

“Before you get that tattoo...”

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Practical Holiness Part IV: “Separation” (II)

Leviticus 19:26a-28; 31

²⁶“You shall not...practice divination or soothsaying. ²⁷‘You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard. ²⁸‘You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord. . .³¹‘Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.”

In several messages from the book of Leviticus we have been asking what it means to be holy, or what is holiness? Holiness is not a matter of emotionalism. Holiness cannot be defined as simply a matter of rigorous religious practice. Holiness is not simply a matter of escaping from this world. Holiness is a positive concept in the Bible. Holiness is a practical concept in the Bible. Holiness has to do with the whole of your life-style. It has to do with every area of life. And the pattern for holiness is set forth in Word and Law of God. If you want to know what it means practically to be holy then you have to look at the instructions of God’s Word. Holiness has to do with everything in life, and this 19th chapter of Leviticus spells that out for us in the clearest of terms. Leviticus 19:1-3 states, ¹“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘**You shall be holy**, for I the Lord your God am holy.” And **Leviticus 20:7-8** states, ⁷“You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. ⁸‘And you shall keep My statutes and **practice them**; I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”

Holiness has to do with how we treat our parents. It has to do with how we approach the Lord’s Day, how you worship the Lord, how you treat your neighbor; showing him mercy, speaking the truth, protecting his property and his life, preserving justice, in general, loving your neighbor as yourself. This is practical holiness as spelled out in God’s law. A man who dishonors his parents, disregards the Lord’s Day, treats his neighbor harshly, etc., whatever else he may be, he is not a holy man.

Not only is holiness practical and applicable to all areas of life, but the meaning of holiness also contains a sense of separation about it. To be holy, like God is holy, is not only to be pure as God is pure, but it is also to be separate, different, and unique as God is separate, different, and unique. And the more you pursue moral purity in your life, the more you will achieve a sense of uniqueness in your life. If you are pursuing moral purity in your life you will stand out in the crowd. You will be separate and different from the world around you.

It is my opinion that there are some laws that God gave to His people Israel that served this primary purpose; they separated them out from the peoples who lived among them. R.K. Harrison, in his commentary, states, “The holiness and purity of the congregation were to be enhanced by observing the principle of separateness, embodied in the divine *statutes*.”

These laws may have some secondary benefits or effects as well, but it seems to me that the primary reason God gave them these laws was to separate them from the Canaanites; to make them a different, peculiar, or special people. This, of course, is true of Christians as well.

1 Peter 2:9 states, ⁹*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession (KJV ‘peculiar’), that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...”*

Paul also exhorts Christians to be a separate people. In **2 Corinthians 6:14-18** we read, ¹⁴*“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹⁷“Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. ¹⁸“And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” Says the Lord Almighty.”*

Now there are, in these verses 19-37 of Leviticus 19, at least eight categories of instruction which if followed would separate the people of Israel out from the people of Canaan. Following these laws would make them a different, unique, special, and separate people. It would mark them as belonging to the Lord. It would render them a “holy” people.

The first four are 1) Separation and Symbolic Purity: Plants and Animals, 2) Separation and Sexual Purity, 3) Separation and Harvesting, and 4) Separation and Life. The next two are the focus of this pamphlet: 1) Separation and Guidance, 2) Separation and Appearance.

I. Separation and Guidance.

We find this in **Leviticus 19:26b; 31** ²⁶*“You shall not...practice divination or soothsaying.”* and, ³¹*“Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.”* And in **Leviticus 20:6, 27** ⁶*“As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.”* ²⁷*“Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their bloodguiltiness is upon them.”*

Everyone is looking for guidance in life. Everyone needs some direction. All of us have at one time or another wished that we could see some handwriting in the sky or receive some special revelation just for us that would tell us exactly what to do in some given situation. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, if you are not yet a Christian, or even if you are a Christian you have this in common; the need for, the desire for guidance. Christian and non-Christian alike are looking for guidance and direction. We are often looking for guidance about a job, a marriage partner, etc.

Then what is the difference? The difference between the Christian perspective and the non-Christian perspective is that we have two different ways of pursuing guidance. This was to be true of the Israelites and the Canaanites. Here is another area of life in which the people of God were to be different, separate, holy.

A. Canaanites: The Canaanites, like many non-Christian peoples, sought for guidance through the practice of some kind of magic. They sought to know what the future held so they could make their plans. They sought this knowledge through the use of wizards, mediums, spiritists; through the practice of divination or soothsaying. What

exactly was this? The practice of divination is the use of some object or procedure in order to discover some hidden knowledge. Tea leaves, sheep livers, palm reading, tarot cards, etc. are used to try received guidance and direction in life.

