

An Aura of Holiness

Leviticus 18:1-20:27

Have you ever had the experience of going to a seminar and sitting right through it and not understanding a word because the person giving the seminar had their own technical language – their own jargon – and you just didn't understand the way they used those words?

Or maybe you've had the experience of going to the doctor and the doctor looks you over and shoves a cold stethoscope against your chest and sticks something sharp in your ear and then proceeds to explain your condition in various Latin terms that don't mean a thing to you.

I sincerely hope that won't be your experience this morning. Yet, some people find Christianity something like that. We Christians seem to speak this foreign language. We use words they don't understand – words they don't use in their normal conversation. They struggle to work out what we mean.

Some Christians even struggle with the language themselves. They've heard the words often enough, but no one's ever explained them. Now they've been Christians so long it's embarrassing to admit they don't know what those words mean and so they just pretend to understand.

One such word is the word *holy*. I didn't think I'd ever come across this word outside a religious context – but then my wife reminded me that Frank tends to use it as a swear-word in *Everybody Loves Raymond* and the Boy Wonder tended to use it as a polite swear-word in the *Batman* cartoons. Even so, I suspect it's not part of the

average Australian's polite vocabulary. Yet, we Christians throw this word around all over the place.

- We speak of *holy communion*.
- Some denominations speak of *holy orders*.
- The expression *Holy Week* refers to the time around Easter.
- We fill our modern songs with the word – many songs even repeat the word over and over and over.

It's an important word – because the Bible itself uses it so often. It's already popped up quite a few times in the book of Leviticus. It's even a word that's applied to God – a word that's often used to describe Him. So, it's hardly a word we can say we want to get rid of it. The word's the focus of these chapters we're looking at this morning. Leviticus 19:1-2

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.'"

Yet, to say it's a word the Bible uses and it's the focus of these chapters, isn't to say it's a word that all Christians fully understand.

What is Holiness?

When people hear this word *holy* – or the related word *holiness* – what do they think of? What do you think of when you hear it? I have this suspicion that many people think of the mysterious or the mystical or the out-of-this-world type thing – something that's shrouded in secrecy; something that's a bit strange or unusual.

- Some people think there are bits of church buildings that are especially holy. There are the bits where the ordinary people are allowed and then there are the holy bits where the ordinary people

aren't allowed and there's the suspicion that if they do go into those bits they'll get zapped by a bolt of lightning. There's something mysterious about those bits that's dangerous for everyday people.

- Some people think there are particular people in the church who are especially holy – the people who've learnt the secrets of the Christian religion and who dress up in the fancy robes and conduct the various ceremonies of the church. They have mysterious titles. They do mysterious things. They have the secret knowledge
- Some people think it's a different group of people in the church who are the holy ones – the ones who dress in uncomfortable clothes and never smile and are always calm and never have any fun and think they're a cut above everyone else. There's a mystery to these people as well – because they never seem to understand what's actually happening in the world since their minds are totally focused elsewhere.
- Some people think of yet another group of people in the church – the ones who had a mystical or mysterious or spiritual experience. They've had the spiritual zap in the middle of their quiet times. They've spoken in strange languages. They've had personal visions of God. They've been caught up into the heavenly realms and seen things of the world to come.

Are they the sorts of things God wanted for Israel when He said to them: *Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy?* They just don't seem to fit Israel's situation, do they?

The word *holy* has two basic meanings. The **first** is

separate; different. When the word is applied to God, it speaks of the fact that God's absolutely distinct from all His creation. He's unique. There's no other "god" like Him. There's no other creature like Him – not even us humans who've been made in His image. God's totally different from anything else in the universe. He's in a class or a category all by Himself.

We can't hope to be like God in that sense. Indeed, it'd be wrong for us to try to be like God that way. That was a very significant part of the temptation in the Garden of Eden. The serpent said to the woman:

You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

They wanted to be like God in a wrong way. They wanted to usurp the role of God in their lives. They wanted to become their own gods. That's the very essence of sin. It doesn't work that way. God always remains the Creator. We always remain the creatures. We always remain subject to Him as God.

The word *holy* has a **second**, related meaning. This is the more common meaning in Leviticus. It's the idea of cleanness. God's holy in that He's totally righteous. Now please note: the idea of separation or separateness is still present. God's holy in that He's separate from all that's unclean. He's separate from all that's sinful. He's separate from all that's evil. God's holiness points to His purity.

It's in this sense that Israel's to be like God – clean, pure, righteous. They're to separate themselves from the lifestyles of the other nations – lifestyles which are impure

and unclean. They're to be different from them. They're to live in the way God tells them to live. They're to live in a way that's consistent with the righteous character of their God.

