

The Details of Justice

Kicking It Off

What is a rule from the home you grew up in that seemed random at the time but makes sense to you now?

Read

Leviticus 19:19-37

Summary

The second half of Leviticus 19 reads like a random list. Don't mix two kinds of seed. Don't wear cloth made of two materials. Wait three years before eating from a new fruit tree. No tattoos for the dead, no mediums, stand up for the gray head, love the stranger, keep honest weights. It's one of the passages skeptics love to quote, and plenty of Christians answer by saying Leviticus doesn't apply anymore. But the list opens and closes with the same words, "You shall keep my statutes," and underneath every line is the character of God. His laws are the scaffolding of His world.

Here's the catch. Nobody is going to make you keep them. No one forces Chick-fil-A to close on Sundays, and no one will force you to ask God how He wants you to rest, work, spend, or dress. Since the Spirit lives in us, the real question is whether we're willing to have that conversation with the Lord at all.

Take the fruit trees. Israel waited three years, and when the good fruit finally came, all of it went to God. It made no economic sense, and that was the point. A heart that gives up the first good year learns to say "God, You provide" in the fifth. The same goes for the mediums. Even if they could tell you the future, God's people rest in His care instead, which is why the command to keep the Sabbath sits right in the middle of those laws.

Then the passage turns to people. The old man who can't produce anything anymore, and the stranger who doesn't fit. Israel knew what it was to be valued only for their bricks in Egypt. God tells them never to weigh people that way. We love people because God is holy, not because they're useful, and because Christ died for us while we were still weak and had nothing to offer Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. No law makes a business close on Sundays, and no one will force us to ask God how He wants us to rest, work, or spend. What area of your life have you never really asked God about?
3. In the fourth year, the first good fruit went entirely to the Lord before anyone ate it (Leviticus 19:23-25). What is one thing you could set apart for God before you enjoy it yourself?
4. Israel was told to keep the Sabbath instead of turning to omens and mediums to find out what was coming (Leviticus 19:26-31). Where do you look for certainty about the future instead of resting in God's care?
5. God commands honor for the gray head, even when an older person can no longer give anything back (Leviticus 19:32). Who in your life is easy to overlook because they offer you no benefit?
6. Israel was to love the stranger because they had been strangers in Egypt, and Christ loved us while we were still sinners (Leviticus 19:34; Romans 5:8). Who is someone you find it hard to welcome, and what would welcoming them look like this week?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"No one is going to make you follow the law of God. And I feel like in many ways we almost want people to make us follow it, so that we can say, 'Well, the government or the powers above me don't make this a rule, and therefore I don't have to follow it.' Many of us, if we owned a business that was open 24/7, don't actually want to have that conversation with God: 'God, how many days should my business be open?' We tell God, 'My business is going to be open seven days a week, Lord.'"

"The fourth year comes, good fruit is coming, and they have to do what is illogical. They have to do what is counterintuitive to their economy: 'Man, that fruit looks good. But what am I going to do? I'm going to give it to God.' And so the fifth year, when you harvest and the yield increases, it's not, 'Man, I'm such a good farmer.' It is pointed to God: 'You're so good. God, You provide.' Why? Because there was the heart posture to give up a fruitful year."

"What if it actually works? Following the justice and righteousness of God is saying, 'I will forgo that, even if it works,' because my security is only in the Lord, in what He has for me. The answer that lies in this is Sabbath. That's not the end goal of my life. My end goal is to dwell with the Lord forever and ever, to enjoy Him forever and ever. And so I'm going to say, 'Even though that's what the world wants, I choose You, because I trust that Your way is better for me.'"

"Well-meaning people would look at me and say, 'It's so good that you're in our country, because you're so good at math.' So I'm a model minority because I'm productive and I'm useful? That is not the basis for being good to immigrants. We were not loved by God because we were the model minority, because we were so good. We provided nothing. There was no reason for God to accept and love us, but He embraced us, and He loved us."

