

Living as God's Just People

Printed Text • Leviticus 19:9-18, 33-37

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EVALUATE what it means to love one's neighbor as one's self; PERCEIVE ways to act with compassion; and PRAY to live a life of justice and compassion.

In Focus

In the March 6, 1994 issue of Our Daily Bread, Haddon W. Robinson wrote: "In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi [the preeminent political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian Independence Movement in the first half of the 20th century] wrote that during his student days, while living in Apartheid South Africa, he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus, he could find the solution to the 1000's year old caste system that was dividing the people of his native country, India. So one Sunday, he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, a white usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned.

"If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu."

"That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior."

Moreover, that usher's unchristian behavior may have changed the course of history and the destiny of a nation as Ghandis' spiritual influence ultimately impacted 100's of millions of people. Our lesson today deals with loving and respecting people for whom God has made them, in His image, to be.

Keep In Mind

"But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:34, KJV).

Words You Should Know

A. Fear (Exodus 20:20) yare' (Heb.) – To be afraid; to stand in awe; to show proper honor or reverence.

B. Prove (v. 20) nasah (Heb.) – To test.

Say It Correctly

Decalogue. DEK-uh-log

Ephah. EE-fuh, EE-fah

Leviticus. lih-VI-tih-kuhs

Zechariah. Zek-uh-RI-ah

KJV

Leviticus 19:9 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.

10 And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God.

11 Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.

12 And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.

13 Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

14 Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord.

15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

16 Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour; I am the Lord.

17 Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord.

33 And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him.

34 But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

35 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure.

36 Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have: I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.

37 Therefore shall ye observe all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: I am the Lord.

NLT

Leviticus 19:9 "When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop.

10 It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.

11 "Do not steal. "Do not deceive or cheat one another.

12 "Do not bring shame on the name of your God by using it to swear falsely. I am the Lord.

13 "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. "Do not make your hired workers wait until the next day to receive their pay.

14 "Do not insult the deaf or cause the blind to stumble. You must fear your God; I am the Lord.

15 "Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly.

16 "Do not spread slanderous gossip among your people. "Do not stand idly by when your neighbor's life is threatened. I am the Lord.

17 "Do not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your relatives. Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin.

18 "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

The People, Places, and Times

A Holy People. God’s people have always had a special relationship with Him, one that is based on God’s nature and character. When Israel agreed to be God’s people and to obey His covenant—following His miraculous deliverance of them from the Egyptians—they bound themselves to ethical and religious responsibilities. These were delivered to them in the form of legal codes (i.e., the Covenant Code and the Holiness Code), which included both positive and negative injunctions. The vertical relationship of God’s people was outlined in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) and was fairly simple and straightforward—they were to have no other gods, they were not to use the Lord’s name in vain, and they were to honor the Sabbath. The horizontal relationship was more complicated and came in the form of numerous specific injunctions, all provided as guiding examples and principles for how they were to govern themselves both at home and in the world.

Background

The Holiness Code of Leviticus 18:1–24:9 was given to the Israelites as a set of ethical and religious responsibilities, which includes both positive and negative injunctions. John Rogerson and Philip Davies write, “The basis of the regulations in 19:11–18 about fair dealing with one’s neighbours [sic] is not so much social solidarity as mutual religious responsibility” (145). A large part of Leviticus deals with priestly matters, while chapters 18 and 20 address sexual relations. Chapter 19, the focus of today’s lesson, deals primarily with Israel’s horizontal relationships with others, particularly addressing justice and fairness as examples of holiness.

At-A-Glance

1. Social Justice: Treating Others Right (Leviticus 19:9–16)
2. Social Justice: Starts in the Heart (vv. 17–18)
3. Social Justice: Cares for Strangers (vv. 33–34)
4. Social Justice: Being Fair in Business and Law (vv. 35–37)

In Depth

1. Social Justice: Treating Others Right (Leviticus 19:9–16)

Jesus summarized the horizontal part of a proper relationship with God as “love thy neighbour as thyself” (see Matthew 22:38–39; Luke 10:27). Inherent in every aspect of God’s holy nature and His laws regarding holiness is His heart of love. Every injunction contained in the entire Sinai Tradition reflects God’s heart of love. Treating others right, or loving one’s neighbor, is the ultimate expression of social justice. Contained within this overriding principle are the following details:

Proper handling of the land (vv. 9–10).

Inherent in treating others right is the matter of strangers (e.g., travelers), but also includes the ubiquitous poor and those who perhaps once were better off but have fallen on hard times. By generously leaving the corners of one’s fields or vines for those less fortunate, the Israelites demonstrated a godly attitude toward others. Today, one’s surplus can be shared with others in any number of ways.

