

# INTEGRITY

LEVITICUS 13:1-59

**GOD'S COMMUNITY IS TO BE CHARACTERIZED BY  
INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL INTEGRITY.**

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# Integrity

## Leviticus 13:1-59

Again, I have to say that even though modern scholars try and find reasons for these rules and regulations, I'm not convinced that we will ever understand why God gave them. I'm not even sure the Israelites understood why God gave them. What they did understand was that in order for their camp to live in the presence of God, everyone was personally and communally responsible to obey them and conform to them. That would be a very good attitude for all of us to adopt as individuals, as families, as groups, and as a church. We need to humbly submit to and obey God.

Secondly, we know that mould and mildew can make us sick, and we know that some skin diseases are contagious. However, for years, many people have misidentified these skin diseases as leprosy. Some may be forms of leprosy, but most of them clearly are not. The confusion comes from the translation of the Hebrew into Greek. The Hebrew word used throughout this passage is *tsaraat*. It is translated in the NIV as and infectious skin disease. It is also translated as infection, infected, and chronic skin disease. It is also is the same word that refers to mildew, contaminated mildew, spreading mildew, and destructive mildew. So you see, it is not just a physical state or disease. It applies to material things as well. Further, it is only a condition that calls for an inspection. The priest will have to determine whether or not it renders a person or a material clean or unclean.

The safety of the community depends on the integrity of God, in other words, that God can be trusted to do what He says He will do and that He means what He says. The priests will have to be trusted to make right judgments. People's lives depend on it. And finally, the individual must be honest enough and trustworthy enough to come forward if he or she suspects they are infected. The success of any community depends on the integrity of all individuals.

The thing is, we can often hide our sin, our bad thoughts, and cover up our bad behavior. But sooner or later we will get caught.

Let me give you an example. A defendant was on trial for murder. There was very strong evidence indicating his guilt, but no corpse had been found. In the defense's closing statement, the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, decided to try a daring trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom through that door." He looked toward the courtroom door and the jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked at the door eagerly. A minute passed, and nothing happened.

Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and I insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

With that the jury retired to deliberate. But after only a few minutes, they came back and pronounced a verdict of guilty.

"But how?" the lawyer asked. "You must have had some doubt. I saw all of you stare at the door."

"Oh yes," the jury foreman replied, "we all looked – but your client didn't!"

As we have said all throughout the book of Leviticus, God is living in the middle of the Hebrew camp. Since God is so holy, they are in constant danger of dying. God set down rules for keeping them safe. But their safety depended on the integrity of each individual. The health of the Christian church, this local church, depends on the integrity of each individual.

I am going to again do two things with this passage. I will try and explain what the rules and conditions are the best I can. And then I am going to try and make some applications that I think come from this text without trying to allegorize it too much. What I can't do, is honestly give you the reasons God gave these rules. Like the Kosher food laws, I can guess at some of these rules, but others I have no clue. I feel quite confident in stating the main idea of this morning's text as

this. **GOD'S COMMUNITY IS TO BE CHARACTERIZED BY INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL INTEGRITY.** In other words, it seems to me that obeying these laws is a test for individuals and for the community. Are they willing to be honest enough to apply God's standards to themselves? For us, the health of a church depends on the integrity of each one of us as individuals and the gathering together of us as a community of believers.

## **I. INTEGRITY OF THE COMMUNITY (VS 45-46)**

### ***Integrity Often Involves Suffering.***

I'm going to take this passage out of order, because I think it is very important to understand what the cost of integrity is. Verses 45-46 describe what it takes and what it costs to maintain the integrity of the community. We will see clearly that **INTEGRITY OFTEN INVOLVES SUFFERING.**

#### **A. SUFFERING AND LOSS (45)**

Because we live in the United States, and since we are taught to be rugged individualists, we will have a hard time understanding the suffering and loss involved in verse 45. Once a person was declared to be unclean, he was not only physically sick and suffering from the disease, he was set apart from the rest of the community in a bad way. Remember to be set apart is the word holy. In a good sense, the Hebrew community was set apart from the rest of the world to be God's chosen people. The priests from the tribe of Levi were set apart to be God's priests. The tabernacle was set apart from all the other tents in the Hebrew camp to be used for worship.

But here the person is set apart from the rest of the community in a negative way. In order that no one would touch the person, the person had to cry out in a loud and distinct voice that he or she was unclean and to stay away. Think about the emotional and psychological pain caused by that. The person was in essence saying, "I'm a freak, I'm dirty, I'm untouchable, I'm a substandard human."

