

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Leviticus 19:1-14
Sermon Title: "Holy, Set Apart, a Different Breed"

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What are we doing, reading Leviticus today? Why are we even dealing with this Book? How many of us have actually read Leviticus? I've heard it said that Leviticus is boring to read, because of all the laws one has to get through. Some people just skip through Leviticus and even through the first part of Numbers in order to get to the good parts. I've been told that Leviticus only deals with Jewish laws that have nothing to do with us. We aren't Jews – we are Christians. We follow another law under Christ. So why read something that doesn't apply to our current situations?

We don't even know what Leviticus means, so we don't know what we are reading in the first place? At the very least, when you leave here today you will know what the word *Leviticus* means. The name comes from the tribe of Levi, which was the only tribe of the 12 in Israel that would provide the priests for worship. All the priests came from this tribe of Levi. The word *Leviticus* comes from the Latin translation of

the Bible, and so it means “the levitical book.” So every time we say Leviticus, we are speaking Latin.

But let us go back to a time when the Levitical book did not exist. Let us go back to when Israel was just a confused nation full of confused people. They were slaves, told to do what their masters wanted. They could not think on their own. They could not hold down their own jobs, form their own government, and create their own marketplaces. They worked hard and ate little and slept restlessly. Then God entered the scene and gave them a plan. Leave your slavery. Go into another land, and claim it as your land. Become a nation with families and government and marketplaces. God could have just handed them his plan, and then sent those people across the Red Sea, across the wilderness, and into the Promised Land, but they were still confused. What sort of nation ought they to be? How should they conduct themselves, forming the type of community that is warm and welcoming?

God handed out a plan and then gave his direction. You don't just tell somebody to do something and then expect them to just do it without guidance. You don't put a youth behind the wheel of a car without being in the car and showing him or her how to drive. You don't give a person a project without

outlining how you want that project to come alive. If people have never done a certain thing ever, then they'll just stand there with a dumb look on their faces, paralyzed in one spot and doing nothing. Israel was free to move without interference, but they needed direction. God provided the direction, partly through this so-called boring book called Leviticus.

We could pick any chapter of Leviticus to examine, but I chose Chapter 19. Right out of the box, the foundation of the community is established: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." To be holy means to be set apart from other things, especially common things. We are a special kind of people doing special kinds of things for our Lord. This is the basis of our Christian community, set apart from the ordinary, the normal, the widely acceptable.

When we first became Christians, didn't we notice a difference? Didn't we notice that at the very start we could not do what other people were doing? Our friends, the people around us, the kids in our school: did we notice that they were going one direction but we had to go a different direction? We soon realized that what others value is not what we value. For society it is money and popularity and possessions. It's always having a good time with copious amounts of alcohol

and dancing and general mischief. That is not how we live with God as our God. Not that God doesn't want us to have fun, but God has shown us better ways to have fun. We also realized that those people – and society in general – have nothing to cling to. When the party stops, when the music is off, and the friends have gone home, what next? Nothing. Emptiness. People without God don't know what to do with themselves. People who put stock in having all the money, all the clothing, all the good looks, still want more. What they have isn't enough. They have nothing to cling to. We have Someone to cling to as holy, set-apart, special people. With God we have direction. We have plans. We know how to have fun that lasts.

So when we first became Christians, we noticed the direction of our lives going in another way, a clearer way. The same happened with Israel when God gave them his laws. When Leviticus was given, the people could learn how to be in a close relationship with God. They could learn how to treat each other with love and respect. No other nation had a loving God that cared so much to help them along the way.

We may go down the line in Leviticus 19, and see the various guidelines that God gives to his people. In

verses 9-10, it talks about harvesting the fields, and not taking in all the harvest that one collects. A farmer should leave some of his crop on the ground, so that those who have no farm, those who have difficulties finding food, may pick up the loose grapes and loose heads of grain for their meal. We might not be farmers, but these verses do apply to us.

When we taken an income – the check is in the mail or goes directly to our bank account – we should not presume that all of it is for us to use. We have bills to pay, we have debts to clear, and we may have the fun things we like to do, but all of our harvest in that paycheck shouldn't be used for our purposes alone. Some of it should be left on the ground, so to speak. We should set aside a portion of our income for the poor and the stranger. It's called tithing. Others might not do it, but we are a special, holy people, a different breed set aside for God. We leave some of our money to the side out of love for God and others. It works with farmers as well as residents of Morrow and beyond.

