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The Sanctity of The Law

Leviticus 19:1-37

Intro: As was mentioned in our last study, the first 17 chapters of **Leviticus** are all focused on the issue of ritual purity as it related to matters dealing with the tabernacle, the palace of Israel's covenant King. Our current study finds us in the middle of 3 chapters (**18-20**) that deal directly with moral purity. Our modern society rarely bothers itself with any serious questions of morality, unless it is politically expedient. Most believe that morality depends solely on the beliefs of the individual and what they accept as being right or wrong but that concept only leads to moral confusion and societal chaos. No, there must be a standard baseline of morality established that can guide a people or a nation into an ordered lifestyle where the innocent are protected and transgressions are punished. The moral standard for Israel was delivered by God to Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai and that same standard has been applied for centuries in some form or another to many, if not most of successful societies in the West.

That standard, of course, is the 10 Commandments and they're mentioned here because our text is going to deal with or allude to most of them and **ch20** is going to deal with every one of them. In **ch19**, the 10 Commandments are going to be applied to various areas of Israelite life while **ch20** will explain the penalties that must be imposed on those who disobey the Lord's commands. The regulations listed in **ch19** aren't arranged in any discernible order but the one thing that ties them together is their relationship to the Big 10, which form the basis for all Jewish law and should be the basis for all moral law in every society.

If you have ever studied the 10 Commandments, you will recognize that they are listed in a very specific order. The first 4 commands focus on the Israelite's relationship with Jehovah, their covenant King. The last 6 commands focus on the Israelite's relationship with their fellow countrymen, their neighbors as it were. This grouping of the commands is reflected in the Lord's response to the Pharisee's question of, "Which is the first (greatest) commandment of all?" **Mark 12:29-31** says, "Jesus answered him, 'The first of all commandments is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,

and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” They asked for the greatest of the 10 and Jesus simply gave them a synopsis of all 10: Love God, love your neighbor. If you can do that, you’ll never go wrong.

1-2 – As I said, these 3 chapters (**18-20**) focus on moral purity, which is just another way of saying holy living. While each chapter deals with unholy practices that the Israelites were to avoid, our text also focuses on holy practices they must be sure to do. Holy living is not simply accomplished by avoiding evil practices; it’s primarily the consistent practice of righteousness. It’s not enough to just make sure you don’t do anything bad, you must also deliberately pursue doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord’s command to holiness can only be fulfilled through obedience to the Lord’s individual commands (**37**).

The idea behind the word holy is separate. When applied to God, it describes His apartness; meaning He is different from man and all other forms of creation; different in His being and in the greatness and majesty of His attributes. He has a righteousness unlike any other; a justice unlike any other; a purity unlike any other – a love, grace and mercy unlike any other. The Lord is unmatched in all of His attributes and that’s what sets Him apart as being distinct from all of creation. But, although God is separate from man, man was still created in the image of God and that means man can follow in the footsteps of God and man can be holy. It’s in this context that Israel is now called to be holy -different, separate – from the nations and peoples around them.

As we’ll see, our text makes it clear that such holiness is not accomplished by withdrawing from the world but by actively engaging in it and with it, living out the Lord’s righteous character in every area of life. In fact, this was why Israel has been set apart, that they might embody and example the Lord’s purity and love to the world around them, demonstrating His holy character to any and all who were watching from afar. Thus, holiness is not restricted to ‘religious’ matters: all of the Christian life is a stage on which holiness is to be lived out. The remainder of ch**19**, from **3-36** lists specific commands for holy living.

3 – This is a reference to both the 5th and the 4th commandments. The 5th

stresses the importance of obedience to parents because in Israel, parents were the ones who provided covenant instruction to the youngest members of society. On a larger scale, honor for parents is an essential building block for the stability and health of all society. If the younger generations are constantly at war with older generations, the foundations of society will be destroyed. For Israel, this command not only included obedience to parental covenant instruction but also caring for them in their old age.

It's interesting that the 4th command is mentioned in connection with the 5th. It's not by accident that the Lord links reverence for parents with reverence for Himself. Submitting to parental authority is the first step to submitting to Divine authority. Parents are substitutes for the heavenly Father, as far as their children are concerned. Parents provide their children with their initial concept of a higher power: they give their children life, they love them unconditionally, they provide for their every need, they support their physical growth as well as their emotional, mental and, eventually, spiritual growth. Now, we don't do this perfectly, but with the Lord's help, we still do it.

The difference between the 4th and 5th commands is that, while the 5th is still very much in effect, there is a real sense in which Jesus Christ fulfilled both the purpose and the plan of the Sabbath for us and in us. [Heb 4:9-11](#) teaches us that Jesus Himself is our rest; a rest that comes from knowing that we don't have to work to save ourselves; a rest that comes from knowing that our salvation is accomplished in Christ. When we remember His finished work, we keep God's Sabbath, we remember His rest.

