

Leviticus: Elementary

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying,² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them (Leviticus 1:1-2 ESV)

*And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.
(Leviticus 9:24 ESV)*

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,² “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. (Leviticus 19:1-2 ESV)

What does the Law teach us about holiness?

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Leviticus 18-20

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Leviticus 18. This morning we are going to continue our series in the book of Leviticus called *Elementary*. Today we are going to learn what the Law teaches us about *holiness*.

Now if I asked each of you the question, *what comes to mind when you think about the book of Leviticus*, I know some of you might say ‘complicated,’ some would say ‘irrelevant,’ but some of you would *holiness*. The people who said holiness would be right! That is really what the book of Leviticus is all about. It is about how an unholy people can live with a holy God.

Imagine the scene with me: here you have a massive number of rescued *slaves* who are now wandering in the desert following around this amazing glorious compound that was the tabernacle. And your God is going to dwell inside there and lead you as you wander the desert and eventually come to the Promised Land.

This is the God who wondrously brought an end to your slavery. The God brought bread down from heaven each morning. The God who brought water from the rock. The God who rained

down meat from heaven so you could eat your fill. And this is the God who has promised to live with you, bless you, and guide you to the Promised Land.

But this is also the God who poured out his wrath when you grumbled about your food and water. This is also the God who forbid Moses from entering the Promised Land because He struck the rock in anger. If you were an Israelite hearing this Law read, you would know two things very well: this God is far more powerful and holy than you can imagine. I can imagine an Israelite asking, ‘how in the world are we going to keep in step with this mighty God?!’

God had demonstrated to the world and to his people that He was not to be trifled with. He is a *holy* God and will have a *holy* people. So God *graciously* gave the Law to His people. It was a rulebook of sorts for them to use. And it had ramifications for EVERY area of their lives. In their worship, marriages and relationships, businesses, and in their administration of justice, God would demand that His people be distinct from the world and set apart for Him. R.K Harrison puts it this way:

Holiness is not restricted to ‘religious’ matters: all of life is a stage on which holiness is to be lived out.¹

Doesn’t that sound like Paul’s words?

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do **all** to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31 ESV)

THAT is what God was after for His people. And God has not changed and neither have His demands. So it is critical today we dig deep and see the relevance for us today. In our cultural moment, we are seeing more and more that we are not aligned with the culture around us. And its important that as Christians we make a distinction between us and the culture. But more than just a distinction, we need to show the world what doing Gods GOOD commands leads to. We need to show them that His ways are BEST. He demands Holiness, and that is good news for God’s people and the world.

With these things in mind, hear now from the Holy, inspired and awesome Word of God:

¹ R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980) E-Version.

¹ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:1-5 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now as we have already said, the people of God were a freshly rescued people wandering the desert but their ultimate goal was the Promised Land. So these laws that we are going to look at were for Israel as they wandered the desert AND for when they would march into the land of Canaan. God was foreshadowing the days when the Tabernacle would remain in one place, when an Israelite would have their own land to farm, and when they would face the temptation to worship their God just like the other nations did their *idols*.

The theme of holiness was to encompass EVERY aspect of an Israelite’s life. Holiness as Paul David Tripp defines it, means that:

you have been set apart by God's grace for God's purpose. Your allegiance is no longer to the kingdom of your success and happiness, but to the progress of his kingdom of glory and grace. And where do you do this? You do this wherever you are, whomever you're with and in whatever you're doing.²

That’s a helpful definition. That is what God demanded of his people when they were wandering the desert, when they would come to the Promised Land, and what he demands of His people today.

So let’s ask the question now, *what does the Law teach us about Holiness?*

What Does the Law Teach us About Holiness?

First we see that the Law teaches us that:

² Paul D. Tripp, “The Doctrine of Holiness,” July 17, 2021, <https://www.paultripp.com/articles/posts/the-doctrine-of-holiness-article>.

1. Holiness is rooted in Redemption

Holiness is rooted in Redemption. IF we reverse this, IF we say, ‘redemption is rooted in holiness,’ we distort the Gospel. IF the Israelites forgot this they were doomed just like we would be.

