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Leviticus 19:1-18 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: ² You shall be **holy**, for I the LORD your God am **holy**. ³ You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: **I am the LORD your God.** ⁴ Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: **I am the LORD your God.**

⁵ When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the LORD, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable in your behalf. ⁶ It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire. ⁷ If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable. ⁸ All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is **holy** to the LORD; and any such person shall be cut off from the people.

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: **I am the LORD your God.**

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: **I am the LORD.** 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. ¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: **I am the LORD.**

¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer^a among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood^b of your neighbor: **I am the LORD.**

¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ 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.**¹

a Meaning of Heb uncertain

b Heb *stand against the blood*

¹*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville

One of the pleasures of summer is the smell of food cooking on a grill, wouldn't you agree? The aroma drifts and even if you aren't grilling yourself if you go for a late afternoon or early evening walk often you pick up the delectable smell and you want to invite yourself over for dinner. Have you ever thought that the same smell that is so appealing to us is also appealing to God?

Today's scriptures have been from the Book of Leviticus, a book I refer to as The Barbeque Book of the Bible. The first seven chapters are all about the offerings and sacrifices that the people are to give to the Lord and with all the grilling of beef, lamb, birds, and grain there is the repeated refrain that the people's burnt offerings were "*an aroma pleasing to the Lord.*" We can relate to that, it is a pleasing aroma.

Leviticus is primarily a book about worship and holiness. The English title, Leviticus, refers to the Levitical priests who were set apart to minister at the Lord's sanctuary. Leviticus describes laws dealing with sacrifices, the consecration of priests, laws about the distinction between what is clean and unclean, the ceremony for the Day of Atonement, laws to govern Israel's life as a holy people. In one sense, there is a lot in Leviticus that does not directly apply to us today; every verse in the Bible is not of equal weight when it comes to its authority in our lives. I had a phone call yesterday from someone saying she was reading Leviticus and looking forward to what in the world I could possibly say about it.

It isn't easy – we no longer sacrifice animals, we believe the ultimate sacrifice has been made for us through Jesus' death on the cross. We do still give offerings, just in different ways, in each worship service for God's work and for example, some of the offerings the ancient Israelites brought were to feed the priests. Some of you are kind enough to share stripers, lobsters, and scallops with me (even though according to Leviticus 11:12, "*Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you,*" that is obviously a verse Cape Codders don't believe is as authoritative as "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" While some of the verses about what is clean and unclean (in chapters 11-15) and in the Holiness Code (chapters 17-26) don't fit our 21st century Christian context, there are still things for us to learn. In fact, I would like to suggest that Leviticus 19 in particular seems to have been a chapter that influenced the life and teaching of Jesus.

The basic idea is that **God's people must be holy as God is holy.**

When you hear the word "holiness" what image comes to mind?

We may picture people at worship, a person at prayer, someone who fasts, someone who never loses their temper, never says the wrong thing, some folks associate holiness with perfection. **Leviticus makes the point that holiness is shown in a variety of ways in all aspects of life.** The repeated use of the refrain, “I am the Lord” in verses 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18 is a constant reminder of the Lord’s authority and the Lord’s presence with us in all circumstances.

Some of the activities described are ones we may associate with holiness like the giving of offerings and obeying the Lord’s commands (Leviticus 19 repeats much of the Ten Commandments we heard last week in Exodus 20).

We may be more surprised to hear in Leviticus 19 that holiness also has to do with how we run our business (when you reap the harvest, don’t strip your vineyard bare), how we treat and pay those who work for us, how we deal with the poor and the alien in our midst, how we relate to and care for those with disabilities, the importance of justice, the willingness to forego taking revenge, not bearing a grudge, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. All of a sudden Leviticus doesn’t sound quite as distant or irrelevant as we might have first thought.

Holiness has to do with there being integrity and consistency in our inner and outer lives. We learn in Leviticus that it is not enough to say we believe something but for our behavior to contradict our words, it isn’t enough to give the right offerings and to treat other people with contempt. This theme will continue through the rest of the Bible. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord criticized people for offering sacrifices and observing festivals and rituals days while injustice, corruption, and disregard for the poor and the oppressed were widespread. The Lord says in Isaiah 1:11-17, *“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats...I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”*

Some people are scared off by the word holiness because they know the depth, tenacity, and persistence of the sins, weaknesses, and issues with which they are struggling. **However, holiness and spirituality for us are not so much about perfection as they are about relationship and humility.** One Christian writer describes it this way:

“Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are *now* in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality, not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws, but because we *let go* of seeking perfection and instead seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness.”²