4 – This repeats the 2nd commandment. The word for idols comes from a root meaning worthless, inadequate or nothingness; it literally means 'nothings'. Idols represent gods that aren't real and really are nothings. The worthlessness of idols underscores the uselessness of worshiping them. The Israelites were not to turn to idols: look to them for help, since doing so meant they were turning their backs to the Lord.

5-8 – While v4 prohibits illicit worship, these verse deal with offering sacrifice properly so that the offeror would be favorably accepted. The focus is on the peace (or freewill) offering. This offering was to always be made of one's own free will; God didn't want forced fellowship from His people. God also didn't want stale fellowship with His people; so the meat from this offering was **never** to be eaten on the 3rd day. To do so would profane the

entire offering, showing utter disregard for the Lord's holy property by treating it as a common object, thereby nullifying the whole sacrifice.

9-10 – These verses anticipate life in the Promised Land. There are actually 5 commands here but they all point to a central theme of covenant law: holy living means generously caring for those in need. This was one of the public assistance programs in Israel. Farmers weren't to completely harvest their fields so the poor and needy could come and glean the remains for themselves. This was a wonderful way to help the poor and the disadvantaged foreigner. It commanded farmers to have a generous heart, putting people before maximum profits. It also allowed the poor to be active and work for their food. They were able to provide for their own needs with both work and dignity.

11-12 – This command points to another important foundation for human society: the right to personal property. It showed Israel that the Lord expected them to deal with each other in a completely trustworthy manner (**11**) and to never involve Him in their wrongdoing (**12**). Stealing is forbidden in the 8th, and those who stole would often lie and deceive to cover up their sin. If accused, they may falsely swear an oath of innocence in the Lord's name; using the Lord's name to get away with the very evils He had forbidden. To do so would be to treat His name as a common or ordinary thing, which is to not only profane the Lord's name but to profane the Lord Himself (forbidden by the 3rd).

13-14 – While **11-12** deals with unjust acts between equals, these verses deal with unjust acts perpetrated by the powerful against those unable to defend themselves. To cheat (defraud) refers to withholding that which belongs to another; to rob refers to taking someone's property by force. Defrauding was sometimes done by not giving hired workers their wages in a timely manner, an especially cruel act since these workers were likely living hand to mouth.

V14 forbids any oppression of the weak, specifically those with physical disabilities. The text mentions the deaf and blind, both of which are at the mercy of others and both represent all those at some physical or social disadvantage, whether physically or mentally challenged, poor, widowed or displaced. While these people may not be able to hold offenders accountable, the Lord most certainly can and will. This law sought to build

basic kindness among the people of Israel. It would take a cruel, hardhearted person to deliberately trip up a blind person. Israel had just spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt and that cruel environment made cruelty seem normal to them. That had to change. An accurate and revealing measure of our humanity is how we treat the weak and unfortunate among us. Generosity and kindness to those in need is an important aspect of holiness.

15-16 – **15** addresses those charged with the responsibility of deciding legal cases. Local leaders judging cases may have been tempted to pervert justice by showing partiality, whether from compassion to the poor or favoritism to the great. **16** continues the legal theme and addresses witnesses; warning them against perverting justice by lying about those involved in a trial, especially when the lie could result in the death penalty. This law commands Israel and us to promote and protect the lives of those around us. We have no excuse to be indifferent to the loss of life.

17-18 – This teaches Israel how to respond when wronged by a fellow Israelite. There are 4 things they must not do: 1) hate, 2) seek revenge, 3) hold a grudge, 4) sin by doing any of these things. There are also 2 things they must do: 1) resolve the conflict by showing the other party their sin, the exact opposite of holding a grudge. Love will rebuke another when it is necessary; peace is the goal. 2) Love your neighbor as yourself. What does this look like? Love is not a feeling, it is an action. To love our neighbor as ourselves, we must be willing to forgive their wrongs as quickly as we do our own. We must be willing to show others the practical care that we show ourselves. Doing so will actually fulfill every law that the Lord gives His people about how to treat one another.

19 – This law teaches the Lord's holy people to acknowledge His sovereign kingship by respecting the categories He has established. The mixing of different kinds of animals and seeds was to rebel against the Lord's design in creation and thus, against His position as Creator. Also, the mixing of different species of animals, seeds and even fabrics was often seen by ancient pagans to be a source of magical power. God wanted Israel to have no association with these pagan customs. By implication, this law also taught Israel to avoid mixtures with other nations, either in marriage or religion. Even in our modern age, there are important distinctions that have purposefully become blurred and things Christians must not participate in;

namely blurring of gender distinctions should be resisted by Christians.

20-22 – This passage deals with a scenario where a concubine (slave girl) was engaged to be married to one man but was forcibly taken (raped) by another man. Normally, the penalty for sexual infidelity was death for both parties but since the woman was a slave and was presumed to be not free to resist, she was not held at fault. The offending man did not get off so easy. Since the woman could not now marry her fiancée, he must be reimbursed. This would come from the offender. The moral guilt of his offense would be settled by sacrifice (reparation offering) where he would pay for her again, plus 20%. The presumption is that the rapist her would then be obliged to marry her. So, depending on the character and disposition of the woman, he may be paying for this sin for the rest of his life.

