

Holy Like God is Holy

Kicking It Off

Have you ever been part of a group (a band, a choir, a team) that was better together than any one of you was alone?

Read

Leviticus 19:1-18 and
Matthew 5:43-48

Summary

Leviticus 19 opens with a sentence that sounds impossible: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." It's easy to hear that as an order to clean ourselves up. But God says it to people He had already rescued from Egypt, people who had bowed to a golden calf not long before. It works more like a parent kneeling down to a kid who just grabbed someone's toy and saying, "You're my child. You're going to be kind." The kid isn't kind yet. The parent is promising what that child will grow into.

Then the chapter gets very ordinary. Honor your mother and father. Don't make idols. Leave the edges of your field for the poor and the immigrant. Pay your workers on time. Don't put a stumbling block in front of a blind man. Don't hold a grudge. And every few lines the same reason comes back: "I am the LORD." We don't do these things because they pay off or because people have earned it. We do them because of who God is and whose we are.

That's where it gets hard. Most of us are glad to love people who are good to us. Leviticus 19:18 says "love your neighbor as yourself," and by Jesus' day some had quietly added "and hate your enemy." Jesus said no: love your enemies and pray for the people who persecute you, because your Father sends sun and rain on everybody. Then He did exactly that from the cross.

None of us can play that kind of music on our own. Think of Leviticus as sheet music, with Jesus as the one who finally played it the way it was written. Now He gives us His Spirit like a conductor, and we each play our own part together, keeping our eyes on Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. God says "You shall be holy" to people He had already rescued, the way a parent tells a child who they are going to become (Leviticus 19:2). Do you usually hear God's call to holiness as a demand to meet or as a promise from your Father?
3. Good things like a spouse, a child, or a job become idols the moment we ask them to fix everything (Leviticus 19:4). What good thing are you most tempted to treat as the answer to all your problems?
4. Landowners were told to leave the edges of the field for the poor and the sojourner, because God was the one who made the crop grow (Leviticus 19:9-10). What would a generous margin look like in your budget, your schedule, or your work this month?
5. Honoring a parent doesn't require pretending there were no wounds, and it leaves the judging to God (Leviticus 19:3). What would honoring your mother or father look like for you in this season?
6. Jesus said to love your enemies because the Father sends sun and rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:44-45). Who is the person you find it hardest to want God to bless?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"When people question their salvation and they say, 'Am I saved?', the question I have back is, do you even want to be saved? Because what if I told you that being saved means that He is your King? If you're a Christian, you're like, 'I want Jesus as my King. Of course I do.' You know what kings do to subjects? They tell you how to live. I think there are too many times people want to be saved into an eternal kingdom but still live by their own temporary sovereignty."

"The reason why we love our neighbor is not because our neighbor is worthy of love. We love our neighbor because our God is holy and requires us to do so, even if it comes at a loss to you and to me. I wish my job was easier. I wish I could be a prosperity preacher: you love your neighbor and God will give you a new car. How often would we be good to our neighbors if we could instantly get a good outcome from it? But that's not my job. Be good to your neighbor because your God is holy."

"Do you have any margins that are generous? Do you have anything on the outsides? I'm not talking about your core business. I'm not talking about the core of your paycheck. I'm just saying, do you even have something budgeted out somewhere where you're like, 'Lord, You do whatever You want with that. Send whoever You want to take from that, because that's not even mine. That's Yours.'"

"Leviticus is the sheet music. It reflects God's eternal character. And Jesus is the one who finally gets the sheet music, and He says, 'Guys, the sheet music isn't wrong, but let me play it for you.' Now He gives us

His Spirit, this internal conductor. So the control we have is: how good are you at looking at your conductor? How good are you at looking at the score, reading your Bible? If you know your music and you follow your conductor, and you play your instrument the way God made you to play, it's going to look different than the person next to you."

Sermon Notes

Leviticus 19:1-18

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. 3 Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. 4 Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the Lord your God.

5 “When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the Lord, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted. 6 It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or on the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire. 7 If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is tainted; it will not be accepted, 8 and everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned what is holy to the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from his people.

