

Leviticus 19:1-18

Pentecost 5 + Proper 10C + July 17, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Holiness and Love

The Word of the LORD from Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” That’s how Leviticus 19 begins, and it’s a tall order. If you’re going to hang around with holy God, than you had better be holy too; so it makes sense that God then gives a bunch of laws to follow if you’re going to be holy enough to draw near to Him. From our Old Testament lesson, then, don’t deprive the poor of gleanings and grapes. Don’t steal, either by outright theft or dealing falsely or lying to get the deal you want. Don’t swear by God’s name falsely. Don’t oppress or rob your neighbor, or withhold the day’s pay from the day laborer. Don’t curse the deaf, trip the blind, or bully and mock other people who are unable to defend themselves. Don’t slander or perjure or hate from the heart. Don’t take revenge or bear a grudge.

To do these things is to do unholy things, which means you’re unholy. The list is incomplete too: there are plenty of other ways to be unholy. Then there’s the matter of degrees: how many grapes do you have to leave for the poor in your vineyard? Ten percent? Five percent? God doesn’t say. What if you don’t curse the deaf, but you think unkind thoughts about your uncle who is hard of hearing? That doesn’t sound very holy to me.

Holiness isn’t about degrees: you’re either holy or you’re not. If you’re going to be God’s people, then you’ve got to be holy. But you’re not, which means you’re not God’s holy people.

Maybe there’s another way to holiness, apart from keeping all of these commandments. Maybe when God says, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy,” He’s saying something far, far better.

By way of illustration, imagine that it’s late February. You’ve been through the snow, maybe an inversion, the fog, the dark, and the gloom. You’re tired of feeling chilled all the time, and you’d like to stop wearing a hat inside the house. Then one day, spring starts to break through. The sun comes out, and it’s a bright sun. It’s a warm, not too hot, sun. Even if the shade still has frost, the sun is blessedly warm.

What do you do? You go outside. You grab lunch on a bench, or take the dog for a walk, or putter around the back yard and start to think about gardening. You take your time walking across the parking lot to your car. You revel in how bright things look, ease those sunglasses on with a smile. You luxuriate as that sunlight warms you comfortably down to the bone.

Now, listen to me very carefully as I give you some instructions. If you’re out in the sunlight, you’ll be warm and brightened. So be warm. Stay in the sunlight. Don’t stand behind a wide tree trunk or spend your time next to the north side of the house. Don’t pick

that day to clean out the basement closets. Stay in the sun, and you'll be warm and brightened.

Please note what I didn't say: I didn't say, "If you can be warm enough and bright enough, then you can draw near to the sun." The sun comes to you, not the other way around. You don't create or even own sunlight: you receive what the sun sends your way. So when the sun comes out, *you shall be warm because the sun is warm.*

So when God says, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy," He's saying, "You are holy because I am here." As long as you're where God is, you're holy. If you're not holy, you're not there – you can't be. So what's with all the commands? It's notable that nearly all of these commands are negative: God isn't telling you what you have to do to be holy: He's telling you what holy people don't do. In other words, He's saying, "I shine upon you and so you're holy. You're holy now in Me! So here's what to do: Don't run back into the shadows! Don't run into the darkness of sin again! Stay where you are – with Me! – so that I can be Your light and Your righteousness!"

How 'bout that? God says, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." If becoming holy is on you, then you're not going to make it. But if it's God's blessing for you as He draws near, it's a gift of holiness! It's good news!

We're missing something, of course, and that's how you got to be holy in the first place. When God speaks of holiness in Leviticus 19, the topic of sacrifice is never far away. You are first holy because of sacrifice, because the holy Son of God became flesh, lived a holy life and bore your sins to the cross. Crucified, He suffered God's judgment for your unholiness; and His resurrection on the third day is proof that the price has been paid. You are holy because, for Jesus' sake, God declares you holy. You remain holy because He continues to draw near to you, because the Holy Spirit continues to gather you to your Savior in His means of grace, forgiving your sins and keeping you clothed in the holiness of Jesus.

Thus, as you hear the Absolution at the start of the service, with those words the Lord is also saying, "For Jesus sake, you are holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." And each time you hear the Benediction at the end of the service, with its new that the Lord's face shines upon you, rejoice that He continues to preserve you as His beloved holy child as you depart this place.

There's another command in here we should look at briefly: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Believe it or not, I've heard it mis-taught in this way: "Before you can love others, you have to love yourself; so make sure you devote time and energy to loving yourself." This interpretation sort of boggles the mind: You have to live in an incredibly self-indulgent culture to believe that God is concerned that you don't love yourself enough; yet here we are. The point of God's command is that you are to work as hard at caring for others as you work at caring for yourself. You are naturally good at loving yourself. If you're at the airport trying to get home and there's one seat left on the plane, your natural inclination is not, "I'm going to wait and see if anybody else needs that seat." If you've made a reservation at a restaurant, I'm guessing you don't insist that everybody else be seated before you get your table; and if you have a vacation fund, I'm betting you don't save up to send your neighbor on a getaway.

You are skilled at loving yourself. You're a natural! The problem is that we're talking about the sinful nature. Because sin has come into the world, you and all sinners are born with the mindset that, "I'm going to take care of me first, often at the expense of you."

So, no: God isn't telling you that you need to love yourself more. That's usually not a problem. God is saying that you need to work as hard at caring for others as you work at caring for you. So back to the text: if you're a farmer who gathers all your grain and all your grapes, it's better for you; but it doesn't help the poor and the sojourner who need to glean. If you steal to help yourself, you have robbed someone else. If you lie or slander to advance your cause, you are misrepresenting or trying to cheat your neighbor. If you hold your employees' wages overnight to get one more little tick of interest, you're costing them money. This is not what holy people do. This is not what the people of God do. As one made holy and set free from sin, you are to love your neighbor as yourself. That's what you've been set free in Christ to do, because Jesus kept that command and loved you to the point of dying in your place. He loved His neighbor as Himself. He loved you at His own expense, at the cost of His own holy blood.

Please note that Jesus didn't love you at His own expense in order for Him to become holy. He loved you because that is what holy people do – and as the Son of God become flesh, He could do no other. As He has loved you and sanctified you, now go and do likewise.

It's a testimony to our sinfulness that we're prone to hear "You shall be holy" as an unfair demand, and "Love your neighbor as yourself" as a gimme. Let both of these commands instead point you to Christ Jesus. Apart from Him, you're neither holy, nor do you love others as you ought. But by His incarnation, Christ became your neighbor so that He might love you at His own expense; and by His death and resurrection, your sins are removed and you're holy before God, set free from sin and love of self so that you can serve others.

Be holy, for the Lord your God is holy.

Or, to turn it around: because the Lord your God – who has redeemed you – is holy, you are holy too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen