

## **“Great Expectations”**

**Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18**

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Frankfort, Kentucky

February 19, 2017

This morning our attention is drawn to a portion of scripture commonly referred to as the Holiness Code. Scholars gave this label to a unit of material in Leviticus, chapters 17-26, because of its frequent use of the word, holy.

Holy is a word that describes someone or something as special, different, distinct or set apart. Certainly God fits into this category and as people of faith, so should we.

The beauty of today’s text is the way it helps us to understand how and where we should be different. It clearly describes what is important to God and should be a priority with us.

I am confident our text spoke to Jesus this way. Many parts of the Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus on the edge of the Sea of Galilee can be traced to today’s scripture. Even the way Jesus conducted his public ministry was shaped by this powerful passage.

There is every indication these words first voiced by Moses and handed down to every generation through the prophets were of great importance to Jesus. I pray they are to us, too. Listen as I share the story behind them.

For over four hundred years, the Hebrew people lived in Egypt. They migrated there during a severe famine and ended up putting down roots.

They became a threat to Pharaoh when their numbers grew alarmingly large, over a million. Pharaoh feared they would rebel against his authority and take over his country.

As a result, over time Pharaoh changed their status from welcomed guests to alien residents to indentured servants or slaves. He made them work long, hard hours to keep them from mounting any kind of military campaign against him.

When their misery and pain became intolerable, the Israelites cried out to God for relief. God heard and responded to their prayers by calling out Moses to be their liberator.

With God in his heart and at his side, Moses confronted Pharaoh and eventually secured the release of the Jews from Egypt. As happy as Moses was to be leaving this place of oppression and heartache with all the Hebrew families, he was concerned about how he was going to supply the needs of such a large group of people and keep them together.

In Egypt, they did what they were told. They had no choice. Now, they must determine how they are going to organize and govern themselves. They have to establish a code of conduct that is fair and equitable and policies that meet the needs of all the people, not just a few.

They also have to honor the God of creation who delivered them from bondage and wants to partner with them to show the world how to live in peace and harmony with all people. They are to be a beacon, a light to all nations that shows people how to arrange their values and priorities, how to handle their problems and difficulties, how to settle disagreements and disputes, how to manage their resources and possessions, how to put the welfare of the community ahead of their personal ambitions and how to advance God's kingdom on earth instead of building their own kingdom by adopting an ethic of love to guide their policies and decisions.

This was no small challenge, and Moses knew it. So, what was one of the first things Moses did after the Israelites left Egypt. He called all the people together to hear a word from the Lord.

"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy," Moses shared with them.

"Holy?" I can hear the people asking as they glanced at one another. Surely, there was some confusion about what it meant to be holy. How could they, mere humans, be holy?

Quickly, Moses told them, giving them advice not just for their present circumstances but for the days after they settled into their new homeland.

“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 foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

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 or rob your neighbor.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD.

Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:9-18)

I suspect when Moses paused there was a period of stunned silence as all of them were thinking the same thing.

Is Moses serious? Does he know how hard this will be? Does he really believe we can live up to these high standards?

Well, yes, Moses was serious, as were all the prophets who followed him and used his words to remind their people of God's great expectations of them. With God's help, every generation could be a beacon and show the world how to live in peace and harmony.

**You know what I like most about this passage?** It is the way it defines or describes holiness. According to Moses, holiness, or spirituality, shows up in the way we treat others and use our resources.

The emphasis is on responsibilities not privileges, justice not partiality, serving others not being served, healing wounds not inflicting them, settling disputes not creating them, seeking reconciliation not revenge and sharing goods and resources with those in need not hoarding them. Holiness is not about what a person says but what he or she does to reflect the heart and nature of God.

Holy people are actively engaged in their community, doing all they can to make it better for everyone. They roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. They walk alongside those who are struggling and listen to their stories. They respond with grace and mercy not judgment and condemnation. Most of all, they are people of integrity and character who can be trusted to make wise decisions that considers everyone's needs.

Holy people are generous, compassionate, respectful, honest, truthful, trustworthy, just, merciful and forgiving. They are bridge builders and peacemakers. They value the power of love over the love of power.

**Why?** This is who God is and what God does, and if they are going to reflect the heart and nature of God, they can live no other way.

**This is hard, isn't it?** For the most part, the world does not recognize or reward people who live this way. Instead, it runs over them in pursuit of lesser, self-serving goals.

**Why should we live as Moses described and Jesus taught if it is so hard?** Why should we strive to be holy people as Peter admonished his readers in his epistle?

This is how healthy communities, neighborhoods and families are formed and sustained. Being truthful, unselfish, respectful and compassionate is the centerpiece of healthy communities.

Deception, disrespect, greed, revenge and retaliation destroy community. The foundation crumbles under the weight of self-preservation and exploitation like a sandcastle in front of a tidal wave.

God knew this. Moses did, too. So did Jesus.

**What about you?** Are you on board with Moses, Jesus, Peter and many others who are serious about making this world better for all people? Based upon how you treat others and use your resources, would you consider yourself a holy person?

**What part of Moses' advice to the Israelites did you struggle with last week?** Where did you fall short?

Did you notice a striking characteristic of Moses' instructions to his people about being holy? Almost all of them were negative.

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. They bring the worst out in us.

As believers, we'll always struggle with this tension, and this is understandable. This faith journey 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. Being holy—different and distinct—is tough.

It is also necessary for building healthy relationships. There are no shortcuts.

**What do you need to quit doing for the sake of family and friendships?** What do you need to replace it with this week?

**How do you do this?** I believe you begin by having a heart to heart talk with God. Be candid and clear. Confess your mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Then ask God to show you a better way and help you to move in that direction.

Remember at the beginning of this sermon I told you the Holiness Code is found in Leviticus 17-26. Look what is introduced in Leviticus 16, the chapter just prior to the Holiness Code.

Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement, which focuses upon God's willingness to forgive the Israelites when they make 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 were human and 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.

I like this. I need this.

Join me as I lead us in praying to the One full of grace and mercy.