9 “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. 10 And 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.

11 “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. 12 You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

13 “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. 14 You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

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.

Outline

1. I Am the LORD - Leviticus 19:1-4; Exodus 32
    a. Genesis is God wanting to dwell with His people, and sin is choosing our own will, which always ends in brokenness. Exodus is a salvation no one can build. Leviticus asks what comes next: how does a saved people dwell with a holy God?
    b. If you trust Jesus as the Lamb, you are saved. The bigger question is whether you want Him as King, because kings tell their subjects how to live, and too many want an eternal kingdom while keeping their own temporary sovereignty.
    c. "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (19:2) is a parent kneeling to a selfish child and saying, you are my child, you will be kind. God is not telling them to make themselves holy. He is promising to make them holy.
    d. "Revere his mother and his father" (19:3) echoes the Ten Commandments. The world honors parents who deserve it; God's people honor them even when they don't, without denying the wounds, because God placed us there and judgment is His.
    e. Imagine a golden calf that actually paid out (19:4; Exodus 32). The gold was never the problem. The sin was saying to a thing, you can solve all my problems, and we still say it to a spouse, a child, a job.
2. From Field to Heart - Leviticus 19:9-18; Ruth 2
    a. The command to leave the edges of the field came to people who had no fields yet, and it reaches us just as much: when you have a field, don't harvest the margins.
    b. God made the crop grow, so the margin is His. Profit is not wrong. The question is whether there is room for others to glean, a line in the budget where you say, Lord, do whatever You want with that.
    c. Ruth, a Moabite with no standing, ate because Boaz understood Leviticus and left the margins for her, and she stands in the lineage of Christ.
    d. No stealing, lying, oppressing, or tripping the blind (19:11-14), because God is the Lord. When faith feels like handcuffs while others cheat and prosper, we sound like Israel longing for Egypt.
    e. The chapter is a portrait of God's character, generous and just, never forsaking the poor, the deaf, or the blind, so it is less about how good I am than about submitting to His will.
    f. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18) is a Leviticus command before it is a Jesus saying. We love our neighbor not because the neighbor is worthy but because God is holy, even when it costs us.
3. But I Say to You - Matthew 5:17, 43-48; Galatians 5:14, 25
    a. Israel's teachers narrowed "neighbor" to their own people and added "hate your enemy," which Leviticus never says. Jesus came to fulfill the law, and He corrected their reading, not the Scripture (5:17, 43).

b. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44), and Jesus did it from the cross.
c. The Father sends sun and rain on the just and the unjust (5:45). Loving only those who love us is how the world loves, and it bothers me too when God blesses people I think are worse than me.
d. "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48) means complete and whole. The whole law is fulfilled in loving your neighbor, and we keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:14, 25).
e. Leviticus is the sheet music. The teachers tried to conduct it and it sounded terrible; Jesus played the whole composition. Now the Spirit conducts us, each playing our own instrument, rests included.
f. My control is keeping my eyes on the Conductor and knowing the score. Make margins in your business, your time, and your life, with an overwhelming sense that you can't do it alone.

Notes

Leviticus has changed how I understand salvation, justification, and sanctification, because the first five books of the Bible are really one story. Genesis is the story of a God who wanted to dwell with His creation. He did not need a friend, since Father, Son, and Spirit had existed together forever. He made man and woman in His image because He wanted to walk with them in the garden, and for a moment they were together in pure innocence without any of the brokenness of the world. Whether or not you believe any of this, you long for that unbroken world. The Hebrew Bible calls it shalom, the peace of knowing that all things are as they should be.

Adam and Eve chose their own will. They decided they would determine good and evil for themselves, and that is the beginning of sin: no longer doing the will of God, but asking what my will is and how I can achieve it. Whenever people enact their own will, it leads to brokenness. We never think our own will is the dangerous one. My hopes and dreams would make everything beautiful; it's the man down the road whose hopes and dreams would ruin me. So human history is a battle of wills, with lines drawn in the sand.

