

## *“Ethics 101”*

**Sunday, February 19, 2017**

**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany**

 **Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 (CEB)**

### **Living as holy people**

The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the whole community of the Israelites: You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

“When you harvest your land’s produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don’t gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the Lord your God.

“You must not steal nor deceive nor lie to each other. You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God’s name in doing so; I am the Lord.

“You must not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not withhold a hired laborer’s pay overnight.

You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the Lord.

“You must not act unjustly in a legal case. Do not show favoritism to the poor or deference to the great; you must judge your fellow Israelites fairly. Do not go around slandering your people. Do not stand by while your neighbor’s blood is shed; I am the Lord.

“You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your fellow Israelite strongly, so you don’t become responsible for his sin. You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

*Thanks, be to God.*

**[MESSAGE]**

The Book of Leviticus is theologically significant because the regulations it contains encompass the

fabric of personal and communal life in ancient Israel.

These regulations are given in very specific detail and always reflect the priestly point of view.

The focus of these verses from Chapter 19 is on personal integrity and outward behavior in daily life.

It affects life in the home and in the field; in the neighborhood and in the courtroom; in how the condition of our hearts affects the conduct of our relationships.

This week our discussion also includes how this ancient text is connected to Jesus' interpretation of the Law for his followers.

As we did last week, today we will see how a portion of The Sermon on the Mount relates to the ancient Israelite understanding of God's Law and how Jesus helps us to see what it means to live a holy life.

**Let us pray**...Lord, you call us to be holy because you are holy. Yet we seem to fall short. Lead us today into a better understanding of what holy living looks like in our world. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

The passage we just heard from Leviticus is a wonderful companion to the Gospel reading that is offered in the Lectionary for today.

Again, we are pointed to the Sermon on the Mount as we hear Jesus discussing ancient law and ways for his followers to live ethically.

## **Matthew 5:38-48 (CEB)**

### **Law of retaliation**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*’ But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well.

### **Law of love**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘*You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass

you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven.

“He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

“If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same?

“And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same?

***“Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.”***

***“You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”*** (Leviticus 19:2)

The common concern in both texts is that *how we love God is evident in every action we take.*

We need to consider that carefully:

- How we love God is reflected to others in every action we take – *whether for good or ill*.
- What we say and do gives witness to the very character and nature of the God we worship and serve.
- This connection between our holiness and God’s holiness is so critical that every ethical statement ends with the same reminder: “*I am the Lord (your God)*.”

This week I kept seeing this image in my head:

remember those cartoons with an angel sitting on a person’s shoulder on one side and a little devil sitting on the other side?

It’s a familiar image used to show the difference between temptation and conscience.

Understanding how we respond to these forces is how we develop our sense of ethics and I believe that is what these texts are about.

In the Old Testament, God established the Law and guided the Israelites to figure out how to apply it to their daily life.

In the New Testament, God sent Jesus to show us an example of holy living so that we might emulate him and become more like the people God planned us to be.

What we realize is, there are always choices to be made and God does not interfere with how we choose to behave.

True holiness, however, is an ideal most of us believe is out of reach.

Holiness is reserved for Jesus or Mother Teresa or the Pope or the Dalai Lama;  
**we can't be that good.**

Holy people live their lives in ways we cannot; they do things we are not capable of doing.

Our humility here may really be a way of letting ourselves off the *“holiness hook.”*

*That is not biblical thinking.*

God told Moses to tell the “*whole community*” to be holy because the Lord is holy.

God wasn't talking to a select few with special “holiness genes”; this command is for everyone.

Being holy is what every person created in the image of God is called to be...or, better described as: “*to do.*”

You see, holiness isn't some mystical state of *being*; it is how we choose to **act** in our everyday lives and relationships.

A holy life is expressed in generosity, mercy, and love toward others; we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and we are to love the foreigner who lives among us.

We can see how this understanding leads us to the high standard that Jesus set forth to love one's enemies.

Both of these texts help us to think about what holy living looks like from a biblical perspective and in our contemporary culture.

It may be difficult for us to see how the rules in Leviticus apply in our culture, but I think we need to look at them for the moral imperatives they include and not simply the letter of the law.

Farmers are to leave the corners of their fields and the gleanings from the harvest for the poor to gather.

There aren't many farmers among us this morning and many of us may not know what "gleanings" are.

The idea was that the farmer leaves behind part of the harvest so that travelers and the poor could come along later and pick up wheat and other crops from the edges of the field.

So how do we hear this in our culture?

Think about what the Bible teaches us about material wealth, sharing, and giving.

The principle of not hoarding all that one makes for oneself and sharing one's abundance with the poor and unfortunate is clear.

That is the concept here in Leviticus.

The farmer *could* collect the entire harvest – after all, it was his seed, his fields, and his investment.

God says, just because you can do something doesn't mean you should do it – **morality trumps capability**.

This is the kind of moral imperative that leads us to a new understanding of how God's economics are different from ours.

Holiness transforms self-centered tendencies into dynamic caring for the well-being of others.

That is what leads people like Bill and Melinda Gates to give away so much of their personal fortune help others.

This is the concept that should govern the way all people of means think about what they have.

Just as the Israelites were "*blessed to be a blessing,*" we are all blessed and God does not expect us to hoard what we've been given.

You are holy when you share with others.

Holiness is being a good employer, paying people a living wage and paying them on time.

Maybe this is something to consider during the debate over minimum wage laws.

Holiness is not stealing what belongs to someone else or telling a lie, even a lie that seems harmless.

You are holy when you do not gossip or slander or hold a grudge.

You are holy when you are fair to everyone equally, without being influenced by either pity or greed.

Holiness is at least not making life more difficult for someone with a disability or standing idly by when a neighbor is in trouble.

An integral relationship exists between love and holiness; Israelites are commanded to love their neighbors as themselves.

Indeed, God commands that the alien be loved as oneself...Aliens living among the Israelites are to be treated the same as native-born persons.

Maybe that is an understanding that should be included in the complex conversations about our immigration policy.

Holiness does not require big gestures or selflessly noble deeds.

It is not reserved for God or the saintly among us.

Holiness is, very simply, living an ethical life at all times in all situations.

Ethics is about morality, living with a sense of right and wrong that transcends ideas of legality.

We should not only apply the test of what is legal to our behavior – just because something is legal does not make it “right.”

We must always apply the test of ethics to our behavior choices – maybe it’s as easy as asking: ***“What would Jesus do?”***

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**