

The Sanctity of Societal Ethics

Leviticus 19:1-37

I. Introduction

- A. As has already been noted, the overarching thrust of chs. 17-23 is loyalty to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel.
- B. If the focus of ch. 18 was on loyalty as it relates to sexual ethics, then the focus of ch. 19 is on loyalty as it relates to societal ethics.
- C. However, the ultimate goal expressed in loyalty to God is the holiness of God's covenant people (19:2).
- D. Holiness is not only the theme of the section, but the theme of the entire book.
- E. Chapter 19 appears at first to be a series of rapid-fire, unrelated laws which are seemingly irrelevant to the Christian life. Many of the commands given are situated in old covenant contexts, and many believers today find it difficult to discern how they relate to life after Christ.
- F. However, it may surprise us to learn that this one chapter contains two significant statements which are quoted verbatim in the NT:
 1. "You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy" (19:2) is quoted in 1 Peter 1:15-16. In other words, the goal for God's people has not changed—whether OT or NT, God wants his people to reflect his character to the world around them. It is also the basis for Jesus' statement, "You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).
 2. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18) is quoted numerous times in the NT, both by Jesus (Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27) as well as in the epistles (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8). In all these texts, the quotation serves as a summary statement of the entire OT law as it relates to our relationships with others.
- G. These two concepts—holiness and love for neighbor—are not unrelated. In fact, Leviticus 19 explains how intimate a relationship they have.
 1. The goal of the law is holiness (19:2)
 2. The means of holiness is obedience to God (19:19, 37)
 3. The expression of obedience is loving others (19:18)
- H. Organization of the chapter
 1. At first glance, there appears to be little or no organization to the commandments listed in chapter 19. This makes it difficult to outline the text and understand how each part relates to the whole.
 2. But the observant Bible student will note several textual markers which suggest a higher level of organization than we might suspect at first reading:

- a) The chapter breaks down into two major sections: 19:3-18 and 19:19-37
- b) “I am Yahweh [your God] repeats 14x throughout the chapter, 7x in the first major section (19:3, 4, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18) and 7x in the second major section (19:25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35). This phrase is used to mark off each subsection of commands within the larger sections of the chapter.
- c) A command to “keep my statutes” begins (19:19) and ends (19:37) the second major section.
- d) Both major sections end with a command to love one’s neighbor, whether a fellow citizen (19:18) or a foreigner (19:34).
- e) Each of the Ten Commandments is reflected in the chapter, especially in the first major section:¹

Exodus 20	Leviticus 19
I am Yahweh (v. 2)	vv. 3, 4, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 37
Graven images (vv. 4-6)	v. 4
God’s name in vain (v. 7)	v. 12
Sabbath (vv. 8-12)	vv. 3, 30
Honor parents (v. 12)	v. 3
Murder (v. 13)	v. 16
Adultery (v. 14)	v. 29
Stealing (v. 15)	vv. 11, 13, 35-36
False witness (v. 16)	vv. 11, 16
Coveting (v. 17)	v. 18

3. There is a symmetry to the two major sections, with key words or phrases used to tie the two sections together (19:3a, 30b; 19:3b, 30; 19:4a, 31b; 19:4c, 32c; 19:15a, 35a; 19:18c, 34b; 19:10a, 37a).
4. All of this data demonstrates a unity to the chapter that makes it “the highest development of ethics in the Old Testament” (Rooker, 250) and a “‘rapid panoramic tour’ of what it means to be holy” (Ross, 351).

II. Exposition

A. Introduction (19:1-2)

1. This chapter of the book is marked in the usual way by the phrase, “Yahweh spoke to Moses” (19:1)
2. The intended recipients of the message: “all the congregation of the people of Israel” (19:2a). This address was intended for everyone in Israel, with no exceptions. No one could turn away and say, “Oh, these instructions aren’t relevant to me.”
3. Holiness is the overarching goal of what follows (19:2b).

¹ Table adapted from Rooker, *Leviticus*, 252.

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4. The NT church is likewise called to this same responsibility. As those who have been saved by God, we are called “as obedience children [to] not be conformed to the passion of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:14-16).
5. Believers represent God in the world. We are his ambassadors appealing for the world to be reconciled to God through the substitutionary atonement provided in Christ (2 Cor 5:20-21). Our conduct as “new creations” (2 Cor 5:17) reflects the God to whom we have turned and whom we represent.

