

The Book of Leviticus

Lesson 12: Be Holy as the Lord Is Holy -- Leviticus 19:1–20:27

There is a phrase that beats like a heartbeat through the book of Leviticus, and in chapter 19 it reaches its clearest voice. “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:2). It is not addressed to the priests alone, nor to a spiritual elite. The LORD tells Moses, “Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel.” Every farmer, every merchant, every parent, every laborer is summoned to holiness. And the standard is not a code of conduct hung on a wall. The standard is a Person. Be holy, because I am holy.

What follows is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible, because it refuses to keep holiness in the sanctuary. It marches holiness straight out into the field, where the farmer is told to leave the edges of his harvest for the poor and the stranger. It walks into the marketplace, where the merchant is forbidden false weights. It enters the courtroom, where justice must not be twisted for rich or poor. It steps into the workplace, where wages must be paid the same day. It governs the tongue, forbidding gossip and grudges, and it crowns the chapter with a command Jesus Himself would call the second greatest of all, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (19:18).

Then chapter 20 turns to the dark places that holiness will not abide, the sacrifice of children to Molech, the consulting of mediums and the occult, and a range of sexual sins that violate God’s design. The tone grows severe, for the penalties under Israel’s civil law were grave. We will need wisdom here, learning to distinguish the abiding moral truths that the New Testament still upholds from the civil penalties of Israel’s nation-state, which were never bound on the church. Holiness has a moral core that never changes and a national casing that has passed away.

Here is the thread that ties it all together and ties it to us. Holiness is not a department of life; it is the whole of life set apart for God. The same Spirit who calls the Israelite to honest scales calls him to love his neighbor, to honor his parents, to keep his bed pure, and to worship the true God alone. And this call did not expire at the cross. When Peter wanted to summon Christians to holy living, he reached back and quoted this very chapter, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15–16, quoting Leviticus 19:2). The call is timeless. The God who is holy still says to us, in every corner of life, be holy, because I am.

Group Discussion: Leviticus 19 moves holiness out of the sanctuary and into farming, business, courts, wages, and speech. Why do we so often confine holiness to ‘religious’ activities, and how would our lives look different if we believed God is just as concerned with our scales and our wages as with our worship?

Personal Reflection: Pick one ordinary, non-religious area of your life, your work, your money, your speech, your treatment of the poor. If holiness fully governed that area, what is one thing that would have to change this week?

Read Leviticus 19:1-20:27

Study Questions

1. Leviticus 19:2 commands, "Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy," and 1 Peter 1:15-16 quotes it for Christians. What does it mean that this call to holiness is timeless, and how does grounding holiness in God's own character (rather than in mere rules) change how we pursue it?
2. Where in your life have you treated holiness as a list of rules to keep rather than a reflection of the God you belong to, and how might seeing it as the latter reshape your obedience?
3. In Leviticus 19, holiness governs the field (gleanings for the poor), the market (honest weights), the court (impartial justice), and the workplace (prompt wages). What does this teach us about how far God's holiness is meant to reach into ordinary life?
4. Which 'ordinary' area of your life, your work, money, or treatment of those with less, have you been keeping outside the reach of God's holiness, and what is one step toward bringing it in?
5. Leviticus 19:18 commands, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," which Jesus names the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39). How does the surrounding context (no grudges, no gossip, leaving gleanings, fair wages) show us what this love actually looks like in practice?

6. Who is the 'neighbour' you find hardest to love as yourself right now, and what would the concrete love described in Leviticus 19 look like toward that specific person?
7. Leviticus 19 repeatedly forbids gossip, talebearing, grudges, and hatred in the heart (19:16–18). What does it reveal about God's holiness that He cares so deeply about our speech and our hidden attitudes, not just our outward actions?
8. Where have you allowed a grudge, a critical tongue, or a quiet hatred to take root, and what would it look like to surrender that hidden sin to God's holiness this week?
9. Leviticus 20 addresses Molech worship, the occult, and serious sexual sin, attaching grave civil penalties under Israel's law. Carefully distinguish the abiding moral truths in these chapters (which the New Testament reaffirms regarding the worship of God alone and His design for sexuality and marriage as the union of one man and one woman) from the civil penalties of Israel's national law (which are not bound on the church). Why does this distinction matter, and how do we hold to God's unchanging moral standards with both clarity and compassion?
10. Looking across these two chapters, where holiness touches worship, work, money, speech, justice, sexuality, and love of neighbor, name one specific way the holy God who set apart Israel is forming you, through Christ, to be wholly set apart for Him.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Peter 1:15–16, Peter quotes Leviticus 19:2 to call Christians to holy living, showing the command is timeless; Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus names love of God and love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) as the greatest commandments; Colossians 2:14–17, the civil and ceremonial law of Israel is fulfilled and set aside in Christ while moral truth abides; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, the New Testament reaffirms God's moral design for sexuality yet announces cleansing and transformation in Christ; James 2:8–9, love of neighbor is the royal law against which partiality is sin.

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