

**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
25 October 2026**

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

There is clip on Instagram that I find very funny. The title is “A Summary of the Book of Leviticus.” In the video we see a dictator of a South American country (perhaps Venezuela) who states, “In my country, if you don’t behave good, you go to jail. You stealing, right to jail. You playing music too loud, right to jail, right away. You driving too fast, jail. Slow, jail. You charging too high prices for sweaters, glasses ... you right to jail. You undercook fish, believe it or not, jail. You overcook chicken, also jail. Undercook-Overcook. You make an appointment with the dentist but you don’t show up, believe it or not, jail, right away.”

I have been in ministry for over 27 years, including my time in Roman Catholicism, and I have never heard a decent sermon on Leviticus. Preachers of all denominations avoid this book because of its heavy emphasis on the Law of Moses and its concerns for ritualistic practices to keep people and places undefiled and pure, or to return them to purity once they have been defiled. But there is deeper truth and indescribable beauty in this book. First, a bit of context.

Leviticus is the third book of the Pentateuch. The events narrated correspond to the early years after the people left Egypt for the Promised Land. The original instructions took place between the building of the Tent of Meetings and the instructions to leave Mount Horeb. They camped for 2 years and 2 months at the foot of the holy mountain (Numbers 10:11-12). Leviticus takes the ten commandments and breaks them down into very detailed instructions. The process of creating smaller edicts derived from the original 10 commandments developed over time until it finally became 613 edicts by the time of Jesus.

The secret to understanding this complex book rests in the creation theology of Genesis. God wishes to dwell with humans. He creates a beautiful paradise in which the heavens and the earth are a united, beautiful, and good reality. It was God’s intent to put into motion a perfect creation where he could dwell in harmony with all that was created out of love. In God’s original design, image-bearing humans would be at the center of creation. They were given authority to name all creatures and plants, and to steward creation in accordance to God’s perfect designs. Humans were given the command to populate creation and subdue it.

The problem for Leviticus is one that we know well. At some point, humanity turned against their loving God and this act of disobedience caused a

separation between the heavens and the rest of the created order. First humans were exiled from God's perfect first world, creating a divided creation. Now, there is a gulf of separation between the heavens and the earth. But Leviticus still believes that God wishes to dwell with humans. The question for those first generations is, "How can God dwell in the dirty, violent, strife-filled, and sin-sick world in which we live? How can sinless perfection dwell among our pollution?"

The book answers these questions by affirming that the proper and faithful performance of Tent-of-Meeting (Sanctuary) rituals can create the right environment for God to come and dwell among them, provided that the people of Israel avoid sin and impurity in all they do. The rituals of the first ten chapters provide the means to gain forgiveness for sin at a corporate level. The purification from impurities in chapters 11 to 16 are meant to create holy and pure individuals worthy of God's presence among them. A holy tabernacle and a holy people, therefore, were necessary for God to dwell in the midst of the people.

Our passage for today is part of a larger section from chapters 17-26 often called by experts "Ethical regulations for practical holiness." The holiness code begins with a prohibition against the unauthorized slaughtering of animals and a prohibition against eating blood. Chapter 18 has a comprehensive list of prohibited sexual relations among the people. Then in Chapter 19, where we find our passage, we have a long list of ethical mandates that should be obeyed to achieve holiness. It starts with a command to honor parents, to keep the Sabbath, and to stay away from idols. Then, after several verses on sacrifices, it addresses the care of the dispossessed, "You shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien."

Then it prohibits defrauding neighbors, stealing, dishonesty, lying to one another, and swearing falsely by God's name. This is followed by prohibitions against treating neighbors unjustly, treating others with partiality, slander, and apathy to the suffering of others. It says, "you shall not stand idly by when the blood of your neighbor is at stake." Then it has an injunction against hate and it encourages the people to help neighbors do the right thing by providing feedback to them. Finally, it warns against taking vengeance and bearing a grudge against anyone, but rather, it states, the people shall love their neighbors as themselves.

Although this holiness code continues to Chapter 26, the command at the end of our reading today is considered the heart of the entire section. It is of such importance that today, in Matthew, Jesus says that on both the Shema and this command, "hang all the law and the prophets." This is the same teaching we

received from Romans 13:8b a few weeks back, “for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Love is at the core of Leviticus: Love of God and love of neighbor. All the regulations and edicts found in the book are concrete ways in which the book seeks to achieve the ultimate goal: To create a holy space and a holy people worthy of God, so that the Divine Presence may continue to dwell with the people. This is an understandable goal that shows the authors’ desire to create space for God by demanding holiness and perfect worship.

Sadly, we know that the law was ultimately unsuccessful in creating holy people and holy spaces. Ezekiel 8-11 shows us the deplorable state of Solomon’s temple before the exile into Babylon. In the same chapters we see the exit of the Divine Presence away from the Temple. Israel failed to obey the Law and Leviticus became exhibit number 1 in the legal trial against the nation in exile. Although their intentions were good, the people failed to obey. They did not create a holy and unpolluted Temple. They failed to live up to God’s expectations in their own lives. Now the Divine Presence has abandoned Israel and it was all their fault.

We who live on this side of the resurrection, know that there has been just one human able to fulfill the complete law. The prophecies that announced the return of Yahweh to Zion were fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. By fulfilling the law for us, Jesus made it possible for us to be obedient to God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our own call to holiness today is aided by the one who was fully obedient, completely faithful, and who became for us the God who now finally dwells with His beloved people. Now, doing many of the things Leviticus requires becomes the ways in which we produce fruit worthy of the kingdom. No longer ways of saving ourselves, but ways in which we show the world the love of the one who saved us all, the Divine Presence that now dwells with us.

But we must be careful of the ever-present reality of evil in our world and in ourselves. We must constantly accept the gift Christ has given us and respond in love by loving others as we love ourselves. Loving others means working for the advancement of all, the institution of a world of justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of all human beings, regardless of race or socio-economic status. We still have a mandate to live by an ethic of love. We must repent for the many times we use, abuse, and malign others. And we must continue to strive to live as disciples of Jesus in a world that has no room for the God of Israel.

May our Lord continue to bless us. Amen!