

# **BUILDING A CHURCH**

LEVITICUS 19:1-37

**A HEALTHY CHURCH IS ONE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE COMMITTED TO IMITATING CHRIST AND COMMITTED TO THE BEST INTEREST OF THE BODY.**

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*Authentic Salvation Is Receiving the Holiness God Imparts To Us, And Pursuing Holiness in Response to His Commands.*

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# Building a Church

## Leviticus 19:1-37

Last time we were together, we studied through the passage that laid out God's commands concerning sexual purity. And further, we said that one of the important results of living sexually pure is that it promoted a unified and dignified society. Further we said that as we look at the culture in which we live, it should be no surprise to any Jew or Christian why our society is so unjust, depraved, violent, and chaotic.

In this morning's text, through Moses, God is going to lay out further criteria for building a unified and dignified society. Since the Hebrews lived in a Theocracy, there was no difference between civil, ceremonial, and religious laws. We have already noted that for our society and probably every society in the world, it is too late to bring unity and dignity. For Christians, we need to apply these principles to our church life. In other words, these are further building blocks that contribute to a healthy church.

It really is sad that most churches in the United States have lost their sense of purpose. Most churches are so diluted with worldly values, that it's hard to find Christians actively pursuing holy living. And perhaps that's why churches in the United States find themselves in such moral chaos.

At one of our reunions, a bunch of us got together to trade stories about our churches. We got on the subject of tough churches. Well, you know that I had plenty of stories about the tough church I used to pastor. As we traded stories, I thought I had the winning story. But one of my friends came up with this experience. He said, "I was preaching a series on holiness. On this particular Sunday, I was preaching on alcohol. I laid out the case for the problems of alcohol and so I took a strong stand on abstaining. Here is how I ended each point, 'If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it all down to the river and dump it in. I would take all the wine in the world, take it down to the river, and pour it all in. And whiskey in the world, I'd take that all down to the river and pour it in.' I was so passionate; I was shaking by the end of the sermon. And then it happened. My worship leader asked the congregation to stand and turn to Hymn #365, and sing *Shall We Gather at the River*." My friend won, without a doubt.

I don't think that many would want to debate the state of affairs in our world and in particular our society. Further, I don't think this should surprise us as Christians. What should shock us is that most churches in the United States are just as chaotic as our society. The reason for this is as simple as it is sad. There is not much concern for living holy. There is a lot of energy spent trying to live happy, but not much energy spent on living holy. Secondly, we have been infected with the self-interest bug that is epidemic now in the church as in society. People today attend churches like consumers shop in malls. That brings me to the main idea of this morning's text. **A HEALTHY CHURCH IS ONE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE COMMITTED TO IMITATING CHRIST AND COMMITTED TO THE BEST INTEREST OF THE BODY.** I'm not sure why, but these are two concepts that do not resonate with modern day Christians. Let's see if we can use this passage as an occasion to examine our personal attitudes towards holiness and genuine interest in the well being of the church over our own personal agendas.

## I. PEOPLE WHO LOVE GOD (VS 1-2)

***Authentic Salvation Is Receiving the Holiness God Imparts To Us, And Pursuing Holiness in Response to His Commands.***

Verses 1-2 remind us that healthy churches are made up of people who genuinely love God. Since the bible equates loving God with obeying God, we could say **AUTHENTIC SALVATION IS**

## **RECEIVING THE HOLINESS GOD IMPARTS TO US, AND PURSUING HOLINESS IN RESPONSE TO HIS COMMANDS.**

There is no doubt that the bible teaches that we are saved by grace through faith. And so the first step we must take is to understand God's work. If you look at your bibles, you will notice that God uses His personal, covenant Name, Jehovah. Throughout this chapter, the phrase "I, the LORD your God, am holy," or a variation like, "I am the LORD" are used 16 times. Since it is repeated so often, God means to remind them that He is their God. He is the One who rescued them from their slavery in Egypt. They did absolutely nothing to deserve or earn God's love or deliverance. They were no less evil than the Egyptians. They were hopelessly enslaved in Egypt without any future. It was when they were at their lowest and most helpless point that God came to rescue them and make them into a nation and to call them His very special people. In fact, God gave them His personal Name, Jehovah. God lived in their community.

### **A. UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORK**

I think this is so important because in some way we have come to think that Jews are saved by works and then Christians are saved by grace. The only reason the Jews found themselves gathered around God in the wilderness and headed for the Promised Land was because of God's grace.

