

Leviticus 19:1-37

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[0 : 00] What is the good life? That's pretty much the question behind all of our self-help efforts, the multi-billion dollar! global self-help industry, isn't it?

All our new year's resolutions, all our financial planning. We might not all go to exotic places like the Caribbean for holiday or live our lives on celebrity Instagram, but also behind all of our new year's resolutions and plans and studying for exams, good as all of these things are, I think at least partly is the desire for our best possible life.

There's a phrase going around that you might have heard recently when someone's having a lot of fun, people say he or she is living their best life right now.

The problem is the goalposts always shift with what that best life looks like, doesn't it? At one stage, it was being glamorous and flying all over the world in private jets and now these celebrities get publicly shamed if they take a plane instead of a train.

Last week we spoke a bit about how, despite how things change, the God of all of these things does not change and will not change. And that is where we get our security from.

[1 : 34] And that means we don't have to be concerned that we'll never know what our best life looks like. Because God's intentions for his people have not changed and will not change because he does not change.

And so I hope tonight we'll see from this chapter that with all these laws that don't seem relevant to us in the year 2020 now, that they actually have an incredible amount to say to us about how and why our best life is the holy life.

The first thing tonight, a good life, is the holy life. You heard the phrase in this passage, you shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Right at the beginning there. And then every couple of verses, every couple of sentences through it, in shorthand, the same thing over again, I am the Lord your God. And it kind of doesn't bite the question, why does God say that over and over again here when he's giving them a list of instructions about how to live?

And we really get that answer all the way back in Genesis already. When God makes Adam and Eve, when he makes the first human beings and he makes them in his image, doesn't he? In open Genesis 1, God created man in his own image.

[3 : 04] In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. He created them in his image. He created us to be like him, although we'll never be him.

And so when God tells him, do these things, do these things in this way, because I am the Lord your God, he's telling them, if you want to know me, if you want to worship me properly, if you want to be who you were made to be, you have to live in a way that reflects who I made you to be.

It's not saying they should try and be holy so that he would be their God. You notice the syntax works completely differently there. He says, no, because he is the Lord their God, they should be holy.

And here God, what he's really doing in this chapter, in this whole section in Leviticus, he's preparing Israel to go into the Holy Land and know how to live, and know how to live their best life. The holy life that he made them, rescued them for. I mean, that does raise the question, you know, when we hear, you know, we've got to be holy. How are we holy?

[4 : 28] How do we live holy lives? Does that mean that everyone has to become church ministers now, people of the cloth, or you know, like the nuns who ran this chapel over there before we bought it?

Of course not. Firstly, the New Testament tells us we are all in Christ, prophets, priests, and kings now. We are all of those things in him, because those are the three offices that Jesus came to fulfill.

So, you know, for a Christian to be holy really just means that we are what God has made us, people set aside for God. People belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ who saved us. And that's incredible news. I mean, 1 Peter 2 verse 5 says here, we're a royal priesthood. It doesn't always feel like that every day in the normal drudgery from day to day, but you are a royal priest in Christ Jesus.

But when we hear that, you know, it should probably also fill us with a little bit of dread. The priests in the Old Testament, just a couple of chapters before this in Leviticus, you know, some of these same things, but a lot more detail.

[5 : 47] A lot more were expected of the priests in their day-to-day holiness. They had more regulations to fulfill than the average Jonathan Bloggs, son of Benjamin Bloggs, in Israel.

But, now that we've got the Holy Spirit given to all of us, and God literally dwelling not just among us, but in us, that raises the bar for holiness a lot, lot more.

But, pursuing a life that means we live as the holy people, the holy God made us to be, the people Jesus came to save us to be, is guaranteed the best life.

Guaranteed, because that's what this God, the Lord God, the God who made a covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the God who fulfilled his promises and has proven him to be the God who doesn't change and the God who is reliable, has promised us.

He is the Lord our God. And if we are holy, that is the best life possible.

