

“Great Expectations”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

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Do people know God better because they know you? As I pondered this passage last week, this question emerged. I believe it is at the heart of this text, which instructs us to reflect the heart and will of God in all we say and do.

Our text is a part of the Holiness Code found in Leviticus 17-26. Since the word holy is mentioned repeatedly in this unit of material, scholars gave it this title.

In religious circles, holy has several meanings: sacred, consecrated, or devoted to God. The goal of a holy person is to seek and do God’s will at all times, which will bring the best out in us and lead to healthy communities. The opening verses of our text make this very clear.

“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.’ ” What followed this command from God were clear instructions on what God expected of his people as family members, friends and neighbors. As a holy people, they were to be compassionate, respectful, kind, generous, truthful, just, fair, impartial, forgiving and humble.

They were to leave food in their fields for the poor to glean. They were to be honest in their dealings with others, never invoking God’s name as a way of taking advantage of someone.

They were to pay their day laborers at the conclusion of each day because they depended upon that money to feed their families. They were to do nothing that would make life harder on people who were already struggling.

They were to refrain from playing favorites and catering to people who could help them later. They were never permitted to gossip or hate, but at the same time, they were to speak out against injustice, always holding their neighbor accountable if he or she hurt someone. In a nutshell, they were to love others as they loved themselves and treat them as they wanted to be treated.

I am confident this portion of the Holiness Code had a profound impact upon Jesus. You will find the ideas presented in today's text featured in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as other words Jesus spoke as he moved from village to village.

The more I studied this text, the more it intrigued me. **First of all, it is addressed to all the people, not just the priests.**

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to **all the congregation** of Israel...'"

God wanted everyone to hear what Moses had to say. These instructions were too important to get second hand. Everybody needed to hear them at the same time from the one who received them from God because everyone's help would be needed to build healthy families and communities.

It was important to God that their faith be personal, active and inclusive. No one was to be excluded from the responsibilities or the blessings.

Secondly, I am intrigued by how adamant God was. He told Moses to tell the people, "You will be holy because I the Lord your God am holy."

There was no wiggle room here. Nothing about this command was negotiable or optional. The imperative was clear, concise and bold.

Why was God so adamant? For the most part, people come to know God by observing the lives of his followers. The way we as believers arrange our priorities, spend our money, do our jobs, parent our kids, handle our challenges, problems and temptations, treat our neighbors, react to those who hurt us and respond to those in need reveals the God we worship and serve.

What kind of God do people see as they observe you? What does your lifestyle tell those around you about God? Are people drawn to God because they live near you, work beside you or go to school with you, or are they more likely to turn away from God?

A young lady had a part in the senior play during her college days. She worked hard on the character she played so she could accurately reflect the author's hopes and dreams.

After the performance, a man walked backstage and introduced himself as the author of the play. "I just wanted to come back to tell you that I have seen this drama produced many times, but tonight, you embodied what I envisioned for the heroine better than anybody else ever has. This evening, you made a dream of mine come true. You gave it flesh and blood and I want to thank you."

Later, the actress commented, “Wouldn’t it be great to get to the end of life’s drama to meet the Author and hear him say, ‘You made the dream I had for you come true! You gave it flesh and blood, reflecting my own heart and nature.’ ”

Do people have a clearer picture of God’s nature because they know you? As an old hymn states, “Do others see Jesus in you?” This is what it means to be holy as God is holy.

The third and perhaps most intriguing part of our text for me is this. Almost all the instructions Moses shared that day were negative.

Do not reap to the very edges of your field.

Do not strip your vineyard bare.

Do not steal.

Do not deal falsely with your neighbor.

Do not lie to one another.

Do not withhold wages from a day laborer.

Do not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.

Do not render an unjust judgment.

Do not show partiality.

Do not slander.

Do not hate.

Do not seek vengeance or hold a grudge.

What does this say about human behavior? It is easy to fall into bad habits. Self-interest, driven by fear and greed, often wins the battle between good and evil, bringing out our worst behavior.

As believers, we will always struggle with this, and this is understandable. Faith is not easy.

Resisting evil and doing God’s will often defy logic, common sense and satisfaction. Ask anyone who turns the other cheek, gives away his coat, walks the extra mile and prays for his enemies, as Jesus instructed his disciples to do in the Sermon on the Mount, which was influenced by this portion of the Holiness Code.

In spite of this, faith demands that we live by a higher standard than the world expects of us, the ethic of love that reflects the nature of God. Often this journey begins by overcoming habits born out of jealousy, fear or greed.

What do you need to quit doing for the sake of family and friendships? One of the most powerful lessons I take away from this text is the need to identify what I am doing which does not reflect the heart of God and is keeping me and those around me from being all we could be.

The first step toward health and wholeness for an individual or a community is to quit doing things which contribute to problems. With God's help, I must refuse to let fear, jealousy or greed dictate my decisions. I must rise above that level of selfishness and seek a higher calling from God to build bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation to others instead of walls of suspicion and hate.

God will help you take that first step toward this new way of thinking and living. As a matter of fact, God is eager to help you. How do I know this?

Remember I told you the Holiness Code is found in Leviticus 17-26. Look what's in Leviticus 16?

Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement, which focused upon God's willingness to forgive the Israelites when they made mistakes. Even before Moses outlined what God expected of the Israelites, he told them about God's amazing grace.

Moses knew grace had to precede the Law because the Israelites would stumble and fall many times. They would not be perfect, and God knew it. So, even before Moses passed on God's "Great Expectations," he assured them of God's great mercy.

What bad habits do you need to confess this morning in order to receive God's forgiveness?

What do you need God to help you stop doing this week which doesn't reflect His heart and nature?

What is the first change you need to make this morning which will help you to be a better family member and neighbor?

Do people know God better because they know you? By God's grace, I hope they will this week.