



Leviticus - Chapter Nineteen

VII Leviticus 18:1-22:33 - The Call to Holiness (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nineteen

In this chapter the Lord strongly commands the people, including the priests, to become holy in their practice, as he is holy. One becomes practically holy by observing all the following negative and positive commandments. Some of the commandments in vv.3-18 are similar to the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:2-17, and the topics in this chapter show that holiness must be practiced in every sphere of one's life. Some of the rules are grounded in the fact that the Lord is the one who saved the Israelites from the bondage in Egypt. Many of these rules, e.g. vv.9-18, are oriented toward the Israelites' functioning as a loving community, serving one another's well-being.

VII.b Leviticus 19:1-37 - Ritual and Moral Holiness

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ 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 You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. ⁴ Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:1-4

Holiness here refers first and foremost to the essential nature of God. He has a righteousness unlike any other; a justice unlike any other; a purity unlike any other, and love, grace, and mercy unlike any other. The term **holy** means 'set apart, unique, and distinct,' and holiness in humans ordinarily refers to their being set apart for service to God.

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. God is separate from man and from all creation. Yet because humans are made in the image of God, they can follow in his steps and also be holy. Human holiness is the imitation of God, i.e. becoming and acting like him.

You shall each revere your mother and father. Honour for parents is an essential building block for the stability and health of all society. If the younger generations are constantly at war with older generations, the foundations of society will be destroyed. This statements reinforces the fifth commandment: <<*Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Exodus 20:12). Reverence for parents is linked to reverence for the Lord. Submitting to parental authority is a step to submitting to divine authority.

You shall keep my sabbaths. The Sabbath recognised God's work of creation and the fact he rested on the seventh day. It was commanded to be a day of complete rest: <<*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it*>> (Exodus 20:8-11).

Because the early church tended to meet on a Sunday, the first day of the week, so as not to profane the Sabbath law, the Christian church traditionally saw Sunday as the new Sabbath. However, Paul makes it clear that it is personal choice whether to maintain this particular commandment under grace: <<*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God*>> (Romans 14:5-6), and: <<*Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted*>> (Galatians 4:9-11).

Do not turn to idols. The word for idols literally means nothings. Idols represent gods that are not real and do not really exist. This statement also confirms the earlier commandment: <<*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for*

the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments>> (Exodus 20:4-6).

Do not make cast images for yourselves. Israel had significant trouble with the worship of idols until the Babylonian captivity, some 800 years after the time of Leviticus. The attraction was not so much to the idols themselves, than as to what they represented: financial success, pleasure, and self-worship. After the Babylonian captivity, Israel was cured of gross idolatry of idols and began a more insidious form of idolatry, idolatry of the nation itself, idolatry of the temple and its ceremonies, and an idolatry of tradition. There are many things in the world today that can draw a Christian into idolatry.

⁵ When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable in your behalf. ⁶ It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. ⁷ If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. ⁸ All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the Lord; and any such person shall be cut off from the people.

Leviticus 19:5-8

When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable in your behalf. A well-being or peace-offering, signifying the enjoyment of peace with God and fellowship, was always to be made by one's own free will. God did not want coerced fellowship from the people of Israel. Sacrifices are to be made in a specific way, namely, according to God's commands. If they are not carried out in the prescribed manner, then the offerer has profaned that which is holy.

Tithes and offerings in the church today should be given with the same attitude of free will: <<Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver>> (2 Corinthians 9:7).

It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it. God does not want stale fellowship with the people of Israel or with his people today. The meat of a peace-offering was considered no good after two days.

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your

vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:9-10

You shall not reap to the very edges of your field. This was one of the public assistance programs in Israel. Farmers were not to completely harvest their fields, so the poor and needy could come and glean the remains for themselves. Thorough harvesting may reflect coveting and greed. Caring for one's neighbour and helping provide for the poor and the alien displays holiness. For a literal observance of these rules, and for kindness that goes well beyond the simple legal requirement, refer to Ruth Chapter 2.

The law allowing the poor and the aliens to gather fruit and crops from another's property was only intended to satisfy an immediate need from what had not been gathered in. It does not give carte blanche for someone to take more than their need for that would be regarded as stealing.

Introduction to Leviticus 19:11-18

This section also frequently refers to the Ten Commandments. Holiness requires that a person keep the Word of God and, in particular, the fundamental moral law enumerated in the Ten Commandments. God not only requires his people to comply with the letter of the law, he also expects them to observe his intentions.

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

Leviticus 19:11-12

Dishonesty in human relationships is prohibited. When someone swore an oath, he would do so by invoking the name of the Lord. To swear falsely, therefore, was to disregard the holiness of God's name and thus profane it. Jesus taught his disciples along similar lines: <<Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King>> (Matthew 5:33-35), and James stated: <<Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation>> (James 5:12).