Sermon Notes

Leviticus 19:19-37

19 “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind.
You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth
made of two kinds of material.
20 “If a man lies sexually with a woman who is a slave, assigned to another man and not
yet ransomed or given her freedom, a distinction shall be made. They shall not be put to
death, because she was not free; 21 but he shall bring his compensation to the Lord, to
the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering. 22 And the priest shall
make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin that
he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.
23 “When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall
regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be
eaten. 24 And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord.
25 But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: I am the Lord
your God.
26 “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell
fortunes. 27 You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your
beard. 28 You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I
am the Lord.
29 “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into
prostitution and the land become full of depravity. 30 You shall keep my Sabbaths and
reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord.
31 “Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make
yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God.
32 “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you
shall fear your God: I am the Lord.
33 “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. 34 You
shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall
love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
35 “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. 36
You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the Lord your
God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. 37 And you shall observe all my statutes
and all my rules, and do them: I am the Lord.”

Outline

1. Keep My Statutes - Leviticus 19:19-25; Exodus 28:4-5
    a. No one made Chick-fil-A close on Sundays, and no one will make you follow the law of God. If you want His righteousness, you ask what the Spirit is telling you about your time, your work, your clothes, and your rest.
    b. Leviticus still applies because it shows the character of God, though not in the way Israel kept it. As with circumcision, what Paul calls us to now is the heart posture in which we keep it.
    c. Cattle, seed, and cloth kept unmixed (19:19) point back to creation, where God separated land from sea and light from darkness. The priests wore the mixed weave (Exodus 28:4-5), so the law marked a line between holy and common that I often don't even see.
    d. The slave woman is not put to death "because she was not free" (19:20). The man brings a ram for a guilt offering and is forgiven (19:21-22). For a people just out of slavery, this says the wrong done to someone without freedom is not their guilt.
    e. After three years of waiting, the first good fruit goes entirely to the Lord (19:23-24). It makes no economic sense, and in the fifth year the heart that gave it up thanks God for the yield instead of praising its own farming (19:25).
2. Listen to the Living - Leviticus 19:26-31; Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 3:22; Matthew 17:5
    a. Cutting and marking the body "for the dead" (19:28) belonged to a world that sought knowledge from the dead. Saul went to the medium at Endor because he wanted what was useful more than he wanted the Lord, and even so Leviticus keeps a path to forgiveness open.
    b. If a paper cut in front of a mirror gave you the answer key, or the next ten years of the stock market, how many of us would do it? People who want information will give up their morality.
    c. "Keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary" (19:30) sits between the daughter given to prostitution and the mediums. Instead of knowing the future, we rest in the sovereignty of God.
    d. The mediums might even be right (Acts 16:16). Righteousness says, I will forgo it even if it works, because my security is in the Lord and my goal is to enjoy Him forever.
    e. God did not leave us without a voice. He promised a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15), Peter named Him as Jesus (Acts 3:22), and the Father said to listen to His Son (Matthew 17:5). Sabbath is time with the One who speaks, by His Spirit.
3. Just Balances - Leviticus 19:32-37; Exodus 1:8-14; 5:18; Romans 5:6-8
    a. Stand up before the gray head (19:32). A culture built on production says the old are not useful and moves them to the edges. We honor them because God is God.

b. The same holds for the sojourner, on an individual level, not as policy (19:33-34). "It's so good that you're in our country, because you're so good at math" made me a model minority, welcome because I was useful, and that is no basis for being good to immigrants.
c. Israel were sojourners in Egypt, worked ruthlessly and still made to deliver the same number of bricks (Exodus 1:8-14; 5:18). A nation that forgets that becomes just like the Egyptians.
d. Just balances and just weights (19:35-36) rest on God's holiness, not on whether people deserve it. That is not unjust scales tipped in anyone's favor, and it is not hostility toward people we don't know.
e. My basis for justice is the cross: "while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6-8). We provided nothing, and so the kids on e-scooters at Trunk or Treat are welcome too.

Notes

No one made Chick-fil-A close on Sundays. No law requires it, and if private equity bought the company, the first thing it would do is open on Sundays to maximize profit. That is the point of Leviticus 19 I can't get away from: no one is going to make you follow the law of God. We almost want someone to. We would like the government or the powers above us to make it a rule, so that when they don't, we can say we don't have to follow it. But if you truly desire the righteousness of the Lord and want to dwell with Him forever, you need to be in submission to His statutes.