B. The Law in the Big Picture (19:3-18)

The first major section concerns the law in the big picture. This first section summarizes the entirety of the law, represented in its treatment of the Ten Commandments, and explains how the correlating concepts of holiness and love intersect.

1. Holiness and the Law in the Big Picture (19:3-8)

These laws begin with a rapid-fire reference to whole law as represented in the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th commandments. “These three laws...summarize the Decalogue. This is the appropriate starting point, for its basic laws were most important for the vitality of the spiritual life of the nation. If people were not going to give their allegiance to God, keep the sign of the covenant, or live out their commitment in the home, there was not much reason to go any further with legal rulings” (Ross, 358).

a) Holiness is respecting parents (19:3a)

- (1) The laws initiate with an emphasis on the 5th commandment—which stands at the head of the laws relating to social relationships.
- (2) “Revere” is literally “fear”—the same posture which all people must take with God. The parent-child relationship is viewed here as a microcosm of the human-divine relationship.
- (3) “Holiness begins in the home.... As far as a child is concerned, his parents are in the place of God: through them he can learn what God is like and what he requires. It is therefore fitting that in his younger years a child should honor and fear his parents, as in later years he will fear God” (Wenham, 265).

b) Holiness is observing the Sabbath (19:3b)

- (1) This law reflects the 4th commandment, which concludes the laws relating man’s relationship with God.
- (2) Fear of parents is coupled with observant of Sabbath. The two reflect similar postures—a willingness to live under divinely-structured authority.
- (3) The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant—it was a repeated observance and marked Israel as God’s distinct people in covenant relationship with Him.

- (4) Although the Sabbath has much to teach us about our need for rest, its placement here alongside respecting parents underscores Israel's call to follow in obedience to God as the covenant law-giver.
 - (5) If they are faithful to observe the Sabbath, it will make a clear distinction between them and the other nations.
- c) Holiness is avoiding Idolatry (19:4)
- (1) This law reflects the 1st and 2nd commandments, and stress more than any other the exclusive loyalty demanded by God from his people.
 - (2) "Idols" are literally "nothings"—they are not what you think they are, and they don't deliver on what you hope they will.
 - (3) "Gods of cast metal" allude perhaps to the golden calf of Exod 32 and reflect one's attempt to represent the Creator God through his creation.
 - (4) God alone possesses the authority to determine how he represents himself. He has chosen to do so through humans made in his image (Gen 1:26-28).
 - (5) The creation of idols destroys the distinction—the separation (i.e., holiness) of God as distinct from his creation.
 - (6) It also reflects a less-than-loyal heart which refuses to trust in the invisible God. This is why the NT as well warns often of the dangers of idolatry, be they in the form of paganism, greed, or heresy (Col 3:5; 1 John 5:21).
- d) Holiness is observing the Peace Offering properly (19:5-8)
- (1) The peace offering here represents the culmination of the sacrificial system.
 - (2) "All the sacrifices led up to the peace offering as the heart of worship. To offer the peace offering was to claim to be at peace with God, to be keeping the commandments, to be enjoying his benefits, and to be offering all the prescribed sacrifices leading up this celebration. If it was done correctly, then everything leading up to it had to have been done correctly as well" (Ross, 359).
 - (3) This law dovetails with the emphasis on the 2nd, 4th, and 5th commandments. An individual who celebrates peace with God is one who is living out the intent of the law. Improper peace offerings result from imprecise obedience.
2. Love and the Law in the Big Picture (19:9-18)

The big picture look at the law continues, but the emphasis begins to shift as the laws focus on how fulfilling the law relates to one's interactions with others. A pattern of synonyms for "neighbor" occurs in vv. 11-18 which builds to a climax in v. 18 when all four terms are used. This pattern stresses the fact that all relationships within the community of God's people fall under these societal laws. No relationship is exempt.²

² Table taken from Wenham, *Leviticus*, 267.