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning.

¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:13-14

The prohibition against oppression is exemplified by two cases: delay in paying the wages of the hired labourer and insulting the physically disadvantaged. Caring for the poor or for those in society who cannot care for themselves was a fundamental community obligation and remains so for Christians today.

¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:15-16

You shall not render an unjust judgement. Justice and righteousness must prevail in the Israelite legal system. No favouritism is permitted; the poor and the great are to be treated the same in a court of law. Jesus taught what this legal principle was all about: <<*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get*>> (Matthew 7:1-2).

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people. A slanderer is essentially a gossip, someone who cannot mind their own business, as referred to by Paul: <<*But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-11), and who delights in discussing the lives of others and spreading stories, both true and false.

¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself.

Leviticus 19:17

To hate in one's heart is prohibited; one should rather reprove, rebuke or reason frankly with his neighbour: <<*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy*>> (Proverbs 27:5-6). Love will rebuke another when it is necessary.

The instruction is followed by a warning: you will incur guilt yourself because of him. Scholars debate the relationship between reproof and incurring sin, but this probably has to do with a situation in which one who refuses to 'reason frankly

with his neighbour,' helping him to see his sin, would share in the guilt of the neighbour's sin when it is committed; it might also suggest that to fail to 'reason frankly' will result in bitter feelings that will overflow into sinful action. The NT supports this theme: <<**My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins**>> (James 5:19-20), <<**And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies**>> (Jude 22-23).

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people. Vengeance belongs to God: <<**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'**>> (Romans 12:19), and there is a sense in which a believer can hold back God's work of vengeance upon others by seeking it for themselves. Of course, this principle applies to interpersonal relationships, and not to the rightful functions of government in keeping the law. Criminals cannot be let free because vengeance belongs to God. God exercises his vengeance through the rightful use of government authority; refer to Romans 13:1-7. It is appropriate to both personally forgive the criminal, and testify against them in court. It is easy to cherish a grudge against another, especially when it is deserved; but too much damage is done to the one holding the grudge.

The instruction and warning of vv.17-18a is developed in a heightened way: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. To love one's neighbour as oneself is a fundamental principle of the Torah, God's law. Both Jesus and Paul teach that it is a foundational tenet for how believers are to treat one another, refer to Matthew 22:39-40, Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14, while James calls this the 'royal law' in James 2:8. In Matthew 5:43, Jesus cites a distortion of this rule in order to restore the rule to its rightful place.

Unfortunately, many ancient Jews had a narrow definition of who their neighbour was and only considered their friends and countrymen to be their neighbours. Jesus commanded people to: <<**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you**>> (Luke 6:27b), and showed that a neighbour is the one in need, even if they are a traditional enemy, as indicated by the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

The command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' is simple yet commonly misunderstood. This does not mean that people must love themselves before they can love anyone else; it means that in the same way they take care of themselves and their concern about their own interests, they should take care and have concern for the interests of others. They love themselves well enough: <<*For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church*>> (Ephesians 5:29). Paul warned that in the last days, men will be lovers of themselves, and clearly not in a positive sense: <<*For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!*>> (2 Timothy 3:2-5). In fact, their misery when things are going bad shows they love themselves; they rejoice in the misery of those they hate! Their challenge is to show others the same love they show themselves.

Introduction to Leviticus 19:19-37

Holiness means more than mere separation, but it always signifies that something is set apart in its proper sphere. In this section, this principle is applied in a variety of areas of life, such as in agricultural practice in which two different types of seeds are not to be planted together.

¹⁹ You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.

Leviticus 19:19

Two different kinds of domesticated animals are not to be crossbred, two different crops are not to be grown together in the same field, and two types of materials are not to be woven together. Ceremonial holiness requires that things stay in their proper sphere, just as Israel must observe its separation from the nations (20:22-26).

The mixing of these things, different species of livestock, seeds, and fabrics, was usually seen by pagans to be a source of magical power. God wanted Israel to have no association with these pagan customs. This law is a good example of something that is no longer binding upon Christians today, because the pagan custom the law guarded against is no longer practiced. However, in this modern age there are important distinctions that are blurred and, in which, Christians must not participate: <<*All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything*>> (1 Corinthians 6:12), and: <<*'All things are lawful', but not all*

things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful', but not all things build up>> (1 Corinthians 10:23).

