

February 19, 2017 (Journey worship)
TEXT: Leviticus 19

I've never preached from the book of Leviticus—ever. If you've ever decided to read through the bible from start to finish, things will go pretty well with the stories of Genesis, and the description of Moses rescuing the Hebrews from Egypt in Exodus. But then the last half of Exodus is mostly laws and prohibitions, which continue on in Leviticus, Numbers and for most of Deuteronomy—which is why so few people have read through the bible from cover to cover. There are only two times the lectionary encourages us to read something from Leviticus during Sunday morning worship—and it's the same passage both times: Leviticus 19:13–18, which ends with the famous verse that Jesus cited when asked what is the most important commandment of them all: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

One way to get “back on track” in our spiritual lives is to be better about reading the bible. For almost 500 years, from the time of the Gutenberg printing press until the dawn of the 20th century, the bible was one of the few books people would have in their homes. People read from the bible daily; children learned to read by sounding out the words in the bible. If you could afford to own a few books, you would likely have a bible and books of theology along with a few books on science, history, and classical literature, like Shakespeare's plays. People had a degree of biblical literacy then that is totally lacking in today's world, despite people being quick to say that they are religious and trust in the bible. Some surveys have shown that half of Americans can't name all four gospels, and 60% can't name more than five of the Ten Commandments.

So I've given all of you a copy of Leviticus 19. If you can get through one chapter from this part of the Old Testament, you'll have a good chance of making it through the other books like it. Let's start at the beginning. You can either read along or just follow along as I read the first 10 verses. (read 1–10).

From the very beginning we are told why these rules are in the bible: *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.* The quality of our life should be distinctive, upright, holy because we belong to and worship a God who is righteous and holy. When we do mean things and dishonest things, we no longer reflect the light and image of God as we ought. So take care of your parents. Honor the Sabbath. Don't turn to idols and don't take short-cuts with the religious rituals. Don't be greedy, reaping your crops to the very edges of your fields. Leave some grapes or wheat there for the poor so that they have a chance at survival in this hard world.

Point #1: The rules aren't meant to be followed simply for the sake of the rules themselves. They only have value if they help us live as children of God, doing our best to humbly show forth the love and holiness of God by all our actions.

The last few verses we read talked about not reaping harvests to the edge of one's fields. That calls to mind the famous story of Ruth and Boaz; do you remember that from Sunday School? Ruth was an immigrant trying to survive in the land of her mother-in-law. She was a hard worker, doing whatever she could to stay out of trouble and provide for her family. (Who says that bible stories aren't relevant today?) Because Boaz honored the rule to leave some grain in the edges of his fields, Ruth did survive—and eventually found her place beside Boaz and became the great-grandmother of King David. Point #2: It's never about the rules themselves. If we live as children of God faithfully, we improve the lives of others automatically—which is God's plan all along.

Look at the next set of eight verses. Don't steal; don't deal falsely or lie; don't swear false oaths. Don't defraud your neighbor or keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. He worked for you all day and needs the wages to buy food; don't starve him by withholding his pay. Don't make fun of the deaf or the blind. Don't render unjust judgments. Whether the person before you is rich or poor, be fair in all you do. Don't slander others or gossip; don't hate in your heart someone in your family. (Vs. 18) Don't take vengeance or carry a grudge against those around you, but love your neighbor as yourself: thus says the Lord. Almost none of those rules has anything to do with you in isolation from others because of one simple reason: the bible has almost no concept of the individual as a person in isolation from others; it only knows us as social beings whose identity arises entirely from our relationships with others.

Since the age of Enlightenment we've tended to define ourselves as individual creatures: *I think therefore I am*. And in the modern age, we prioritize our needs over others: *Me first. Read my blog, like my posts, pay attention to my relentless tweets*. The bible on the other hand has a different perspective on life. You are defined, not by your individual life, but your life in relationship to God and others. I only come to understand who you are if I know the community around you. It's like a reporter coming to this worship service and, instead of asking _____ to tell us about yourself, she asks _____, _____ & _____ to tell us about you.

Loving your neighbor as yourself is how we literally come to exist – it is an act of self-creation. That is why preceding verse 18 are verses reminding us to live honorably with others: don't steal, lie, cheat, make fun of, or take vengeance on others. By damaging them, you are literally damaging yourself, for your identity is tied up with theirs. Reading the bible reminds us of this in a way that no modern literature ever can.

Now we come to the last half of the chapter, and things shift a bit. Leviticus was written a long time ago and is the work of many hands. This part of Leviticus is basically a manual for the priests and was likely composed between 1000–700 BC. It still wants us to be holy, as God is holy—but rather than naming positive things we can do in our relationships with others, it now names ways the people of God should avoid the patterns and habits of others in their land.

(Vs. 19) Don't let your animals interbreed or sow your field with two kinds of seed or wear a garment made of mixed materials. (Vs 20) It is still a sin to have sex with a slave woman, although it is not a capital crime punishable by death. (Vs. 23) When you plant trees for food, don't eat their fruit for three years—give the fourth year's harvest to the Lord and from the fifth year onward, it will be a blessing to you. (Vs. 26) Don't eat anything with its blood—this either refers to old rules related to temple sacrifices of animals or it may also refer to some ritual practices of other religions. Don't practice witchcraft. Set yourself apart by not cutting the hair on your temples or the edges of your beard. (Vs. 28) A favorite for parents with older youth—don't make gashes in your flesh or tattoo any marks. (Vs. 29) Back to other false religious practices: Don't send daughters to be temple prostitutes, thinking that doing so will increase the annual harvest. It won't. And (vs. 31) don't visit mediums or wizards.

Some of these rules could be lifted out of context and used as a stick to beat up someone who wants to get a tattoo or see a fortuneteller or follow astrology. But ultimately they are simply reminders that choices matter; relationships matter; and what you do either reflects an attitude of gratitude, walking humbly before your God, or a "Me first" narcissism that will use any and all tactics to get ahead.

The chapter ends with a few verses again focused on our relationships with others: (Vs. 32) Rise before the aged and defer to your elders. Do not oppress the alien in your land. You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (vs. 35) Be honest in your business dealings: don't cheat in measurements or quantities—use honest balances and weights and measures. Why? Because I have shown mercy to you, as the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery in the land of Egypt. Why? Because you should be holy, for I am holy. Why? Because it's the right thing to do! Keep these statutes and ordinances as part of what it means to belong to me, the Lord your God.

A long time ago, people tried to write down what it looked like to be children of God—holy and set apart. They used the language of their day and age and the categories of life around them. Reading their words now 2,700 years later is not always a simple task. But there is value in this chapter and all the chapters of the bible, if we are willing to look for it humbly. Jesus picked vs. 18 as the summary of the entire bible, as the lens through which every story and every rule is to be viewed. As you trust in Christ, I'm sure there is much more he will lead you to discover in other parts of the bible. For we are to be holy—in words and actions, not just here in church but out in the fields and markets; not just with friends beside you but the aliens outside these walls: and not just when folks can see you but always. That's who we are as children of God, according to the bible and the dear ol' book of Leviticus.