23-25 – These verse also anticipate life in the Promised Land. When they entered the land, all fruit from any fruit trees they planted was to be considered forbidden for the first 3 years. The fruit in the 4th year belonged to the Lord and the fruit in the 5th year could be eaten. The reason for this law isn't given but it did reinforce to the Israelites that the land was the Lord's and He is giving it to them as a gift.

26-28 – These verses prohibit a series of pagan practices. As mentioned in our study of ch 17, eating meat with (or over) the blood may have been associated with pagan worship or occult practices. This may be why it's immediately followed by a warning against practicing divination or seeking omens. Humans have a natural aversion to uncertainty but Israel was prohibited from turning to occult practices; they were to turn to the Lord who would guide their future decisions by means of lots or prophets. When He didn't, Israel was expected to walk by faith and live in accordance with God's general will as revealed in the law, trusting that the Lord was in charge of their future and that He would shepherd them with tender love and care.

V**27-28** prohibit pagan mourning rites, such as various hair and beard styles or cutting one's body for the dead. The rationale is not provided here but we know that cutting one's body is associated with pagan worship in **I Kings 18:28** (priest of Baal on Mt Carmel). It may be that these were all Canaanite practices that the Lord wanted Israel to remain distinct from. Today these

things don't have the same pagan associations as they did in ancient Israel – at least not in the Western world – so believers are no longer prohibited from getting them. Some like to use v28 as a proof text against having tattoos but if that were the case, all Christian men would also need to walk around with long beards and curly sideburns like the orthodox, Hasidic Jews.

29-30 – 29 warns Israelites from a temptation caused by poverty or greed – prostituting their daughters. Like every other Israelite, daughters were part of the Lord's holy people. To degrade them in such a way would be to desecrate that which is holy. As such, daughters were to be treasured; they were not to be treated like a common thing that anyone could use. Instead, the land was to be filled with those who embraced the covenant from the heart (30). To keep the Sabbath was to affirm the covenant and all it entailed. Also, because the Lord dwelt in His sanctuary in the midst of the camp, Israel was to follow His command obediently, showing due reverence to His holy presence. Having the Lord as a neighbor should have a radical impact on how a person lives.

31 – Again, to turn to any proveyors of the occult was the same as turning your back on the Lord. To try to discover what God has declined to reveal is a sin against His wisdom, providence and goodness. In His great mercy, God has hidden most of the specific knowledge of the future from mankind and instead, He's given us hope – the expectation of future good – in its place. We're not meant to see the future clearly, we're to walk by faith and trust in God.

32 – This is a 3-fold command. 1st to show respect for the elderly; to acknowledge the wisdom and experience that comes with years. Now, just having gray hair doesn't necessarily mean someone is wise; there's no fool like an old fool. 2nd, this law also promoted respect for authority, since the elderly would often be one's parents or leaders in the community. Such respect was also showing the Lord's love to the disadvantaged, for we slow and weaken with age and are in greater need of patient care and compassion. If you met the first 2 requirements, the 3rd was automatically accomplished: having a reverential awe of the Lord enables us to imitate His ways.

33-34 – This makes it clear that resident aliens were not to be mistreated;

they're to receive full and impartial justice, just as if they were native-born. The Israelites knew first-hand how dehumanizing it was to be mistreated in a foreign land. They were to show the resident alien the same practical love they'd been shown by the Lord their God. Those who experience the Lord's love and mercy are to be the quickest to extend it to others.

35-36 – This law prohibits injustice in dealing with others, whether in the public court or in business transactions. The use of dishonest weights to acquire dishonest gain was a practice completely contrary to the justice and morality the Israelites were to embody and example. Honesty was also required in both dry and liquid measurements. The reason for such honesty was rooted in Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord, the one who redeemed them from oppression, not so they might oppress others but so they might demonstrate to others their Lord's holy and redeeming love.

37 – The holiness Israel was to possess was only accomplished through obedience to the Lord's commands. Such obedience enabled Israel to carry out their divine mission of embodying the Lord's character in the world and as they engaged with the world in holiness, they would facilitate the spread His kingdom and reign. Such obedience would also ensure that Israel was protected from the Lord's righteous judgment and instead, they would experience life under His favor and blessing.

As wonderful as all this is, we must also remember that truth that God gave His law for the purpose of restraining sin, not to reform sinners. The penalties He imposed were for the purpose of upholding His law, not improving the offenders. This might seem like a small distinction but it is an important one because, while the law can be a light that exposes evil and a guard that restrains evil, it can never change the human heart. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can do that.

The law cannot save you, it can only show you that you need a Savior. Jesus, in living a sinless life, fulfilled the law and became the perfect sacrifice for your sin, and for mine. Keeping the law will make you a moral person but it won't make you sinless. Many a moral person will stand before God and be judged for their sin. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can forgive your sin, only salvation in Jesus Christ will put you in a right standing with God. Only in Christ can you be protected from God's righteous judgment; only in Christ can you experience life under God's favor and blessing. 😊