because they knew *they* were *not* holy. They were far from it, and they would prove that again and again and again in the years that followed.

And yet the Lord continued on with them, and as the book of Exodus goes on, the Lord spelled out in greater detail what He *expected* of His people. There are instructions for how they were to conduct their lives and instructions for how they were to worship Him, and *specific* instructions for how they were to build a tabernacle, a tent of meeting where He would come down and dwell in the midst of His people.

And the book of Exodus ends with the glory of the Lord filling that tabernacle right there in the sight of all the people, the glory of the Lord *dwelling among them*... but how could that be? How could these people, these *sinful* people, have communion with the LORD God, with a *holy* God like that? How could they ever possibly meet *all* of His demands of holiness? How could they *be* holy?

And immediately following the book of Exodus, the book of Leviticus answers those questions by explaining the sacrifices and the rituals and the worship and the daily life that's required for those in a right relationship with God. In effect, in this book, God is saying, "*This* is how you are to be set apart from the nations—a holy nation. *This* is how you are to be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy."

And so, we get all these details, we read all these "you shalls" and "you shall nots". And yes, some of those laws and some of those rules seem so arbitrary, sound so crazy and strange to us. Like what kind of cloth your clothes can be made of and how to trim your sideburns. Even the right way to eat a steak. But is *any* of that really what makes a person *holy*?

Or here, in our text, we have some more requirements, and these ones don't sound strange or arbitrary at all, in fact, I think just about anyone would agree that this is good and enduring advice. Here, we're told how the Old Testament people of Israel were to care for and provide for the poor and needy, how they were to act justly in court, how they needed to overcome their hatred and never bear a grudge. And it's all summarized by the last words, "***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***" But as sensible and understandable as this is, is *that* what makes a person holy? Is *this* the way to achieve holiness?

If so, this text, just like the Lord Himself, is *terrifying*. Because this particular statute I *cannot* say applies *only* to a specific people at a specific time. It applies to me too. And this command to love my neighbor as myself, it *always* accuses me. Because it shows me that by my nature and by my deeds, I am *not* holy.

Jesus used these words a lot in His teaching. For example, more than once, Jesus told people that the command to "***love your neighbor as yourself***" is one of the two most important commandments, along with the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. "***On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets,***" Jesus said. (Matthew 22:40) "***There is no other commandment greater than these.***" (Mark 12:31)

And in a conversation with a lawyer, who wanted to know what he had to *do* to inherit eternal life, the answer was, "Keep these two commandments." "***And who is my neighbor?***" the Lawyer asked, a little

anxiously, I imagine. (Luke 10:29) And Jesus replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan. And you remember how He ended *that* story: ***“You go, and do likewise,”*** Jesus told him. (Luke 10:37)

The Apostle Paul picks up Jesus’ teaching later on. He writes, ***“The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*** (Romans 13:9) And a little earlier on in Romans, he wrote, ***“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink... do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*** (Rom. 12:20-21)

So, it is obvious that Jesus and His apostles teach us that *love* is to be the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian life—not *just* the life of the Old Testament people of Israel—but my life, and your life. *Our* life is to be a life of love. People *should* be able to tell that we are Christians by our love for our neighbors.

And so, I’m always a little startled to realize just how easy it is for me to put excuses between myself and my neighbor so that Jesus’ command to love my neighbor doesn’t interfere too much with the kind of life that I would prefer to live.

For example, I have my own fears and my own desires and my own needs. And I have no problem extending myself for someone else—to a degree—but there is a point where my own self-interest kicks in. And I start worrying about myself and *my* own needs and *my* own safety. The plans that I’ve already made that “helping” might interfere with. “If I do this for them, how am I going to get taken care of? *Am I* going to be taken care of?” And I start treating this command as though God had really just said, “You shall love your neighbor as long as it is convenient for you.” And I think *you* do that too.

So, *is this* what makes a person holy? Following this command? And if it is, how can *we ever* have communion with a perfect, holy God?

What does it *mean* that God is “holy”? What does God’s “holiness” entail? Well, just look at our text; we have examples here of what that holiness of God looks like. First of all, it means being “just.” Not being partial, not slandering, judging righteously—being “just.” And that *is* what *God* is, just like Moses said, ***“All His ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He.”*** (Deuteronomy 32:4) That God is holy also means that God is “loving”—not hating, not taking vengeance, not bearing grudges—but loving. That God is holy means that He is perfectly just and perfectly loving. In fact, I think if we looked at everything God reveals about Himself in Scripture, we could summarize it like this: The God of the Bible is both truly just and truly loving.

Now people that don’t understand the Bible tend to pit these two characteristics against one another. They say things that differentiate between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of the New Testament.” They see the “God of the Old Testament” as being all about justice, filled with wrath and judgment. And they see the “God of the New Testament” as being all about love, filled with compassion and acceptance. And they say things like, “I prefer the God of the New Testament.” And this is absolutely—by the way—false teaching.

The God of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments alike, is *always* and *at the same time* both just

and loving. And the central issue of the whole Bible is about how these characteristics of God relate to one another. The “God of the New Testament” has not ceased to be a *just* God. And the “God of the Old Testament” was already and always a *loving* God. One has not replaced the other.

Instead, the justice and the love of God are reconciled at the cross. Looking to the cross, we see there the *ultimate expression* of God’s simultaneous justice and love. Because in the death of Jesus Christ for our sin, the *love* of God has fulfilled the *justice* of God by taking the punishment for sin upon Himself, the punishment that His own divine justice required. And so, at the cross the true holiness of God is revealed.

So, God tells His people, ***“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”*** Here’s how that went for the people of Israel, and here is how it works for you and me. The Lord did not keep His holiness to Himself. He didn’t use it to distance Himself from His people. He came down to His tabernacle to *share* His holiness with them. They didn’t make themselves holy. They *couldn’t* make themselves holy. God made them holy.

And the holy God, the just and loving God, did not stop there. He sent His Son, the Holy One, to tabernacle among us, to share with us His perfect holiness. Jesus kept the law of God perfectly. He loved His heavenly Father with all His heart and with all His soul and with all His strength, and He *truly* loved you His neighbor as Himself. He loved you to even the point of death on the cross. And on that cross, Jesus not only *displayed* the holiness of God, He *distributed* the holiness of God. He shared His perfect holiness with you. He makes you holy.

In Holy Baptism, He claimed you as His own and made you holy. As you read and hear and study His Holy Word, He makes you holy. As you partake once again today of this Holy Communion, the very body and blood of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, He makes you holy.

And today, God calls on you, His holy people, to be holy just as *He* is holy. And He gives you some examples of what that looks like. And what it looks like is to be one who is both just and compassionate, one who judges rightly by both condemning sin and loving his neighbor.

In other words, God calls on us to be people of the cross. He calls on us to be honest and truthful and fair in condemning sin, but to do so by speaking in love and out of a desire to *rescue* our erring neighbor. And this is so very important. Because while your *own* salvation might not be at stake in this command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” you better believe that your neighbor’s salvation might be. And what they need most of all is a neighbor who will love them the way that God does.

And who better to do that than you? You have been set apart for just such a purpose! You have been made holy just as God is holy, so that you can love your neighbor just as God loved you. May God help us to do so, in Jesus’ saving name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.