

Be Holy for I AM Holy Series

Practical Holiness

Leviticus 19:1-18

Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus

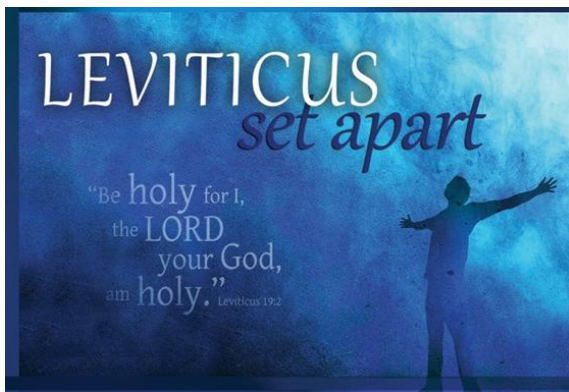
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXTS: Leviticus 19:1-18

We continue this morning in our series on the Book of Leviticus: to be set apart for God. The central calling in this third book of the Bible is the Lord's speaking, repeating eight times: "You



shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy." In Genesis, the Lord begins with the creation of humanity in His image and His likeness. In the Book of Exodus, He redeems us as a people and calls us His firstborn son. So, when we reach Leviticus, we come to the place where God speaks to us as our heavenly Father. There is no movement of time; there is no movement of geography in the Book of Leviticus. It is just an extended conversation with the living God,

and the message that God gives is instructions for us to live in a way that reflects His own character and holiness. Leviticus 19 begins with a great scene. At the beginning of Leviticus, the Lord spoke to Moses from the tent of meeting, and now, in Leviticus 19, He speaks to the entire assembly of the people. This is a large gathering of 600,000 families gathered around, and they are addressed now by God in a scene that recalls Mount Sinai. As God speaks, He speaks with a summons for holiness, a call to be holy for He is holy, the central message of this brief portion of God's Word. This call to imitate God gives us a cardinal principle, a fundamental tenet, a 'due north,' if you will, of Scripture. It is the motive and goal of ethics, or righteous living, in the Bible, and the relationship between laws and instructions in how we are to live is unique in this way. A historian of comparative legal systems in Europe was asked to summarize the differences in different national cultures in their approach to law and ethics. He said: "It's very simple:

- in Germany, everything is prohibited, except that which is permitted;
- in France, everything is permitted, except that which is prohibited;
- in Russia, everything is prohibited, including that which is permitted;
- and in Italy, everything is permitted, including that which is prohibited."

The relationship between how we are to live in the Bible flows out of a different center. It flows

out of a conscious, intentional imitation of the living God. Aristotle, many centuries ago, spoke of ethics, or right living, as the golden mean: all things in moderation. Some American pragmatists advocate the principle of operating for the greatest good of the greatest number of people. Many postmodern people today live their lives with the often unspoken assumption “do no harm.” That is really a very low view of living, isn’t it? Just do no harm: don’t harm myself or my neighbor, and then I can do whatever I want. In the Bible, however, there is a very different living center. It is not a principle; it is not an idea. It is a conscious, intentional imitation of following after, a reflecting of, another person, and that Person is the Lord God Almighty. God acts in Scripture so we see His behavior. God speaks in Scripture. The living God is not the strong, silent type. He speaks and reveals His will to us, and now in Leviticus 19, He tells us explicitly that we are to live in such a way that reflects His character and likeness. This is the fulfillment of His intention in the Garden of Eden: “Be holy for I am holy.” This is a call to reflect God’s holiness. You and I are sometimes inclined to think of holiness as just personal piety, our prayer life, or maybe religious practices or observances, and yet, what we see in Leviticus 19 is that reflecting the character of God has a lot to do with our life in this world. Most of our life in this world is not spent in the forest. Most of our life in this world is not spent in isolation, on a reflective nature walk. Most of our life in this world is spent in community with other people, inside the walls of our homes, our dorm rooms, our cubicles at work. Most of our life in this world is spent in deliberate, intentional interaction with other people. It was God’s intention from the beginning that we live in such a way that reflects the character and will of Almighty God. There is no motivational center like this in ancient or modern times. It is so much higher than “do no harm.” What a low view of humanity that really is.

Leviticus 19 flows out of this living center of imitating God, and it flows out in very concrete terms. This chapter is sometimes described as practical holiness. This chapter unfolds as a commentary on the Ten Commandments in many ways, and we will see this as we go through it. I want you to notice as we move through Leviticus 19 this morning that all of the commands that God gives are rooted and grounded in the statement that He is the Lord. Why do we act the way we do? We act this way because of who the Lord is. Let’s look at this together. As we have noted, the Lord reminds eight times in this passage: “I am the Lord.” When you know the Lord, His ways, His actions, His words, you are equipped to think and live and operate in relationship with other people in a way that reflects God and not in a way that is dangerous. Have you ever been around someone that you think early on: “You are dangerous. I don’t feel that I can share anything important to me with you, because you might just go and post it online.” Sometimes you are in a relationship with someone that you work for or with and you think: “You are dangerous. You take credit for the work that I do, and you don’t look out for me.” God’s people are to represent the safety of being close to our great heavenly Father. Let’s look at this together.

