

Practical Holiness - Like a Good Neighbor Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-10, 17-19

A portion extracted from "Leviticus - Being Holy," by Vic Folkert @ SermonCentral.Com

Probably my favorite commercials on television these days are the ones with the tag line, "**like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.**" In these spots a very likeable young salesman, "Jake from State Farm," keeps bumping back into customers who want to return the personal favor which they think he has done for them by saving lots of money on their property insurance. Slightly embarrassed, Jake tries somewhat unsuccessfully to explain that State Farm gives everyone great insurance rates.

This is a very influential commercial, so I hope that State Farm always lives up to its neighborly claims, because that has not always been the general reputation of insurance companies which I can vouch for from my own personal experience.

Thankfully I do not remember which insurance company he worked for, but when Betty and I bought our first house, a fellow church member did us "a favor" by advising and then selling us what he said was the right amount of property insurance we needed. Several years later as we were reviewing various insurance policies – trying to save a bit of money - we learned that he had sold us the most expensive policy that company offered; far more than what was needed by a pair of new homeowners, just struggling to make ends meet.

That salesman was anything but a good neighbor. In fact, in Leviticus 19, God has something to say directly to this un-neighborly neighbor.

Leviticus 19:13

You shall not defraud your neighbor;
you shall not steal; and you shall not keep
for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.

While pretending to be neighborly, this salesman actually stole from us in behalf of his company's profit and of course his own heftier commission.

Why am I making such a big deal out of neighborliness? Because Leviticus 19 offers a very radical definition of "holiness" for us to take to heart today: which is that **the best way to live a holy life in this world, the best way to imitate God, the best way to imitate Jesus, is to be a good neighbor to everyone you meet.** We will hear more about Jesus' teachings on neighborliness in a moment, but let's begin with this radical definition for "**holy neighborliness.**"

Chapter 19, which in many ways summarizes much of the book of Leviticus, opens with God telling Moses to say to the people...

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

You shall each revere your mother and father,
and you shall keep my Sabbaths:

I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:2- 3

Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. This phrase is repeated quite often throughout the book of Leviticus.

Are you holy?

Do you even want to be holy?

When you think of a 'holy person,' who do you think of?"

Maybe you think of a holy person as someone who never smiles, or has an attitude of being "*holier than thou*." I don't want to be that person!

Some of us grew up under very legalistic standards of holiness: "*Good Christians don't dance, drink, smoke, or chew—or run around with those who do.*" In reaction, we might want to be a "cool Christian," who discusses the Bible over a beer, or still says grace at mealtime but holds up a cell phone so that people will think they are talking to someone else – which they are, just not on that cell phone.

Others think of a holy person as one who is super-spiritual. She prays an hour a day and gets text messages from God. Since none of us can measure up to that, we might assume that we are not the holy type.

BUT THE TRUTH IS, YOU ARE HOLY!

What does it mean to be holy?

The literal meaning of the word is to be "*set apart*," which in the Bible means "*set apart as belonging to God and for His personal use.*"

In the Old Testament, priests were set apart as "holy unto the Lord" they were set apart to perform special services for God, to receive the sacrifices that the people offered to God. They didn't earn the title of "holy" they inherited from their parents who were first appointed that position simply because they were the children of Aaron.

In fact, the entire nation of Israel was set apart as holy. Were the Israelites holy because they were better than most people? Certainly not; you know their history. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, Moses explains why they were declared "holy".

"The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

The people of Israel were declared to be "holy," special to God, because He had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

The same is true for all of us who now call ourselves "Christian." We are declared by God to be "holy" because Christ Jesus died in our place, so that we might be forgiven our sin and set apart as a member of God's holy family. But of course God wants the members of His holy family to live lives in accordance with His values, to be useful for His purposes; which is what Leviticus chapter 19 is all about: **how to live as one of God's holy people in this world.**

Let me tell you another interesting fact about Leviticus 19. The phrase, "***I am the Lord your God,***" is repeated 16 times in this one chapter; usually after another command for how we are to live with other people. That phrase then is a clue, a guide, a way of emphasizing that God is saying, "*this is what you should be doing,*" when He says, "***You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.***" What God is saying is, the best way to live a holy life in this world is to do what God would be doing for you if he were your neighbor.

Several years ago, the phrase, *what would Jesus do?* (WWJD), became a popular way of encouraging people to think and respond like Jesus – which is also have them living a holy life the way God would live it. That is still a powerful phrase for guiding all our choices in life and it is exactly what Leviticus 19 is trying to teach us.

So, if you want to live a holy life, to be doing what God wants you to do, you would first expect to live by the **Ten Commandments**. Thus it is no surprise that you can find all of the Commandments repeated in this chapter, but presented in a different order from the original list that you might have memorized, because wrapped around them are listed other various commands which expand upon the Commandments especially regarding how you should treat your neighbor; your neighbor being defined as everyone other than yourself.

So when this chapter opens by saying "*be holy revere your mother and father and keep My Sabbaths,*" what it is saying is that you should show the same respect to your parents that you would show to God. And you should show your respect to God by honoring His holy day, keeping the holy rest that He has commanded for you on that day.

