

Leviticus Bible Study #21

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 19:1-37

1 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. **3** Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. **4** Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD your God.

5 “When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted. **6** It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or on the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire. **7** If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is tainted; it will not be accepted, **8** and everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned what is holy to the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from his people.

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.

17 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. **18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

19 “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

20 “If a man lies sexually with a woman who is a slave, assigned to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, a distinction shall be made. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free; **21** but he shall bring his compensation to the LORD, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering. **22** And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the LORD for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.

23 “When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. **24** And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. **25** But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: I am the LORD your God.

26 “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. **27** You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. **28** You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.

29 “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity. **30** You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

31 “Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.

32 “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

33 “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. **34** You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

35 “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. **36** You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. **37** And you shall observe all my statutes and all my rules, and do them: I am the LORD.”

Introduction

While the Israelites operated under the revealed Law of God, this revelation was done progressively. While the whole moral Law was revealed at Sinai as God pronounced the Decalogue,¹ the application of these broad tenets was yet to be elaborated. Even before Sinai, the habit of the Israelites during this period was to take disputes and legal questions to Moses or one of the appointed judges so as to clarify where God stood on a matter.² The decisions rendered by Moses and the appointed chiefs of the people form what is now known as *case law*; if a decision was prominent among the children of Israel, then God made the decision a legal precedent with the full force of Divine command. Typically, the circumstances which led to any decision were kept out of the text of the law, for men only need to hear the precedent, not the potentially gossip-inspiring details of persons and conflicts. However, on occasion Moses does give more detailed examples which reveal the ways in which various cases may arise, as he does in the matter of Zelophehad's daughters and inheritance law.³

The nineteenth chapter of Leviticus appears to be a collection of case-law decisions, answers to procedural questions, and additional warnings regarding misbehavior on the part of the Israelites. While at first glance it may appear random in the presentation, Moses has collected the decisions into three groupings. The first eight verses are concerned with the first table of the Law, or how one interacts with God rightly. Verses nine through eighteen are concerned with the second table of the Law, or how one interacts with their neighbor. The remainder of the text extends and elaborates on the second table, namely in its impact on the environment, how age impacts one's neighbor etc. With these groupings, Moses provides the priorities of obedience (in descending order of course) from placing God first to caring for one's neighbor to caring for their new home in the Promised Land.

Vs.1-8

1 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. **3** Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. **4** Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD your God.

¹ Exodus 20

² Exodus 18:13-27

³ Numbers 27:1-11

5 “When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted. **6** It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or on the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire. **7** If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is tainted; it will not be accepted, **8** and everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned what is holy to the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from his people.

Beginning this section is the prime command, “you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” In the New Testament, St. Peter will write to Christians and extend this same command to the Church, supporting the doctrine of supersession which states that the Church is the true Israel.⁴ St. Peter applies this to a general awareness of one's conduct ordered aright, but for the ancient Israelites it approaches a greater level of specificity. While this passage includes a just a few examples, it broadly includes all of the first table of the Law; one must only worship the true God, maintaining the proper use of His Name and honoring the Sabbaths, and honoring their parents. Citing the Fourth Commandment may seem strange to the reader since one's parents are not the Lord, but as Luther explains in the *Large Catechism* one's parents are tasked with representing God and providing for a child in His stead; thus to honor one's parents is to honor God vicariously.⁵ Before Moses is tasked with relating the case-law decision, the Israelites are thus reminded of their first priority.

The particular decision in verses five through eight relate to peace offerings. More specifically, it is peace offerings “that you may be accepted.” Though the regulation also relates to the peace offerings of fellowship, it applies more strongly to the *shelamim* as fulfillment of a *vow*. The Israelite who completes a vow does so with a peace offering in view at the end of the task. By making the offering, he or she declares *Shalam* before God. Here, though the circumstances of the case are not given, our Lord adds that one must perform it correctly. The celebratory eating must cease by the third day, wherein whatever is left must be burned to ashes. While the time limit is not explained, a reasonable speculation is that the meat of the offering would begin to rot after three days; this would be an incursion of the curse on creation onto the offering, thus making it a violation of the Edenic ideal to which Israel was called. To eat rotten meat as part of a celebration is to taint the proclamation of perfection, contradicting the dual principles of *Shalom* and *Shalam* alike.⁶

Vs.9-18

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. **17** “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. **18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

⁴ 1 Peter 1:13-16

⁵ <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#:~:text=Therefore%20it%20is%20a,done%20him%20all%20good.>

⁶ While we have discussed these terms before, a summary reminder: *Shalom* is peace and wholeness, *Shalam* is the process of reconciliation or *getting* to that state of *Shalom*.

