

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Be Holy in This Season

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

“Love your neighbor.” That familiar command has taken on even greater urgency with the spread of the coronavirus. Everywhere you turn, folks both religious and nonreligious are claiming this biblical mandate and using it to spur themselves and others into action. Though the coronavirus affects certain categories of people more than others, it still afflicts people across the spectrum of age, race, ethnicity, and location. To some degree, everybody is vulnerable. So there should be no boundaries on our compassion and care. Love your neighbor.

That specific command comes at the end of today’s text from Leviticus. Actually, the full injunction is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Remember that this statement is a summary. It gathers up what God has been saying for several chapters on the subject of holiness. His holiness, and the holiness of his people.

According to the opening of today’s text, the two are inseparable. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy”’” (vv. 1-2). This is a word for all of God’s people. So far in Leviticus, a lot of the rules have been geared primarily toward Israel’s priests. But beginning in chapter 17, the focus shifts to codes and instructions for the larger community, the lay folks. They too need guidelines for their new life together. They’re transitioning from enslavement to Pharaoh to covenant with God, and the main thing God expects from them is holiness. “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

God’s holiness has to do with God’s transcendence, God’s absolute otherness. In other words, God is wholly different from us, completely and totally incomparable to anyone or anything that he has created. What’s more, God is separate from sin and from the way it defiles, degrades, and destroys human life. In short, holiness is God’s nature. Holiness is what makes God, God. And yet at the same time, God wants us as human beings to share in his holiness and to reflect it in our lives.

Sometimes we think of God’s holiness primarily as a source of overwhelming fear. In many people’s minds, God is like the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. Recall that after Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man arrive at the Emerald City, they journey through a long, dimly lit, gothic hallway, on their way toward the Wizard’s presence. Eventually they arrive at a large inner sanctum, where they’re greeted with an explosion and billows of green smoke.

After the smoke clears, a giant, menacing, bodiless head shouts, “I am Oz, the great and terrible! Who are you?” As soon as Dorothy tries to answer, the Wizard booms, “Silence! The great and powerful Oz knows why you are here! Step forward, Tin Man.” The Tin Man approaches with great trepidation, only to hear the Wizard say, “You dare come to me for a heart, you clinking, clanking, clattering collection of caliginous junk?” Then the other travelers are met with similar greetings. To the Scarecrow, Oz shouts, “You have the

effrontery to ask for a brain, you billowing bale of bovine fodder?" And to the Cowardly Lion, Oz shouts, "And you, Lion?," whereupon the poor Lion is overcome with fear and faints. According to one person, "This, unfortunately, is similar to the unflattering caricature summoned up by many when they think about God. The Wizard puts on a false show of majesty, but there is no love, no grace, no mercy."¹

In this way of imagining God, he's all majesty and no mercy. All grandeur and no grace. But this is very different from the God we meet in the Scriptures. Yes, God is holy, but his holiness is coupled with love and compassion, and a will to save. In his holy love, the Lord saved his people Israel. He saw their suffering and heard their cries. He came to them and revealed himself to them as the Lord, disclosing to them what he was like and rescuing them from bondage in Egypt. They became his people, not because of what they had done but because of what he did for them. Likewise, we're God's people in Christ because of what God did through him to save us from captivity to sin and death. In Christ, the holiness of God took on human form, dwelled among us, and still inhabits us as his people.

"I am the Lord your God." That's the refrain throughout today's Scripture passage. Think of it as the reason behind the rules. And in today's text, each paragraph of God's commands closes with it. "I am the Lord your God." It's like a link on a web page. If you click on the link, it opens up a summary of the backstory, the story of how God revealed himself, rescued his people, and entered into covenant with them. "I am the Lord your God." Behind all the rules is a relationship between God and his people.

And as God's people respond faithfully to what God has done for them, something happens. They become more like God and act more like God. I don't mean that in some heretical sense of human beings trying to be the Creator rather than the creatures. The basic relationship doesn't change. But what does change as God's people obey God's commands is that God's people look more like God, in all his holiness. They take on more of God's character. As theologian John Brown once put it, "Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills."²

And, we can add, acting as God acts. That's how God's people have always known who God is and what God wants, not only by what God has said but what God has done. God's action in the world and in our lives discloses God's nature and purpose to us. And when it comes to holiness, our action, our way of living in the world, reveals and reflects God's holiness. It's through our obedience to God's commands that we reflect God's character, God's values, God's priorities.

