

Leviticus 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Leviticus chapter 19 So that you may be accepted.

It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire. If it is eaten at all on the third day it is tainted, it will not be accepted, 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.

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, 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. You shall not steal. You shall not deal falsely. You shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God.

I am the Lord your God. You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf, or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God.

[1 : 38] I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness you shall judge your neighbour.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour. I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance, or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. 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.

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, but he shall bring his compensation to the Lord to the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering.

[2 : 46] 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. 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. And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord. But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit to increase its yield for you.

I am the Lord your God. You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.

You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves. I am the Lord. Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity.

You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary. I am the Lord. Do not turn to mediums or necromancers. Do not seek them out and so make yourselves unclean by them.

[3 : 56] I am the Lord your God. You shall stand up before the grey head and honour the face of an old man and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong.

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.

You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just effort and a just hin.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And you shall observe all my statutes and all my rules and do them. I am the Lord.

Leviticus chapter 19 is an exceedingly important chapter. It's a single speech framed by perhaps the most important and fundamental statement of the entire book. You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

[4 : 56] This is a statement addressed not merely to the priests but to the entire congregation of the people. Holiness must characterise everyone in the nation from the least to the greatest. There are people set apart to the Lord, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, as we see in Exodus chapter 19 verses 5 to 6.

This democratisation of holiness is also expressed in a concern for the well-being and loving treatment of each and every person within the nation, no matter how low or high they may be.

These chapters of Leviticus express what it means to be a people set apart. Verses 3 to 8 present a series of vertical commandments related to the first five commandments of the ten words of Exodus chapter 20.

Verses 9 to 18 present a series of horizontal commandments related to the second five commandments of the ten words. In verse 18 we meet the statement in which the entire second half of the ten words is summed up.

The second great commandment you shall love your neighbour as yourself. The chapter is concluded by a return to its opening theme of God's identity and his claim upon his people and a reminder of the ten words and the rootedness of this chapter within their material.

[6 : 12] I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. The same sort of sentence that comes at the beginning of the ten commandments. Leviticus chapter 19 should probably then be regarded in large measure as a commentary upon the ten words.

Once again, but in a manner that's more pronounced than in the previous chapter, chapter 19 is punctuated throughout by the statement I am the Lord. Righteous behaviour is seen to arise logically from God's holiness and his claim upon his people.

If you look through the chapter you can see material corresponding to each one of the ten commandments much as we do in Exodus chapter 21 to 23 or Deuteronomy chapter 6 to 26 which are also extended commentaries upon or expansions of the ten words.

Leviticus 19 is not as expansive as these other instances though but what each of these expansions of the ten words do, however, is to explore some dimension of the inner logic of the commandments as a whole.

Here perhaps the surprising feature is the fact that the list begins with the fifth commandment followed by the fourth. Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father and you shall keep my sabbaths.

[7 : 23] These two commandments are the two positive commandments at the heart of the ten words in Exodus chapter 20. In verse 30 there is a return to the opening with the statement you shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary.

We return to the sabbaths and to the theme of reverence but with the mother and father being replaced by God's sanctuary. Reverence for mother and father is proper behaviour in the context of the most fundamental familial and social relationship.

However, as we go throughout the chapter this is expanded to a more general posture of love and concern towards neighbour and stranger. The importance of the body as something to be honoured and as a realm set apart to God is once again underlined here as it was in the preceding chapter.

The sabbath commandment in verse 3 is followed by commands that speak of the importance of honouring the things that belong to God. Commands concerning the avoidance of false gods and the making of idols and the proper practice of sacrifices.

Verses 9 to 18 largely expand upon the second table of the law and sum it up in a positive concluding statement. So in these verses we see the refraction of commandments into further distinct principles.

[8 : 35] For instance the prohibition upon stealing also includes a commitment to give the poor their due of our produce. In verses 9 to 10 this section especially focuses upon not stealing or bearing false witness and synthesises these commandments into a vision for a just and equitable society where oppression and injustice are opposed there is loving concern for everyone native or sojourner and everyone is provided for.

In this material we see also the seeds of prophetic concern for justice in society. If we just read the Ten Commandments by themselves we could be forgiven for missing this concern about social justice.

But when you see the Ten Commandments expanded in the material that is ancillary to them you will realise that this is actually integral to those principles particularly the principles concerning not stealing and not bearing false witness against your neighbour.