[7 : 15] Secondly, the thing we see here, I think, is the holy life is a life lived in a whole way. W-H-O-L-E. A whole way.

It is a holistic holiness. What does a holy life look like? Well, in short, it's a life dedicated to God. We've got to touch on that, haven't we? In Leviticus, you've got these terms being thrown around. You've got things that are outside of the normal pattern.

Dead things, animals that crawl when they should walk, all of those things that are unclean. So anything outside the norm, outside the normal explication, that's unclean. Then you have normal, that is clean, everything that is as it should be.

And then you have things dedicated to God. And they are holy. And then, when things are holy, when they're set aside for God, there are particular rules about how they should be handled.

[8 : 18] That's why they've got rules about the sacrifices and rules about the temple. And our lives, set aside for God, really are no different in that way.

And Leviticus helps us to see what that's like. People sometimes make a distinction when we come to the laws, and it's confusing sometimes.

You look at a chapter like this, and which rules are applicable and which aren't. People make a distinction between the moral laws, like the Ten Commandments, and those are always true and will always apply.

And then civil laws, that kind of govern the things of how do we live from day to day, and how Israel lived from day to day in their society. And then the ceremonial laws, the sacrifices in the temple and those kinds of things.

And the New Testament tells us that ceremonial laws are abolished and fulfilled, because Jesus was the final sacrifice. So that's why we don't have rules about washing before we come into this building, although sometimes with mud on the carpet, you wish we had.

[9 : 24] And that leaves us with the civil law. And that's really what we have in here in this chapter, isn't it? And that's, you know, some of them are more obvious.

The bits about mixing of fabrics and not interbreeding different types of cattle and those types of things. They were there to remind Israel that they were separate, that they were set aside for God, that they were special, that they were not to intermingle with the nations around them.

Every day you put on your clothes, you were reminded of that. But in the church that goes away, and we heard about that this morning, didn't we? That's Ephesians for you.

That is Jews and Gentiles being united in the church. That's the mystery that Paul is so excited about. The rest might be a bit more tricky. But actually, hopefully, we'll see tonight they aren't. In Luke 10, there's a lawyer that comes to Jesus, and he wants to test him, really, about this. He wants to, you know, trick him.

[10 : 33] And he asks him what he should do to inherit life. And Jesus asks him, doesn't he, he says, what is written in the law? You should know this, you're a lawyer.

And he answers, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself.

And what does Jesus say? Well, you've answered correctly, do this and you will live. I don't know if you realise, but this chapter that we've just read, verse 18, is the only place in the Old Testament that that phrase appears.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. That not just Jesus, I mean, this lawyer used it before, but Jesus affirms it. This is a summary of the law.

Right in that one sentence there. Jesus doesn't say, yes, and all the things around it, they've gone away now.

[11 : 41] They don't apply, do they? I think it's really striking that in this chapter of laws and things about living, right in the middle of that, you've got this verse, and this is the verse that is the summary of all the second half of the law.

The second half of the Ten Commandments. The instructions that God says, this is how you should relate to each other, because that reflects who I am. It's all summarised in that one verse.

Now, we don't have time to look at all of these commandments tonight, but I don't think we have to, to get the sense of the completeness of what Jesus is talking about here.

Firstly, it covers all of the Ten Commandments in this one chapter. If you go through it, God, through Moses, shows them, this is how it becomes real.

This is how the Ten Commandments become real in daily life. Have a look. Verse 4, no images to worship.

[12 : 51] Verse 12, no using of the Lord's name in vain. The Sabbath on a father and mother, murder, adultery, and so on as well. Verse 11 and 13, no stealing.

You shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely. And then really fascinating, verse 13, you shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning.

Not keeping back what is owed to someone. Verse 35, 36, just weights, using just weights and measures. We've got false witness, we've got coveting in there as well.

You know, when we start to see this in that light, you can't separate out the moral law that most people would say, yes, that stays and all these other things fall away so easily.

