

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleanings from Leviticus, Number 12
July 12, 2007

Parting Comments and Reflections

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

In my sermon this past Sunday, my last before vacation and my second week of continuing education, I spoke of Christian character. As part of trying to define what I meant by the term “character,” I contrasted it with our concept of virtue:

We talk about character, but often what we really mean is virtue. I know the distinctions are fuzzy, but let me suggest one I find helpful. Virtue has to do with morality, most often with strict adherence to moral laws or norms. It is a matter of restraint and abstinence from vices. If I am virtuous, I don’t do this or this or this, and I wouldn’t even consider doing that, where “that” is something I see certain other people doing. Virtue is a judgment, for or against myself and for or against others.

Character, I think, has more to do with the way I present myself to other people and treat them. Virtue responds to rules and regulations, character responds to people and to the demands life makes upon us for strength, understanding, and courage.

Being a book of rules and regulations with plenty of restrictions and prohibitions, Leviticus seems to deal mostly with virtue rather than character. Yet, we need to see the direction of the flow from God to the people. It’s not a matter of Israel’s trying to earn God’s approval and favor; it’s a matter of their learning to live in accordance with the way God has treated them, to be responsive to God’s love and mercy. So, God’s character, as displayed in God’s deliverance of the people from slavery and hopelessness, is the driving force. I’ll try to explain what I mean.

If I’m good, I’ll earn reward. If I’m bad, I’ll earn punishment. This simple choice (though it may not be simple in practice) states the normative way of looking at life, the way life “should be” for normative people who consider right-and-wrong the most important distinction in human life. There is some of the normative in all (or almost all) of us, as well there should be to keep us from descending into lawlessness.

Leviticus, however, flows mainly in the opposite direction: from the LORD God to the covenant people. The way God is should determine the people’s character. The people are not to obey for reward but, rather, to become the covenant people of their God, reflecting in all of their personal and communal life the character of God. True, chapter 26 applies very heavily the

incentives of reward and punishment. The form of that chapter, however, is that of the sealing of a covenant which traditionally included blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. So, even this rewards-and-punishments chapter stands within the context of the covenant relationship: *you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*. There is no bargaining, no trading of good deeds for approval. The children belong in the family, and their behavior should express the family's character. They are not trying to earn their way into the family by virtue or merit, which is unnecessary because they already belong. There is no thought of what would later be called among Christians "salvation by works."

A perceptive friend outside our congregation read my sermon, and part of his response said, "I particularly like the emphasis on character as a disposition toward others, a readiness to enter into their point of view. This can be seen as a complement to the more rule-bound idea of virtue, since rules tend to narrow sympathies and force complicated individuals into rigid categories." I think his word "complement" is important because it says we need both character and virtue – that is, the way we treat other people requires norms and guidelines. He might have chosen any of a number of other words suggesting sympathy and compassion negate the rules and norms, but he didn't. What Paul the apostle calls "the law of Christ,"¹ which is freedom within the context of love, still needs some guidelines. Paul would agree. What the law of love does not need is our self-flattering judgments upon each other and those rigid categories into which we force each other.

What is the place of the normative in Christian character and life? How does love handle rules and regulations? What does the desire to forgive and heal do with right and wrong? Paul argues that everything the law requires of us is contained within the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself."² For Paul, anything done without love is lawless and worse than lawless.³ Somewhat as Leviticus tells the covenant people they must be holy because their God is holy, Jesus tells us we are to be like our Father (God). The New Testament lesson for Sunday's sermon was Luke 6:36-38 where Jesus tells us we are to be merciful as our Father is merciful. Christian character is merciful, non-judgmental, forgiving, and generous.

Forgiveness is the life-changing force of love. Those who caricature grace as "anything goes" with no sense of right and wrong misrepresent forgiveness as permissiveness and excuses for unjust and hurtful behavior. Forgiveness does not dismiss the offense as though the wrong didn't matter. That's nonsense. That would be like dealing with a fire by pretending it isn't burning instead of putting it out, clearing away the damage, and rebuilding the structure. In this case, the damaged structure is a relationship that has been violated. Healing is needed for the person to whom the harm was done but also for the person who has done the harm. Grace wants to recover and rebuild the relationship which requires healing for both parties. The normative in us wants to

¹ Galatians 6:2

² Romans 13:8-10

³ I Corinthians 13

confront the wrong done by the person who started the fire and lay blame where blame is due. For the very normative, healing takes a back seat to blame. For the Christian normative, forgiveness can come only after the wrongdoer has stopped doing the wrong, accepted the blame, and submitted to the rightness of the judgment. Here we might well apply my friend's observations on forcing complex people and complicated situations into rigid categories of right and wrong. Jesus met "sinners" with understanding (not approval), and often they responded positively and thankfully. He enabled them to turn and leave behind the guilt and shame of their past, to be healed as well as forgiven, and to enter a new way of life.⁴

What do you think? What are your thoughts on Christian character, rules and regulations, or any other subject this "discussion starter" moves you to reflect upon.

This concludes my gleanings from Leviticus. I hope you found something worth taking home. This past Sunday's sermon is here: <http://home.comcast.net/~rsindall/sermon070708.pdf>

⁴ See the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10.