“Be holy for I am holy,” in Leviticus 19:2 begins to unfold in the very concrete realities of interpersonal relationships. In Leviticus 19:3, the Lord says:

“Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep My Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.”

This is the ESV translation. The NIV says we should *respect* them. The word here is more than respect; the word is literally to *fear*. There is a right fear of your parents because they are placed in a position of authority over you. God creates us in relationship with others, and this pattern, this gift of life, teaches us from our youngest days that we exist in relationship of authority, not only to our parents, but to God, our heavenly Father. This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments, to revere your mother and father. The Lord says: “You shall keep My Sabbaths,” the fourth command. God instructs us to keep the Sabbath in conscious imitation of Him. The Ten Commandments are spoken twice in Scripture: once in Exodus 20; again in Deuteronomy 5. In Exodus 20:8-11, we see that the reason for keeping the Sabbath is in conscious imitation of God, who designs the Sabbath for our rest:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day.”

God initiates this pattern of six days of working and then a day for rest and worship. In Deuteronomy, the motivation for the keeping the Sabbath is not God's action of creation as in Genesis, but for God's action of redemption in Exodus. In Deuteronomy 5, the Lord said they should keep the Sabbath day because they had worked seven days a week, 365 days a year, for 400 years, and then God rescued them, and He gave them a day off. Some of you know what it is like to not have a day off, and yet it is God's intention and design that He gives us this as a gift. Notice that these commandments are to be kept because we live in imitation and reflection of the Lord. We look at Leviticus 19:4, and the Lord says:

“Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal.”

Again, the motivation is: “I am the Lord your God.” We don't turn to idols. The Hebrew expression here is *to turn or lift up our face*. The first commandment is literally: “You shall have no other gods before My face.” Our faces are to be directed toward the Lord because He is living. We are not to turn our faces to anything else or anyone else, to give our heart's affection to. That belongs rightly to the Lord. Whatever you turn your face to, you begin to worship. Not only do you begin to worship, but you begin to imitate it. Sometimes for people this is a sports team; sometimes it is a band that they love, and they are so locked in that they begin to change and alter their appearance. They are locked in. Sometimes you see this with sports teams. People color their faces and their faces are changed. Sometimes you see this with musicians, and people alter their appearance, because they are so identifying with it, their faces are turned there. The Lord says our faces should be directed towards Him, because: “I am the

Lord.” The Lord says in Isaiah 40:18:

“To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare Him to?”

He is the living God. Nothing we can ever make is a fitting representation of the living God. He has made us.

In Leviticus 19:5, the Lord then describes that we are to partake of holy things in the right way:

“When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted.”

These are the fellowship offerings, and the Lord says to offer them in such a way that you may be accepted. He goes on to describe that the fellowship offerings brought by the offeror and his or her family are to be consumed. You cannot hoard holy things. You cannot offer to God a fellowship offering and then keep that in your storage room. There are no deep freezers in heaven; there is no provision for serving God that I am going to store up for a later time. God's intention, His design, is to keep us in a state of unbroken fellowship. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray for our ‘daily’ bread. We don't ask for a week's portion, or a month's portion, or a year's. He teaches us to ask for daily bread because He knows us better than we know ourselves and that living in daily, conscious dependence on God is the path of life. God's design is for relationship with Him and one another, and these offerings are not the offerings that are used for atonement. These are the fellowship offerings that provide the basis for the meals of communion, and the Lord says that these must be eaten and fully consumed in a timely way.

At the beginning of Leviticus 19:9, the Lord changes the topic to explicit actions that we make in relationship to those in need around us. He says:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.”