Those things concern not just not lying and not stealing but giving people their due and being a society where there are not structures of oppression and institutions such as the law being used in a predatory way.

Verses 17 and 18 parallel each other. They present an alternative to the nursing of hatred and grudges. Frank communication with and love for one's neighbour. We must speak openly and honestly and address our concerns to our neighbour in words and deal with them and start to resolve our conflicts.

[10 : 02] The focus here is upon our neighbour with whom we are at odds. The second great command finds its first articulation in the context of our duty to love our enemy.

Jesus' teaching that you should love your enemy is something that's grounded within the Old Testament itself. Jesus is merely elaborating and developing something that's quite clear within the text of Leviticus 19 itself.

And we should also note the way that the teaching here is similar in structure to the way that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. So you have hate or a grudge within your heart. How do you deal with that?

You deal with it by frank communication with your neighbour communicating through your problems and through that you dissolve the conflict. Or you deal with the root of vengeance by pursuing love.

And love being seen not just as a sort of state of mind or feeling but something that's very practical and worked out in action. That is how you deal with the issue of hatred in the heart.

- [11 : 02] Leviticus 19 foregrounds the importance of right relationship to neighbour as the context within which faithful relationship to God can be lived out. While much of Leviticus is focused more directly upon appropriate ritual and relationship to God, in Leviticus 19 loving relationship to one's neighbour, to the poor, to the alien and stranger, to the blind, the deaf, the elderly, to father and mother, etc.

is presented as the testing ground for the truth of our relationship with God. As the Apostle John says in 1 John 4 verses 20-21, Verse 18 then is a version of the golden rule.

It can also be regarded as a positive expression of the tenth commandment, an understanding that then can inform the entirety of what it means to keep the second table of the law. The tenth commandment, the desire in covetousness, desiring what belongs to your neighbour, that is reversed in love for your neighbour, not seeking to take from him but to give to him, to give to him what is due to him in the way of love and also to seek his good rather than to seek to take from him what is his.

The tenth commandment also propels our attention inward to the deeper reality that underlies our keeping of the law. It's not just a matter about external conformity to certain external actions.

It's about dealing with the issues of the heart itself. Love your neighbour also presents the negative prohibitions of Exodus chapter 20 verses 13-17 in a positive form.

- [12 : 53] So the law is summed up not in a series of do-nots, it's summed up in a positive injunction to love your neighbour and to love God. The material that follows this, much of which concerns divisions, extends the sorts of concern for division and order that we see in association with the tabernacle and its service to other parts of Israelite life.

And what such laws do is create a pronounced sense of order and meaning in Israel's life more generally. Israel's life is a choreographed life, a life that has structure and order to it where there are clear divisions, there are clear categories in which Israelites would understand themselves, their day-to-day life and the world around them.

And those categories give a sense of the holiness and the order of their life more generally. The similarity between their lives which have these categories at play and the life of the tabernacle where those divisions and those categories of holy and profane or clean and unclean are of central importance.

By regulating the sewing of fields or the making of cloth or the way that you would cut your hair and your beard the law presented the entire fabric of the average Israelite's life as a matter of holiness and being set apart for God even in the most quotidian events of their lives they were supposed to recognise and remember that they belonged to God that they were his people and that they behaved differently for that reason.

Verses 33-34 extend the principle of love for neighbour even further. The neighbour is not just the person like us but includes the stranger and the alien. Israel must remember that they were once the stranger and must show hospitality to the strangers in their land and perhaps we can think back here to the story of Hagar.

- [14 : 41] Hagar was a stranger in the house of the Hebrews Abram and Sarai and she was afflicted there and then they were told in the previous chapter that one day their descendants would be strangers in a land not their own that they would be afflicted there but they could not see the person in their own house who was suffering that fate.

Now Israel has to have learnt its lesson they were once the strangers now they should be able to recognise and see the strangers the ones who others would overlook they need to remember that they were once that person that God is a God who takes concern for the outcast for the stranger for the widow for the orphan for the poor and for the oppressed of the world and they must treat them accordingly that is part of what it means to be a holy people set apart to the Lord.

A question to consider the ethics of Leviticus chapter 19 focus our duty upon love to our neighbour the person who is in our path as it were whoever that person may be rich or poor alien or native or someone of high status someone of low status someone who's elderly someone who's young it is not focused however as we often focus our ethics upon a more general duty to just love everyone it's focused upon a particular person upon the neighbour upon the person in your path what might be some of the practical and the theoretical implications of this difference in focus need■■■