

Holy Accountability

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5:43-48

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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

19:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

19:2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

19:9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

19:10 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: I am the LORD your God.

19:11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.

19:12 And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

19:13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.

19:14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

19:15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

19:16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

19:17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Matthew 5:43-48

5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

5:44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

5:45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

5:47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I am reading [The \(Un\)Common Good; How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided](#) by Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners community in Washington DC, a Christian community dedicated to living out the gospel together in social

justice. Wallis tells the story of Mary Glover. Mary was a cook in a day-care center in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of DC where Sojourners was located in their early days. Only twenty blocks from the White House, Columbia Heights was at that time one of the poorest and most violent areas of DC filled with people considered pejoratively by society to be the “least of these.” But we know how Jesus considered the marginalized, those who are poor, hungry, without shelter, sick, in prison. They were his beloveds and part of his family.

Mary Glover, who was poor herself, was one of the consistent volunteers in Sojourners grocery give away every Saturday morning to help poor families make it through weekend. She was the designated pray-er, because given her Pentecostal roots, she was the best pray-er in the group.

Every Saturday before Sojourners opened their doors to the 200 families that lined up at the door and around the block to receive the free groceries, Mary prayed. Wallis confesses that he got up almost every Sat just to hear Mary pray. “We would hold hands, and Mary would thank the Lord for waking us up that morning and that we were all still alive: “Thank you Lord for another day! That the walls of our rooms were not the walls of our graves! And our beds were not our coolin’ boards!” Then Mary always ended her prayer by saying, “Lord, we know you’ll be coming through this line today; so help us to treat you well.”

For me Mary Glover in this story is an embodiment of the instructions we hear in our texts from Leviticus and Matthew today. Instructions to be “holy” and “perfect” as God is “holy” and “perfect”.

“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. “ “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

How many of you think of yourself as holy or perfect? Go ahead, raise your hand! Yea...me too. Not many of us would say we are perfect. Though we may drive ourselves and our loved ones nuts trying to be perfect...without fault...without mistake or blemish. And that word “holy” has real difficulties for us...because we associate it with arrogance...“holier than thou.”

The Hebrew word used in Leviticus for holy, *qadosh*, does not primarily mean pure or sanctified. It means “set apart.” God says to the people of Israel, “You are set apart as my people for my work.” And in being set apart, God invited them, and invites us today, into a very intimate relationship of holiness. “Be holy, as I am holy.” The people of Israel knew from Genesis that they were made in God’s image. They knew that God had delivered them from slavery and oppression. They knew they were God’s people created to love the God with all their hearts, minds, strength and souls. “Be holy, as I am holy.” This is a relationship of trust and accountability. As God’s people they were and we are accountable for:

- sharing the harvest of the work of our hands with the poor and the stranger,
- dealing fairly and honestly with one another, no stealing or lying,
- paying fair wages to those we employ as laborers,
- helping – not hindering- those marginalized with disabilities,
- dealing equally with all people in matters of justice; no playing favorites with rich or poor,

- being accountable for our words and actions; no slandering, no profiting from others' oppression,
- being accountable for our emotions and our attitudes; no "hating" in our hearts or with your words

And if these sound a bit similar to the Ten Commandments....that is the writer of Leviticus' intention!

Jesus was steeped in the knowledge of the people of God that we discover in Leviticus. Remember the Torah, the prophets and the psalms were his Bible. He knows the deeper meaning of *qadosh*, fo being God's holy people set apart for God's work. Throughout collection of teaching we call the Sermon on the Mount, he tells the crowds on the mountainside that they are God's people. They are in an intimate relationship of trust with God. This is not entirely new information to them. Yet Jesus is reinterpreting the law of the Torah in light of the times they were living in, times of oppression of the people of Israel by the Romans. He tells them as God's people here is how you are accountable to God in this intimate relationship. "Love even your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." In New Testament Greek the word translated as "perfect", *teleios*, does not mean "without fault or mistakes". It means be "healthy, whole, mature, complete." Jesus gives his commandments to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors in the context of an intimate, growing, healthy, maturing relationship of wholeness with God.

I am privileged, humbled and challenged to be serving a community such as Plymouth who already strives to be holy and perfect. We strive to take seriously our intimate relationship with God that propels us to be holy and perfect in relationship to God and to one another, and to the strangers, and the "least of these" that Jesus loves. John Wimberly, the consultant with us last week, described our congregation as one of the healthiest that he has work with as a community in relationship to one another and to God. He observed that it is in Plymouth's DNA as a community to do hands on work for God's kingdom. And I would add to accept the challenges of our texts today.

Taking the Leviticus text and its list....Let us continue to ask ourselves how do we use only what we truly need from the work of our hands and apportion some of the harvest for those less fortunate? Can people glean in our fields? How do we deal justly with all people no matter their economic status? How do we love your neighbor as yourselves through our actions and through extravagant welcome? Let us continue to ask ourselves, where can we reach out in genuine love to our enemies?" Do we have "enemies" as individuals, as a community? Here's the thing about enemies, we may still not like them....but we have to ask how we find a way to love them as our neighbors, as we love ourselves? What does that love look like? Respect? No slander? Honesty? Can we pray for those that we vehemently disagree with? Not that they change their minds to think like us! But pray for their highest and best as children of God. And leave them as much without judgment as we can in God's hands for God to guide their hearts and minds.

We will never do any of this without mistakes. We will forget at times in the frustrating details and logistics of our life together and our work for God's realm that God has called us into intimate relationship and think we have to do everything by ourselves. But that's the thing about God...the thing about God we know in Jesus the Christ...God keeps coming back over and over offering us God's love and justice, mercy, grace and presence.

The words of scripture today are words to live by in our troubled times. Yet they boil down to more than following a list of commandments. Being holy, set apart for God's work, loving our neighbor as our self, and striving to be perfect, to live into wholeness and maturity because we belong to God boils down to the prayer of Mary Glover. "Lord, we know you'll be coming through this line today; so help us to treat you well."

Look around you this week. Look for God's "least of these." Look for those who may seem to be your enemy. Look in all the lines your encounter as Mary did in free groceries line. Look for the stranger, the marginalized, the ones who seem so different from you in values and lifestyle that you think you could never be in relationship with them. "Lord, we know you'll be coming through the lines of our lives this week; keep us accountable to you in holiness and wholeness; help us to treat you well." Amen.