I was talking with my dad on the phone yesterday and as we often do we asked each other what we were preaching about this week. As we talked we discussed the common thread in our sermons of **relationship with God being more important than mere external religious observance** because he is preaching today about the parable Jesus tells in Luke 18:9-14 to “*some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*” This is the parable of two men who went to the temple to pray – one a Pharisee who prayed giving thanks that he wasn’t like other people and reciting his spiritual qualifications of neither stealing nor committing adultery, fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of his income to God’s work. The other man wouldn’t even look up to heaven and was beating his breast saying, “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” Jesus said the second man was the one whose prayer was heard and who went home justified by God. Make no mistake, God desires holiness and obedience, the Lord’s preference is for someone who obeys the commands, doesn’t steal, commit adultery, or abuse his family, fasts, tithes, yet retains a sense of humility and his true dependence on God and looks on other people with compassion rather than contempt. Given an either or choice however, Jesus says God leans toward the second man who was far more in touch with his true condition and therefore more humble than the first, who compared himself to other people rather than with a holy God and therefore looked down on others rather than looking ruthlessly at his inner being.

Part of what we need is the constant reminder that how we listen to and follow God’s word truly is a matter of the utmost importance in our lives. Robert Kupferschmid was an 81-year old with no flying experience. However, due to a tragic emergency, he

² Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality* (Zondervan, 2002), p. 13.

was forced to fly an airplane. On June 17, 1998, he and his 52-year-old pilot friend, Wesley Sickle, were flying from Indianapolis to Muncie, Indiana. During the flight, the pilot slumped over and died at the controls. The Cessna 172 single-engine plane began to nose-dive and Kupferschmid grabbed the controls. He got on the radio and pleaded for help.

Nearby were two pilots who heard the call. Mount Comfort was the closest airport, and the two pilots gave Kupferschmid a steady stream of instructions of climbing, steering—and the scariest part—landing. The two experienced pilots circled the runway three times before this somewhat frantic and totally inexperienced pilot was ready to attempt the landing.

Emergency vehicles were called out and ready for what seemed like an approaching disaster. Witnesses said the plane's nose nudged the center line and bounced a few times before the tail hit the ground. The Cessna ended up in a patch of soggy grass next to the runway. Amazingly, Kupferschmid was not injured.

This pilot listened and followed those instructions as if his life depended on it—and it did. Imagine what would take place in the lives of believers if we listened to and obeyed the Word of God with the same earnestness.³ The result would be greater holiness.

Holiness is not easy, especially when we take Leviticus 19:18 to heart, “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.**” While in Leviticus 19:18 it refers to a fellow Israelite, the law is extended to include others in Leviticus 19:34, “*The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; **you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.***”

Leviticus 19:18 is what Jesus called the “second” commandment in Mark 12:31. In Mark 12 Jesus is being grilled, so to speak, by representatives of several religious factions - the Pharisees, Herodians, the Sadducees and the scribes. One scribe who was impressed with Jesus’ answers asked him, “Which commandment is first of all?” Jesus answered, “**the first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall**

³ *Citation:* story related by Gregg Donnelly, of Maple Plain, Minnesota.

love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher, you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’- **this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.**” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

How we love our neighbors is an increasingly pressing question in this world in which war and destruction are raging in so many places and acts of violence continue to sow seeds of vengeance and retribution. In his book, *Can Man Live Without God*, Ravi Zacharias shares the following story. “One day an evangelist by the name of Jakov arrived in a certain village. He commiserated with an elderly man named Cimmerman on the tragedies he had experienced and talked to him of the love of Christ. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him that he wished to have nothing to do with Christianity. He reminded Jakov of the dreadful history of the church in his town, a history replete with plundering, exploiting, and indeed with killing innocent people.

“My own nephew was killed by them,” he said and angrily rebuffed any effort on Jakov's part to talk about Christ. *“They wear those elaborate coats and crosses,”* he said, *“signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore.”*

Jakov, looking for an occasion to get Cimmerman to change his line of thinking, said, “Cimmerman, can I ask you a question? Suppose I were to steal your coat, put it on, and break into a bank. Suppose further that the police sighted me running in the distance but could not catch up with me. One clue, however, put them onto your track: they recognize your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?”

“I would deny it,” said Cimmerman.

“Ah, but we saw your coat,’ they would say,” retorted Jakov.

This analogy quite annoyed Cimmerman, who ordered Jakov to leave his home. Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to befriend Cimmerman, encourage

him, and share the love of Christ with him. Finally one day Cimmerman asked, "*How does one become a Christian?*" Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ and gently pointed him to the Shepherd of his soul. Cimmerman bent his knee on the soil with his head bowed and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he embraced Jakov and said, "*Thank you for being in my life.*"

And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, "*You wear His coat very well.*"⁴

Holiness means we wear the coat of Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives, at home, in church, in our communities, where we work, every where we go - we bear the image of Christ who gives, teaches, serves, loves, and forgives.

⁴ Citation: Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Word, 1994).