The chapter begins with “you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,” but the subsequent sections end with their respective headers. In this section, it is centralized on “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Christ identifies this as the second greatest Commandment in the Law.⁷ As soon as the reader sees that verse, the preceding commandments make sense as part of a whole. A farmer who does not completely harvest his produce is permitting gleaners to harvest a little for themselves, thus caring for the poor. Someone who steals or lies or oppresses or robs fails to love his neighbor as himself. This includes treating the disabled with a measure of dignity and care which accommodates their vulnerabilities instead of taking advantage of them.

One may note that the section includes a great deal of emphasis on honesty. If one swears by the Name of the Lord falsely, he has committed two sins, both in lying to his neighbor *and* taking God's Name in vain. Moses here includes commands directly against lying to one's neighbor, slandering, and bearing false witness, but in addition to this he includes the requirement to “reason frankly.” This is to say, being open when upset with one's neighbor rather than harboring secret grudges or hatred in one's heart. The mirror commandment to loving your neighbor as yourself is thus made plain, that believers are forbidden from *hating* their neighbors. It is this “flip side” of the Second Greatest Commandment that St. John explains in harsh terms, such that one cannot be considered a Christian at all if he harbors such hatred.⁸ This includes, as St. James says, a command against partiality in favor of the rich or high status over poor brothers and sisters.⁹

Vs.19-35

19 “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

20 “If a man lies sexually with a woman who is a slave, assigned to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, a distinction shall be made. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free; **21** but he shall bring his compensation to the LORD, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering. **22** And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the LORD for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.

23 “When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. **24** And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. **25** But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: I am the LORD your God.

26 “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. **27** You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. **28** You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.

29 “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity. **30** You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

31 “Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.

32 “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

33 “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. **34** You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

⁷ Mark 12:28-34

⁸ 1 John 1 2:9, 3:15

⁹ James 2:1-7

35 “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. 36 You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. 37 And you shall observe all my statutes and all my rules, and do them: I am the LORD.”

These verses *also* appear disconnected in topic until one reaches the last sentence, just as the previous ten. Here the unifying law is “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity.” This is not merely a command to maintain equal weights and measures in transactions, extending outward into animals, slaves, the land itself, and personal conduct. In a word, the Israelites are commanded to have a strong ethic of life over death and wholeness over confusion. It is likely that St. Paul had these tenets in mind when wrapping up the principle thus and applying it to congregational dynamics: “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace.”¹⁰

God intends for His people to live in a state of being sensible and clear. The cows are the way God made them, so intentionally trying to change their nature through hybridization is a cause of ignorance and destabilization; muddying the waters by introducing different animal types is thus verboten. The same goes for planting seeds of different kinds, which would lead to confusion in matters of harvest. Since the priesthood wore mixed fabrics,¹¹ for a normal Israelite to wear them would be to cause confusion as to whether competing religious orders had arisen. Prostitution creates havoc between men and women, and its lucrative profits only expand its destabilizing influence. Communicating with the dead brings in confusion between life and death itself, and along with divination causes the interference of one world with another.

The nation who is tasked with representing life on earth, living in the closest one can get to the Edenic state, must not plant discord within her borders thereby inviting more of the curse upon themselves. To the contrary, the picture God wants to paint in the land is one of verdancy and life, just as Eden was. Disfigurements and tattoos on behalf of the dead suggest a permanent mourning state, inviting the people to emphasize death over life. To this point the Law not only commands against confusion of properties and persons, but also demands the visual verification of life everywhere the Israelites perform agriculture. The trees are not to be harvested until the fourth year, and even that is reserved for the priests to eat; for four years, all the land is covered in a state of plenty without being consumed.

Yet it is not just vegetable and animal life which must be emphasized. A slave is shown to be a person, not merely property. A slave girl coerced into sexual congress by her master is still a victim; the man who slept with her must make restitution for defrauding his brother,¹² now that he has claimed her as his own wife instead of a slave.¹³ Old people are still *persons* despite their being less physically able, and must be honored for their previous labors instead of mistreated or ignored. The sojourner is still a person, and not only must be treated well but must be *loved* with the same accommodations for the duration of their stay in the land; for that matter, they must also be treated as being under the same Law. They are thus exhorted to *participate* in the life of the people and its Divine mission, encouraging them to convert.

Christians are free from many of these restrictions today, but we are called to see the greater principles God had in mind. Though Christians may hybridize animals today, even here one must take pause to ensure that it is not done to *harm* the animal. Believers must emphasize life over death, personhood over property, and fair dealings over greed. All of these are virtuous matters presented in these commandments as broader principles in the New Testament, making them more valuable in our freedom than for Israel in their bondage.

10 1 Corinthians 14:33

11 Exodus 28

12 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7

13 Sleeping with a slave woman elevated her to a wifely status, Exodus 21:7-11. In this case law, the slave woman could not refuse the order, and was thus made a spouse to the owner instead of the man she was betrothed to.