The practice of *soothsaying* is much the same. Here the focus is not on the discovery of knowledge in general but rather it is a knowledge of the future that is in view. A *soothsayer* is someone who attempts, through the use of magic, to predict the future. It is through the manipulation of the forces of nature, of impersonal force or blind chance that a knowledge of the future is sought.

You may object, “*Yeah, but people don’t do that today.*” You might be surprised how many people in this world practice this in some form or another. And many, who are in modern secular cultures, act as though they can in some way control their lives and their future. Now in contrast to this worldview is that which the Israelites were to maintain.

B. Israelites: The Israelites were forbidden to seek guidance in this way. They were to seek guidance from God and from His word and law given to them through the prophets. If God did not reveal it to them, then they had no business seeking to know it. They had great freedom and great confidence in knowing the will of God revealed to them in the Word of God. **Psalm 119:105** states, “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*”

They were to understand the distinction between the revealed things that belonged to them and the hidden things that belonged only to God. **Deut. 29:29** says, “*29 “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.*”

This knowledge set them free to live their lives with absolute confidence. Instead of trying to dig out some hidden and secret of will of God for their lives they could focus on what God had revealed to them and seek to live within the bounds of this will. They could live confidently knowing that their God, their Heavenly Father, would direct their paths as they put their trust in Him. This is how King David puts it in **Psalm 37:4** “*4 “Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart.*”

This is how they were to be separate and holy in the manner in which they sought guidance. They were to seek guidance from God and God alone. To seek guidance or to provide guidance in these other ways, by divination or soothsaying, was forbidden because it undermines the spiritual integrity of God’s people. It is false, deceptive, and will lead men into peril.

How about your life? Do you exhibit a sense of confidence and security in your life? Are you seeking guidance from the principles set forth in the Word of God? This will make you a separate people. A holy people.

II. Separation and Appearance. Leviticus 19:27-28

²⁷*“You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard.*

²⁸*“You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.*

Now here we see that the Israelites were even supposed to look different from the Canaanites. Even their outward appearance was to be different. By following these laws they would be set apart, marked as separate and holy unto God. How did this make their appearance different? There are three items mentioned here: Beards, scars, and tattoos

Now admittedly this portion of this chapter is difficult to address. I have probably read too much about these matters in my study and now I am faced with the ominous

task of distilling all that I have been reading and thinking about into a just a few paragraphs. However, here it goes.

A. First, Beards. Vs 27 ²⁷ *'You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads, nor harm the edges of your beard.'*

The Jewish men would appear different from the Canaanite men because they would not round off the side-growth of their heads or trim the edges of their beards. What this means exactly is hard to tell. Perhaps, you have seen some pictures of *Hasidic Jews* with the ringlets coming down the sides of their temples, and with their long full beards which I suppose they never cut. They stand out, they look different. This makes them a separate people. It would make them readily identifiable as a peculiar and unique people.

B. Second, Scars. Vs 28a . ²⁸ *'You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead...'*

This was the practice of the Canaanites. They cut and scarred their bodies on several occasions. Often they would scar their bodies as a result of cutting themselves as expressions of deep grief. Some peoples would cut and scar themselves in order to mark themselves as different or as a part of particular group or tribe. Many African tribes are identified by their tribal markings or scars. This, the Israelites were forbidden to do. They were not to imitate the Canaanites around them. They were to be different. Their distinctiveness and separateness was to be set forth on God's terms, and according to His law. The only acceptable mark that was to be borne by them in their bodies was the sign of circumcision. This was God's mark upon them. This was the distinctive mark of their identity as the people of God.

C. Third, Tattoos. . ²⁸ *'You shall not. . .make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.'*

In addition they were to be different in appearance by not making any *"tattoo marks on themselves..."* Again, this was a practice of the Canaanite tribes among whom they lived. Throughout history many non-Christian peoples have identified themselves by tribal markings, both by way of cutting and scarring and by way of tattooing the skin. Tattooing is a well established practice within Hinduism and also in Arab countries and African tribes as well. Western explorers of the new world discovered tattooing among many of the tribes of North, Central, and South America. And Captain Cook, the famous British seaman discovered tattooing among the tribal peoples of Tahiti.

However, the Israelites were commanded by God not to imitate the pagan cultures around them. They were not to seek to identify themselves in this manner. They were not to mark their bodies for the purpose of setting themselves apart or for the purpose of memorializing some significant event in their lives. In this way they would be separate, different, and unique in the land of Canaan. They would be set apart, a people for God's own possession.