²⁰ If a man has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave, designated for another man but not ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, since she has not been freed; ²¹ but he shall bring a guilt-offering for himself to the Lord, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram as guilt-offering. ²² And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of guilt-offering before the Lord for his sin that he committed; and the sin he committed shall be forgiven him.

Leviticus 19:20-22

The concept of holiness governs sexual relations in Israel. It requires that a fair judgement be conveyed in legal matters pertaining to adultery and promiscuity. This specific case relates to the case of a slave girl who has been promised by her master to be the wife of another and is therefore not free to make choices for herself, as she belongs to another. The inquiry would no doubt decide whether she should be taken as the wife of the man who lay with her or not. The loss of her virginity would make her unsuitable for marriage by another man. It is likely that reparation would need to be made by the man to both the owner and the betrothed man even if he did not marry the girl, and offerings had to be made to the Lord as the act constituted sin.

The sin he committed shall be forgiven him. This is the situation described: A slave girl is engaged to marry a free man, and then a different man has sex with her. Normally, the penalty was death; but because the woman was a slave, and was presumed to be not free to resist or guarded by a father, the penalty was not death to either party.

²³ When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall regard their fruit as forbidden; for three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. ²⁴ In the fourth year all their fruit shall be set apart for rejoicing in the Lord. ²⁵ But in the fifth year you may eat of their fruit, that their yield may be increased for you: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:23-25

In the land of promise the fruit of the tree must not be eaten for the first three years. In the fourth year it is holy and an offering of praise to the Lord. Only in the fifth year can it be eaten.

Forbidden literally means ‘uncircumcised,’ and so the law of the land is being compared to circumcision. As a child is not to be circumcised before the eighth day, so the fruit on a tree is not to be plucked or eaten until after the third year.

That their yield may be increased for you. God knew that not harvesting the fruit for this period would be beneficial for both the trees and the surrounding ecology, and result in ultimately more productive fruit trees.

²⁶ You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practise augury or witchcraft. ²⁷ You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. ²⁸ You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord. ²⁹ Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, so that the land may not become prostituted and full of depravity. ³⁰ You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord. ³¹ Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:26-31

You shall not. The things listed here are all practices of the Canaanites. Holiness requires Israel not to act like the pagans in any areas of life. The message for the Christian era is to be discerning which cultural practices are appropriate and which are not. Simply conforming to the secular world is not acceptable: *<<Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>>* (Romans 12:2).

Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute. To prostitute a daughter in this context probably means to give her as a ritual prostitute at a pagan temple; this was of course forbidden, although in the eyes of the pagan culture, it was a religious thing to do.

The account of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar in Genesis 38:12-30, where Judah believed she was a shrine prostitute and made her pregnant, is an excellent example of what can go wrong when the people of God turn to prostitution. It brought great shame on Judah, yet their liaison would result in the birth of Christ many generations later. God can turn any situation around: *<<We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose>>* (Romans 8:28).

Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them. These were ways the pagans sought to contact the dead or other spirits; this was a doorway into the occult, and strictly forbidden; those who seek after these

things are defiled. Today, both the occult and spiritualism are still practised. Christians will do well to avoid such practises and to pray for God's protection over the communities in which they are practised.

³² You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. ³³ When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:32-34

You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old. This recognition of one's elders is an extended principle of love for neighbour but also recognises that the elderly still have an important role to play in society, even if they are past the age of contributing through physical work. Culturally, it was accepted that age and experience were equivalent to wisdom. This is clearly not always the case but respect for the older generation is still a good thing.

Since the Israelites had been aliens in the land of Egypt and knew what it was like, they ought to treat the strangers living among them just like themselves. In this regard the commandment in v.18b is broadened beyond one's own countrymen to foreigners, as confirmed by Luke 10:29-37. Jews living in Israel today see the land as rightfully theirs and the Palestinians as being the aliens. The Jews would do well to remember this command in their relationships with their neighbours.

³⁵ You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. ³⁶ You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:35-36

You shall not cheat. In a summary way the rule in v.15, i.e. to avoid injustice and partiality, and to judge in righteousness, is taken up again and applied to commercial transactions.

An honest ephah is a unit of dry measure equal to about 35 litres and an honest hin is a liquid measure equivalent to approximately 5 litres.

³⁷ You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them: I am the Lord.

Leviticus 19:37

You shall keep all my statutes. This sums up the entire chapter and was stated even more strongly in: <<*You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 18:5).

Fifteen times in this chapter, God declared I am the Lord, and the one with the right to tell people what to do. This is something that God expected ancient Israel to respect, and expects his modern day followers to also respect. The relationship between a lord and his people meant that the people had obligations to their lord, but the lord also had obligations toward his people. The lord was obligated to care for his servants, and the Lord God certainly cares for his people.