In Exodus, Abraham's descendants were enslaved to another nation's will, and Pharaoh told them they would do what Egypt desired. They cried out for salvation, and the whole book answers one question: can you build your own salvation? Israel couldn't, and neither can we. God saved them, and He saved us through Jesus. Usually that is where the Bible studies stop. But once the people are saved, they still have to learn how to dwell with a God who is holy, perfect, and righteous.

If you trust Jesus as the Lamb sacrificed for you, and you believe He is the Son of God who died and rose three days later, you are saved, and there should be no question about it. The bigger question, the one that moves us toward maturity, is how I dwell with the Lord forever. Being saved means He is my King, and kings tell their subjects how to live. Too many of us want to be saved into an eternal kingdom while still living by our own temporary sovereignty. God promised through Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27). The new covenant is not my will straining to do God's will. I surrender my will, and His Spirit empowers me and leads me to do His.

The world looks at the moral laws and calls us bigoted and backward. Yet everyone agrees there is good and evil, and everyone wants their own will to win. I am not going to give you an argument for the internet, because the reason is much simpler. We follow the moral code of God because God is God, and He is holy.

Some Christians hear that and think they have to master every statute and never put a foot wrong. I want to hug that person and tell them to rest. God has given you His Spirit. I know His Spirit is in you because He saved you, and I know He saved you

because He sent His Son to die for you, so that when God sees you, He sees the righteousness of His Son. You are not a robot, though. You still move through the world, but through a different lens, and it will offend people who are trying to make their own will strong enough to stand against everyone else's. Your will is not as good as God's will, and His way is higher.

Good Christians take "love your neighbor as yourself" and quietly add a condition: I'll love my neighbors when they're good to me. When my neighbor insults me, my will is not going to surrender to an evil man. You may be completely right that your neighbor is evil. That is exactly the reasoning Jesus speaks against. We don't love our neighbor because he is worthy. We love him because our God is holy and requires it, even when it costs us. I wish I could tell you obedience pays right away, that if you love your neighbor God will give you a new car. I can't. Loving your neighbor might cost you your car. You do it because you are His people, saved from the bondage of sin.

"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (19:2). God is not telling Israel to make themselves holy. He is saying, you are my people, and I will make you holy. Picture a parent kneeling down to a child who has been snatching toys and saying, you are my child, you will be kind, you will be generous. In that moment the child is not kind. The parent says it anyway: I will raise you to be like me. We would rather keep God in our pocket like a genie, yet He is our Father and our King, leaning down and saying, you foolish little kids, I love you so much, and one day you will be like me.

The chapter echoes the Ten Commandments, and it begins with parents: "Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father" (19:3). The world's ethic says be good to your parents if they are good to you, and cut them out if they aren't. As far as it goes, that isn't wrong. But God calls His people to be good to their parents even when they are bad to us. That doesn't deny the truth. There may be wounds and scars, and God's people live in the truth. But I am not the one to judge them. God will, and that is a terrifying prospect. So I revere them because God placed me in that family. It is in the Ten Commandments and repeated here because it is not a small thing.

Israel had just watched Moses come down from Sinai with the tablets and find them worshiping a golden calf. None of us feel the pull of a golden calf, so imagine one that worked. Every morning there's $1,000 under it, then $2,000, then $5,000. We would all stand in line. The gold was never the problem. The sin was what the people said to the calf: you can solve all my problems, praise be to you. Only one name deserves that sentence, the name of the Lord. We still say it to good things. A single person says it to a spouse, a couple says it to a child, a worker says it to a job, and each one will be sorely disappointed.

"You shall not reap your field right up to its edge" (19:9). Israel was in the wilderness with no fields and no vineyards, so the command applied before they had a field, and it applies to us even though most of us don't farm. When you have a field, don't harvest the margins, so the poor and the sojourner can glean. That grinds our gears, because I worked hard for that harvest. But God made it grow, which is why the grain offering gave back to Him what He had already given. Profit is not wrong. The question is whether you have margins where others can glean from your prosperity, since God gave me the rain and the good soil while my neighbor's ground is dust. So I leave the edges, and the foreigners and the poor who come for them aren't stealing from me. They are gleaning what belongs to the Lord. Do you have a margin like that, something budgeted where you say, Lord, do whatever You want with this, send whoever You want, because it was never mine? Even that margin is God's doing, not mine.

