

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Living as God's Just People

Read Leviticus 19:9-18, 33-37

Key verse: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34).

R.C. Sproul had this to say about the importance of both *social* and *personal* holiness in the lives of believers: "Social ethics must never be substituted for personal ethics. Crusading can easily become a dodge for facing up to one's lack of personal morality. By the same token, even if I am a model of personal righteousness, that does not excuse my participation in social evil. The man who is faithful to his wife while he exercises bigotry toward his neighbor is no better than the adulterer who crusades for social justice. What God requires is justice both personal and social."

A key principle underlying the entire Book of Leviticus, including these verses from chapter 19, is stated in 19:2 – "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." As Sproul reminds us, Christians are called to live holy lives, by God's grace, lives that express God's holiness and righteousness in both our personal moral standards and in our approach to social ethics. Leviticus 19 focuses primarily on God's call to social justice and holiness. Here are a few of the key areas that challenge us to grow in our concern for social justice and our personal investment in loving our neighbor:

Practicing social holiness and justice in our response to the poor

Did you know that there are over 2,500 verses in the Bible that deal with the issue of helping the poor, the sick, the hungry? In Leviticus 19, God calls His people to set aside a portion of their incomes for the immediate, practical help of poor people: "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. 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" (vv. 9-10).

Practicing social holiness and justice in our response to foreigners and aliens

To be holy means treating foreigners and aliens with justice and

compassion: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (vv. 33-34).

A recent study cited in *The Wall Street Journal* reveals a common, often hidden, prejudice against foreigners and aliens. A summary of the study said, “The further from native-sounding one’s accent is...the less trustworthy we perceive the information to be. Researchers found that the heavier the accent, the more skeptical participants became.” (*The Wall Street Journal*, 10/2/10).

In other words, if the way you talk sounds like you’re “not from around here,” I am likely to be suspicious of you, whether or not I am aware of this bias. This bias is not a judgment based on your character, but merely on the fact that you talk different.

So, still today, we need God’s grace to help us love people who are from different ethnic, national, or racial groups! It’s a part of what it means to be holy.

Practicing social holiness and justice as a way of life

Leviticus 19 touches on many other practical areas in which God’s people are called to treat others justly. These areas include the following directives:

Be honest in your dealings with others – “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another” (v. 11).

Be fair and honest in your business practices – “You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning” (v. 13). In our time, we are used to paying or receiving a paycheck on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. But in ancient Israel, a laborer often depended on being paid daily in order to have food to eat each day. So, verse 13 is a call for just labor practices.

Verses 35 and 36 also call for honesty and integrity in business practices: “You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin.” (An “ephah” was a dry measure, and a “hin” was a liquid measure.)

Treat with dignity and respect people with disabilities – “You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind” (v. 14).

These ethical directives in Leviticus 19 reach a climax in the powerful words of verse 18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

R.C. Sproul is right. “Social ethics must never be substituted for personal ethics.” But by the same token, “even if I am a model of personal righteousness, that does not excuse my participation in social evil....What God requires is justice both personal and social.” (continued)

As Methodist Christians, we have a great legacy that informs what it means to practice both personal and social holiness. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, taught that God's grace in Jesus Christ can change our hearts and empower us for holy living, in terms of personal morality and spirituality. But Wesley also said, "We know no holiness but social holiness."

From its beginning, the Methodist movement, at its best, has created a powerful synergy between personal holiness (personal morality and spirituality) and social holiness (working to alleviate poverty, racism, oppression, and social injustice). As Methodists, we still believe in the power of grace to transform our hearts and lives. And we still "know no holiness but social holiness." May God help us to grow in holiness, both *personal* and *social*.

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