Honesty with everyone (vv. 11–13).

It might seem obvious at first, but the injunctions against committing perjury, stealing, and lying (which parallel the third, eighth, and ninth commandments respectively) are sometimes harder to obey when the boundaries are less clear. When the cases are obvious, the choices between right and

wrong are clear. But often deception, deceit, and fraud can take very subtle and more easily justified forms. The godly person avoids all such acts, however minor, that dishonor God and harm others.

Not taking advantage of others (vv. 14–16).

2. Social Justice: Starts in the Heart (vv. 17–18)

Don't hate and don't seek revenge.

Jesus was very clear when He commanded in Matthew 5:43–44 to love even one's enemies, which would more than encompass these verses speaking primarily about "neighbors." Jesus knew that murder started with hate and frequently originated with a grudge that morphed into vengeance. An injunction against this evil root would preclude much trouble, grief, and heartache, not to mention it would spare lives. God is fully capable of exercising vengeance, as eloquently captured in the prayer of Psalm 94:1, "O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself." In verse 3, Psalm 94 asks the timeless question, "How long shall the wicked triumph?" The answer is that however long it is, their judgment belongs to God and God alone.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The second greatest commandment is reiterated in both testaments and reinforced by Jesus and others (see More Light on the Text). This is presented as one of several positive injunctions, but it happens to capture the heart of the entire Holiness Code—in fact, all the law codes. Nothing better defines the child of God or social justice than loving one's neighbor as one's self.

3. Social Justice: Cares for Strangers (vv. 33–34)

Strangers are sojourners (travelers).

Strangers also may be newcomers or foreigners (aliens), and God's children are to treat them as they would be treated—again invoking the second greatest commandment. This clarifies beyond question the New Testament rhetorical question, "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29). The answer is abundantly clear—everyone! None are excluded from the injunction, as clarified by the various specific examples. Whether they are visitors just passing through, settlers from another culture, or foreign outsiders, all are to be treated like blood relatives and loved as one's self.

Israel once was a stranger in Egypt.

Considering that the great Exodus from Egypt had not happened very long before the time of these injunctions, the reminder should have been a very familiar example. Nothing drives a point home better than a personal example, especially a recent one. For Christians, the parallel is with their personal deliverance from the bondage of sin, which more often than not is remembered with great fondness, no matter how many years transpire. Occasionally, however, some need to be reminded that they once had been delivered from oppression and bondage, and they should not even consider mistreating others or inflicting them with any kind of injustice.

4. Social Justice: Being Fair in Business and Law (vv. 35–37)

Just scales, righteous dealings, and fairness toward all.

Occasionally, some Old Testament laws translate perfectly into modern society without need for any kind of cultural filter. The injunction about unjust scales is preceded by a general command of not doing any unrighteousness in "judgment" or in weighing any matter, but specifically when scales

determine values and deception is difficult to detect. This could find countless modern applications, such as gas stations not setting their pumps accurately; taxi drivers “running up the meter”; expense accounts or invoices being “padded”; accountants doing “creative” bookkeeping.

Obedying God’s just ordinances is evidence for righteousness. Even where there is an unbridgeable cultural distance between the laws of the “Sinai Tradition” and today, God’s people are still called to a standard of holiness measured against God’s own holiness. Nothing demonstrates personal righteousness more than being faithful to living in a way that honors God. Nothing more explicitly defines such a life as one that is committed to loving others through practical expressions of social justice.

Search the Scriptures

1. Where is the Holiness Code found in Scripture (Leviticus 19)?
2. Were the laws in the Holiness Code exhaustive?

Discuss the Meaning

Locate some of the examples given in the Holiness Code of specific examples of injustice. Try to find modern examples that would parallel the same principles. Now think about some of your personal experiences with injustice or unrighteousness. How did these experiences make you feel? Now contrast these memories and feelings with a memorable time when you witnessed holiness, justice, or righteousness. Finish by thinking about how you have treated others justly and unjustly.

Liberating Lesson

Often, the lofty matters of holiness and justice become elusive principles when confronted with complex, emotional, and controversial events and circumstances—such as the nation’s concern for border security and how that should be translated into laws and actions. As much as one wants to obey God’s Word and love one’s neighbor, how are those realities impacted when a neighbor is breaking the law? Should everyone crossing the border illegally be granted unlimited freedom to enter the U.S., even if some of them are criminals from the Mexican drug cartel, murderers, kidnappers, and drug and weapons dealers? How should the thinking of law-abiding Christians be balanced to reflect the concerns for the innocent poor seeking a better life as well as the safety of fellow American citizens? These are not easy questions or simple issues. God’s people must be careful to weigh (judge) the issues and allow themselves to be driven by principles of biblical justice and not let God’s definitions be confused by the vested interests of politics.