Remember, the word for holy in Hebrew is *kadosh*. It means to be set apart for a particular purpose. It means to be different from all the rest. In applying holy to God, we mean that He is like no other god. Jehovah is a living God, a real God, and a powerful and loving God. Jehovah is like no other god because there are no other gods. In applying holy to the nation of Israel, the concept is that they are like no other nations because by grace God has called them to be His very special people. God made them holy by grace.

The Apostle Paul makes that same point in regards to Christians. We were all hopelessly wicked, lost, enslaved, and dead in our bondage to Satan, sin, and this world. It is in our most hopelessly lost state that Jesus came to each one of us. He offered hope, freedom, and life to each one of us. Just like the Hebrews responded to God's free offer by putting the blood of a lamb on their doorposts, Jesus says that if we apply His blood to the doorposts of our hearts and open the door to our heart, He will come in and make us His very special people. God gathers Christians around Himself through the Headship of Jesus and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Jesus makes us holy by grace through faith. So the point of this is to say that God makes us holy when we respond to Him in faith. It is a gift we can no way earn or deserve.

### **B. UNDERSTANDING OUR WORK**

However, after understanding God's work, we must understand our work. Here in verse 2 we come to God's command. Since God is holy, and since He made us holy, He commands us to be holy. So in some sense, we must pursue and be holy. This seems to be our work. God gave the Hebrews commands that He expected them to obey. God made them holy and gave them commands. They must be holy by obeying God's commands.

In the New Testament, Paul addresses the churches in his letters as saints. The word for saints Paul uses is *agiois*. Literally it means holy ones. If we are authentic Christians, then we are holy ones. We were made holy by grace through faith by the blood of Jesus. And yet, like the Hebrews, we are commanded to be holy and to pursue holiness. Keep in mind that the Apostle Paul is the disciple that wrote the most concerning the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. But listen to what he says concerning his own personal pursuit of holiness:

*<sup>26</sup>So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step. I am not like a boxer who misses his punches. <sup>27</sup>I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what*

*it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified" (I Corinthians 9:26-27 / NLT).*

If we do not understand this concept of receiving and obeying God's command to be holy, then we misunderstand Christianity. We know from history, that the Hebrews rebelled from the very start. They rebelled on the way to the Promised Land, and God punished that entire generation by waiting for them to all die off. We know that even once they entered the Promised Land, they again continued to rebel and disobey these commands. God had pagan nations come in, destroy them, and carry them off into captivity. About 33 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Jerusalem was burned to the ground, the temple destroyed, and the Jews scattered throughout the world. They remained that way until 1947. God is serious about His people living holy lives. To separate the holiness God gives us by grace from the holiness we are commanded to pursue leads to a false view of salvation. Listen to how Paul warns Christians about this by using the Hebrews as examples:

*"<sup>1</sup>I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, what happened to our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. God guided all of them by sending a cloud that moved along ahead of them, and he brought them all safely through the waters of the sea on dry ground. <sup>2</sup>As followers of Moses, they were all baptized in the cloud and the sea. <sup>3</sup>And all of them ate the same miraculous food, <sup>4</sup>and all of them drank the same miraculous water. For they all drank from the miraculous rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>Yet after all this, God was not pleased with most of them, and he destroyed them in the wilderness.*

*<sup>6</sup>These events happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did <sup>7</sup>or worship idols as some of them did. For the Scriptures say, "The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged themselves in pagan revelry."<sup>8</sup>And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day. <sup>9</sup>Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites. <sup>10</sup>And don't grumble as some of them did, for that is why God sent his angel of death to destroy them. <sup>11</sup>All these events happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us, who live at the time when this age is drawing to a close.*

*<sup>12</sup>If you think you are standing strong, be careful, for you, too, may fall into the same sin. <sup>13</sup>But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it" (I Corinthians 10:1-13 / NLT).*

### **C. MISUNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY**

Think about where we find ourselves in modern day churches. We come to church and think we are fine because we have confessed Jesus as Lord. We come to church, and do all sorts of religious stuff. We have prayed for people and witnessed them getting well or free from demonic possession. We may have seen and been involved in miracles. We may even manage to talk and sound religious. But we would do well to think about what is actually going on in our lives because Jesus points out very graphically that we can fool others, perhaps fool ourselves, but we can never fool Him:

*"<sup>21</sup>Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and*

*performed many miracles in your name.’<sup>23</sup>But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized’” (Matthew 7:21-23 / NLT).*

Please let’s take note of this. When God comes to us with the offer of salvation, and we receive it, He makes us holy by grace through faith. But we are required to be holy and to pursue holiness. If we are not, then the chances are we are not true believers at all. Jesus said that obedience is the key. I think that it is safe to say that **AUTHENTIC SALVATION IS RECEIVING THE HOLINESS GOD IMPARTS TO US, AND PURSUING HOLINESS IN RESPONSE TO HIS COMMANDS.**

To miss one part of that equation is to miss salvation. Jesus said that Christianity was simple. All we have to do is love God and love one another. If you take a look at your outlines, you’ll notice that I grouped the verses according to their topics.

