

Command and Promise
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Duke Chapel
October 25, 2020

If I say “The Lord is my Shepherd”, you are likely to say “I shall not want.” That’s right; I heard you. You probably know that this is the opening verse of Psalm 23, and some of you, even now are reciting it to yourself. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” (Psalm 23:1-2) Many find this a familiar and comforting psalm. Perhaps fewer of us know the connections between Psalms 22, 23, and 24 to see how they move from anguishing lament through the valley of the shadow of death and on to the affirmation that “The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.” (Psalm 24:10b) Last weekend, a program presented by the Psalms in Dialogue Project here at Duke Chapel explored the relationship of these three psalms to each other through music, dance, and painting. If you missed it, I commend it to you.¹ It is available online. When we see the 23rd Psalm in its context of the poems before and after it, it becomes even more comforting and touches a deeper core.

If I say, “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy: It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on” it might not be on the tip of your tongue that these are the words of the character Iago, in Act 3, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Othello*. *Othello* is a powerful tragedy, in which Iago’s consuming jealousy wreaks havoc in multiple lives, and prompts Othello to murder his innocent wife. This is no flippant comment about a trivial envy, but points to jealousy as a life-destroying monster. Referring to jealousy as a “green-eyed monster” may be a familiar phrase, yet when we know its context and the story of the painful chaos that jealousy creates, then the phrase takes on great power.

I know of no record of Jesus quoting the 23rd psalm, although he did speak of shepherds (Matt 18:12-13) and referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. (John 10:11) And he certainly did not quote *Othello*. What Jesus did quote is Leviticus. Leviticus. This book of laws may not be your “go-to” scripture in the midst of the pandemic and maybe you have skipped over this and other large sections of the Old Testament. Take heart, you are not the only one who skips this book. In three years, the lectionary offers a Leviticus reading only twice, and it is the same passage, the one we heard this morning. Today I wonder if knowing a bit more about Leviticus will help us gain a deeper appreciation of our Lord’s teaching.

¹ <https://chapel.duke.edu/psalmsvideo>

The verse of Leviticus that Jesus quotes, and that we quote, is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev 19:18b) This is from a section of the book called the “Holiness Code.”² In this section, God gives Moses a great variety of laws to structure the lives of the Israelites. The laws cover a wide range of topics including animal sacrifices, relationships between individuals, festivals, and the year of Jubilee. There are laws about rituals and personal conduct. This goes on for chapter after chapter. There are 10 chapters of this “Holiness Code”, and it is embedded in a larger stretch of scripture that runs from the end of Exodus through Leviticus and into Numbers,³ which is filled with instructions. Apparently, God has a lot to say about how the Israelites are to live. Jesus quotes from the 19th chapter of Leviticus. Here are a few examples of other decrees in this same chapter.

- “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 leave them for the poor and the alien.” (Lev 19:9-10a)
- “You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances and honest weights.” (Lev 19:35-36a)
- “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute” (Lev 19:25)
- “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old.” (Lev 19:32a)
- “You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.” (Lev 19:14)

From this small sample you can see that God is concerned about agricultural practices, business dealings, family relationships, and protection of the vulnerable. The holiness God desires is much more than an hour on the Sabbath. It encompasses every aspect of life.⁴ These laws are to structure the lives of the people, to create systems in which they can thrive, and to form them as a whole people. A people that are holy. A people that will be a light to the nations. The aim here is systemic holiness.

I know that we can get bogged down in individual laws within Leviticus and some seem so strange to us that we shake our heads in wonderment. One law prohibits putting “on a garment made of two different materials.” (Lev 19:19b) While I am sure this had a purpose in the ancient world, and perhaps still does for some, it doesn’t seem essential to me. I think rather than being distracted by some of these individual laws, perhaps what we can see instead is the sweep of what is created through these instructions. We see God’s desire for a holy people. More than that, we see God’s command for the people to be holy.

