BE HOLY

Leviticus 19:1-37

Key Verse: 2

“Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’”

Thank God for the LORD, who is holy and so wants his people to be holy to him. It was because he set apart them from the nations of the world to be his own. In chapters 18 and 20, the LORD commanded the Israelites not to engage in the corrupt sexual lifestyle practiced by the surrounding nations. God warned his people against sexual impurity as well as spiritual impurity. God abhorred all such things; the death penalty – on top of being cut off from his people – could be applied to those who would follow such practices of the world. In today’s passage, chapter 19, we can see the overall view of being holy as God’s people. Especially the well-known words of the Bible, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, are uniquely written here in the Old Testament, which Jesus quoted as the 2nd greatest commandment after “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:29-31). Let’s probe further into the LORD’s command, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.”

In verses 1 and 2, 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.’” As we studied, this is a recurring theme of Leviticus, starting from 11:44-45, “I am the LORD your God; consecrated yourselves and be holy, because I am holy…I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” This very command ends in 20:26, “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy.”

Then the LORD says in verse 3, “Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God.” In chapter 19, this is the first thing mentioned when God spoke about being holy. Here, “respect” is the same word in Hebrew as “revere” in 19:32, “revere your God.” Revering or respecting parents and observing God’s Sabbaths are written together, and I think this is insightful and profound. Observing the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Dt 5:12) and the last of the commands regarding loving God. It is the visible expression of God-loving. It is to worship God wholeheartedly, in a matter acceptable to him. And honouring parents is the fifth commandment. So here the fourth and the fifth commandment are connected. When parents and children worship God in spirit and truth, the children learn how to revere God and consequently to revere their parents. What insight! So parents are to show his children how to worship God. Then the children will learn also how to honour their parents.

So to worship God and honour parents is the foundation of a holy life. And those who know how to respect their parents and have a sound relationship with their father and mother are able to make a sound relationship with others as they grow in a community and society. When the children honour their parents, simply because they are their parents through whom they came into this world, they will be blessed, as God said in Deuteronomy 5:16, “Honour your father and mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”

And in verse 4, the LORD says, “Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.” When people worship the invisible God, hearing his word and sensing God’s presence, they will not turn to idols or gods of visible images, overcoming their desire to see God with their physical eyes.

In verses 5-8, sacrificing a fellowship offering is mentioned. Being holy includes having fellowship with God and with his people, sharing together generously. The fellowship offering is to be eaten until the third day, with no leftovers.

Verses 9-18 concern relationships with others. To be holy is not to be alone and holy. Being holy is to be expressed in a relationship with others. One is to be mindful of the poor and needy. The LORD says in verses 9-10, “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” Wow! The LORD God is concerned about such seemingly trivial things. This is the LORD.

The fear of God is the basis of our relationship with other human beings. In verses 11-17 it says, “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD. Do not defraud your neighbour or rob him.” These are related to one’s attitude toward his neighbours, particularly in his words, “Don’t lie; don’t deceive and don’t defraud.” When one lies again and again, it can become a habit, giving a foothold to the devil, who is the father of the life. We should watch out for it. The LORD continues, “Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight. Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.” When we fear God, we cannot treat our neighbours roughly and thoughtlessly, especially the lowly and the needy. God-fearing definitely affects our relationship with our neighbours. The LORD continues in verses 15-16, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favourtism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not endanger your neighbour’s life. I am the LORD.” The fear of God rejects perverting justice, partiality, favourtism, slander, and endangering a neighbour’s life.

Then the LORD says in verses 17-18, “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.” In our relationship with our neighbour, there should be no hatred in the heart, no revenge, no grudge, but frank rebuke. Then now the Spirit of the LORD reaches to the command of love, “love your neighbour as yourself”, which is one of the main teachings of the Bible. One’s holiness is to reach to his or her love, loving the neighbour. It must have been a sensational command and teaching to selfish human beings at that time, and in fact in every generation. To us, “love yourself” or “take care of yourself” is very familiar, and “love your neighbour as yourself”, quite unfamiliar and new. The fallen Adam did not know how to take care of even his wife, when she needed true help and encouragement, repenting together. Rather, Adam only blamed her, saying like, “Because of you I became like this.” Then we remember that Cain hated his brother to the point of killing his brother Abel. We see that since man’s fall, the history of enmity and hatred began. Now after bringing his people out of the land of the slavery, the LORD who is holy commands, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” It is remarkable. Then we find in 1 Samuel 18:1, 3 that Jonathan loved David as himself, though David could be his rival to the kingship of the nation Israel. Yet, Jonathan loved David even when his father tried to kill David, and Jonathan loved him to the end. When David heard of the news of Jonathan’s death, he grieved, saying, “Jonathan, my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women” (2 Sam 1:26).

