

## God Commands And Defines Holiness

(Leviticus 19:1-18, 33-34; Matthew 5:1-2, 17-20, 38-48; Romans 12:1-2, 9-18)

In today's news from the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. They had left slavery behind. But now what? How were they to live? Well, the God who delivered them from slavery had not abandoned them. God called Moses to a summit meeting--up on Mount Sinai, to tell Moses, so that he could tell the people, exactly how they were to live. Thus God told Moses, "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."

Now, God could have left it like that, commanding the Israelites to be holy, as he is holy. But God knew his people too well to leave it at this. God knew that we humans tend to create him in our own image. He knew that we humans tend to make holiness into what we want it to be. Like the woman who came out of a worship service all aglow, saying, "I love everybody," but five minutes later was making fun of the way someone was dressed and joking about cheating the cashier at a local department store. Or, like the man who came out of church one day and said to his pastor, "I love God so much that I'm ready to choke anybody who dares speak a word against him." Or, the man who, after the Los Angeles riots, looted a record store, justifying his thievery by saying, "Gospel tapes. I love Jesus." Anne Lamont, the quirky Christian novelist, stings us with her insight, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." Yes, God knew his human creatures too well to just command holiness. He knew that we humans would make holiness into what we want it to be. So God gave concrete examples of what holiness really is.

God said...

1. Holiness is when a person is respectful of his parents.
2. Holiness is when a person respects the Sabbaths and doesn't just treat them like any other day.
3. Holiness is when God and God alone--and not self or things or popularity or money--is worshipped.

4. Holiness is when you reap your harvest and gather grapes, but you leave in the field and on the vine some of your harvest for the poor and the aliens in your land to pick up and eat.
5. Holiness is when you are honest with each other.
6. Holiness is when you respect the name of God.
7. Holiness is when you don't steal or cheat your neighbor or anyone whom you might easily take advantage of, such as the blind.
8. Holiness is when you practice justice, not being partial to anyone.
9. Holiness is when you don't hate or hold a grudge.
10. Holiness is when you love your neighbor as yourself.
11. Holiness is when you don't oppress immigrants, remembering that you yourself were once an immigrant.

I wonder if those Israelites, hearing God's examples of holiness, were as surprised as we are. Holiness is not just sitting quietly and looking reverent in church on Sundays and then living our lives the way we want to the rest of the week. Holiness can never be isolated to ritualistic worship of God. While holiness is expressed in how we respect God, it's also expressed in the responsibility we show for our fellow human beings. Holiness concerns our relationships, in other words, not only with God, but also with one another. According to God in Leviticus, we're not holy unless we live our lives building community, by practicing the three r's of respect, responsibility, and relationship.

A lot of people never read Leviticus. There's a lot in it about the temple, directions for sacrifice, dietary laws, the garments of the priest. Superficially, it seems that this book doesn't have a lot of say to us modern Christians. Very little preaching is done on Leviticus. But the Holiness Code in chapters 17-26 is extremely relevant to our living. They are God's rules for living as his community, being holy as he is holy. They contain some of the loftiest ethical teaching in all of scripture.

Just think about it. In his Holiness Code in Leviticus, God says we should live our lives being grateful for what we have but also thinking beyond ourselves to those who are less fortunate than we are. We are told to be generous with our resources and thoughts regarding those who are less fortunate than we are. God expects us to provide food for the hungry and poor so that they may live. He expects us to treat others justly and honestly

in daily living, in business transactions, and in the institutional structures of community. In Leviticus, God even commanded the Jubilee Year: every 50 years, all debts were to be erased and slaves set free. God expects us to restore property and freedom to those who have lost theirs. God tells us that we should strive to be holy as he is holy by showing a deep and sincere concern for the weak, the poor, the helpless, and even the enemy and the alien. Those who live as God's holy people care for those who are struggling and seek justice for everyone. A nation in which people live only for themselves is not a holy nation. God summed up holiness in Leviticus 19:18 by telling us, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's obvious that Jesus was very familiar with Leviticus and God's Holiness Code. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, he quoted Leviticus, stating that we are not only to love God but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. And when a lawyer asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, illustrating that we are to do not just something but all we can for everyone in our community, even those who are very different from us. Furthermore, as part of his Sermon On the Mount, Jesus, like God in Leviticus, took the abstract idea of love and made it concrete, giving very specific examples of how holiness is to be lived out.

Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well....You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5: 20-47).