And further, the person would have to adopt a state of public mourning. When family or friends died, the relatives would tear their clothes, throw dirt on themselves, not comb their hair and cry and wail in emotional pain. But in this case the person is mourning their own social, religious, and emotional death. We can't understand this because when we are sick, we can go to the hospital or a nursing home and be treated. But for the Hebrew, they were dead to the community.

#### **B. ALIENATION (46)**

And that brings us to the alienation they experienced described in verse 46. The infected person had to leave the camp, leave his family and friends, leave the worship area, and live alone outside the camp. This unclean person had no protection from robbers or killers. They were unprotected. Can you imagine having to live like that? Can you imagine the isolation, the desolation, and the hopelessness? If you saw one of these skin lesions appear on your skin, how would you feel, what would you do? Would you be tempted to cover it up?

I think this is how hell is described in the Bible. People joke a lot about hell and don't take sin very seriously. This is what hell will be all about. It will be an eternity separated from God. It will be an eternity spent alone and alienated from everything good and beautiful. When Jesus describes hell, He often describes it as Gehenna. Gehenna was a place south of Jerusalem, outside the city where dead animals and filth were dumped. It was a place of death. Jesus describes hell as a place of great emotional, psychological, and physical suffering. Jesus also referred to the experience of hell as being cast into the outer darkness where the suffering never ends.

The type of suffering a Hebrew would experience once declared unclean by the priest is the closest experience to hell we can experience on earth. I think it is important for us to understand that

being declared unclean by the priest would be like receiving a death sentence that one could never die from. If you or I had a skin lesion on our upper arm where no one would ever see it, would we be tempted not to report it? One thing about being an authentic Christian is having the integrity to be open, honest, humble, and forthcoming. If nothing else, we should come to understand that we cannot hide from God. The fact is this **INTEGRITY OFTEN INVOLVES SUFFERING**.

I chose the word integrity purposely because it has a double meaning for us. When we talk about the integrity of a material or a surface, we are referring to its strength, its purity, and it's being in the state it was created to be. For example, when we talk about the integrity of an airplane, we are referring to its capability to fly the way it was designed. If we talk about the integrity of the airplane body, we mean that it doesn't have any holes or damage, etc. The integrity of cloth, leather, cotton materials, etc. means that they have no holes, tears, patches, etc.

## **II. INTEGRITY OF SKIN (VS 1-44)**

### ***Physical Pain of Integrity***

In verses 1-44, the integrity of human skin is described. In other words, skin is supposed to be smooth, without tears or bumps. In this section, we will come to understand the **PHYSICAL PAIN OF INTEGRITY**. In these cases we are talking mainly about the pain of the lack of integrity of a person's skin.

#### **A. TYPES OF DISEASE**

Verses 2-8 describe general skin swelling and irritation. The symptoms here are skin swelling, open sores that are deep, skin discoloration and hair turning white in the infected area.

Verses 9-17 describe a condition that looks like severe scaly eczema. The symptoms are scaly skin, flaking, white swelling and raw flesh.

Verses 18-23 describe skin breaks due to boils and pustules. The symptoms are white swelling, reddish-white spots, white hair in the infected areas and sores that appear to go more than skin deep.

Verses 24-28 describe skin breaks due to burns. Again the skin has reddish-white spots, white spots, raw flesh, and sores that seem to be more than skin deep.

Verses 29-37 describe head and face infections. The symptoms here are sores on the head and facial area. The hair in the infected area looks yellowish and thin. The sores seem to be more than skin deep.

Verses 38-39 describe general outbreaks of skin spots.

And finally, verses 40-44 talk about a particular kind of sores on baldheads.

#### **B. COMMON SIGNS OF UNCLEANNESS**

To summarize this section, let me say that we have all either had or seen people who had sores that look like those described here. But let me summarize some of the characteristics and describe the common signs of uncleanness. Skin that did not look normal would contain sores and swelling, raw flesh, discoloration, hair color change within the infected area, and a worsening during a quarantine period. If you read the passage carefully, you will notice that if the priest wasn't absolutely sure, the person would be quarantined up to 21 days to make sure.

## C. SIGNS OF HEALTH

Signs of health in this section are described as the skin growing back, scabbing that covers the wound, normal coloration returning, hair color normalization, and symptoms improving during the quarantine period.