That isn't legalism. The Spirit lives in us now, so the question is not whether a restaurant owner must close on Sunday because the Bible says so. The question is what the Spirit is telling you about your own life and your own business, and most of us don't want that conversation. We tell God our business will be open seven days a week, and then we lift up Chick-fil-A as better than everyone else. The conversation reaches every part of life: how I honor the Lord with my time, my clothes, my work, and my possessions. I come from a family of doctors, and my sister is an ER doctor, and people get hurt on Sundays. I am not condemning anyone who works on Sunday. But "my job requires it" doesn't end the question. Each of us has to ask how we will rest, not only so our bodies recover, but so God gets the glory.

The Hebrew word tsedeq is translated both righteousness and justice, and its root has to do with what is straight, the guiding principle of how things ought to be. The world has its own working understanding of justice, and much of it lines up with Scripture because people learned what works, which is why our culture still benefits from a weekly rest. As culture moves on, more people will attack the Sabbath, and someone will eventually ask why not work all seven days. Even then, we would need to ask the Lord how to honor Him on the Sabbath, because it is one of His statutes.

People love to throw verse 19 at Christians: the Bible says you can't wear polyester. Christians answer that Leviticus doesn't apply anymore. I don't accept that answer, because it means God's word isn't useful or that He changed His statutes, and He says, "You shall keep my statutes." Leviticus applies to us because it shows the character of God, just not in the way it applied to Israel. Paul taught that circumcision is no longer the outward act but the circumcision of the heart, and the early church had to learn that when Gentiles came to faith. Israel kept these statutes literally and faithfully, and living them literally today would be nearly impossible. So we live the heart of them.

The heart of this one points back to creation. God separated land from sea, light from darkness, and night from day, and He brought order to everything He made, while our tendency is to mix what He separated. A commentary pointed me to Exodus 28, where the priests' garments are made of the very mixture the people were told not to

wear, which marks a distinction between the holiness of the priests and the dress of the people. That convicts me. How many times have I failed to make a distinction between what is holy and what is common? Aaron's sons were struck down for bringing unauthorized fire, and I often don't even know I've mixed things. God doesn't need me in a three-piece suit, but I can't say He doesn't care what I wear. The question is whether I have made any distinction at all to honor Him, or whether I just do whatever works.

Then the passage turns to a man who lies with a slave woman assigned to another man, and it says she shall not be put to death, because she was not free. The guilt is not on her. The man brings a ram for a guilt offering, and God provides the way for him to be forgiven. Think about who first heard this: a people who had been slaves in Egypt, where the men and the women had been overpowered again and again. They were hearing that when you are not free and wrong is done to you, the fault is not yours. It is on the one who did the wrong. That sounds obvious to us because we don't own people, and praise God for that. For Israel it was part of the scaffolding, showing that God's righteousness is not arbitrary and reaches every part of life.

Next come the fruit trees. For three years the fruit is forbidden. In the fourth year, when the good fruit finally comes, all of it is holy, an offering of praise to the Lord, and only in the fifth year do they eat. Israel was still wandering in the desert without a single orchard, learning principles of the heart before they had land. This is firstfruits. There is a season of waiting with nothing to show, and then the breakthrough comes and the business is finally in the black, and that first good year goes entirely to God. It makes no economic sense. The nations offered their harvests to their gods and then feasted on them, but Israel gave the fourth year to the Lord and called it holy, not wasted. I know my own reaction: I waited three years for this tree, and now it's mine, and God can have the bad years. But when the fifth year comes, the heart that gave up the fourth doesn't say, I'm such a good farmer. It says, God, You provide. We like to shrink generosity to a ten percent tithe, and Leviticus asked for far more than that. Last week the margins of the field went to the sojourner. This goes a step further, good fruit given to God simply because I love Him.

That is why keeping His statutes matters. They are the scaffolding of His world, and your life will run more smoothly when you follow them. Yet God isn't after the increased yield. He is after a thankful heart, and He grows it by teaching us to designate the fourth year as holy, so that in both years we are saying, Lord, protect me and provide for me, I need You. Skip that, and both years are simply productive, and there is no conversation with the Lord because you have it all figured out. Even a rule against mixed fabric would keep you asking how He wants you to come into His presence, and that question is what He is after, not 100% organic cotton.