So what does that look like in practice? If you've been reading through Leviticus up to this point, you may very well be tempted to think in terms of religious practices and religious people.

- Chapters 1 to 7 were all about sacrifices. These sacrifices were used to make people *clean* or to make them *holy*.
- Chapters 8 to 10 were all about the priests and their ministry in the tabernacle. They were a group of people who'd been made holy – that is, they'd been separated from the ordinary people to serve a special function for God (the function of making sacrifices). What's more, they operated in a holy place – the tabernacle. Because they'd been made holy, they were permitted into that place near where God's presence dwelt.

In other words, you could come up with an idea that holiness only related to religion and the religious leaders. And that idea would be wrong.

God says to them:

Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

He doesn't say:

Be holy when you come to the tabernacle because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

That distinction's just not there. Nor does He say:

Be holy if you're a priest because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

He addresses the entire nation. Each and every one of

them who acknowledges God as God is to be holy.

Different from the Nations

What does that holiness look like in practice? Turn to Leviticus 18:1

The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.'

These people had been slaves in Egypt. As such, they'd seen how the Egyptians lived. Some things they copied – as far as their lives as slaves permitted them to do so. Some things they simply dreamed of copying when they had the personal freedom and the personal wealth to be able to do so. Their minds had been influenced by their environment. Their sense of right and wrong had been influenced by living among these Egyptians. But, God says, they're not to copy them. Those guys didn't acknowledge God. Those guys didn't try to submit to God's way. So, they're not to copy what they've seen back there – rather, they're to follow God's instructions.

Similarly, these people are about to be given the land of Canaan. Currently, other people live in that land – the Canaanites. They have their own lifestyle. It too is a lifestyle that doesn't acknowledge God. It too is a lifestyle that includes many practices God hates. When they see that lifestyle, they'll be tempted to copy many of those

practices. They'll look fun – interesting – exciting – sophisticated – even modern. They'll be tempted to decide for themselves what's right and wrong. But God says:

No, don't copy them – follow My instructions. Live the way I tell you to live. Their way is the way of rebellion against Me. I've rescued you from that sort of thing. Give up your rebellion. Live the way I intended you to live.

Holiness means being different from the other nations.

And in case they didn't get it the first time, God repeats it in Leviticus 18:24

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

Everyone who does any of these detestable things – such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God.

And in case they missed those two times, He tells them again in Leviticus 20:22

Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that

the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.

There's no doubt and no excuse. God made it very clear to them. They were God's people. They were to be different from the other nations.

And it's exactly the same when we come to God's people in the New Testament. It hasn't changed one bit. For example, have a look at 1 John 2:15

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

The world in which we live rebels against God. They express that rebellion

- in the way they act,
- in the things they say,
- in the very way they think.

We live in that world. We're influenced by the way they live. We're hit with it day after day. It's so easy for us to adopt their attitude.

- Where's the harm in fudging a bit on my tax return – everyone else does it?
- What's wrong with passing on a juicy story about a friend – after all, it's true?

- Why not enjoy those underwear ads in the catalogues – who gets hurt by that?
- Why not tell everyone how great I am – for the humble are left behind in our world?

And so it goes on and on and on. God says:

Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. Be different. Don't follow the crowd. Don't be brainwashed by your culture. Don't be seduced by evil. Follow my instructions.

The Details of being Different

OK, so Israel's to be different. But what's being different mean?

- Does it mean wearing white when everyone else is wearing black?
- Does it mean shaving your head while everyone's growing their hair long?
- Does it mean sacrificing sheep while everyone else is sacrificing pigs?

It could very well mean those things. But that's not the point. The point is: it means whatever God tells them it means. Being different means following God's ways.

And so God spells that out for them. Have a quick look at some of the things it means.

- 18:6-18 – being different means letting God tell you who you can and can't marry. There's a whole list of close relatives with whom you're not allowed to have sex.
- 18:19 – being different means not having sex during your wife's monthly period.
- 18:21 – being different means not sacrificing your children to pagan gods.
- 18:22 – being different means not practicing homo-

sexuality.

- 18:23 – being different means not having sex with animals.
- 19:3 – being different means honouring your parents and keeping God's Sabbaths.
- 19:4 – being different means not having idols.
- 19:5-8 – being different means eating your fellowship offerings at the proper time.
- 19:9-10 – being different means leaving some harvest in the fields so the poor can have it.
- 19:11 – being different means not stealing and not lying and not being deceptive.
- 19:12 – being different means keeping your promises.
- 19:13 – being different has an impact on your business practices: how you treat your customers and how you treat your employees.
- 19:14 – being different has an impact on how you treat the blind and the deaf.
- 19:19 – being different touches on how you plant your fields and what sort of clothes you wear.