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vv. 11-12		fellow citizen		I am Yahweh
vv. 13-14			neighbor	I am Yahweh
vv. 15-16		fellow citizen	people	I am Yahweh
vv. 17-18	brother	fellow citizen	people	I am Yahweh

a) Love is caring for the poor (19:9-10)

- (1) This paragraph acts as a transitional section from vv. 5-8 to vv. 11f. Technically, these two verses are bundled with vv. 5-8 (note that the phrase “I am Yahweh your God” does not appear until v. 10, signaling that vv. 5-10 are a unit).
- (2) If the emphasis of the peace offering is on declaring one’s harmony with God, it carried a corollary intent of celebrating that harmony with other members of the covenant community. The peace offering, in other words, was a communal meal to be shared with friends.
- (3) This leads naturally to the heart of the law as it pertains to one’s relationship with others, particularly the vulnerable in society—love as a summary of the law.
- (4) The law required farmers to leave margin along the edges and corners of their fields and vineyards so that the poor come glean. It also restricted farmers from picking up any of the crop that had fallen to the ground during the gleaning process.
- (5) “Here, then, was one of the most specific tests of spirituality: care for those less fortunate (see Lev. 23:22; Deut 24:19-22). This concern is central to the Bible, but why is it listed right here? The main answer is it naturally follows the ruling on the peace offering. To offer the peace offering was to claim to be at peace with God; it was a thanksgiving offering. But if the offerer did not provide for the poor it was a hollow claim. In other words, if the test of gratitude was generosity, then someone who claimed the former but lacked the latter was a hypocrite” (Ross, 359).
- (6) The NT reiterates this premise. Generosity correlates to thankfulness. It also correlates to genuine spirituality and, as James puts it, “pure and undefiled religion” (Jas 1:27). The sacrifices which NT believers offer to God are those of praise, thanksgiving, doing good, and sharing with others (Heb 13:15-16).

b) Love is being honest (19:11-12)

- (1) These verses pertain directly to the 3rd, 8th, and 9th commandments.
- (2) Verse 11 contains three rapid-fire prohibitions against stealing, lying, and deceptive practices.
- (3) Verse 12 pertains to making false oaths. To invoke Yahweh’s name in a deceptive or false oath profaned God’s name through misuse and violated the command to use God’s name in a way that reflects his holiness.

- (4) “The theology that informs these commands reveals that God provides for people’s needs (so trust him and do not steal from others) and that he is the God of truth (so deal honestly and faithfully)” (Ross, 360).
 - (5) The NT stresses the importance of honesty in the Christian life. Believers are to act truthfully. James encourages believers to faithfulness without relying on oaths (Jas 5:12), and Paul stresses that we are to “put away falsehood” and “speak the truth” with our neighbors (Eph 4:25).
- c) Love is not take advantage of others (19:13-14)
- (1) These laws also pertain to the 8th commandment, but stress the implications of stealing.
 - (2) To steal or rob are to oppress or exploit an individual for one’s own ends.
 - (3) One practical application of this is given in verse 14—withholding payment from a hired worker, who relied on these daily wages to make ends meet.
 - (4) Additionally, exploitation and oppression occur when someone takes advantage of people who are unaware of what is happening. This is illustrated by the reference to cursing the deaf and placing a stumbling block before the blind. In both instances, disadvantaged individuals cannot perceive what is happening and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.
 - (5) The law thus emphasizes the fear of God (v. 14), who sees and hears everything. The heart of these commands is this: your actions must be based on love for others, not simply on what you think you can get away with.
- d) Love is preserving justice (19:15-16)
- (1) These laws pertain to the 6th and 9th commandments.
 - (2) The focus shifts the legal sphere, where love is expressed through upholding justice. God is just—he does not show partiality to anyone. Although he protects the weak and vulnerable and calls his people to do the same, he does not let justice go. He always judges righteously.
 - (3) Injustice involves showing any kind of partiality, whether to the poor or the rich. Either case perverts justice.
 - (4) It also could involve slandering an individual, which could ruin their reputation. Making false or unsubstantiated allegations against someone else could actually endanger a person’s life.
 - (5) The NT calls for the same level of justice in the church. James warns against showing partiality, especially to the rich (Jas 2:1-4), which is a violation of the “royal law” (2:8). Likewise, the NT warns against gossip and slander (2 Cor 12:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 5:14; 6:4; 1 Pet 6:4).