But notice that all of these commands were rooted in the phrase:

I am the LORD your God

Gordon Wenham helpfully puts it this way:

This short phrase, “I am the Lord your God,” was a reminder of what God had done for Israel and how he had chosen to make them his people.³

You couldn’t hear these commands WITHOUT being reminded of how God was your REDEEMER. How He saved you when you had no hope of saving yourself. CLEARLY the holiness which he demanded of you was NOT a requisite to be saved. Instead, He rescued a group of sinners, and THEN demanded that they follow His ways. Israel’s holiness was always rooted FIRST in their redemption.

That is a lesson that Israel learned early on and we can never learn it enough either! How many of you have grown up in homes or churches where you *felt* like your relationship with God was based on your holiness? Sure, you understood the Gospel in your head and knew this to be wrong, but somehow somehow you couldn’t shake the feeling that you had to earn grace. Is that you? I think all of us have felt this pull but I will say it loud and clear: YOU WERE NOT SAVED BECAUSE YOU WERE GOOD! YOU WERE SAVED TO BE MADE GOOD!

You and I had nothing to offer God. Our best works were filthy rags before Him. Even on your very best day when you think you have not done anything wrong, you couldn’t live up to the righteousness of God. He loved us and chose to save us to make us good. We should never tire of hearing this message. Because if we forget this, we are going to jump right into a works-based salvation. And we will try to earn our way to God. We will try and do what He has commanded

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (W. B Eerdmans Publishing Co.1979), 251.

apart from the Holy Spirit's empowerment and will fail miserably. And we are going to preach a false Gospel and lead our friends and loved ones to destruction.

Your pursuit of holiness, just like Israel's was, **MUST** be rooted in what Christ has done for you! If you can't look at the life of Christ and see that He lived the righteous life you should have lived, died the death you should have died, and was accepted by God on **YOUR BEHALF**, then you have missed the Gospel. But if you *have* got this, if *this* is your hope, then you will always remember that your pursuit of holiness is based on your redemption. You will remember that you were sinking, doomed for death, when He loved, rescued, fed, healed, and blessed you. Remember Christ is your redemption. And your holiness is rooted in this.

That leads us to the second thing the Law teaches us about holiness. It is that:

2. Holiness is non-negotiable

To see this look with me at Leviticus 19:1-2:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "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.** (Leviticus 19:1-2 ESV)

God doesn't give any options to His people. The command is loud and clear: **You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.**

Holiness is rooted in our redemption in Christ and **MUST** lead to our increased holiness. That is the Gospel way: saved from sin and death and saved **TO LIFE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS**.

And did you notice who God was addressing here? Look with at verse 2 again:

² "Speak to **all the congregation of the people** (Leviticus 19:2a ESV)

God was addressing **ALL** the people of Israel. **ALL OF THE PEOPLE**, not just the priests, but everyone, was called to this standard. The average Joe or Sue in ancient Israel was called to live lives that were set apart to God. You couldn't simply rely on the Levites to perform the sacrifices and all would be well with you. No, God demanded that you obey His commandments with

every fibre of your being. Living with the glorious, all powerful, holy, and generous God in your midst demanded certain things.

You were required to offer your worship the way God prescribed, to do marriage and sex the way God prescribed, you were to keep His feasts, you were required to love and do justice and mercy, you were to do good to your neighbour, the poor and the immigrant. These were NON-NEGOTIABLE. Why? Well God tells us why:

⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. **7 I will take you to be my people**, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:6-7 ESV)

Israel was rescued for the purpose of being God’s people. And God’s people are required to holy and distinct lives. And when Jesus came along, did He shatter this way of thinking? Absolutely NOT. In His sermon on the Mount, after seemingly raising the bar in what was required of God’s people, He said these staggering words:

You therefore must be **perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** (Matthew 5:48 ESV)