Near its end, this chapter also says....

You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old;
and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.
Leviticus 19:32

So we are also expected to give the same honor and deference to ALL senior citizens that we would give to our own parents and to God. **We are to show our respect for older people by rising to our feet to honor them when they enter our presence** (now you know where that tradition came from).

We are also to give the aged our "**deference**" which is one of those weighty old-fashioned words we don't hear much anymore. What deference means is, "*to be polite to another person, to show them respect, to put their interests first, to listen to and to honor their opinions.*" **As God's holy person, think about this deference you are expected to show an older person the next time one enters your presence.** By closing this command with the phrase, *I am the Lord your God*, God is telling us "this is what I expect you to do as my holy people."

In a similar way as you read through this chapter, you find many more practical expansions on how to obey the Ten Commandments, to be holy, especially in relation to those around you... your neighbors.

You shall not steal;
you shall not deal falsely;
and you shall not lie to one another.
Leviticus 19:11

These commandments are then surrounded by instructions not to steal from the poor by leaving portions of your wheat and grape harvest for your hungry neighbor (Leviticus 19:9). Neither should you ever cheat your neighbor; who is both the person living next to you but also the laborers working for you. Nor should you spread malicious rumors about your neighbor or do anything else that would hinder their ability to prosper. The Hebrew language literally says, ***you shall not stand on your neighbor, I am the Lord*** (Lev. 16, literal translation).

You shall not hate in your heart anyone ...
you shall reprove your neighbor ...
You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge
you shall love your neighbor as yourself:
I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:17-18

Which brings us to the central command in this chapter, the one which Jesus included along with *loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength*, as being both the most important commands of all and in complete fulfillment of all the others:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (vs. 19), is simply the summary of this whole paragraph.

First notice that verse 17 contains a command which only you and God can know if you are being obedient: ***You shall not hate in your heart*** *anyone of your kin* ("kin" in this case – as Jesus would later point out – includes everyone you relate to). But you do have a responsibility to correct your neighbor when you see them straying – lest you be guilty of ignoring sin.

Now I know that this idea "reproving your neighbor" along with the supposed abuses of "being your neighbor's keeper" has been regularly criticized and satirized in "Church Lady" skits through the years. For instance, echoing the modern "tolerate everything" attitude in our culture, lifestyle author **Alexandra Stoddard** wrote, *we all have neighbors. Greet them on the sidewalk or in the elevator, but try not to peer through their windows. Windows are to look out from, not into.* Yet the Bible teaches that part of truly loving your neighbor also includes being responsible for helping them live a God honoring life.

Thus, as a holy person, you cannot hate, bear a grudge, or take vengeance against your neighbor and you should try to help them live the best life they possibly can. In other words, you are to treat them with the same love and concern by which you hope yourself will be treated. **The Golden Rule** – *do unto others as you would have them do unto you* - is just the action application of this command.

There is so much more interesting material in this chapter, all of which we will try to explore during our Something More Bible Study this coming Tuesday, but for now we need to jump forward to Jesus' day to see how He passed along the teachings of Leviticus 19.

Realize that in Matthew, chapter five, after giving us the **Beatitudes** – *blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy, blessed are the peacemakers ...* – which are basically Jesus' description of being neighborly, the rest of His **Sermon on the Mount** is largely an exposition on portions of Leviticus, chapter 19 and especially verse 17. His declaration that anyone who is angry or insulting of their brother – their neighbor – which Jesus said according to God's way of thinking is equal to murdering them, is

merely a restatement of ***You shall not hate in your heart anyone you shall love your neighbor as yourself*** (Mt. 5:21-22, Leviticus 19:17-18).

Then near the end of His sermon, Jesus brings up a current distortion of this ancient Godly command: , `you have heard that it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, which Jesus then turns back around saying, ***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.*** In other words, ***love all your neighbors as yourself...***

Be perfect, therefore,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.

**You shall be holy,
for I the Lord your God am holy**

Matthew 5:43-48 Leviticus 19:2

He then concludes His sermon with, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,* which is the same as that ancient command, **You shall be holy, for I the Lord Your God am holy**

Once, a lawyer challenged Jesus' summary of the greatest command, *to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and your neighbor as yourself.* The lawyer wanted to know, who qualified as his neighbor? So Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan which brought him to the conclusion that ***your neighbor is the one who shows mercy ... go and do likewise*** (Luke 10:37).

Reflecting on Jesus' teaching, Fred Rogers concluded, "***when we look at what is best in the person we happen to be with at the moment, we are doing what God does, so in appreciating our neighbor we are participating in something truly sacred.***"

Now you know why Fred Rogers called everyone "**NEIGHBOR.**"

So what should you take home from today's message?

Simply, that the best way to live a holy, God honoring life, is *to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and to love every other person you meet as yourself.* But you already knew that. Now it's just a matter of putting it into practice today, tomorrow, and every day for the rest of your life.

Let's ask God for the strength love everyone His way.