Do not steal, verse 11 says. Others might. They steal. They are sneaky. They think they can get away with stuff all the time. They live in the shadows and can't be trusted for anything. We are different. We go

a different direction. What is yours is yours, and we respect that. What is mine is mine, and possibly I could share it, because ultimately what is mine isn't mine but a gift from God.

Cheating and stealing go hand in hand. Verse 13 talks about cheating a neighbor, who is anybody we may encounter. The imagery given here is that of a person snatching a baby from the arms of her mother.¹ Think of the violence of that act. Think of the shock of the mother's face, as somebody carelessly robs her of her most precious possession, ripping the baby from her arms. Think of the baby who is jerked from one person to another, and all she can do is cry.

Cheating is like that image. It is violence done by one person who thinks he is better than the other person, who thinks he is strong and the other person is weak. God talks about this in Leviticus 19 to show these inexperienced Israelites, who are wet behind the ears, that others might do that. They might cheat, but we do not. We know how to act. We know how to respect others, *and* even the things they have. We are set apart.

The rest of Leviticus 19 goes on to speak about other ways we interact with people. God speaks about

¹ John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus*, cf. 315.

how we deal with injustices and how we overcome hatred with love. God speaks again about farming and weaving clothing. God speaks about sexual misconduct and discusses an unusual case about concubines and fiancés, which y'all may read at another time.

But there is one matter to discuss that we skip over, which God deals with in verses 5-8. People used to give peace offerings to God, if they wanted to eat meat. The animals sacrificed could be a cow or a bull, a sheep or a goat. The priests received a portion of that animal as food, while the one offering the sacrifice could share the rest with family. In verses 5-8, God says that the people had to eat their peace offering in a day, two at the most. On the third day the offering had to be burned. If it was eaten on the third day, it would be considered an abomination against God.

Now, as we read this we cannot help but ask the question, "Why?" Why is the sacrifice considered an abomination, if eaten on the third day? None of the commentaries that I read could give a clear explanation. They just said, "Don't do it." The best I could gather is that the Israelites did not have refrigerators, so meat could spoil very quickly in the wilderness. The sacrifice would keep until Day Two, but on Day Three a person could get sick on it. But

what if the Israelites had refrigerators back then? What if they could keep meat by packing it in salt? Does what God say still stand: “On the third day it is an abomination to eat it”?

Of course, my second question after asking “Why” is this, “What does it matter to us? Why even talk about this peace offering stuff, since we do not sacrifice animals to God for meat or worship? Why don’t we just leave verses 5-8 alone, and go on with our days?”

Verses 5-8 have everything to do with us, because what is happening in these verses is this: God decrees something, and we must follow it. God asks or commands us to do something or not to do something, and we should obey.

God doesn’t just make things up. God doesn’t tell the people to not eat their peace offering on the third day just for laughs. God doesn’t string us along with his holy words. God only opens his mouth to speak what needs to be spoken. What is said is true, and necessary. God always has a reason to state something. Always. God always sees the beginning of something and the end of it, and all the little pieces and parts in between. He has the big picture mapped out in front of him, and he knows exactly what we must do to live the abundant life that Christ speaks of.

God may tell us some ridiculous things. He may tell us to do something that we cannot understand. We cannot see how this thing is going to work out. Parents are told to remain patient with their rebellious children. Their children don't like to them, so the parents feel they should just give up. God says, "No. Stick with your children. Be patient." The parent can only hope God knows what he is doing. A spouse is told to stick with his or her unfaithful spouse. But the relationship has been damaged – there is no way to go back. God says, "No. Keep loving him or her." The wounded spouse can only hope God knows what he is doing. A person cannot find a job after leaving college or high school. How many times must he or she search? Prayers are not being answered – offers are not coming forward. God says, "Keep trusting me, and keep looking." The unemployed student can only hope God knows what he is doing.

It was a hotel receptionist for shared words of wisdom with me once. Five years ago, the day my wife and I came down here to search for a home, the girl behind the hotel counter asked, "What brings you here?" I said, "God," and then proceeded to tell her how I found out about Morrow Church. When I finished, she said to me, "I have learned never to talk back to God. He knows what he is doing." Wisdom

from a person checking me in to my hotel room.

God knows what he is doing. He knows the path we should take. He tells us something in order to get on that path. It might be unclear to us. It might not make any sense. It makes perfect sense to God, and that is what God is trying to do: make us perfect in every way.

We are a special people. We are a holy people, a different breed set aside for God. Through Jesus Christ we are claimed as God's children, and so with that we serve at the pleasure of our God.