Verses 26 to 31 forbid omens, fortune telling, cuts for the dead, tattoos, and mediums. The nations around Israel communed with the dead, and King Saul went to the medium at Endor because he wanted what would be useful to him more than he wanted to follow the Lord. If you tattooed your body to commune with the dead, that is not okay, and even then Leviticus holds out a path to forgiveness through the atoning sacrifices. God simply does not intend for you to learn His truth from seers and witches. People who want information will give up their morality. If a paper cut and a few words in front of a mirror gave you the answer key, and no one would ever catch you, how many of us would do it? Make it the top ten companies of the next decade, and most of us would cut ourselves. Leviticus says we are missing it. We are called to dwell with the Lord Most High and talk with Him, and some will forgo His sovereignty just to manufacture one last conversation with someone they lost.

In the middle of these laws, between the daughter given to prostitution and the mediums, God says, "You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary." The answer to wanting to know the future is to rest in the sovereignty of God. I don't think mediums are all hogwash. The book of Acts describes spirits that gave people knowledge they had no other way to have, and a medium might know which stocks will double. Following the righteousness of God means saying, I will forgo it even if it works, because my security is in the Lord. The answer is Sabbath. My end goal is to dwell with the Lord and enjoy Him forever, so I keep His Sabbath, revere His sanctuary, and tell Him, I choose You, because Your way is good for me. And God doesn't leave us there. Deuteronomy 18 promises a prophet, Peter says in Acts 3:22 that the prophet is Jesus, and in Matthew 17 the Father tells us to listen to His Son. Sabbath is time with the One who speaks, through His word and by His Spirit.

Verses 32 to 34 bring two kinds of people before us, the old and the stranger. A culture built on production says the old aren't useful and should be sequestered and forgotten. Scripture says to honor them, because God is God and God is holy. The same goes for the immigrant, and I mean that individually, not as policy. I was born in California, and well-meaning people told me it was so good I was in this country because I was so good at math. I was a model minority, welcome because I was useful, and people were good to me as long as I was good to them. That is not the basis for being good to immigrants. Israel knew it. A king arose who did not know Joseph and worked them ruthlessly, demanding the same number of bricks without straw. So God told them to love the stranger as themselves, because they knew that plight. A nation that grows and starts saying it must look after its own has become just like the Egyptians.

Just balances and just weights rest on the holiness of God, not on whether people deserve them. It breaks my heart to hear the church speak with hostility about people it

doesn't even know, because I pray God sends the sojourner and the undeserving to our church. My basis for justice is the cross. While we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly, and God shows His love in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He did not love me because I was a model minority or good at math. We provided nothing. Just scales don't mean throwing every resource at illegal immigrants, since law and order and boundaries are useful. They mean asking whether we are good to people only when they are good to us. At Trunk or Treat, the kids who leave skid marks with their e-scooters and the neighbors whose dogs use our yard are welcome to all the candy they want, because I have a God who loved me when I was terrible to Him. Our debt has been wiped clean. So think this week about how you keep the Sabbath, how you honor God's order in the world, and who in your life gives you no advantage at all, an aging parent or a stranger. Love them, because Christ loved you when you were of no advantage to Him.

Blog

If you have ever tried to read straight through Leviticus, the second half of chapter 19 is probably where you started skimming. The first half has the verse everyone knows (even if you thought it came from the New Testament), "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). The second half reads like a list of do's and do not's. Don't let your cattle breed with a different kind. Don't sow two kinds of seed in one field. Don't wear a garment made of two kinds of material. Don't eat the fruit of a new tree for three years. Don't tattoo yourselves. Stand up when an old man walks in. Keep honest weights.

When I read this section, I come away seeing God as very particular about how we follow His statutes. I don't want to preach that away on Sunday, because He is particular. What I want to see is the moral code He is giving His people underneath every one of these laws, the odd ones included.