The Lord says not to squeeze your profits at the expense of the poor. The first job that I ever had was as a corn detasseler. It was a miserable job, and I remember being paid a robust hourly wage of \$1.85. The day began clothed in a trash bag because the corn was covered dew. It was cold and wet in the morning. There were around 15 young men and women that got on top a tractor, and we drove through the cornfields and plucked tassels off the corn. In the first few hours of the morning, we got wet. It was cold, it was miserable, and the only break was coming to the edge of the field when there were about 30 seconds when the farmer had to turn the tractor around, and then we'd start going the other direction. By about noon, the dew was burned off, and it became unbearably hot. So, we were frozen the morning and burned up in the afternoon. We then went home in the evening covered with corn dust, slices on our hands, and counting those robust \$1.85 wages. But I have this very vivid picture in my mind of the joy

of reaching the edge of the field. God tells people not to harvest all the way to the edge, to leave that for those around you in need. Not only do not harvest to the edge, but the Lord says not to gather the gleanings after your harvest. In other words, when you pass through the fields and gather the sheaves, the Lord's instructions are to leave what falls as you harvest. Don't squeeze every cent out of your work. Leave part of it for those around you in need. This is God's way, and it is very different from how we think in our fallenness. He repeats this, because He knows we need it. He says in Leviticus 19:10:

"You shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God."

In other words, as you go through the vineyard, the same principle applies: you shall not cut every single cluster of grapes from the vine, and even as the grapes are being harvested, and some of them fall, the Lord says these are to be left for the poor and the sojourner. The grounding of this command is an imitation of the Lord: ". . .because I am the Lord your God." The motivation for living in this way flows out of Scripture. Exodus 22:21 says:

"You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

Psalm 68:5-6 says:

"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home; He leads out the prisoners to prosperity."

This is a conscious imitation of the Lord.

In Leviticus 19:11, we are told that in all our dealings with one another as peers:

"You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another."

Why? Because God is a God of truth. Each of the terms used here is slightly different. The first word picks up the language exactly of the eighth commandment: *"You shall not steal."* The next phrase, *you shall not deal falsely*, is a term in Hebrew used to express the specific desire to keep something that you have in your possession unlawfully. It is a little different. Robbing someone is when you have something that I desire and I take it from you, or I cheat you out of. This next term is a desire to deny the truth that what I have really belongs to you. The last term is again slightly different. It is a desire to seek to take something that rightly belongs to someone else, and the Lord says you shall not deal in these ways with those around you.

In Leviticus 19:12, reflecting the third commandment, He says:

"You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."

Notice again that this command is grounded by *I am the Lord*.

The living God is calling us to act in a way that reflects Him. What is your motivational center of gravity this morning? Is your motivational center of gravity comfort, prosperity, achievement, a better future for my children than you enjoyed? These are all good things, but they are not ultimate things. The center of gravity to guide your life and mine this morning is to think and act in such a way that reflects God. There is nothing like this in antiquity or today. The Lord says in Leviticus 19:13:

“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.”

It is interesting how when work, we really want our paycheck delivered on time. The Scripture knows that this is in our hearts. We are eager to receive, and sometimes begrudgingly give. Yet God says: “That is not how I operate.” The expression is so vivid. It almost personifies the wages or the salary, and the Lord says in very concrete terms that the money that you owe someone should not stay at your house overnight. This was a very literal translation: “What you owe someone, don't let it stay under your roof. Give it away. Treat those around you fairly.” Those who know the Bible well will recognize here very clear language that comes from Exodus. In Exodus 1, God's people were oppressed and mistreated. They did not receive their wages for 400 years, and interpreters over the centuries understood the plundering of the Egyptians as compensation for wages that had been withheld for 400 years.

In Leviticus 19:14, the Lord continues. He says:

“You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.”

This is unique in antiquity, and modern societies have just barely caught up with God on this point. This is the first law that we have in the world that addresses the needs of the disabled, the handicapped in society. The sin that is prohibited here is one that is calculated to injure. It is one that is calculated to do harm in precisely a way that could not be noticed. The Lord says you shall not curse the deaf, you shall not speak words that the deaf cannot hear. You shall not place an object that would cause a blind person to stumble. Then He says that you should fear the Lord your God: I am the Lord. The Lord is the defender of the weak, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. God says in Leviticus 19:15:

“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.”

The Lord knows that this can happen in one of two great ways. He knows that we can show favoritism to the left and to the right. You can be partial to the poor and incline the scale of

justice toward those in need wrongly, and you can also incline the scale of justice wrongly towards the wealthy. These are the sins, if you will, of the left and of the right. The Lord says in righteousness you will judge your neighbor. He says in Leviticus 19:16:

“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.”

This has been interpreted two ways. In the history of interpretation, this last phrase, some readers read as: “You should not exploit your neighbor.” The Hebrew literally says: “You shall not stand upon the blood of your neighbor.” Some readers have seen this to mean you should not exploit those around you. In other words, you should not build an empire for yourself exploited on the blood of other people. Others have seen this as a reference to you should not stand by against the blood of your neighbor. In other words, you should not refrain yourself from proactively responding to those in need around you.

The last two verses of this great section of the Scripture take us beyond our observable behavior into the inner motivation of the heart. The Lord knows our heart. In Leviticus 19:17, he says:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.”