You can't separate out the moral law. The way God wants us to live reflects who he is. And he says that over and over there again, doesn't he? Do this because I am the Lord and I am holy.

[13 : 53] You get the picture. You know, it's not always a word for word quoting back. And I think that's helpful for us because it helps us to see that the Ten Commandments and God's law, God's instructions for holy living isn't just a bunch of tick box options.

It's not like a pre-flight checklist that a pilot goes through. It's not, you know, like this lawyer tried to go and, you know, see kind of how can I narrow it down to the least I need to do.

We start to think about holy living in a way that touches every area of life. And see what are the implications of all of these things.

How far can I stretch it, not how much can I narrow it down. It's all encompassing of our lives. You know, God talks here about our private lives.

He talks about public worship. He talks about private worship. He talks about family life. He talks about societal life. He talks about business and the courts.

[15 : 05] It all belongs to him. And it all must run in a way that reflects his holiness and his hatred of sin and his perfect justice. And his perfect love.

That's the holy life. It's not some dry list of things to do, isn't it? When you read the compassion for the marginalized and the poor and the vulnerable in there, that is the heart of God.

I want to take some homework this week and go through that list and try and see the principles behind those laws and how they apply today. But the point I want to make, and the point we need to grasp, all of us, especially when we make plans and when we review our lives like people tend to do at this time of the year and think how we should organize and plan, is this.

Every single aspect of our lives need to reflect the holiness of the one true holy God. Let's think through just a couple.

We don't have time to do all of them. We could do many, many, many of them. We don't farm. So, you know, it's very difficult for all of us to leave the gleanings at the edge of the field for the poor to come and pick up.

[16:32] But when you start thinking about that, it does seem that contributing to the needs of the poor, especially in a way that gives dignity to people who are poor, I mean, they work in this, there's a mutuality there, and seeking a welfare system, for example, that does that isn't optional.

Or take verse 13 that I mentioned there about not holding back a worker's wages. So when we buy things, do we take the time to buy from suppliers that don't exploit their workers and hold back their wages, as it's put in this chapter?

What shall we always do? We do loads of online shopping. I think the poor postal system creaked under all the packages getting delivered for Christmas and getting sent back soon after.

I think the first package was delivered at an off-license at 7.02am in London on Christmas Day. But here's the question for us. Do we know whether that driver is on a zero-hours contract and given impossible targets by the delivery company and penalising them if they take a break in their 18-hour day or go to the loo?

Impossible targets seem like false measures, don't they? These questions should be on our radar, really, if we think through every aspect of our lives in terms of what living a holy life looks like, I think.

[18:16] We can go through each of them, like I said, but I think you get the point. Leviticus tells us, in a bold, clear call for holy living, that we'll see that living a holy life is how God helps us to feel whole again in a world that is fallen and fractured because of sin.

It's not a list of things that constrain us. It's not a list of things that limit us. It is a list of things that help us feel whole again by living in a way that reflects God's character.

But here's the third thing that maybe falls off our radar even more. I think thirdly we see here, a holistic holiness seeks to make others whole too.

I think too easily we can think a holy life is a life that is separate from the world around us.

We've made personal holiness something to do primarily with our own sinful tendencies towards speaking and reading and touching and watching.

[19:31] And that's good and right. We should avoid the water cooler chat with the crude jokes. Don't watch pornography. Don't gossip. Those aren't holy things to do.

But what I don't think we realize just how much that focus on holiness is influenced by the world around us. In a sense, you know, it can become an unholy, a common holiness.

Because Western culture especially is incredibly individualistic, isn't it? We know that. It's all about me. It's all about what makes me happy and safe and empowered and whole.

I think Leviticus 19 is a bit of a shock to the system when we think about holiness. Just have a look with me at verses 11 to 17, just very briefly there.

The Hebrew text uses a couple of words there that are all translated, can all be translated neighbor. And because it's different words, they translate it with different words in the text there.

