

I Am the LORD

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18



“God does not require a pure heart before embracing us.”

I read that quote from Henri Nouwen at just the moment I needed to read it. I had been struggling all day with this sermon, particularly this biblical text, and I came home and found in the mailbox a note from Stephen Ministry containing a grief booklet. This is one of the many ways Stephen Ministry provides care to this congregation, including me after the death of my father, and I am grateful. I opened the booklet and it fell open to a page in the middle, with the words from Nouwen in the sidebar:

“God does not require a pure heart before embracing us.”

We need to hear this before, during, and after reading Leviticus, because otherwise the book may be more than our Presbyterian hearts can take. Leviticus is the graveyard of most “Read the Bible in a Year” programs. Someone comes up to me, usually in late December, and says, “Pastor, I’m making a resolution to read the Bible through in a year. I’ve got an app on my phone that says if I follow the program every day I can do it.”

I usually put a timer on in my head at that point and determine however many weeks it takes him or her to get to Leviticus, that’s how long the resolution will last. They come back in with a dazed look in their eyes some Sunday and say, “I was doing fine till I got to Leviticus.”

It is true. Leviticus prohibits trimming your beard. Prohibits getting tattoos, which I’ve quoted to my wife and daughter to no effect. Prohibits wearing clothes with two kinds of fabrics--everyone wearing yoga pants, that’s going to send you straight to hell. Maybe you know that Leviticus forbids cursing your mother or father--and if you’ve done so, it calls for the death penalty. Leviticus says not to eat shrimp or lobster and, most pernicious of all to those of us residing below the Mason-Dixon Line, bacon or bar-be-que. ¹

¹ Thanks to David Lewicki for parts of this synopsis.

Many Christians will read these various prohibitions and conclude Leviticus is not really for us to take seriously. We say something like, “Jesus came and brought grace,” and close the book. But such an approach ignores Jesus’ statement that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. It also ignores Jesus’ own very real connection to Leviticus.

Remember when someone approached Jesus and asked him to say what was the greatest commandment in the law. It was a trick question. There are 613 laws in Judaism. How would he possibly narrow it?

The first and greatest law he quotes from Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” Then, before the questioner has a chance to say ‘good job,’ Jesus says, “And a second is like it...” And then he quotes from Leviticus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To drive the point home, he announces, “On these two hang all the law and the prophets.” So not only the 613 laws, but also the testimony of the prophets all boil down to these two things – love God with all you have and are, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

And so yes, Leviticus has a lot of prohibitions, many laws, some quite specific. All of them were intended to shape the community into a community of response to God’s holiness by becoming themselves holy. Notice after each command is the phrase, “I am the LORD.” The laws are there not as a burden, but as a gift, a concrete way the community is shaped according to the mercy and justice and love of the God they love with heart, soul, mind, and strength.

“You shall be holy, for I, the LORD, am holy.”

The shape of a holy community looks like a farmer harvesting his fields. His hands grow weary and his muscles ache as he nears the end of the day. As the sun begins to set, he says a prayer of thanksgiving to God, the one God. And as he prays he looks at the edges of his fields, wheat that has not been gleaned, grapes left untouched on the vines, or lying freely on the ground. He does not harvest the edges. As his lips say thank you to God, his life, out here in the field, reflects that thanksgiving in concrete action for his most vulnerable neighbors.

Once he is gone from the harvested field, many will come. Women carrying infants on their backs will pluck the unharvested grain. The man who begs outside the synagogue in town will find bundles of grapes. The foreigner will load his bag with produce. And so this field will feed the poor, the sojourner, the weak and frightened. They will all find nourishment, with more to spare, all from this act of faith and thanksgiving.

I believe when Jesus lifts the command to love our neighbors as ourselves he is grasping the central message of Leviticus. It seems to me the message is that our holiness is not so much in order for us to be what we sometimes call “holier-than-thou” - to lord our piety over others - but rather our holiness is to be in response to God’s holiness, in which God is set apart and distinct precisely because of the depth of God’s love and mercy for us and for the world.

In a world where taking from others, engaging in shady deals, or lying has become routine, damaging relationships and ripping at the fabric of trust that binds us together, we are called to be truth-tellers, to be holy.

In a time when it is easy to not honor commitments, when taking advantage of those who are vulnerable is the price of doing business, when we hold back the wages of a desperate day-laborer simply because we can, we are called to be holy.

In an environment where those with special needs are often singled out and subjected to cruelty, we are called to be holy in our interactions with the blind and the deaf, with all who stand out and are often pushed out.

It is tricky reading a book like Leviticus, because it is clear that Jesus didn’t much care about whether or not you wear yoga pants or eat bacon. He once told his disciples that it wasn’t what you put into your mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of your mouth which defiles. His disciples were known to not observe some of the Levitical purity laws, like the ritual washing before meals. When confronted about these things, Jesus never said the law was void; instead, he reminded them that the Law is a gift, and that the heart of the law was not a series of onerous codes for every behavior, but rather the love of God and love of neighbor.

At one point he said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith.” Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition when he says this. Remember Micah, who said God was not interested in the various offerings prescribed in places like Leviticus, instead, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

When reading a book like Leviticus, we are called to remember the words of one of our confessions, that “the Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God’s

work of reconciliation in Christ.”² We are to read all of Scripture through the lens of Christ, who is the fulfillment of the law at its depth – the love and mercy, the grace and love and justice of God.

It is not lost on us that to follow the law as Jesus fulfills it is much more difficult than choosing what to wear or what to eat. To remember “the weightier matters of the law” is ultimately not something we can do on our own. Which is why it is important to remember the words of Henri Nouwen that came at the beginning of this sermon:

“God does not require a pure heart before embracing us.”

God’s embrace of us, God’s love of us, God’s claim on us through baptismal waters, comes *before* our response. Our responses will necessarily be imperfect, clouded by sin. And yet we continue, in thanksgiving, to offer our response, to allow ourselves to be shaped into the community God intends. We pray our prayers of confession, knowing we fall short. We say the law again and again after we have heard words of forgiveness in order to remember that the law comes *after* God’s grace, *after* God’s forgiveness, *after* God’s embrace.

And so when we gather in Wilson Hall and bag sweet potatoes that have been gleaned according to inspiration from Leviticus, we do so because the LORD is our God, and we are thankful.

When we sit at the bedside of someone who is sick and join our prayers with theirs, we do so as an act of love of neighbor, and we do so because the LORD is our God, and we are thankful.

When we sit beside those who grieve, engaging in acts as simple as sending a booklet in the mail with a note that lets someone know he or she is not alone, we are loving our neighbor, and we do so because the LORD is our God, and we are thankful.

When we go across the globe to join hands with refugees fleeing war, sojourners in a strange land, and yet our neighbors, we do so because the LORD is our God, and we are thankful.

When we stand up for those marginalized, vulnerable, and lonely in the world, we recognize Jesus’ definition of neighbor and we love fiercely, because the LORD is our God, and we are thankful.

² Confession of 1967, 9.29.

Again and again we return to this place to worship, study, and serve, so we will remember we belong to God, and that God does not require a pure heart before embracing us. And then we go out into the world to be the thanksgiving we feel. This is how God's kingdom continues to draw near. May it be so. Amen.