If we were to have any of the conditions described above, can you imagine the physical pain they would cause? And can you imagine how we would emotionally suffer as we awaited the progression or healing of the disease? Everything would be riding on the verdict of the priest. I think a couple of the modern diseases that help us relate to this are the anxiety of cancer patients awaiting the results of bone scans, biopsies, and blood tests. People who have AIDS are often treated as outcasts. People with flesh eating disease are shunned. Added to the severity of the disease itself is the emotional and psychological isolation people feel. Sometimes people who undergo this type of suffering come to feel as if God is not even there for them. For the Hebrew who had been declared unclean, it was a death sentence from which he or she could not die. It was like being in living hell.

In the New Testament times, the church used excommunication as a tool to restore wayward Christians. In other words, if a person was caught in a sin and refused to repent, or even grasp the seriousness of the offense, the church would break fellowship with them. The isolation and alienation along with the psychological and emotional suffering was designed to bring them to true repentance. Excommunication is no longer an effective tool because it can't accomplish what we hope it would accomplish. If a person doesn't agree with one church, they simply go to another church. People have all sorts of friends and connections outside the church, so that's why I say excommunication is no longer a valuable tool. Besides we are taught that we have individual rights and we have the freedom to exercise them.

But for the Hebrew, when they were set apart because of the physical ailment, they were cut off emotionally, socially, psychologically, and religiously. They had nowhere to go. I think that in C. S. Lewis' book, The Great Divorce, he demonstrates how people work themselves to hell. I can't speak for anyone else, but I know that hell is not a place I will ever joke about and it's a place I never want to go. Pursuing holiness is often painful and to maintain the integrity of the community there is often suffering. To be sure there is sometimes a **PHYSICAL PAIN OF SUFFERING**.

## III. INTEGRITY OF MATERIAL (VS 47-59)

### *Material Cost of Integrity*

Verses 47-59 describe the integrity of material things. In order to maintain the integrity of material things, sometimes things had to be discarded, thrown away, and burned up. At other times, portions of the material had to be cut out and burned. The point here is that there is also a **MATERIAL COST OF INTEGRITY**. In other words, if the article was contaminated by mould or mildew, the owner would have to incur the financial loss of the garment. Later we'll see this apply to building materials as well. But for now, the regulations set forth here apply to linen, wool, knits, and leather.

### A. SIGNS OF UNCLEANNESS

The signs of uncleanness are pretty simple. If there is a growth of mould or mildew that keeps on growing even after being washed, cleaned left alone, and even having portions trimmed away, it is unclean. It must be burned up and thrown away.

Here is what I want us to understand. The same word describing the skin breaks is the same word here used to describe the mould and mildew affecting the garments.

## **B. SIGNS OF CLEANLINESS**

Could we apply that to our spiritual lives? Jesus said that if our eye caused us to sin, we should pluck it out and throw it away. It would be better for our eye to perish rather than our whole being perish in Gehenna. In our pursuit of holiness we need to cut away those things in our lives that cause us to sin. I don't think Jesus meant that we should literally cut out our eye, but if we have trouble with lust or pornography, we should definitely cut the computer out of our lives. We should perhaps cut television out of our lives. Perhaps we need to distance ourselves from our non-Christian friends who cause us to stumble. Definitely, if you are a believer and dating a non-believer, you should definitely cut away that relationship.

The thing about these skin sores or the mold and mildew is that they tend to spread and affect other parts of the body and other parts of the material. If we entertain any sin in our lives, no matter how small, we can be sure it will spread throughout our whole being and ultimately destroy us.

When a piece of material becomes contaminated by mold or mildew, if once washed and cleaned the mould and mildew disappeared and didn't return, it would be clean and could be used again after being washed yet one final time. If a piece of the material was cut out of the whole and once washed the mould and mildew did not return to the rest of the material, the material could be used after being washed one final time. The key to being clean was that once the mould and mildew was eliminated, it did not return. That is the kind of watchfulness and commitment we need to adopt in our personal lives and in our church lives. There is often a **MATERIAL COST OF INTEGRITY.**

## **IV. INTEGRITY OF PEOPLE**

### ***Ultimately Integrity Depends On Individuals.***

I saved this section for last because I think this passage hinges on the integrity of all the people involved. In other words, when talking about the health of an organization, **ULTIMATELY INTEGRITY DEPENDS ON INDIVIDUALS.**

In this morning's passage, we are talking about the Hebrew community. This community is God's chosen people and God has decided to live among them. This also applies to us as Christians. We are God's people, called out of the world, and gathered together under the headship of Jesus Christ.