There is no such thing as holiness without concrete action. That's why, in today's text from Leviticus, and the chapters around it, God gives his people very specific instructions about how to act justly, how to live rightly with one another, in everything ranging from family to sexual relations to speech to the economy. There at ground level, in the details of daily living, is where holiness takes shape and becomes visible. As one person has put it, "The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."³

There's a story about a businessman, well known for his ruthlessness, who once announced to writer Mark Twain, "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the 10 Commandments aloud at the top." "I have a better idea," replied Twain. "You could stay in Boston and keep them."⁴

Just having God's mandates isn't enough. It isn't just about knowing them. It's about keeping them. It's one thing to declare, "Love your neighbor as yourself." It's another thing to flesh that out in specific ways in the context where you find yourself.

Right now, we find ourselves in a context we've never experienced. The coronavirus pandemic has brought sickness and suffering into the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the globe. The number of cases and the number of deaths are rising rapidly. We've been uprooted from our routines. Our daily rhythms have been disrupted. We're isolated from one another behind closed doors, fearful and anxious about what might happen to us and to others we know and love. Schools have closed. Many hospitals are overwhelmed. The economy has ground to a halt. So much has changed so fast.

But today's text reminds us that something crucial hasn't changed. The Lord is still our God, and we are still his people. God is still holy, and still expects us to be as well. Maybe we're now at a stage in this experience where we can think more about what that means for us, as individual believers and as a congregation. More and more, the reality of the coronavirus outbreak is sinking in. After the initial shock, we're steadily coming to grips with the hard and painful truths of the situation. We're facing more of the facts, and seeing more clearly what we need to do and how we need to do it. So now is a good time to reflect more deeply and precisely on what holiness looks like in the midst of this crisis, during the new normal.

One thing we do know is that holiness doesn't mean retreating from our obligations and responsibilities to others. Being God's people doesn't mean withdrawing from the trials and tribulations of our fellow human beings, hoping to secure ourselves and let others fend for themselves. As God's people, redeemed through Christ, we don't focus on escaping from the suffering, but rather on entering into it. As Evelyn Underhill has put it:

The real mark of spiritual triumph—the possession of that more lovely, more abundant life which we discern in moments of deep prayer—is not an abstraction from this world, but a return to it; a willing use of its condition as material for the expression of love. There is nothing high-minded about Christian holiness. It is most at home in the slum, the street, the hospital ward.⁵

Right now, we can't just go freely into the hospital ward, or other places where we could serve those who suffer. And for good reason. In this case, one of the best ways we can serve the sick, and prevent others from getting sick, is by keeping our distance and isolating ourselves from one another. In this situation, that's part of what it looks like to love your neighbor. Being holy means staying home.

What else does love your neighbor look like in the midst of the pandemic? It looks like checking in on others to see how they're managing. It looks like sending a card or letter to a friend. It looks like cultivating the congregation's fellowship online. It looks like donating to shelters and food banks. It looks like giving to those who are unemployed and have lost their income. It looks like praying for health care workers. It looks like making faithful use of the time that you have with the family members right around you. It means tending to your own well-being, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

Remember that this season of suffering created by the coronavirus presents us not only with challenges but with opportunities as well. Opportunities to grow in holiness and to make progress in exhibiting God's character. As one pastor wrote in his blog earlier this week:

Jesus once said that the most important thing in the world is to love God and love others, and if you could sum up the mission statement of any church in four words it would probably be that: Love God. Love Others. What I'm realizing is that the threat of coronavirus does not keep us from loving God. If anything we can go deeper in our spiritual practice.⁶

"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." As you seek to act justly toward your fellow human beings and live rightly in your relationships with others, may the holiness of God take shape in us. Love your neighbor as yourself. Be holy in this season of suffering, and let the love of God become visible in and through you.

¹ David Slagle, at the Preaching Today website. Accessed March 26, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2002/august/13803.html>>.

² Quoted in J. Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 51.

³ Dag Hammarskjold in "Markings." *Christianity Today* (Vol. 36, No. 4).

⁴ *Today in the Word* (September 1991) 32.

⁵ Evelyn Underhill in "The School of Charity." *Christianity Today* (Vol. 40, No. 8).

⁶ Jim Somerville, "God Is Our Refuge and Strength. BGAV website. March 26, 2020. Accessed March 27, 2020 <<https://bgav.org/somerville-god-is-our-refuge-and-strength/>>.