Then in the New Testament Jesus brought this command of love to light. When an expert in the law asked about the first and greatest command, Jesus did not neglect him but clearly stated as the second, after the command of loving God with one’ whole heart and soul and strength. The command “love your neighbour as yourself”’ is written in all synoptic gospels. Jesus developed the command, “love your neighbour” even to “love your enemies” (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:35). Then Paul said in Romans 13:9-10, “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself...”, and in Galatians 5:14, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” And James said in James 2:8, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ you are doing well.” And in John’s gospel Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” In John 13:3, Jesus had given to them a new command, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This is a new command in that Jesus showed an example to the point of laying down his life. Then Apostle John said in 1 John 3:16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” This is truly a beautiful command that we are to obey.

Who is our neighbour. In Luke chapter 10 , when Jesus told an expert in the law to love his neighbour as himself, he asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” Subsequently, Jesus told the story of a good Samaritan that the Samaritan took care of a man who fell into the hands of robbers, while a priest and a Levi just passed by. Afterward Jesus asked him back who was the neighbour to the man. God wants each of us to be a neighbour to the needy person put in my life. Yet, when I think further of who is my nearest neighbour, I realize that my nearest neighbour is the one who has lived with me longest and served God the longest. We can show our kindness and offer services to new or distant people for a short period time. But it is easy to neglect the presence of the nearest one, taking it for granted, or just taking advantage of the person. It is painful to see that old couples divorce, children leaving their parent before marriage, or gospel workers leave the ministry they had served for a long time, whatever the reason. My point is that we all need to learn to obey this command of the LORD, “Love your neighbour as yourself” beginning with my nearest neighbour. Interestingly Jesus applied this truth to a husband’s loving his wife in Ephesians 5:28-33, “husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it…each of you must love his wife as he loves himself…”

Here we are reminded of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” May we grow in the life of love.

Then the LORD says in verse 19, “Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not put plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” God’s people should keep God’s creation principle. When it is ignored, problems happen and become uncontrollable as time passes by. Those who keep God’s creation truth are wise and they will experience his blessings more and more.

In verses 20-22 God protects the right of a slave girl. One who violates her should offer a guilt offering to the LORD.

The LORD says in verses 23-25, “When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. But in the fifth year you may eat its fruit. In this way your harvest will be increased. I am the LORD your God.” To be holy and live a holy life, one should learn to trust in God for necessary provisions. We should not try to make money by all possible means, even dishonouring the name of the LORD. Fundamentally we must trust in God, however hard the circumstances may be.

The LORD says in verses 26-29, “Do not eat any meat with blood still in it. Do not practice divination or sorcery. Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD. Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.” All these were practiced in pagan culture, which God’s people should not follow. How can we overcome all such un godly influences? The LORD continues to say in verse 30, “Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD.” Observing the LORD’s Sabbaths is written once again, for worshipping the LORD on the Sabbath is the key and the source of strength to overcome all such godly influences. And in verse 31, the LORD says, “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD.” When we worship God in spirit and truth, we can have discernment for the work of evil spirits and discern false religions.

And in verses 32-33 LORD says, “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD. When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself , for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” The people of the LORD are also to know how to treat the elderly and the alien, remembering the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

And the LORD says in verses 35-36, “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt.” May we fight against our dishonest and deceptive sinful nature, striving to live before God at each moment.

Finally, the LORD says in verse 37, “Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the LORD.” Again, God’s decrees and laws show his deep concern and love for his people. God’s laws and decrees are truly God’s blessing. In this chapter, the words, “I am the LORD,” are written 15 times. The LORD is the God of love and salvation. He is the LORD. When we know that he is the Lord in my heart and life and in my family and God’s community, we are motivated to live as his holy people keeping his laws and decrees not following the ways of the world. Thank God for the tremendous blessing of the Bible given to us as his greatest blessing. May we cherish the Bible and purely love the words of God, sincerely studying and clearly understanding them one by one that we can live by them.

In this chapter, we learn how to be holy. Observing the LORD’s Sabbaths, that is worshiping God as of first importance is the foundation and in so doing children can honour their parents. May our worship be true and alive and may we keep the enlightening command, “Love your neighbour as yourself” and practice it in our lives as his holy people.