And so it goes on.

Holiness touches all of life – or rather, all of life is to be lived in a holy way. As you read through this list of rules and regulations, you could be excused for wondering what's going on. It seems to jump all over the place. There doesn't seem to be any order or logic to it.

- There are rules about how you relate to God.
- There are rules about how to relate to other people.
- There are rules about what to eat.
- There are rules about business.
- There are rules about words.

- There are rules about what you can and can't do with your own body.

And it seems to jump from one to the other and back again and all over the place. It's as if someone got a stack of cards, put a different rule on each card, shuffled them and then listed them one after the other. Surely God could be a bit more systematic in the way He put this list together.

I think there are two important lessons to be learned from this. **First**, what I said a moment ago – all of life is to be lived in a holy way. God doesn't divide up our lives into various compartments and say:

Well, this compartment belongs to Me and that's got to be kept holy – and this compartment belongs to your boss and I'm not worried about how that looks – and this compartment's yours to do with what you like and you don't have to worry about whether or not it's holy.

That's not how it works. God's God of the whole of life. It all belongs to Him. It's all one big compartment – and we're to treat Him as God of the whole lot.

- We're able to express our rebellion against God by ignoring what He says in any little bit of our lives.
- In the same way, we're to be holy by expressing our submission to God in all the bits of our lives.

Secondly, there's no hierarchy of rules when it comes to our obedience to God. We tend to think there are some big rules (like don't kill people and don't rape anyone) and some little rules (like don't eat any meat with blood in it or don't wear clothing made of two different types of materials). We tend to think it's important for our holiness if we keep the big rules and the little rules don't matter quite so much. God doesn't see it that way.

Suppose I set up a hierarchy of God's rules.

- Being greedy gives me one unholy point.
- Gossip gives me two unholy points.
- Telling a lie gives me ten unholy points.
- Stealing gives me fifty unholy points.
- Murder gives me one hundred unholy points.

I go through all of God's rules and I assign different points to each of them. What have I done wrong? I've set up a system where I've invented different degrees of holiness – and different degrees of obedience to God. And that's a nonsense.

When it comes to God, either I obey Him or I don't. I can't half obey. When it comes to obeying Him, all of His rules come at the same level.

- When God says *do not steal*, I can either obey or disobey.
- When God says *do not covet*, I can either obey or disobey.
- When God says *observe My sabbaths*, I can either obey or disobey.

It doesn't really matter what you put after "when God says", it won't change the level of your obedience or lack thereof. Disobedience to God is disobedience to God no matter which rule you're talking about. Rebellion against God is rebellion against God no matter which rule you're talking about. Making an idol and planting your field with two kinds of seed are equally disobedience to God. They show an equal lack of holiness. The issue isn't whether this makes sense to me. The issue is: What has God said?

That doesn't mean that different sins don't have differing

social consequences. They do. And some of those differing social consequences come about because of the different punishments God stipulates for breaking His rule. Yet, in relation to the issue of holiness – in relation to how I'm treating God – disobedience is always disobedience and it's equally disobedience no matter which rule I disobey.

Holiness Today

The relevance for us today should be obvious. God says to His people:

Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

He still says that to His people today. You can find it directly in 1 Peter 1:13-16.

It's important to emphasise that being holy doesn't make you God's people. We need to get the order right.

- Israel was already God's people. That happened before they got God's instructions. God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They already were God's people. These rules explain to them how to live as God's holy people.
- It's the same with Christians. People become Christians because God rescues us through the death of Jesus. That's the only way to become one of God's people. Yet, to those whom He rescues, God says: *Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.* This is what it means to be God's person.

Now, I should say, the details of what's involved in obeying God aren't exactly the same for us as they were for Israel. Some of these laws pointed forward to Jesus – and He's now fulfilled them in such a way that they no longer

apply to us in the same way (such as the laws about sacrifice). Yet, the overall principle hasn't changed.

Being God's person means submitting to God. It means doing what God says. What's more, it means doing what God says in all things. It's not a matter of me picking and choosing where I want to obey God.

God, I like this rule about not stealing, so I'll try to keep that one; but I don't like this rule about You telling me who I can and can't marry and so I'm not going to pay any attention to that one.

It doesn't work like that – because being holy means treating God as God in all areas of my life.

And so, in the same way, it's not a matter of making a few sacrifices and thinking: Well, now I'm holy. It's not a matter of singing a few songs and thinking: Well, now I'm holy. It's a matter of being holy in all my life. It's not following the thinking of my Australian culture. It's not following the pressure to speak and act like the non-Christians around me. Rather, it's paying attention to how God tells me to live. It's being different.