God commands a very different posture. The ESV says: “. . . but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor.” The expression behind this is that you should rebuke your neighbor openly. Sometimes we get upset with the people around us, and sometimes we get upset with them for good reasons. The Lord is telling us to do something here that requires a heart of obedience: to speak frankly and openly with your brother in the way that he or she has upset you. This requires courage and obedience. If you don't do this, then your anger simmers inside and starts to rot you out from the inside. The Lord says you shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall speak openly, shall rebuke him openly, directly. Matthew 18 tells us to do this first one on one, and if your brother or sister will not listen to you, then go with another, and then with the community. The Lord is teaching us something very profound here, and that is to address the injury and not let it simmer. The Lord says lest you incur, or literally bear sin, on account of him. You know this from your own experience when you are upset, and you just hold it in and you don't explain it. I'm not saying to go on a public tirade, but you should address it with the person who has upset you. That is so healthy and godly. The Lord has this pattern with us in Isaiah 1 where He says: “Your sins have separated you from Me; and come let us reason together.” Let us bring it out into the open so that it can be resolved. Proverbs 9:8 says:

“Reprove a wise man and he will love you.”

When you share with a spouse what is really upsetting you, it makes your marriage stronger,

not weaker. When you share with a colleague, or a fellow student, or someone you are working on a group project with, what is really upsetting you, it makes the group stronger not weaker.

The Lord knows what happens to us if we do not obey His wisdom here. In Leviticus 19:18, the Lord tells us:

“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.”

He knows that if we do not address what is upsetting us, then that anger will simmer and then boil, and then translate into action. It doesn't go away. It translates into actions, so the Lord watches out, and He says you shall not take vengeance. If you don't address what is upsetting you with a person around you in a godly way, then you will take either vengeance, judgment in your own hands, or you will bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, and this is a toxic thing in the soul. It is toxic to act out of your hurt feelings, to take vengeance. Another way of taking vengeance is external, whereas bearing a grudge is internal. You know who loses the most is the grudge bearer, the grudge holder. You hold onto it, and it just starts to rot you out from the inside.

The Lord says, instead of letting your hatred simmer and then boil over, instead of this mode of operating, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. What a contrast! The two halves of this verse bring us to an impossible juncture. How do you move the human heart from being in a place where I am angry—I'm upset, I'm ready to take vengeance, I'm ready to hold a grudge, I'm enjoying the satisfaction, the tenseness of holding onto that—to a place of love? That is not an easy question to answer. How do you move from: you've upset me so much; you've hurt me so badly; I've disobeyed God by not telling you about it and now it's boiling over and raging inside; I'm ready to crush you; I'm ready to speak ill of you; I'm ready to hold on to this? How do you move on from this? You move the human heart from vengeance and holding onto a grudge to love in one and only one way. It is the last phrase of this verse. The only way that you can move your heart from vengeance to love, from hatred to love, from barrier grudge to free forgiveness is because of the last phrase: “I am the Lord.” Even at this point, we are called to live in intentional imitation of God.

I was blessed this week by a medieval reader of the Bible. What a gift to be able to read the thoughts of people who have stared at the Bible over the centuries. There is a certain French reader named Joseph ben Isaac. He had a nickname, Bekhor Shor, which means *the firstborn ox*. I don't know what that means exactly. Perhaps he was stubborn, determined, or if he just looked like an ox. I don't really know. But he lived in the 12th century in Orleans in France, and he was gripped by the tension between the first half of Leviticus 19:18 and the second half. He

asked:

“How does God expect one who has been wronged to the point of wanting to take revenge to love one’s fellow? The answer lies in the final, often overlooked, clause of this verse: ‘I am Yahweh.’ I am the LORD. Let your love for me overcome your hatred for him and keep you from taking revenge, and as a result peace will come between you.”

It is not accidental that our Lord Jesus used Leviticus 19:18 to summarize the will of God. Luke 10:25-28 records the account of when Jesus met a man who was learned in the Scriptures:

“And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’

He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How do you read it?’

And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’

And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’”

In the context of His final public teaching in Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus was asked:

“‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”

How can we move from revenge, wanting to take vengeance into our own hands, to love? We do this in imitation and reflection of God our heavenly Father, who, though we were His enemies, died for us. We do this in conscious imitation of the Lord, who has not counted our sins against us, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). There is no more powerful, no more beautiful motivational center for living in this world than a conscious attempt to reflect the holiness and the righteousness of God. Jesus affirms this through the apostle Paul in Colossians 3:12-13:

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

God calls us to be holy, to reflect Him in every aspect of our lives, in the minutiae of our living in interpersonal relationships one with another. We can do this only by faith in Him who sent His Son to die for us.

Amen