## **II. LEARNING TO LOVE GOD (VS 3-8, 19, 23-31)**

### ***Jesus Made It Clear That The Only Way We Can Demonstrate Our Love For God Is To Obey His Commands.***

Verses 3-8, 19, and 23-31 show us we can learn to love God. **JESUS MADE IT CLEAR THAT THE ONLY WAY WE CAN DEMONSTRATE OUR LOVE FOR GOD IS TO OBEY HIS COMMANDS.** I can’t begin to tell you how much misguided statements I hear Christians make. They clearly make up their own rules for living that are not even close to being biblical. Let me just quote you a few statements from Jesus concerning love and obedience:

*<sup>9</sup>I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. <sup>10</sup>When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in his love. ... <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you obey me” (John 15:9-14 / NLT).*

I have heard people say that God loves us unconditionally. Have you used that phrase? What do you mean by that? If I understand Jesus correctly, He seems to be saying that in order to remain in His love, we must obey Him. And yet I see Christians making up their own rules for living and then say, “God loves us unconditionally.” Is that really good theology?

### **A. DOING THINGS GOD’S WAY (5-8, 19, 23-31)**

Verses 5-8, 19, and 23-31, clearly teach that we must do things God’s way. Verses 5-8 once again review the Fellowship Offering. We studied this in depth earlier so I will just point out a couple of things here. The word that describes this particular offering comes from the Hebrew word *shalom* which means peace. God gave specific rules as to how the sacrifice must be offered and eaten. If people disobeyed the regulations and fudged even a little bit by eating some leftovers on the third day, God is offended and the person must be cut off from his people.

If we want to be at peace with God, we cannot do what we want to do and we cannot make up our own rules for living. We cannot fudge by mixing our worldly desires and attitudes with Christianity. The reason the church in the west is in chaos is because we have not followed God’s commands. If we are not experiencing peace in our lives, the chances are that we have not been obeying God.

If we were living in the time this chapter was written, we would have been wiped out on the spot because we think we are so smart and so enlightened. In verse 19 and 23-25 God commands the Hebrews to demonstrate their holiness in the way they farm. I don’t know that there is any reason for these commands other than God reminding them that they are to be totally different from their neighbors. First of all, they were to not cross breed animals, plant more than one kind

of crop in one field, or mix more than one material together. Here is what is happening. The Israelites are about to enter the Land of Canaan, which is modern day Israel. In Canaan, the farmers connected farming with worship. At every stage, whether it is planting, weeding, watering, harvesting, etc., they would go to the temple and worship by having sex with temple prostitutes. Perverted sex was a part of worship and farming.

God wanted there to be no mistake with His people that they were in no way to imitate these people. They were to be totally different. We know from history that the Israelites did pick up all the idolatrous habits from their neighbors.

Think of how sexual immorality has invaded the Christian church. We have the same rate of divorce, sexual addictions, pornographic addictions, and immorality as the secular culture in which we live. We have not influenced our society. The society has influenced us.

Think about how tempted we would be to rationalize fudging the rules in verses 23-25. When planting orchards, the Hebrews would be waiting for fruit to appear. They would plant the tree and care for it. Finally, when it produced fruit, they would be all excited. However, like the tree in the Garden of Eden, they were forbidden to eat from it. They would have let all that fruit ripen, fall off the tree, and rot. For three years they would not be allowed to eat from any of the fruit. The fourth year, they would have to bring all the fruit to the temple for the priests. Only on the fifth year could they start to eat the fruit.

How tempting would it be over the course of these 4 years to want to taste the fruit? Couldn't you see us reasoning about letting this fruit go to waste and how sinful it is to let food go to waste? Yes, we think we are so smart and noble. But there was another famous person who reasoned like this. I think it's really scary to see how much we are like this person:

*<sup>3</sup>Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus' feet with it and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with fragrance.*

*<sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples—the one who would betray him—said, <sup>5</sup>That perfume was worth a small fortune. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor.' <sup>6</sup>Not that he cared for the poor—he was a thief who was in charge of the disciples' funds, and he often took some for his own use" (John 12:3-6 / NLT).*

Think about the way we spend our time, money, and energy. I think that one of the most discouraging things that I have experienced as a pastor is the attitude in which people serve in the church. People think somehow that because what they are doing for the church is volunteer work, they can be shoddy with their work. After all, they reason, I'm doing this for God out of the goodness of my heart. For me the frustrating thing is that people really don't give their best. They give what's leftover and give only what they perceive to be pleasurable. I'm pretty sure that most people who call themselves Christian, are not even close to giving God their first and their best, whether it is their time, money, or energy.

