

Sunday March 7, 2021
Lesson 1: Living As Holy People
Scripture: Leviticus 19: 1-18

Context:

We begin a new series for the spring and remainder of the season of Lent with a focus on holiness. The first section continues the theme of looking at the practices of holiness in scripture and how holy living is transformative. The first lesson comes from the book of Leviticus found in the Old Testament.

Today's passage in the book of Leviticus comes from a section known as the Holiness Code. Many biblical scholars have identified chapters seventeen through twenty-six as the Holiness Code because of its repeated use of words having to do with holiness.¹ The Holiness Code is comparable to other collections of biblical law, especially the Covenant Code and the Deuteronomic Code, and at times overlaps with its commands and application.² Like the other codes, the scriptures in the Holiness Code are attributed to conversations between Moses and God concerning holiness and how the people are called to live.

An important note about the Holiness Code is the background of ancient law collections. Like most other law collections, there is no apparent principle arrangement of the laws as the apodictic (thou shall not) and casuistic (if ___/then___) laws are scattered in the text, and there are some repetitions and inconsistencies.³ One must always be aware of the context as it helps us understand the time of its origin and understand how it applies for today.

The central tenet of the Holiness Code is the concept of holiness for everyday living. The primary meaning of the Hebrew word translated "holiness" (qudesh) is separation.⁴ To be holy is to be separate from those things profane, impure, or even ordinary. Throughout the Holiness Code, there is the constant theme of how there are degrees of separation, which still connect everything and everyone together. God (Yahweh) declares the people separate from other nations and thus they must strive to separate themselves from others. Persons, spaces, and times are all separate and the reasoning is to preserve the sanctity of all.⁵ Thus, all can be holy.

Today's ultimate theme from this section of the Holiness Code is the love of neighbor. The people of God are called to obey the commandments, practice hospitality to the immigrant and poor, and be good neighbors. They are to be holy and set apart from

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 151.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 152.

the ways of the world, which might entice them to act otherwise.

Application

The Holiness Code is often one of the most misunderstood parts of scripture. Today, the debate of how to interpret holiness still goes on as it participates in the culture wars and matters pertaining to the body such as human sexuality. As stated before in the context section, one should always look at the whole of the book of Leviticus to understand the application for today. Within the book there are repetitive statements, blatant contradictions, and themes repeated throughout the book.

If anything, the word “holy” stands out as the motif of the book, particularly in the passage read today. God wants the people to be separate in how they do life together. They are to obey the commandments, practice hospitality to the immigrant and the poor, and be good neighbors to each other. Grudges, slander, and hatred are not holy. If anything, they violate the ethic of love the Lord gives for people to live together.

At times, it feels as if holiness has been hijacked just like good manners. My parents taught me that manners were taught to us so we could learn how to make others feel comfortable and welcome. You wait for guests to go first so they know they are important. You pull out the fine china so they will feel they are special and significant. You write thank you notes because showing gratitude is an important way to show love and care.

Yet at times others take manners to berate over the heads of others. “They didn’t sit at the right place or use the right fork.” “They wore that and were totally overdressed.” You fill in the blank of the times you’ve heard people attack others for their “lack of manners.”

The same has gone for holiness. The whole point of the people of God from yesterday and today practicing holiness is to grow closer to God and love those around us better. The rules of holiness are not to be some type of club to beat over the heads of other people.

What’s worse is when religious people use holiness to fight with each other. Currently, our denomination seems to be specializing in this area. We have folks threatening to leave if people don’t see things their way. People break their covenant screaming they are only doing it because “they did it first!” People are dishonest about the purposes for which they seek to start new denominations claiming it’s for “holiness” when in reality its about power and dismantling episcopal authority and itineracy.

We have become like the world around us and have forgotten the definition of “holiness.” We are not separate from the world because we have become the world in how we handle conflict and “loving” our neighbor. We have forgotten our roots and to look at the love of our Lord.

If we are to be holy, we must be honest with ourselves when it comes to our relationship with God and others. As sinners, we will all struggle. There is that Christian brother or sister who has hurt us and the grudge actually seems justified. Telling little white lies prevents a conflict so we just say it until we feel better about ourselves. It is easy to be nicer to rich people than those who are poor. Hatred sometimes feels easier to possess than love.

Yet as God reminds us in the Holiness Code, we are better than what we think.

God has created us to love one another and to strive for holiness. We are called to love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves. God has given us those tools, which may take us to strange and foreign places. God is calling for us to be holy, to glorify our Lord by believing and acting differently. We are called to be holy because God is holy.

Why do you think holiness is so important to the Christian faith? How is holiness connected to both loving God and loving our neighbor? How do you seek holiness in your daily life?

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