Have you ever noticed that? Don’t we often forget this and think that Jesus offers more *leniency*? Well its not the case. After Jesus ascended back into heaven He poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Church and now all of us are called to even higher standards! Why? Because just like the Israelites we are called to serve God with GREAT GRATITUDE. The Israelites saw God part the sea and BUT WE have seen Jesus crucified on OUR BEHALF. How much MORE ought we to pursue this holiness! Paul exhorts the Church this way. He tells them to:

put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in **true righteousness and holiness.** (Ephesians 4:22- 24 ESV)

Holiness is a non-negotiable for you Christian. And this leads to the third thing the Law teaches us about holiness. It is that:

3. Holiness is for your good

Holiness is for YOUR GOOD CHRISTIAN. Boy if we could remember this how it would transform our thinking! Humans have been believing the same old lie since the dawn of creation. It is that God is WITHHOLDING FROM US. That His ways are NOT BEST. That if we could jump over the fences He has put up we would be free to live in bliss. Isn't that what the world says? More and more we are seeing this played out. Restraint used to be equated with wisdom. Denying or deferring pleasures to a later time used to be seen as honourable. Now that is *oppressive*. We have bought the lie and it is killing us.

But God was teaching Israel through the Law that holiness was for their good. Look with me to Leviticus 18:24-25:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean,²⁵ and the land became unclean, **so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.** (Leviticus 18:24-25 ESV)

You see holiness is about putting up BOTH 'you shall' AND 'you shall not.' First, look at the 'thou shall not.' The Canaanites sexual practices including adultery, incest, homosexuality, prostitution, bestiality were forbidden. Their gross child sacrifices were forbidden. ALL of these lead to death.

God, as a loving Father, forbid what He knew would lead to His children's death. AND, He also commanded what He knew would lead to LIFE. Leviticus 18:5 God puts it this way:

⁵ **You shall** therefore keep my statutes and my rules; **if a person does them, he shall live by them:** I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:5 ESV)

These verses mean that if you and I stay within the bounds that God has put up we will be blessed. Just like Israel was facing a culture that would mock them for their lifestyle, so you and I are facing the same thing. And friends, it will only get worse! More and more, our beliefs will seem oppressive to the culture. We will look like we are in the stone age. But we can't bend and break. Israel did time and time again! They abandoned God's ways and adopted the nations

practices around them. And what happened? EXILE! Banishment! And then, only then, while sitting in Babylon as slaves did they realize how far they had fallen.

Friends, God's design for worship, family, sex, parenting, work, relationships, all of it is for your good. It is for your good to fight for purity in your relationships. It is GOOD that husbands and wives DELIGHT in one another rather than in cheap counterfeits like pornography and whatever substitute you can think of.

It is GOOD that you single or unmarried Christians defer sex till marriage. And to fight the temptations that face you with all of your might! And to wait to be able to enjoy God's good gifts in the confines that He has commanded.

And parents it is GOOD that you choose to put your anger to death and instead CHOOSE patience and self control with your kids. And you who don't guard your tongue, it is GOOD that you keep gossip and grumbling far from you and choose to only speak of what is true and good!

For some of you young people who are facing peer pressure at school, it is GOOD that you defer temporary pleasures for eternal ones! You may not see it now, but one day you will! God's commands are better for you than the cheap substitutes the students around you are offering. I mean that! Holiness is hard work but it is for your good. For my good!

Do you truly believe that Christian? Because the sooner you and I do, the sooner we will glory in God's ways as we should.

Fourthly, the Law teaches us that your:

4. Holiness is Kind

Look with me to Leviticus 19:9-16 to see this:

⁹ "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. ¹⁰ And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall

leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

¹¹ “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. ¹² You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

¹³ “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. ¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

¹⁵ “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:9-16 ESV)

Your holiness is for not only YOUR good but also your neighbours good. Why? Because holiness is actually kindness in action!

