

Leviticus 19:1 The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy...

¹⁷“Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. ¹⁸“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.’”

Dear Friends in Christ,

DOING WHAT DOESN'T COME NATURALLY

What *Does* Come Naturally

You know, I don't remember that people used to be so focused on the wrongs done to them. So many people get offended, demand apologies, and (here is the kind of funny part), then they turn around and insult the same people they called out for insulting them. But my guess is that this is actually nothing new. The only new thing is that people now have a platform to complain to the world. In the past you had to be content to shout your complaints in the village square. Now anyone can broadcast their personal grievances to the world. Welcome to the world of 21st century social media!

How do you think that compares with God's original plan for us? Just after he put man and woman on this earth, he walked the Garden of Eden with them. And as they walked the garden, I am sure that God's desire for his children was something higher. As he said in today's reading: ***“Be holy, because I the LORD your God, am holy.”*** Be holy.

What do you think “Be holy” means? Maybe it means, Be nice. Or maybe to be holy, you just follow the rules—like in this 19th chapter of Leviticus where God gives us about three dozen commands.

Here he tells us things like: Honor your parents (and in case you kids think I picked that one just because I am a parent, it is the very first one). It continues with things we would agree with: be kind and generous to the poor, don't lie or steal, don't slander your neighbor, judge fairly. We could agree with all the commands. And if people would just follow these rules from God, our world would be a much nicer place.

But our reading today covers the most difficult two verses of it all. It says, ***“Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly.... Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge.”*** Whoa! We need to back it up a bit. What I mean is this: If you are in your five-year-old son's room sitting on the end of his bed in a serious conversation telling him, “Don't hate your sister,” what must have just happened? There must have been a fight, or maybe she smashed his favorite-in-the-world Lego creation. You don't say “Don't hate your sister or brother” out of the blue. Something must have happened.

This verse of the Bible is saying, ***“Be holy... love your neighbor”*** even when you have every reason to chop them off at the knees, to teach them to never do that again, to get mad *and* to get even.

All the other commands of Leviticus 19, we can say, “Yep. The world would be a better place if everyone did this. If they would just tell the truth in court, if they would help the poor, if they would honor parents and authority...” But these two verses are where holiness gets uncomfortable.

God looks at this world, and because he is a loving God... I don't quite know how to describe what goes on in the heart of God because I don't know the heart of God... But I imagine that when God looks at man's inhumanity to man, he is grieved. And I think that what grieves him even more is the

way people react to wrongs. Personal slights lead to arguments. Arguments lead to fights. Fights lead to feuds. Feuds lead to wars. The first wrong is wrong. But human reactions to wrong take it out of all control.

Three Bad Ways to Respond to Wrongs

Our reading talks about how people react when they have been wronged. It talks of four reactions: hate, rebuke, revenge, grudge.

Hatred is that feeling you probably felt when you were hurt or insulted. It was almost instantaneous. If someone mocked you publicly, you probably instantly disliked that person, intensely. Hatred is the flash of anger directed at a person. Hatred opposes at every point, the person who has wronged you. If anyone says anything good about that person, hatred will urge you to bring out the dirty laundry. If the person shows up, hatred makes you leave the room. Hatred wants nothing to do with that person, and only hopes for bad for them. After all, look what they did! A Biblical example of this is found among Joseph and his brothers, the great-grandsons of Abraham. Joseph's dad loved him more than his ten older brothers, and so they hated him. Sometime later, completely lacking any tact or common sense, Joseph told his brothers a dream he had. In the dream they all bowed down to him! *"And they hated him all the more"* says the Bible. Joseph was a fool, but his brothers were inexcusable. **"Do not hate your brother."**

When we have been wronged, there is a second option. It is the grudge. You might wonder, what's the difference between hatred and a grudge? Let's do one of those word association things they do on ACT tests. Hatred is to grudge as fire is to _____. I would say, "burning coals." Hatred is like a flame that's out there for everyone to see, that will set fire to any leaf or paper that comes near it. A grudge is more like the glowing coals. A grudge is not as flashy and showy as hatred, but it burns hotter and it lasts longer. A grudge is willing to wait its time. A grudge will hide itself, wear the smile, have a friendly conversation, until just the right time when the maximum damage can be done. A Biblical example was when Jacob tricked his twin brother, Esau, out of his inheritance. *"[Esau] held a grudge against Jacob... He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'"* Esau would let life go on as usual, for a while, and then! Yet no matter how you have been wronged, our reading says, **"Do not bear a grudge against one of your people."**