## **B. COMMITTED TO ONLY GOD (3-4, 26-31)**

Loving God not only means doing things God's way, it means being committed to only God as illustrated in verses 3-4 and 26-31. I know we all know this intellectually, but if we were to honestly examine ourselves I'm pretty sure most of us would find idols that we worship. We worship culture, pride, success, money, power, sex, fame, and all other sorts of worldly things. If you want to find out what idols we worship, all we have to do is open up our day planners and find out where we spend most of time, open our checkbooks and credit card statements and find out where we spend our money, listen to what we talk about most and what occupies our thoughts.

This section sounds a lot like the Ten Commandments God gave Moses in Exodus 20. Verses 3-4 deal with 3 basic commandments. They are not to worship idols. They are to care for the elderly, especially their mothers and fathers. They are to keep God's Sabbath holy. I think those are pretty self-explanatory.

Verses 26-31 give a series of "Thou shall nots." We have already talked about the command not to eat blood. The pagan nations that surrounded the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan ate blood as a way to gain supernatural power. God commanded them to keep all blood holy.

God forbid the Hebrews from getting involved in magic, fortune telling, or channeling the dead. Isn't that interesting for us? People call up psychic hotlines; go to fortunetellers, and help make voodoo and other cultic practices popular. People are attracted to people who claim to contact and channel the dead. God forbid all that then and He forbids it today. And yet, Christians don't feel any repulsion to these practices.

Keep this in mind that all these practices are connected to idolatry. So when a parent is giving their daughter to prostitution, it is probably connected with giving her to the temple to become a temple prostitute. In modern days, we read about many parents selling their daughters into prostitution.

It also says that they are not to cut themselves or mark themselves with tattoos. I think this has to do with cuttings and markings that have to do with dedicating themselves to false gods.

Let me deal with cuttings first. In Elijah's battle with the false prophets on top of Mt. Carmel, the false prophets were cutting themselves in hopes of getting their gods' attention. That is something God never wants from us. Many young people today have started to cut themselves. In most cases it is demonic and a cry for attention.

Tattoos have also become popular in our culture. I'm not sure that the tattoos that we have today are like the ones talked about here. Although there are some pretty demonic tattoos out there. I'm not sure the other type of tattoos like hearts and flowers are what are envisioned here. I say I'm not sure because I'm not sure. Those of you who know me know that I have a tattoo. I don't want to interpret this in a way to justify my behavior. I think there are tattoos that are harmless and those that are clearly demonic. However, let me just say this in contradiction to my take. Even to this very day, Jews who have tattoos of any kind cannot be buried in Jewish cemeteries. I think that's one you will have to decide on how to apply.

But the clear message here is that there is one God. He has revealed Himself to us in the Bible. Worshiping anything or anyone other than the One True and Living God is idolatry and God will not tolerate it. We are called to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. **JESUS MADE IT CLEAR THAT THE ONLY WAY WE CAN DEMONSTRATE OUR LOVE FOR GOD IS TO OBEY HIS COMMANDS.**

### **III. LEARNING TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS (VS 9-18, 20-22, 32-37)**

***God Has Given Us Very Specific Commands As To How We Are To Love One Another.***

Jesus followed up that command with the command to love our neighbors. Learning to love our neighbors is described in verses 9-18, 20-22, and 32-37. **GOD HAS GIVEN US VERY SPECIFIC COMMANDS AS TO HOW WE ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.** Again, we can't just pick and choose. What God says, He means.

## **A. CARING FOR THE DISADVANTAGED (32-33, 20-22, 14, 9-10)**

Caring for the disadvantaged is important to God as illustrated in verses 32-33, 20-22, 14, and 9-10. I have heard some of the most cock-eyed theology over the past 30 years. Some theologians said that in order for us to love others as we love ourselves we must first love ourselves. I don't have time to fully defend this, but let me just state it. I don't think most of us have problems with loving ourselves. Even the person who appears to have the lowest self-esteem still is self-absorbed. We are a nation of self-absorbed people.