We live in a very individualistic society, so we don't truly appreciate what these verses mean. But Israel was a people who lived in small tight-knit, family based communities. It wasn't about the ME, it was about the WE. Israel learned this lesson as they heard these Laws read out to them. Let me reread the quote I read earlier:

Holiness is not restricted to 'religious' matters: all of life is a stage on which holiness is to be lived out.⁴

An ancient Israelite was to see that being generous to the poor, speaking the truth, paying your workers on time, helping the disabled, and not gossiping pleased God and also built up their neighbours. Isn't that amazing that God would dig so deep into the life of His people? God cares about the minute details of our lives that we think are irrelevant. Why? Because He knows that taking holiness seriously doesn't only benefit you but your family, friends, your neighbours. Just as sin spreads, so does RIGHTEOUSNESS!

Can I just say here, THIS is what the world needs to see and hear. They need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ which transforms lives! It doesn't only remove sin, but it transforms men and women into holy and GOOD people! And I am telling you, if our unsaved family members, our neighbours, our co-workers saw this, it would change everything! If we were slow to speak and quick to listen to avoid gossiping, if we were able to overlook small offences in our workplaces,

⁴ R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980) E-Version.

and if we were to not speak poorly of our co-workers or bosses how people would take notice! And even if those people never received Christ as their Saviour, they would be better for it! Jesus told us to be salt and light and the pursuit of holiness is just that! You and I can't take this lightly because we will only hurt ourselves and the people around us if we neglect it.

But lastly, and tight closely with this, the Law teaches us that:

5. Holiness is a community project

You can't beat lust alone. You can't heal your marriage alone. We need each other. Leviticus 20:1-2 boldly captures this. Look there with me:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. **The people of the land shall stone him with stones.** (Leviticus 20:1-2 ESV)

We have already seen that God HATED child sacrifice. And God's prescription to deal with it was death for the perpetrator. And not just any death, but death at the hands of the *community*. In order to purge evil in the community, in order to protect against sin the camp, God demanded death. We might grimace at that, but it illustrates that the people of God are a community of believers who need to take their calling seriously. Israel was meant to be a holy community. An Israelite was called to BE INVOLVED with their neighbours. They were to care about the holiness of their community!

And that is the same for us. You are to be there in the corner with your brothers and sisters actively rooting for their sanctification! You are to be spurring them on. And on the flipside when you know your brother or sister is in sin, you are to be active in helping pull them out. Why? Because YOU ARE BROTHER'S KEEPER. YOU ARE YOUR SISTERS KEEPER.

The Church won't flourish in its witness if we don't take holiness seriously in our community. We won't flourish in our witness if we let sin fester. We saw this earlier in this series and that is why God had His people stamp out quickly any sin that was in the camp. So holiness is a community project. And we see this in the New Testament as well. Jesus told his disciples this:

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ **If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.** (Matthew 18:15-17 ESV)

Just as every Israelite threw a stone, so the Church casts their vote when dealing with sin in the community. Friends, you will not be holy if your brothers and sisters in the Church aren't active in your life. Spurring you on to look more like Christ. And on the flipside, the Church won't be holy if you don't take care to be your brothers and sisters keeper! Holiness is a community project.

This is why membership matters. Because you commit to the Church and WELCOME them into your life. You say, ‘I’m open, ask the tough questions, and if I need it, give me the tough love, and no matter what, I won’t run away when you confront me.’ That kind of commitment is necessary for the people of God to live the lives God has called us to. Because we are a family. We need each other’s help. And just like I said, there will be times in our lives when we cannot beat a certain sin without the help of lots of brothers and sisters battling it beside us. And there will be times when tough love will have to be given if someone has strayed into sin. Membership matters because holiness matters.

Friends, as we come to a close this morning, let’s challenge ourselves to pursue radical holiness in EVERY aspect of our lives. In our thoughts, homes, relationships, work places. Let’s seek accountability with one another. Let’s ask tough questions. Let’s put on love and hate the gossip we are tempted to share. Let’s pursue holiness with every fibre of our being as we remember our great God and His great redemption. And let’s remember that God’s ways are ALWAYS for our good! Let’s take our holiness seriously. Because God’s exhortation to Israel is addressed to us as well:

⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18:4-5 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let’s pray.