Application For Activation

God’s people are to be in the world but not of it. Theirs is a higher calling to the kingdom of God and to holy living as defined by Scripture— which translates to a timeless command to treat others as we would be treated, to love others as we would be loved, and a determination to be just and fair in all one’s human relationships. Surely, there are enough challenges in this one paragraph to last a lifetime.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Leviticus 19:9–18, 33–37

Introduction

Just in this lesson, the phrase “I am the LORD” appears eight times. With other verses in chapter 19, it appears a total of 16 times and 162 times within the entire Bible. Within the lesson, the phrase expands in verses 10, 34, and 36 as “I am the LORD your God” (see also vv. 3, 4, 7, 24). All of the above are abbreviations of the full first use in the chapter, “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:2), which serves as the introduction to the chapter and this lesson. These words are the simple but all-sufficient reason that Israel (and the church) is to obey. This portion of Scripture is all about God’s holiness and His requirements for our holiness, and thus has been called the “Holiness Code.”

The chapter spells out Israel’s ethical and religious responsibilities. Some injunctions are negative (to be avoided) while others are positive (to be embraced), which together “say both yes to what God requires and no to what God forbids,” in the words of Samuel Balentine (160, emphasis added). As a whole, this chapter underscores and elaborates the Ten Commandments (Decalogue) given to Moses in Exodus 20:2–17 and reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

9 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. 10 And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.

Jesus quoted from the Law to confirm that the greatest command is vertical, to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5, right after the great “shema” verse in 6:4), while the second greatest command is horizontal, to love one’s neighbor (see commentary here on Leviticus 19:18 and 19:34; also Matthew 22:38–39; Luke 10:27). Virtually all of Leviticus 19 deals with the horizontal, which includes proper handling of the land in order to care for the needs of the poor. In 19:10, the Hebrew word for “poor” is *‘aniy* (aw-NEE) and has been consistently interpreted among most versions. The Hebrew word for “stranger” is *ger* (gare), but this word has been interpreted as “foreigner,” “alien,” and “sojourner.” The point is to not pick the fields or vines clean and to not think only of oneself or one’s own profits. The point is to act generously with every harvest and crop and to consciously think of others, especially those less fortunate, like the poor and those who are away from home—the travelers— and to care about their needs in a practical and tangible way.

11 Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another. 12 And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD. 13 Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

This part of the Holiness Code of Leviticus is cast in the negative, by way of prohibitions, just as there were both positive and negative injunctions in the Decalogue. It is all about social justice, which involves much more than economic justice, as some might think incorrectly. To steal, deceive, or lie is squarely denounced in the eighth and ninth commandments (do not steal and do not bear false witness), but in this context, it seems to apply especially to the poor. Later verses in this lesson directly include all who are in a state of vulnerability and indirectly include everyone.

Ultimately, the prohibition is against deception and deceit of any kind, against anyone, for any reason. Paralleling the third commandment (do not take the name of the Lord in vain) with different words in Leviticus 19:12 refers to using God's name in an oath that one does not intend to keep. Today's swearing on a Bible in a courtroom, but planning to commit perjury, specifically would violate this injunction. Dishonesty compromises both the individual and the entire human community, and it is contrary to and destructive of God's holiness. Oppression of any kind does not reflect God's holiness, which demands a higher standard and values even the "least of these" as the same thing as serving God Himself (Matthew 25:31–40). In Leviticus 19:13, the Hebrew word for "neighbour" is *rea`* (RAY-ah) and ultimately refers to everyone (see commentary here on verses 18 and 34).

14 Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD. 15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour. 16 Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.

None are more vulnerable than the handicapped, and even in ancient times, it was clear that God would not tolerate injustice of any kind inflicted upon them. In fact, this specific injunction is followed by the familiar and powerful rationalization, as if to say, "Do this, just because I the Lord say it." Verse 15 is a more general reference; as if verse 14 needed another blanket for those who might find exceptions to "do no unrighteousness" of any kind in judgment (negative injunction) – whether it involves the poor or the rich—but rather "judge" your neighbor righteously (positive injunction). "Judge" comes from the Hebrew word *shaphat* (shaw-FAT) and can mean to govern, vindicate, or punish, but it can also mean to either decide a controversy or enter into one. "Judgment" in Hebrew is *mishpat* (mish-PAWT) and means a just ordinance; it is a little more specific (with the "just" element) than "statute" (see commentary on v. 37). The context of this entire section speaks to men acting like wolves who single out the weak, or sickly, or those most likely to be easy marks. A child of the holy God is not to do these things – or risk God's anger.