That is how Ruth, a Moabite with no standing in Israel, fed herself and her mother-in-law. Boaz understood Leviticus. He told his workers not to hinder her, because the margins were for her, and Ruth stands in the lineage of Christ.

Don't steal, don't deal falsely, don't oppress your neighbor, don't curse the deaf or trip the blind (19:11-14). Each command closes with "I am the LORD." We don't do these things because they are smart. We do them because God is God. When we watch coworkers cheat and get ahead, our faith can feel like handcuffs, and we start to think we would be free without our morality. That is what Israel said about Egypt at the first moment of discomfort: at least we had variety in our food. God calls you to treat people fairly who may not deserve it, not so you will prosper, but because you are His people and you represent Him. When I read this chapter I see what God is like, generous and kind and just, never forsaking the poor or the blind. What we strain to do is simply His character.

I always thought "love your neighbor as yourself" was a Jesus thing. It's a Leviticus thing (19:18). In time, Israel's teachers read "neighbor" as fellow Israelite and concluded that God's enemies were theirs to hate. Jesus answered them: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (5:43-45). Leviticus never said hate your enemy. Jesus was correcting what had been made of Scripture, and He lived it on the cross, praying for the people killing Him while they dared Him to come down and show His power.

The Father sends sun and rain on the just and the unjust. In our economy of love we are good to those who are good to us, which is how tax collectors love. God's

generosity isn't bound by how good anyone is. If that bothers you, it bothers me too. I see God bless people I think are half as good as me, and I ask Him why He can't be that good to me. And I hear Him ask, are you good to people that way? "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48), complete and whole. That perfection comes the way Paul says: "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" and "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:14, 25).

When I was a youth pastor in Dallas, many of our Korean American kids played in the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra. After the concerts I told each of them, you sounded great, and it was a kind of lie. I didn't hear them. I heard the symphony. Leviticus is the sheet music, the unchanging music of God's character. The teachers tried to conduct it, and it sounded terrible. Then Jesus said, the sheet music isn't wrong, let me play it for you, and He played the whole composition. Now it is our turn, and we can't, so He gives us His Spirit as the conductor inside us, and the title of the piece is Love Your Neighbor. Each of us is a different instrument, and together the body sounds like Christ. My control is to keep my eyes on the Conductor, know the score by reading my Bible, play when He calls, and rest when He says rest. So make margins in your business, your time, and your life, and do it with an overwhelming sense that you can't do it on your own.

Blog

Ask a room full of Christians to quote a verse from Leviticus and most of them will come up empty. Then read them this one: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Pretty much everyone knows it. Jesus called it the second great commandment (Matthew 22:39), and Paul said the whole law is fulfilled in it (Galatians 5:14). Very few people know where it comes from. It is in the part of the Bible most of us skip, at the end of a paragraph about grudges, a few verses after a law about leaving grain at the edge of a field.

Leviticus 19 opens with the sentence the rest of the chapter is built upon. "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" (19:2). When I read it this week, it took me back to the burning bush, where God gave Moses His name. When you see LORD in capital letters in your Bible, that is the name. It also took me to Jesus, who said something just as demanding: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Both sentences sound impossible, and they are, if holiness is something we have to produce. Leviticus never grounds its commands in what we produce. After nearly every paragraph in this passage God says, "I am the LORD," or "I am the LORD your God." He says it seven times in sixteen verses. He never says, "Do this and I will be your God." He says, "I am your God," and then He describes what His people look like.