### **A. OF GOD**

First and most importantly, our survival and our health depend on the integrity of God. What God promises, He will do. We don't have to go around wondering what God wants, we expect, and what action He will take. Towards the very end of his life, Moses sets God's proposition before them. Listen to what He says:

*<sup>11</sup>This command I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand or perform. <sup>12</sup>It is not up in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'Who will go to heaven and bring it down so we can hear and obey it?' <sup>13</sup>It is not beyond the sea, so far away that you must ask, 'Who will cross the sea to bring it to us so we can hear and obey it?' <sup>14</sup>The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it.*

*<sup>15</sup>Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between prosperity and disaster, between life and death. <sup>16</sup>I have commanded you today to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands, laws, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and become a great nation, and the LORD your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and*

*you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods,  
18then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long,  
good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.*

*19"Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and  
curses. I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you  
would choose life, that you and your descendants might live! 20Choose to love the  
LORD your God and to obey him and commit yourself to him, for he is your life. Then  
you will live long in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac,  
and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 30:11-29 / NLT).*

God promised to bless Israel if they obeyed. They didn't and we know from history that God punished them ruthlessly. He made things so bad for them that when the Babylonians came to destroy them, things were so bad in Jerusalem that women were killing their own babies, cooking them and eating them.

God promises to be with His children who take His commands seriously and follow them. God said he would be with the humble. But God also promises to destroy the proud and the wicked. He is not talking about following cultural norms. He is talking about following His commands in the Scriptures. In my accountability group, we were recently studying through this concept. We came to the revelation that many of the things we do that seem good are because we were raised to do them. Other times we do good to get the approval of other people. Many times we do good things because they are part of our culture. But in reality, those kind of good works count for nothing. I like the way Jerry Bridges summarizes this in his book The Pursuit of Holiness:

*"Clearly then, the sinless holy life of Jesus Christ is meant to be an example for us. Consider then His statement, 'I always do what pleases Him.' Do we dare take that as our personal goal in life? Are we truly willing to scrutinize all our activities, all our goals and plans, and all of our impulsive actions in the light of this statement: 'I am doing this to please God'?"*

If we ask that question honestly, we will begin to squirm a bit. We know we do some things, good things in themselves to gain admiration for ourselves rather than glory for God. We do other things strictly for our own pleasure, without any regard for the glory of God."

Here is the point. We may be able to fool others. We may even be able to fool ourselves. But God sees it all. He knows it all. We can make up an excuse, but we must remember that God will not accept any excuses. God promised to be with those who humbly seek Him. He promised to stand against the arrogant and those who insist on doing things their own way. God keeps His promises. God is the very measure of integrity. I hope that we all understand that. God promises to do good. But He has also promised to do great harm as well. Remember the description of hell we painted.

## **B. OF PRIESTS**

Next, the health and safety of the community depended on the priests. I'm not sure if I could have been a priest in the Hebrew community. Think of the incredible responsibility. It is no wonder that God forbid them from drinking before they went on duty. To declare someone unclean would be to give them a living hell death sentence. If he incorrectly diagnosed someone to be unclean, he has just ruined that person's life along with his family's life and his friends' lives.

On the other hand, if he misdiagnosed someone who was in reality unclean to be clean, then he would be responsible for God's judgment on the entire community. Because of David's stupid sin of taking a census, God brought a plague on the nation that killed 70,000 people. If the priest even unintentionally allowed an unclean person to wander freely through the camp and worship at the tabernacle, God may wipe out the entire nation. The priest always had to make very clear and sober judgments. He was responsible for individuals and the community.

It's important to note that the priest does not ever serve as a doctor. The priest has just been given the rules by which he declares a person or an article to be clean or unclean. He has no

power to change the status of a person or article. He has merely been commanded to give the diagnosis.

I know people have all sorts of ideas of what a pastor is and what they mean when they address a person as pastor. If I had my choice of titles, I would definitely refuse the title of pastor. To me that title indicates that I would be in charge of your spiritual well being. But that would also imply that we had a shepherd/sheep relationship. And yet, I think that most people don't want to take the advice or counsel of their pastors. Anybody that has been a pastor for any length of time will testify that people listen to what they want to listen to and they only do what you tell them if they agree with you. The biblical model of a pastor is that the pastor leads, the congregation obeys. I'm sure none of you have that idea of what a pastor is. Most people think of a pastor as one who will hold their hand when they are hurt, or comfort them in times of crisis, and is someone there to talk to. But none have the biblical model of shepherding in mind. So I really don't think pastor is a proper title. You can address me as pastor, but know that I'm not buying it.