Slander is another specific type of evil or injustice, which in Ezekiel 22:9 is connected to murder. In modern times, the legal definition of slander is publishing something about someone else that is not true and doing it with malice. The biblical injunction refers to gossip, which can involve either true or untrue statements that are spread perniciously. Because it causes so much damage, and because it is so far from holiness, slander or gossip is singled out for prohibition in Scripture (see also Jeremiah 6:28; 9:4; Proverbs 11:13; 20:19). Gossip or slander also violates the eighth commandment.

17 Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. 18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

In Matthew 5:43, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:17–18 (part of the Mosaic Law), understanding clearly that hate in one's heart is what leads to murder. Thus, hate has always been condemned in both testaments of Scripture, with or without the act of murder. The specific expressions of revenge and bearing a grudge in verse 18 are a sharper focus of the general injunction against hatred. Other parts

of the Old Testament zoom in even further on the subject of revenge, specifying repeatedly that God alone has the right, and God alone is able to exact perfect justice, regardless of the severity of the act or actions that inspired the hate and revenge (see Jeremiah 15:15; Nahum 1:2; Psalm 94:1). It is common knowledge that resentment and anger fester and invariably result in unholy expressions and deeds. It is also commonly known that such attitudes often harm the bearers more than their targets.

Juxtaposed against, and antithetical to, all forms of injustice, hatred, and evil, love stands as the quintessential solution and antidote. In Leviticus 19:18 the Hebrew word for “love” is ‘ahab (AH-hab). The do’s and don’ts of loving one’s neighbor could have been listed by the thousands, but this list in Leviticus, expanded from the Decalogue in Exodus, should have served as sufficient extension to make the clear point that love for God translates into love for neighbors, and that love does not inflict injustice, hatred, vengeance, and so on. Jesus quoted from the now famous citation of the second greatest commandment, captured by all three Synoptic Gospel writers (Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27), Paul (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14), and James (James 2:8). Again, the only rationale needed is that God is God.

19:33 And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. 34 But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

As stated, the Hebrew word for “stranger” is ger (gare) and can include a sojourner; in verse 33, the phrase “stranger sojourn” is interpreted from the Hebrew guwr (goor). Thus, the phrase easily could have been a bit of humorous alliteration (i.e., spelled phonetically, “the ger guwr”). It is easy to see the proper way to treat strangers in a brief sentence: “Love them as you love yourself.” In a literal sense, the Israelites had been “stranger sojourners” in Egypt not long before, so the reference in verse 34 to their former place of slavery was appropriate and the connection vivid. God loved the Israelites when they were sojourners in the foreign land of Egypt, and He also loved them when they rebelled against Him and practiced evil. Likewise, He loves us while we have been strangers and sinners to Him.

35 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. 36 Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have: I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Evel (EH-vel) is the Hebrew word for “unrighteousness,” and it sounds remarkably like our word “evil.” Indeed, the meaning is synonymous with injustice, iniquity, and wickedness, and it can include violent deeds of injustice. In verse 36 the Hebrew word for “just” is tsedek (TSEH-dek) and means justice, rightness, and righteousness—the exact opposite of evel from verse 35. Few Old Testament theological concepts emerge quite as strongly as the twin themes of justice and righteousness (see Proverbs 21:3; Isaiah 16:5; Amos 5:24). We are to embody or model our love and obedience to God through our love for and service to others, without exception. Jesus further underscored the Levitical amplifications of the Decalogue by removing all listed specifics and replacing them with an even more impossible-to-achieve holiness—namely that to simply think about acting unjustly would make one guilty of the whole law (Matthew 5:22). In contrast to unjust weights used in unrighteousness, those in Leviticus 19:36 who use “just weights” both exercise justice and are evidence of righteousness.

37 Therefore shall ye observe all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: I am the LORD.

Again, the word “judgments” in Hebrew is mishpat and means just ordinances, an equivalent of “statutes,” although that word in the Hebrew is choq (khome), which refers to God’s laws in this use, but does not contain the clear, “just” element of mishpat. We must obey God’s commands!

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Leviticus 5:1-19

Tuesday

Leviticus 6:8-23

Wednesday

Leviticus 7:11-34

Thursday

Leviticus 8:30-36

Friday

Leviticus 9:22-23

Saturday

Leviticus 11:41-45

Sunday

Leviticus 19:9-18, 33-37