In verse 34 God tells them that they are to care for the elderly and for the foreigners living among them because they should know what it was to be living in a foreign land and being mistreated by the locals. Empathy is what is needed to live in a godly community. And I would say that it is very hard to find people who show genuine empathy. Many people appear to be showing empathy when in fact they are feeding one of their own emotional needs. For example, some people may have a need to help others only because it fulfills the need in their own hearts to be needed. Genuine empathy takes a lot of work to get beyond our own self-interest and self-absorption.

Truly the way a society cares for the least advantaged among them demonstrates whether or not they belong to God. Verses 20-22 sound strange to us because it deals with a slave girl who has willingly had sex with someone even though her master promised her to another. I'm not sure I understand this but let me just say a couple of things. In the case of a Hebrew man and woman having sex outside of marriage, the penalty is death. And yet in this case, neither the slave girl nor the man is put to death. Maybe God put this law in as a way to protect the freedom and dignity of the slave girl. For example, maybe she fell in love with another. Her master promised her to another man. Even though she was a slave without rights, if she went and had sex with this man she loved, she would no longer be accepted as a suitable wife. Therefore, the owner would have to return the dowry and the man would have to reimburse the slave owner. We will address slavery at another time but let me say it is not the same as 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery that we are all familiar with.

Verses 9, 10, and 14 show that God is very interested in social justice. No one is to mistreat any handicapped person. They are not to taunt them or mistreat them. Most of all, we should work to preserve the dignity of the less fortunate, the physically handicapped, and mentally handicapped. The welfare system in our country is meant to take people's dignity away. Our welfare system is designed to keep people dependent on welfare and to take away their dignity.

In Israel, God commanded them to leave fruit and grain behind. This way the less fortunate could come and gather food for themselves. The welfare recipient would be required to work to gather this food. God set up a society that would reset itself every 50 years so no family could get too far ahead or fall too far behind. God set up a society where people could care for one another without taking away anyone's dignity. I have seen many Christian do-gooders that have lorded it over people they were helping. That is not God's design.

## **B. COMMON COURTESIES (11-13, 16-18,)**

I think that verses 11-13 and 16-18 expose one of our weaknesses as a society. But common courtesies are expected of people living in a Christian setting. We are not to harm anyone in our community by stealing, lying, cheating, or lording it over anyone. Jesus said that gossip and hatred are the same as murder. The positive command to these commands is to love one another by speaking and living the truth in love.

### C. COMMON DECENCY (15, 35-37)

Finally, in verses 15 and 35-37 we are to exhibit common decency. Clearly our society is no place to find justice. But in the church, there should be no favoritism shown. We are very familiar with justice being perverted to the advantage of the rich. However, look carefully at verse 15. We are not to show favoritism to someone just because they are poor or disadvantaged. There are to be no excuses made for the rich or the poor, for the advantaged or the disadvantaged. What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong. What's true is true and what's false is false. In order to be a community that reflects the nature and will of God, we must show impartiality.

It's interesting to me that this chapter ends by commanding the Israelites to be honest and fair in business. There are so many temptations for us to be dishonest in our business dealings. It is easy to justify cheating by saying things like everybody else does it, but God wants us to live and speak the truth in love. That's what makes a godly, unified and dignified community. **GOD HAS GIVEN US VERY SPECIFIC COMMANDS AS TO HOW WE ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.**

## IV. EPILOGUE

In today's text God has said,

*"Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." Jesus told us how we do that when He said, <sup>37</sup>You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup>A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup>All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."*

Jesus put real meat on those commandments in His Sermon On The Mount recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. I would encourage all of us to spend time reading it. The point is this. **A HEALTHY CHURCH IS ONE IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE COMMITTED TO IMITATING CHRIST AND COMMITTED TO THE BEST INTEREST OF THE BODY.**

Most of us have a pretty good idea of what God expects of us, and most of us here would be willing to argue about Christianity with non-believers. However God wants obedience not just knowledge. Francis Schaeffer sums it up nicely.

*"We must ask, "Do I fight merely for doctrinal faithfulness?" This is like the wife who never sleeps with anybody else, but never shows love to her own husband. Is that a sufficient relationship in marriage? No, ten thousand times no. Yet if I am a Christian who speaks and acts for doctrinal faithfulness but do not show love to the divine bridegroom, I am in the same place as such a wife. What God wants from us is not only doctrinal faithfulness, but our love day and night. Not in theory, mind you, but in practice."*

God has made us holy by the blood of Jesus. Now He has commanded us to be holy.