

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number Six
June 7, 2007

Leviticus 19:29 (NRSV)

Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, that the land not become prostituted and full of depravity.

I'm skipping verses, jumping ahead in chapter 19, and I'll go back for some regulations that relate to the attitude and practice of neighborliness, but verse 29 jumped out at me. This one-sentence prohibition speaks volumes in our modern world. The forcing of children and young women into prostitution is a worldwide and, apparently, age-old disgrace upon the humanity of the human race.

A couple years ago, I read the estimate made by Church World Service that some 100,000 children are sold or just kidnaped each year into slavery, including sexual slavery. There are even training "schools" set up to teach elementary school aged children (mostly girls but boys, too) to be prostitutes. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof has written numerous pieces on the plight of children and young women (often teenagers) who are kidnaped or sold by their families into prostitution. Some sell themselves to help their families, and others are lured by promises of legitimate jobs, then trapped. If they protest or try to escape, they are beaten and raped. It seems to be common practice to rape the girl repeatedly until she no longer has any will left or sees any point left to resisting prostitution.

In some cultures, girls are valued so little that fathers figure they may as well get from their daughters whatever benefit they can. In parts of Asia, elementary school aged boys become the pimps for their younger sisters who may be as young as four or five years. The individual stories are heart-wrenching, but much of the world seems to have little heart for the sufferings and deaths of women or children. Church World Service reports that, not surprisingly, many of the same children used for prostitution are also used for pornographic videos.

Leviticus takes a blunt stand against profaning a daughter of Israel, a daughter of the covenant with Yahweh God, by making her a prostitute. The land itself cannot bear such a thing and would be corrupted by it.

Did the ancient Israelites carry this attitude over to the daughters of other peoples? I don't know. In time, certainly, Judaism would do so, but the development of positive attitudes toward girls and women has been a long, slow process and is nowhere near complete to this day, even in the most "civilized" of societies, including our own. In some cultures, a girl or young woman who has been raped nonetheless represents such shame to her family that they feel compelled to kill her in

order to regain their family honor. I understand neither how being victimized shames one's family nor how being killed by those who supposedly love her restores their honor.

I also have to wonder about our disgust with prostitutes in general. We have contemptuous names for them and regard these women with disgust that sinks to the level of loathing, and we see them as criminals, as though they preyed upon helpless men. How do we achieve such a reversal of reality? Does anyone imagine girls dream of becoming prostitutes the way their classmates dream of becoming physicians, lawyers, or astronauts? Are the hardened faces toward passing cars not defensive, as put-on as the makeup? Who in our society is more vulnerable – to beatings, rape, disease, and scorn – than a prostitute? Many might argue that the rape of a prostitute is not really rape at all, but it is.

In a culture that equates virginity with purity, the girl who is raped and forced into prostitution has “lost her virtue.” How can a victim incur sin and shame by being victimized? We would not call the victim of a mugging a thief, as though he were somehow involved as a responsible participant in theft. So, how has a woman forced by physical strength, intimidation, or economic necessity for her survival or that of her children lost her virtue? I have read of women who had other choices but decided to become prostitutes for the money, but surely they are not the ones who take chances with their lives every night on city streets. In the brothels of Asia, the girls seldom reach adulthood. Disease kills them first, or else the violence of their oppressors (pimps or “clients”). Some have escaped, but too often family and/or society have closed in their faces, and they have had no choice but to return. Some give their own lives to provide opportunity for younger siblings to escape such a life.

My argument is not for the justification of prostitution but for empathy with its primary victims. Such treatment of girls (and boys) and women degrades them, the God who loves them and entrusts them to our care, and the very land itself – that is, the society, nation, and world that assigns them too little value to care and assigns much greater value to money and power. That's what I hear Leviticus telling us.

Of course, the same regulation could be read differently. It could be read as an anti-vice law, with no sympathy for the daughters but only disgust at the sexual activity itself. No doubt it was read that way sometimes, because Jesus found contempt for the women caught in prostitution and brought scorn upon himself by associating with them and giving them hope.

The prohibition may be read normatively or humanistically. If normatively, then the law itself and sexual morality are the things that matter, and the women are left out as shameful beings. If humanistically, then the daughters matter as people, and they are not to be shamed and degraded by such exploitation. Is the daughter protected for the sake of purity, or is purity protected for the sake of the daughter? We may not be sure until a daughter of our people is violated and reduced to the slavery of prostitution. Then, do we feel disgust or compassion for her? Most societies have chosen the normative – disgust. Jesus chose the humanistic – compassion.