

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleanings from Leviticus, Number Five
June 6, 2007

Leviticus 19:1-8 (NRSV)

- 1. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:**
- 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.**
- 3. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.**
- 4. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God.**
- 5. When you offer a sacrifice of well-being to the LORD, offer it in such a way that it is acceptable in your behalf.**
- 6. It shall be eaten on the same day you offer it, or on the next day; and anything left over until the third day shall be consumed in fire.**
- 7. If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is an abomination; it will not be acceptable.**
- 8. All who eat it shall be subject to punishment, because they have profaned what is holy to the LORD; and any such person shall be cut off from the people.**

Chapters 17-26 of Leviticus are known as the Holiness Code, and they form a unit distinct from the form and style of the rest, with their briefly stated regulations, repeated use of the word “holy,” and frequent repetition of declarations such as, “I am the LORD [Yahweh] your God,” and, “I the LORD your God am holy.” The Holiness Code mixes regulations concerning sacrificial rituals, sexual relations, and neighborliness.

In chapter 19, I’ll glean mainly for insights into the concept of neighborliness. It is from this chapter, as we’ll see later, that Jesus draws the second of the two great commandments, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Verses 1-4 sound like the Ten Commandments but with the addition of the concept of holiness. Because Yahweh is holy, the covenant people are to be holy also. What does that mean? At this point, it might be best to think of this holiness as being special to Yahweh God who loves Israel and has made covenant with this people. You are not just any people; you are Yahweh’s own people, and so you are to take your cues for living from your God’s ways rather than from your own impulses or the customs of the peoples around you. As Christians, we hear the Newer Testament speak of our being “in Christ” and of what it means to live “in Christ.” I think the idea here is similar. How do Yahweh’s people think and live?

As followers of Jesus, we are to think and live differently from the way others might. Paul tells the Romans not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds, in response to the mercies of God, so they will be able to know what is right to do in life’s

situations. This is dangerous ground on which we are walking here, dangerous because it so easily leads to legalism and self-righteousness – to the “I’m better than you are” and the “I’m pure and you’re disgusting” pretensions Jesus warned us not to fall into. The idea is that in our lives people should encounter the love and compassion of God. Paul follows his admonition to be different (transformed) with such specifics as not to repay with evil (harm) the person who has done harm to us but, rather, to “overcome evil with good.” So, our being different “in Christ” is not to be for our own sake at the expense of others. We are to be different toward others for their sake so they may know the love and forgiveness of God.

In the next posts, I’ll be looking at Leviticus 19 for what it has to say about neighborliness. Before I finish this one, though, let me say something about verses 5-8 printed above. Last night I forgot to take out the kitchen trash before going to bed. I forgot also that it included the packaging from chicken, and the odor left no doubt what I should do first thing this morning. Some biblical commands seem easy to follow, and not eating meat on the third day after the animal was sacrificed is one of those. Remember, they lived in a hot climate and had no refrigeration.

How literally, though, should people take such biblical injunctions? We regularly eat meat from animals dead more than two days, since we do have refrigeration. Of course, our meat was not offered in sacrifice, and as Christians we do not keep these laws anyway. We are free to eat shrimp or crabs even though Leviticus calls them unclean, and we do not have to cut our hair a certain way or refrain from wearing an article of clothing made from two different materials. But my point here is that sometimes taking a regulation too literally can defeat the purpose for which it was given. These regulations in Leviticus were given to make the people understand they were special to their God, not to make them mean-spirited and judgmental.

We should stop at red traffic signals, right? That’s the law. When my father was teaching me to drive, he regularly asked me to practice on U.S. Route 22, the highway nearest our home and back then the number-one killing road in the nation, mostly because of the stretch from Somerville to Newark. Since we lived along that stretch, it was important for my survival to learn to drive that road. So, my dad made sure I knew to check my rearview mirror before slowing down whenever a traffic signal turned amber just ahead of me. If there was a truck behind me, I was to go through the light, even if it was turning red. Too many people had been killed because they had stopped suddenly for a traffic light, only to be pushed through the intersection by a tractor-trailer. My father knew there was a delay on the side street’s green light, and he knew the risk of a serious accident was far less from going through the light at the last moment than from stopping too short. The law was made to save life, not to take it, and few people would instruct their children to stop for the very first moment of red no matter what the consequences.

Jesus tells the legalists of his day, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” Likewise, the covenant was made to include people in the love of God, not to exclude them. Between one extreme of “anything goes” and other extreme of “the law is the law is the LAW!” we have faith-thinking to do.