I think perhaps I would prefer Reverend or Doctor (in the sense of a professor). I feel much more comfortable in this role. Like a teacher, I will simply tell you what the word of God says. I will faithfully and diligently lay it out for you. Whether you choose to obey it or not, is up to you. The only time I will actively step in and address bad behavior or wrong thinking, is when it affects the whole congregation. For example, if one was gossiping or stirring up trouble by upsetting others, I will definitely address that. If leaders are acting in a way that hurts the congregation, I will address that. Otherwise, I will teach God's word, it's up to you as individuals to live it out.

### **C. OF THE INFECTED**

And that brings us to the responsibility of the infected individual. Here is where it got confusing for the Hebrew. If a person was declared unclean, she would immediately relate that illness as a result of sinning against God. That was often the case. Miriam, Moses' sister, was infected with this very type of skin disease described in this passage. When Aaron looked at her he said:

<sup>11</sup>... *Oh, my lord! Please don't punish us for this sin we have so foolishly committed.*  
<sup>12</sup>*Don't let her be like a stillborn baby, already decayed at birth"*  
(Numbers 12:11-12 / NLT).

God often afflicts people with different kinds of illnesses as a result of their sin. In fact, this would be the very first thought. In fact the thought was so prevalent, that it was hard for anyone to imagine the second occasion. People often were afflicted as a way in which they could honor God and be improved during the process. We know that Job was afflicted with the boils and pustules. They came as a direct attack from Satan but God used it to improve Job. Paul was afflicted as well. But people were not quick to pick up on this reason. When Jesus and the disciples happened on a blind man the disciples asked Jesus whose sin the man was being punished for. Was he being punished for his parents' sins or his own sins? Jesus said neither. He was born that way for the glory of God.

I would suggest a third possibility. But I want to make it clear that the Hebrews would never allow for this and neither would the early Christians. But since we live in a sinful world where everything and everyone are tainted by sin, bad things just happen and are part of everyday life. Someone may have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and been infected.

## **V. EPILOGUE**

I'm not really sure of the third possibility, but I am sure of this. The whole responsibility is on the individual who is infected. If I woke up one morning to discover one of these infections on my chest or on my leg where no one but me could see it, it is totally my responsibility to report myself to the priest for inspection. This could be a punishment for my sin or it could be a test of my

personal integrity sent by God, or it could be a test of the priest and the community's integrity to see how they handled it. The whole responsibility lies on the individual. Is that the kind of integrity that characterizes us? Knowing that I may be an outcast for the rest of my life is a real test of integrity. I'll deal next time a little more about how we can approach this, but for now let me summarize it like this. I am not responsible for your spiritual growth, you are. You are not responsible for my spiritual growth, I am. I am not responsible to hold you accountable; you are responsible to find people to hold you accountable. It is your responsibility to place yourself in situations where people will hold you brutally accountable.

I know in the accountability group I'm in, everyone is brutally honest and will tell me the truth. What we do is what the New Testament calls church. I wish all of you belonged to a group like the one I'm in. As your teacher, I'm telling you, that's what it takes to be an authentic believer. The point is this. **ULTIMATELY INTEGRITY DEPENDS ON INDIVIDUALS.**

It takes brutal self-reflection, brutal honesty, and humility to build a healthy community. Integrity is not much talked about today but the point for us is this. **GOD'S COMMUNITY IS TO BE CHARACTERIZED BY INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL INTEGRITY.**

I like this story of a young man who knew what it meant to do a healthy self-examination. The story comes from Kent Hughes:

*"The pharmacist of the town drugstore overheard a young boy talking on a pay telephone. 'Hello, sir, I was calling to see if you needed a lawn boy. Oh, you have one. Well is he adequate? Oh, he is! Thank you, I was just checking,' said the young boy.*

*The pharmacist then said to the boy, 'Sorry you didn't get the job, son.'*

*'Oh, no sir,' said the boy. 'I've got the job. I was just calling to check up on myself.'"*

That's the kind of courage, humility, and honesty it takes to build a healthy community. I can tell you that I experience the fullness of what church means in the accountability group I'm a part of. I wish all of you could experience what church could be as well.