Being holy is obviously not for the faint of heart, is it? Only strong, determined people can be holy, not only providing resources and justice for

the poor but even going beyond this--beyond what God in Leviticus demands--to what Jesus in Matthew demands: doing whatever it takes to create and maintain community, be that praying for an enemy, turning the other cheek, being merciful and generous to undeserving people, as God is merciful and generous to us undeserving people, being perfect as God is perfect. Speaking on the seeming impossibility of this, C.S. Lewis wrote: "The command 'be ye perfect' is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He (God) is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command."

Let's share a few examples of people who obviously let God make them into creatures who obeyed his command to be holy and perfect, as he is holy and perfect. First, there was a woman who had some chickens, and her chickens regularly got out of her yard into a neighbor's yard, just infuriating the neighbor. This woman was a godly woman, but the neighbor despised her, despised the church, despised do-gooders, and hated those chickens. One day when one of the chickens got through the fence, this man picked it up and wrung its neck and threw it back over the fence. The woman happened to be in the yard at the time, and the dead chicken landed right at her feet. That evening, she knocked on her neighbor's door, and when he opened it, he saw her standing there with a big bowl of her famous chicken and dumplings. She gave it to him, saying, "It occurred to me today that in all of my years, I have never prepared a meal for you, and I just want to give this to you, and I hope you enjoy it." It broke the man's heart. He invited her in, and they ended up living in respect, responsibility, and relationship with one another.

Second, former Boston Red Sox Hall-of-Fame third baseman Wade Boggs hated Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees but because of one fan. The guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town, he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults. It's hard to imagine one fan getting under a player's skin, but apparently this guy did. One day, as Boggs was warming up, the fan began his routine yelling, 'Boggs, you stink' and variations on that theme. This time, though, Boggs walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands, and asked, "Are you the guy who's always yelling at me?" The man said, "Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?" Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to his pre-game routine. The man never yelled at Boggs again; in fact, he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

Third, there was a young employee who stole several hundreds dollars of his firm's money. When the breach of trust was discovered, he was ordered to report to the senior partner. He knew he would lose his position. He feared legal action. His world was in collapse. Upon his arrival, the young man was questioned. When asked if the charges were true, he answered in the affirmative. Then came an unexpected question: "If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?" Startled, he replied, "Yes, sir, you surely can. I've learned my lesson." The executive responded, "I'm not going to press charges; you can continue in your present responsibility." He then added, "I think you ought to know that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptation....I was the first....The mercy you are receiving, I received. It's only the grace of God that can keep us both."

Understanding God's words in Leviticus and Jesus' words in Matthew, the Apostle Paul wrote the Romans, "I appeal to you...brothers and sisters...to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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...Let love be genuine...Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers...Bless those who persecute you...Live in harmony with one another...associate with the lowly...Do not repay anyone evil for evil...so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:1-2, 9-18).

How relevant today's scriptures about holiness are, for if there's anything that we and our world need, it's peace. Too many of our communities are like that of Mr. Poppovich in a *Hill Street Blues* episode several years ago. Mr. Poppovich was a widower who lived in his own house with a neat, well-kept yard, but he was very angry at the kids in his changing neighborhood because they kicked the soccer ball in his yard and crushed his marigolds. He threatened to shoot the kids. And one day he actually came out of his house with a shotgun. He fired the gun, killing a teenager. As a result, Mr. Poppovich was under siege in his own home, surrounded by angry, hate-filled neighbors. No community of holiness there. This community was seriously lacking in respect, responsibility, and relationships. There was no mutual concern or justice. No one loved one's neighbor as oneself. Mr. Poppovich's neighborhood was filled with suspicion, anger, and hatred.

The God who loves us does not want us to live like this. So God calls us, just as he did the Israelites, just as Jesus preached in his Sermon On the Mount, to be holy, to live our lives respecting God and others, to live our lives being responsible for others, to live our lives building relationships with others, to live our lives loving our neighbors as ourselves, to live our lives doing whatever it takes to build community, even forgiving and being merciful to those who have wronged us. God calls us to be holy in our neighborhoods, in our congregation, in our schools, in our work places, in our town, state, and nation.

Author Kurt Vonnegut once said, "I got a letter from a woman a while back. She was pregnant, and she wanted to know if I thought it was a mistake to bring a little baby into a world as troubled as this one is. And I replied what made being alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met. They could be almost anywhere. By saints I meant people who behaved decently and honorably in societies which were so often obscene. Our own society is very frequently obscene...Perhaps many of us...regardless of our ages or power or wealth, can be saints for her child to meet." Indeed, let us be saints for her child and every one of God's children we meet. Let us be holy, as our God is holy. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 21, 2010