Now, this is all well and good, but the sixty-thousand dollar question for us is this: *Are Christians living in the 21st century forbidden as well to scar or tattoo their bodies?* I surmise that there are more than just a few of you reading this pamphlet who have tattooed or pierced your bodies for various reasons. Is this a matter of Christian liberty, or it is it a binding prohibition, just as it was in the days of Moses and Aaron? Well, here we need to be very careful to use sound principles of Biblical interpretation. There are two extremes to be avoided: 1) There is no application of these laws to us because they are restricted to the Old Testament only. 2) All of these laws, without exception, are binding upon us in exactly the same manner as they were binding upon them.

With both of these extremes there are problems. If you choose the first choice, there is no application, then what do you do with the rest of the regulations in this

passage concerning divination, prostitution, the Sabbath law, etc. Does anyone want to argue that because these laws are found in the Old Testament that it is now acceptable for Christians to practice divination, soothsaying, and prostitution? I hope not.

On the other hand, if you choose option number two, all is applicable in the same way as it was then, not only is scarring and tattooing forbidden but so is the wearing of mixed fabrics, the cutting of the corners of your head, and the trimming of your beard. So what is the answer.

The answer is found in the underlying principle that is being enforced and illustrated by these various commands. What we have here is a mixture of regulations, some of them based squarely upon the Ten Commandments and then some of them that have a peculiar cultural significance for the nation of Israel as God's special covenantal nation. There is here a mixture of regulations that are clearly binding upon all people in all ages, and regulations that were binding upon Israel only.

This is the situation with the dietary laws. Jesus Himself teaches us that these laws are no longer binding upon us. Laws upholding the Lord's Day and sexual purity are clearly binding upon us, while laws against trimming the beards and tattooing are not as clearly binding.

So what is the underlying principle to be applied to us? It is simply this: *Don't imitate the pagan cultures around you. Don't take your cue about how to act and dress from the cultures of people who do not know God. Don't imitate the unbelieving culture.*

In this regard then I have to ask you, if you have a tattoo, why do you have it? If you are thinking about getting a tattoo, why are you? I think that it is a matter of Christian liberty but I must tell you that I think it is unwise. Here is the principle: **1 Corinthians 6:12** ¹² *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything"*. You may have the freedom as a Christian to scar or tattoo your body, but I am asking you this question: *Is it wise, is it profitable? Are you following the culture around you? What purpose does it serve in your life?* It appears to me that for almost 20 centuries Christians have not practiced tattooing or scarring or piercing. Many non-Christian cultures have practiced tattooing but on the whole Christian cultures have not. Even as recently as fifty years ago the majority of Christians would not even have entertained the idea of tattooing themselves.

Some say that the reason they want a tattoo is simply for the purpose of decoration. Others say that they are memorializing some spiritual event in their lives, like the day of their conversion. And perhaps that is an acceptable exercise of your freedom and liberty as a Christian. But I want you to think about something: What is the mark that Jesus gives us to set us apart from the world? What is the sign that Jesus gives us that marks us as belonging to Him? What sign has He given us by which we receive a new identity as the body of Christ. The answer is *"Baptism."* Baptism is Jesus' tattoo.

Do you realize what blessed incomprehensible privilege has been bestowed upon you in your baptism? To be granted entrance into Christ's church; His body, which is the fullness of Him who fills all in all. There is no more prestigious institution on the face of the earth.

So you see, to be holy means, at least in part, to be different, to be separate, to be devoted to Christ. Is your life noticeably different than the lives of those who live in this world and do not know God? Are you being transformed by the renewing of your mind, or are you being conformed to the image of this world? Who are you following? Who are you imitating? Far too often we are just mimicking the values of the world around us. Jesus has separated you from the world, and He has sent you back into the

world in order to have an impact upon the world. Again here is the challenge. Live a holy life, and keep a healthy distance from the world, and pray that men might see the difference that Christ makes in your life, and that you might have an opportunity to explain that difference to them. And remember, the power for Holy Living is found in the Holy Spirit. You cannot practice practical holiness without the work of God's Spirit in you. Remember what Paul said to the churches in Galatia, *"But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh."* (**Gal. 5:17**)

Romans 12:1-2 *¹"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ²And **do not be conformed** to this world, **but be transformed** by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Holiness is not emotionalism. Holiness is not something that is confined to what you might consider to be strictly *religious* activity. Holiness is practical and has to do with every aspect of our lives on this earth as beings made in the image of God. Our God is holy and he has called us as His children to be holy as well: to be holy men and women, to be holy fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, parents and children; to practice holiness in our daily lives. To be holy means that you belong to God. You have been separated from this world that you might be a special people who belong wholly unto God, purchased by the blood of Jesus.