

Holy, Holy, Holy
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Matthew 22:34-40

When my brothers and I were kids, we used to joke that our jeans that had holes in them were the perfect ones to wear to church. After all, they were holey jeans. Of course, my mother never let me actually wear holy jeans to church. Being holy is something that God wants us to be, not about having holes in our clothing. But what does it really mean to be holy?

Here in the book of Leviticus we find God telling Moses to say to the people: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” This is a serious charge! God wants us to live and act like God does! Not an easy task by any means.

The book of Leviticus is perhaps one of the least read books in the Bible. It is not exactly a favorite for preachers to preach on because most of its content is archaic and considered out of date. As primarily an instructional manual for priests, the book of Leviticus deals with all of the details for carrying out a sacrifice, rituals concerning purity and impurity, as well as the Holiness Code.

Understanding the rituals and practices of a burnt sacrifice are not first on our priority list to learn as Christians. In fact, the whole notion of these kinds of laws and rituals are no longer necessary in our post-Christ resurrection society. After all, with Jesus we no longer need to sacrifice in this way!

But the book of Leviticus is not entirely useless. In fact, it can now be looked at as a rich history of the way things used to be. And when we read it more thoroughly, we find tidbits of rich biblical texts that are very much relevant for today! Leviticus 19 is one such chapter.

We can learn a lot about the importance of ritual in Leviticus, and more specifically we can learn a lot about what it means to be holy. We know that God is holy. Holy can be defined as “sacred” or “whole”. God’s holiness is pure and good and untainted by evil, hate, and darkness. The holiness of God is trustworthy, loving, and peaceful. What then does holiness mean for us? Surely we cannot perfect God’s holiness in our own lives. That is an impossible task. But what we can do is strive to be holy like God.

In Leviticus, this is outlined in terms of ethical and religious behavior in balance with justice and love. Verse fifteen speaks of holiness in terms of justice. “You shall not render unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.” In other words, think justice before you act. Don’t always side with those who are poor simply because they are poor. If the person you are poor happens to be poor and at the same time deem to be in true need, then help him. Don’t just help simply because you feel guilty if you don’t. Likewise, don’t assume those with money are right in what they do or say. Financial stability does not equate to ethical behavior. Make decisions to help or trust based on what you know about God’s justice and care and by what is inside the person, and not simply because a person is poor or rich.

You may have heard the saying, “Don’t judge a book by its cover” or the one that goes, “Never judge another until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” Both those sayings say that we have to dig deeper into a person’s life before we make a rash judgment.

Especially as we live out our days in recession, we have to filter out who is truly in need and who is simply trying to scam us. I have heard numerous persons in need give me the sob story of a lifetime. Most of the time I have no way to know whether the person is telling me the truth or what they think will make me want to help that person. In the last year, I have heard many stories about how this person and that person have been going from state to state looking for work. I listen to their stories, hear how bad the job market is and how they have simply gone from town to town looking for help. Most of the time I am able to refer them to local organizations where they can get a hot meal, some food, and sometimes a place to stay. I know better than to hand out cash—even I have been scammed. Not knowing the true stories of these persons, I am called to make a judgment call. It’s not easy. I try not to make that judgment call on their outer appearance. On some occasions I help indirectly and on others I refer them to other places.

It’s sometimes hard not to treat some persons differently than others—especially when there is so much need in our community. But God calls us to be holy—and holy means that we judge others with fairness and ethics and not by looks or financial stability. A clergyman once asked the poor children before him, "What is holiness?" Thereupon a poor little boy in tattered rags, jumped up and said, "Please, your reverence, it is to be clean inside."¹

Verse sixteen goes on to say that we shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and we shall not profit by the blood of our neighbor. In other words, negative gossip about others is harmful and far from holy. So is rejoicing in the harm of others, or gaining by their downfall. Being holy means helping build others up, not tearing them down. It means learning how to forgive and encourage rather than criticizing.

Verses seventeen and eighteen say that we are not to hate any of our kind. Nor shall we bear a grudge or take vengeance against anyone. And if we know that a neighbor has done wrong, we are to call into question that neighbor’s actions or be held liable as a supporter of our neighbor’s actions. This is heavy stuff! To be holy in this way is to love our neighbor as ourselves. It’s hard not to hold grudges. It’s easy to hold on to anger, but to do so is to not strive toward holiness.

¹ <http://www.moreillustrations.com/Illustrations/holiness.html> (accessed October 18, 2011)

Craig Barnes shares this story:

When I was a child, my minister father brought home a 12-year-old boy named Roger, whose parents had died from a drug overdose. There was no one to care for Roger, so my folks decided they'd just raise him as if he were one of their own sons. At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home—an environment free of heroine-addicted adults! Every day, several times a day, I heard my parents saying to Roger: "No, no. That's not how we behave in this family." "No, no. You don't have to scream or fight or hurt other people to get what you want." "No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family."

And in time Roger began to change. Now, did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of the family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of my father. But did he then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. It was tough for him to change, and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love he had received. Do you have a lot of hard work to do now that the Spirit has adopted you into God's family? Certainly. But not in order to become a son or a daughter of the heavenly Father. No, you make those changes because you are a son or daughter. And every time you start to revert back to the old addictions to sin, the Holy Spirit will say to you, "No, no. That's not how we act in this family."²

God has to remind us once in a while, "No, no. That's not how we act holy." I will leave you with this quote: D. L. Moody once said: "A holy life will make the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns, they just shine."³ Amen.

Prayer:

Holy Lord,
Help us to strive toward holiness. Create in us a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

²<http://www.sermoncentral.com/Illustrations/SearchResults.asp?Category=&Page=2&Sort=rank&keyword=holy&ScriptureBookA2=&ScriptureVerse2=&TopicID=0&since2=0> (accessed October 18, 2011).

³ D.L. Moody. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/holy.htm> (accessed October 18, 2011)