One more option Leviticus puts in front of us is "Revenge". Many people get confused at this point. Many think that the Old Testament approved of revenge because of those words, *"Eye for eye, tooth for tooth."* Yes, it is in the Bible. But those words were never spoken to individuals. "Eye for eye" never gave anyone the right to revenge. All three times "eye for eye" was spoken in the Old Testament, it was spoken, not to individuals, but to judges. It did give the courts of Israel the right to punish people appropriate to the crimes they had committed—which is very different from revenge. When Jesus, in our Gospel reading, said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you..."* Jesus was not overturning these words of the Old Testament, but he was overturning the religious teachers of his day who mis-applied the courts' right to punish and gave individuals the right to revenge. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" was never meant, not even in OT times, to approve of revenge. In our reading God clearly, simply, says, **"Do not take revenge."**

So, is there anywhere in your life that you have these feelings of hatred, a grudge, or hope for revenge? Is there anyone whose insult or abuse you resent? Does the memory of humiliation or pain linger, telling you, "If only I have a chance, I will teach them to never do that again." These, dear Christian, are thoughts unworthy of one redeemed by our Savior.

In Leviticus, and again in our readings in Matthew and Romans, God tells us that these thoughts are sin. He does not deny that wrong has been done to you. He does not say the shame and pain you suffered is meaningless. But he does say that he has called us to do more than return evil for evil. He has called us to be holy as he is holy.

The Fourth Option – Rebuke

But wait! Wasn't there a fourth option? Yes! There it is, in verse 17: "***Rebuke your neighbor frankly.***" So if you can't get even with them, at least you can tell them off, right?

Well... If you can't hate them, if you can't hold a grudge, if you can't get revenge—and we can't because God forbids them in the very same verse—then what does it mean "to rebuke them." Clearly it has nothing to do with "telling them off." It means that when you rebuke them, when you verbally reprimand them, the reason you do it is not to get even, but to help them! We are to rebuke with the intent, not of revenge, but to turn them from their ways, to bring them closer to God.

And if you say, "Well then, since I can't stand to help that person, I just won't say anything to them," verse 17 adds this: "***Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.***" If you don't help them confront their sin, you share in their sin! Your job is to warn them, to seek their good, their salvation, that you may one day live forever with them!

There are three things we should *not* do: hate, grudge, revenge. And there is one thing we *should* do: rebuke in love. Why is it that the three things I want to do, I am not allowed to do; and the one thing I don't want to do, I am supposed to do? Why? It is because sin still lives in me.

We often want revenge. We want the right to hold a grudge. We want the right to be aggrieved. We want the right to hold the wrong others have done over their heads, and to beat them with it whenever they get a little bit uppity or just a little bit ahead. This is the way the world acts. This is what we are tempted to do (and probably at times have done!) We Christians have been deceived into responding to wrongs the way the world fights. In so doing we sin against God.

Being Holy Like God Is Holy

When we fight like the world does, when we respond to wrongs like the world does, we have failed God's command, "***Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.***" "Holy" not only means sinless, it also has this meaning of "set apart." We should never forget that is part of "holy," "set apart." We are not allowed to act like the world acts. We are not allowed to fight fire with fire. God has called us to something better, something different. He has called us to "***love your neighbor as yourself.***"

Try turning the table for a moment. Don't think of someone wronging you, what if you have wronged someone else? What do you want others to do to you? Maybe you were just plain mean. Or maybe it was a bad day for you. Or maybe you didn't mean anything by it, but they just took it wrong. No matter how you may have wronged someone else, which of these four do you want them to do to you? To hate, bear a grudge, get revenge, or rebuke out of concern? That is what I thought. "***Love your neighbor as yourself.***" Yes, sometimes we need to take our "rights" and throw them in the garbage can and consider what others need, even those who have wronged us, and to truly love them as we would want them to love us, or better yet, to love them as our sinless Savior loved us.

This little-read book of Leviticus is useful. When God tells us to be holy like he is holy – to be like him, Leviticus shows how this works. Leviticus told Old Testament Israel, how they could come close to God in shadows of a coming Savior. The entire book is about two things: sacrifice and obedience. Now the human way of looking at it would put obedience first, and then, when we have failed to be perfectly obedient, talk about sacrifice for sin. But Leviticus does it the other way around. The first 16 chapters are about sacrifice for sin, then the last 11 chapters are about how his people are to live. Which is just what God has done for us. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He loved us first, he saved us, and now, after the fact, he calls us to live for him. Yes, this is truly what it means to "***Be holy as the LORD your God is holy.***" Not to wait for other people to be nice to us, to treat us well, and then return the favor. But to do just as God did to us in Christ, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Then, by doing what doesn't come naturally, we will love as God loved us. Amen.