² Leviticus 17-26

³ Exodus 25 - Number 10

⁴ *Opening Israel's Scriptures* by Ellen Davis, p. 63

This command is clear in our reading today. “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 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.” (Lev 19:1-2) You shall be holy for I the Lord am holy. This is a pivotal verse in this chapter and is echoed throughout the chapter. After each section of instructions is the refrain, “I am the Lord your God.” There is no doubt about the source of this command. This is not “Because your mother said so” or “Because it’s your daddy’s way.” This all-encompassing command for holiness is from the Lord our God. We tremble in the face of it.

Now imagine taking this command for systemic holiness and packing it into those seven words that Jesus quoted, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” My guess is that when Jesus spoke these words, he knew he was drawing from the Holiness Code of Leviticus. He knew God desired holiness to permeate all aspects of life, both individually and corporately. When we pack all this meaning into these few words, the words become more powerful and profound. I think Jesus intended these words to carry a lot of weight.

The phrase “love your neighbor as yourself” is the ethic of the Christian life, yet sometimes we miss its depth. We focus on the little things, smiling at the grocery store clerk or running an errand for a neighbor. An old pop song encouraged:

Come on people now
Smile on your brother
Everybody get together
Try to love one another
Right now⁵

The sentiment is good and I am in favor of smiling at people and running errands for neighbors, but if getting together to love one another was easy, we would have done it already. The song was a hit in 1969; in 50 years we may have made some progress, but we are a long way from loving one another right now. Instead of reducing the ethic of loving our neighbor as ourselves to the lowest common denominator or the easiest thing we can do, perhaps we need to allow it to form and reform all aspects of our lives and remind us of a call to holiness.

While we may be tempted to reduce the demands of this ethic, we can also be inclined to focus on the last part of the phrase, to “love your neighbor *as*

⁵ “Get Together” by The Youngbloods <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-youngbloods/get-together>

yourself.” The thought is that we can only love others in as much as we love ourselves, and so we see in this a call to love self along with loving others. This is a worthy line of thought and I am in favor of psychological health. We are beloved of God, each one of us, and that is our essential identity. I would point out, however, that Leviticus doesn’t seem to care at all about our self-esteem. I think the assumption in these ancient laws is that humans tend to be self-centered and so need to be redirected.

When we hear Jesus’ teaching about the greatest and first commandment and the second one like it, we need to know its context. The context points us to a love of neighbor that is deep and wide, built into the fabric of our lives and society. For this reason, this command calls us to see that love of neighbor plays out not just in individual relationships, but also structures and systems. This is why we write laws, and rewrite laws. Why we develop family traditions, then adjust those traditions through the years. This calls us to examine our community’s culture to see if it is as loving to all as we hope it might be. And sometimes we do the unglamorous work of reviewing the policies and procedures of our organizations, to ensure that they are fair and just. And in a democracy, we vote. The goal is to create patterns and systems in which all people can thrive. All levels of our corporate life, along with our individual lives, are to be formed and reformed by this ethic.

Of course, this feels overwhelming, unless you also see promise. Hundreds of years ago, some in the church felt burdened by regulations and laws that they could never perfectly fulfill. It led to the Reformation and significant change in the church. They knew, and we affirm, that obeying laws is not the essence of our faith. This is true even in Leviticus and certainly in Jesus.

In addition to command, there is also a promise.⁶ God said, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” You shall -- this is command. There are actions to do and behaviors to adopt. You shall -- is also promise. If the verse was shorter and read “You shall be holy” period, we would be on our own. It would be a frightening and impossible command. Instead, God declares “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” We are not in this alone. Any holiness that we may have is inextricably linked to divine holiness. God was dwelling among the people of Israel in the same way that God is dwelling with us right now. This is not an injunction to works righteousness demanding that somehow we have to get it right

⁶ Commentary on Leviticus 19 by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2186

for God to be among us. God is already here. God has already chosen to dwell among the people, among us. God provides the means of grace, whereby forgiven and restored, we can live in the presence of God.⁷ Any holiness we have comes from God.

Jesus said the greatest commandments were “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These words came from Jesus, who was God in flesh dwelling among us and who promised that we would never be left alone. He even claimed that he will dwell in us and we will dwell in him, as close as a vine is to branches. And, he promises “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” (John 15:5)

The command to be a holy people is incredibly demanding and the promises of God to be with us, to love us, to reform us, and to claim us as God’s own are incredibly gracious.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 125