[20:45] And it builds up from verse 11 to verse 18. Verse 11, it talks about fellow citizens. I am the Lord. Verses 13 to 14, your neighbor, I am the Lord.

Verses 15 and 16, fellow citizens again, people, your neighbor, I am the Lord. You know, suddenly there's people in there.

And then verses 17 and 18, your brother, fellow citizens, people, neighbors, I am the Lord. Anybody who read this, or heard this, read to them, would have picked up on that pattern and realized that verse 18 is the high point.

It builds to this climax where God's concern is for how we look after the welfare of others and look out for the welfare of others. And we have a bit of a gut punch there to the thinking that holiness, I think, is primarily a personal thing or a passive thing.

And here's why. So Leviticus 19 shows us that you can't be a holy person living a holy life and not be concerned about making the world whole.

[22:03] a whole, a world that looks and lives like the holy God who made it. You know, we know the Apostle James writes, doesn't he, that faith without works is dead.

And it might surprise you how many of these commandments from this chapter of Leviticus 19 he picks up in James in that book. In fact, you know, many of the commentators think he was consciously echoing these, you know, I'm not going to do all of them because that will take too long but in James 5, 12 he says, do not swear by anything let your yes be yes and your no, no.

We read that in this chapter, don't we? Not use the Lord's name in vain in verse 12. In chapter 5, verse 4 he says, you held back the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields it is crying out

against you.

We've read that here, haven't we? In chapter 5, verse 9 he says, don't grumble against one another. Verse 18 and verse 8 of chapter 2 he says, love your neighbour as yourself.

Love your neighbour as yourself can mean many things. It's one of those phrases that people have used for all kinds of things and cover all manner of sins. Politicians like to send thoughts and prayers after tragedies.

[23 : 25] But when God puts that phrase smack bang in the middle of this chapter that drips with the kind of ways we ought to treat one another with the practical ways we ought to look after especially the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalised, the sojourners.

that's calling us to see that if we believe such a world where everyone lives in a holy way is the only way in which people will really flourish if that's what we want for ourselves working to change the world around us while knowing that it'll only really be changed when Jesus returns and makes everything new including our limited efforts to live holy lives we can't I believe and I think Leviticus 19 compels us to think not strive to see this happen at our homes in our communities in our politics and in our workplace.

If you want to think through this more in two weeks we're starting a course Living in Christianity Monday night here thinking through these things how does it look to live in a Christian way in our workplace at home in society and how does a society look that reflects that.

After Jesus asked that lawyer in Luke 10 the man was indignant and he asked Jesus to trick him again and he says well who exactly is my neighbour whom I should love as myself.

Tried to limit it down and Jesus turned that question around didn't he with that parable of the Good Samaritan and he asked him after that who was a neighbour to that man so our temptation might be in a world that is increasingly unholy to withdraw to live personally holy lives that's not loving our neighbour necessarily and I don't think Leviticus 19 says that is holy living really we can do more we can't do it all but we can do something we can write to our MPs we can lobby we can volunteer we can buy ethically and we can challenge companies that work against family living we can do those things we're not going to change everything but we can love our neighbour as much as we are able to in this way we should and we can and we must of course strive to share the gospel as widely and as often as we can because only a holy God can change unholy hearts you can be concerned about many things about me but don't be concerned that

[26 : 25] I'm preaching a social gospel that we'll be saved through doing good deeds this isn't social Marxism that I'm talking about here or something like that this is the second commandment when Leviticus 19 tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves as Jesus does it's not a question in the first place about who our neighbour is living our best life living a holy life demands that we ask the question who we're a neighbour to and that we're concerned about social issues and about injustice and all of those things that maybe we tend to withdraw from because they're hard but this question of who am I a neighbour to is the question that Jesus answered when he was born as a man and he had the greatest love for us didn't he laying down his life not just for his neighbours but for his friends Amen