The people listening that day were still camped at Mount Sinai. Within the past year, at that same mountain, they had made a golden calf and worshiped it (Exodus 32:8). Right after the calf, God told them, "You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal" (Exodus 34:17), and Leviticus 19:4 repeats those exact words. The congregation hearing "You shall be holy" was the congregation that had bowed down to the calf. God still called Himself their God. They also had no fields yet. They were living in tents in the wilderness, and God was already telling them how to harvest land He had not yet given them. He was describing a people in a specific context before that context existed.

The commands themselves are more ordinary than most of us expect. When you harvest, don't reap your field right up to the edge, and don't go back for the grapes that fall. "You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner" (19:9-10). The book of Ruth shows what that looked like in a real field. A widow from Moab went out to glean behind the harvesters, and Boaz told his men, "pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean" (Ruth 2:16). He kept the law and then went past the edge. Don't steal, don't deal falsely, and don't lie to one another. Don't keep a hired worker's wages overnight (19:13), because, as Deuteronomy explains, "he is poor and counts on it" (Deuteronomy 24:15). Withholding a paycheck until morning costs the employer nothing,

and yet it might cost the worker his dinner. "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God" (19:14). Don't tilt the courtroom toward the poor or toward the powerful, and don't go around spreading what you heard about someone (19:15-16).

The chapter moves inward as it goes. It starts at the edge of a field and ends inside a person.

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 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." (19:17-18)

The alternative to hating someone in your heart is not pretending everything is fine. It is going to them and saying it, honestly, to their face. Jesus gave the same instruction: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (Matthew 18:15).

No court in Israel could enforce any of that. Nobody can see a grudge. The deaf man never hears the curse, and the blind man never learns who moved the stone, but God hears and sees all of it. That is why "fear your God" sits right where no one else would ever find out. Holiness in Leviticus was never only about what people could see. It reached all the way into the heart, long before anyone heard the Sermon on the Mount.

These commands also show what God Himself is like, which is the point of "be holy, for I am holy." Moses describes the LORD as the God "who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Leviticus 19 tells Israel not to be partial and to leave food for the sojourner. To be holy like God is holy is to treat people the way He treats them.

This is where the chapter is hardest on me. Of everything in these verses, the two I most need to hear are the command to revere my mother and my father (19:3) and the command not to hate my brother in my heart. And I think because I need to hear them, they are the ones I wish to pass over most quickly. And this isn't even because I come from a bad family. Leviticus is speaking to the reality of the family, in that it is the Lord who has placed you in the specific context of community, and your job is not to manufacture your own familial holiness, but rather, our responsibility is to learn to love and respect our family members because God is the one who placed you in that specific community. Our reverence for our parents does not derive from our parent's holiness, but rather the Lord's. Our love for our brother is not because our brother is worthy of affection, but because God has called us to love.

Almost every command in this passage has another person in it: a parent, the poor, the foreigner, a worker, the deaf, the blind, a neighbor, a brother. And God spoke it to "all the congregation." The "you" in "You shall be holy" is plural. Holiness in Leviticus is not something you do alone in a room. God's people live it together, with each other and for each other, in the field and the marketplace and the courtroom and the family.

Some of you are just starting to understand that God is holy and that you are not, and that Christ has made you clean. This chapter raises the next question, which is how anyone is supposed to live like this, and what living by the Spirit even means.

Leviticus answers part of that question itself. In the very next chapter God says, "Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you" (20:8). The command to keep the Sabbath in 19:3 uses the same words God spoke at Sinai, when He called the Sabbath "a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you" (Exodus 31:13). You are called to be holy as God is holy, but this holiness is not achieved by your own power. It is achieved by the power of God. The prophets saw the day coming when He would do it from the inside: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27).

Jesus did not set this chapter aside. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). We aren't here to change the statutes, and neither was Christ. He was interested in making sure we understood the heart of the law, and when He preached on the mountain, Leviticus 19 ran all through His sermon.

Read Leviticus 19:1-18 this week, then read Matthew 5 and look for Leviticus in it. (The rest of chapter 19, including the stranger who is to be loved "as yourself," comes on October 25.) Come Sunday ready to talk about the edge of your field, the grudge you've been keeping, and what it means that the God who said "You shall be holy" is the God who makes us holy.