The passage gives us its own frame. It opens with "You shall keep my statutes" (19:19) and closes with "you shall observe all my statutes and all my rules, and do them" (19:37). In between, seven times, God says "I am the LORD" or "I am the LORD your God." A King who owns everything has something to say about everything, and in these nineteen verses He speaks to the farm, the orchard, the body, the family, the place of worship, and the market.

The chapter before this one shows what is at stake. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them" (18:3-4). Every people lives inside somebody's statutes. There is God's truth, which lies in the scaffolding of His statutes, and there is the truth of humanity, which lies in the scaffolding of our desires.

You can see the other scaffolding in the middle of this passage. Israel was not to "interpret omens or tell fortunes" (19:26), not to "make any cuts on your body for the dead" (19:28), and not to "turn to mediums or necromancers" (19:31). The nations around them did all of these things. People wanted to know the future, and they wanted to reach the people they had lost, so they looked for answers wherever they could find them. Isaiah answered it with a question of his own: "should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isaiah 8:19). Moses had already given Israel the alternative. The nations "listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners," but God would raise up a prophet from among their own people, and "it is to him you shall listen" (Deuteronomy 18:14-15).

If you have a tattoo and verse 28 stung a little, read it again. These verses were about cutting and marking the body for the dead and for other gods, which is what Israel's neighbors did when they mourned. We'll talk more about that on Sunday. Six

verses earlier, in the same list, a man has wronged a woman who was a slave, and the law sends him to the altar with a guilt offering, and it ends with "he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed" (19:22). Mercy is written into the middle of the rules.

The last verses of the chapter turn from what Israel must not do to what they must do. "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (19:32). The verse ties honoring them to fearing God, not to anything they could still produce.

Then the stranger. "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (19:33-34).

Last week we read "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). Sixteen verses later God uses the same words for the foreigner living among them. Those are the only two times the word "love" appears in Leviticus, and the second one reaches past Israel's own people to the outsider who doesn't belong. People in Jesus' day argued about who counted as a neighbor. Leviticus had already answered part of that question in this verse.

God gives the reason in the same breath: "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Israel knew what it was to live in a land that was not theirs. God had told them once before, "You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). They were to remember that feeling every time they met someone who didn't fit.

Then the scales. "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (19:35-36). In an ancient market a scale was a beam with a pan hanging from each end. The goods went in one pan and the seller's stone weights in the other, and the buyer had no way to check the stones. Deuteronomy describes the cheat: "You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small" (Deuteronomy 25:13). One set was for buying and one for selling, so the scale always tipped toward the merchant.

Correct scales matter in every part of life. A scale is a way of measuring, and measurement determines judgment, so incorrect measurement leads to incorrect judgment. The chapter itself makes that connection. "You shall do no wrong in judgment" in verse 35 repeats the words God used about the courtroom in verse 15, "You shall do no injustice in court." And the word translated "just" for the weights is the same word translated "righteousness" in that verse about the court. In Leviticus, righteousness is always using an honest weight.

We do our best to live with integrity because it helps us connect with the Lord. The more we use dishonest scales, the less we can hear the Lord in our lives. Scripture warns about being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). A dishonest scale rarely feels like a crisis. It is a small adjustment, made over and over, until we can no longer tell what something actually weighs.

Most of us don't sell grain, but we all carry weights. We have one measure for our own mistakes and another for everyone else's. We weigh our own motives generously and other people's harshly. Some of you grew up in church and have started to question how you were raised. That questioning is healthy, and I'm glad for it. Just weigh with one scale. If we weigh the church on God's scale and weigh the culture on the culture's own, we are carrying two kinds of weights.

Jesus did not soften any of this. "With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). God has never needed a dishonest scale to find us wanting. Yet the reason He gives for these laws is that He had already rescued His people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (19:36). Every law in this passage comes from a God who showed them what He was like before He asked anything of them.

As followers of Christ, we must be sure to follow Christ. It's not our rule set that we follow. It's not our logic that we follow. We follow Him and Him alone. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Read Leviticus 19:19-37 this week, and read Deuteronomy 18:9-15 beside verses 26 and 31. Then read Ephesians 2:11-22 and notice who the strangers are. Come Sunday ready to hear about the scales you carry, the strangers you know, and why a God this particular is very good news.