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- e) Love is being selfless (19:17-18)
- (1) Even though gossip and slander are not reflective of the holiness of God, there are times when difficult conversations need to happen between fellow believers.
 - (2) When someone sees a fellow member of God's people in sin—or especially when that individual actually sins against us—the temptation is to harbor resentment against them.
 - (3) But the law here warns against letting hatred fester, which in Matthew 5:22 is identified as spiritual murder.
 - (4) Rather, love for others involves dealing truthfully with a person who has sinned, especially when that sin is against us.
 - (5) Leaving the matter unresolved actually puts your own life at risk. True love for others involves being willing to rescue people who are caught in sin.
 - (6) The law of v. 17 is reflected in God's call on Ezekiel to be a watchman over Judah (Ezek 33). If Ezekiel failed to warn Israel of their sin and the impending judgment that was coming, then he would also be indicted.
 - (7) Likewise, true biblical love recognizes that judgment belongs solely to God. Thus, v. 18 prohibits taking vengeance on another person or bearing a grudge against them. This is a difficult attitude to foster, but one which is willing to be selfless and allow God in his sovereignty to operate in the heart of another person.
 - (8) Verse 18 summarizes not only these commands but all of the law as it relates to our dealings with others: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
 - (9) “It is unique in the ancient world, an Old Testament moral principle that is the driving force behind all dealings with neighbors. The point seems to be that they were to see others as people with needs, as they themselves had needs. The expression of love for other people then meant to come to their assistance.”
 - (10) The NT recognizes that believers in Christ have the same proclivity to hatred and angst, as well as pride. It is easier to allow a person to wallow in their sin and to watch in smug scorn, rather than come to their aid and rescue them.
 - (11) Thus, NT Christians are called to “restore” individuals caught in sin, doing so with caution so as not to act in a way that develops pride and self-righteousness (Gal 6:1).
 - (12) Likewise, we are to operate in such a way that we are willing to meet the needs of anyone, regardless of the social or economic standing (Jas 2:8).
 - (13) In the NT context, loving one's neighbor is a lifestyle done when a believer is walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh (Gal 5:14).

C. The Law in the Details (19:19-37)

The emphasis of this next major section shifts from the message of the law as a whole to obeying the law in its details. The section begins and ends with the command to “keep [all] my statutes” (19:33, 37).

1. Holiness through proper distinctions (19:19-32)

Three different scenarios are presented in this section which illustrate the necessity to maintain proper distinctions as the people of God.

a) Distinctions in mixtures (19:19)

- (1) The people were not to breed different kinds of cattle, sow different kinds of seed in the same field, or wear garments made of different types of material.
- (2) The principle underlying this prohibition is the requirement of maintaining distinctions between things which God had divided.
- (3) These are aspects of daily Israelite life which helped to reinforce the spiritual necessity of separateness, which is at the heart of holiness.
- (4) Although these specific laws are no longer binding as legislative commands for NT believers, the principle is illustrated in the necessity of maintaining distinction between believers and unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14-7:1).

b) Distinctions in social status (19:20-22)

- (1) The OT incorporated the social structure and slave and free within its legislation. Although it does not condone slavery, it recognized it as a social reality and regulated it as such.
- (2) Here, a scenario is presented where a man had seduced a slave girl into sexual intercourse, although she had been “assigned” to another man.
- (3) The word “assigned” occurs only here in the OT and so its meaning is uncertain, but it appears to mean that she had been promised for marriage to another man.
- (4) However, the girl had not yet been ransomed and so was not free. In other words, she had been promised for marriage but the arrangement was still informal because the man had yet to pay the ransom price and so formalize the engagement.
- (5) Usually, adultery was punishable by death, but since the betrothal had yet been formalized, the man and the girl were not guilty of adultery. Therefore, they were not to be put to death.
- (6) The man, however, was still guilty of violating the girl and so had to offer a guilt offering to atone for his sin.

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- (7) The principle of the underscores that even those of lesser social standing in Israel, i.e., slaves, were still protected by God's law. A man could not get away with violating a woman on the basis that she was only a slave.
- c) Distinctions in harvest (19:23-25)
- (1) These laws look forward to the time when the nation was living in the land and was able to plant trees and harvest produce.
 - (2) In this instance, the law recognized that it took at least four years for a fruit to produce usable fruit. Thus, the harvesting before the 4th year was prohibited because anything before that was produce fruit which was not good to eat. Such fruit would not make a good offering of firstfruits to Yahweh.
 - (3) During the 4th year, then, the people were to consecrate all the fruit to God, recognizing him as the giver and sustainer of produce and labor.
 - (4) Beginning the 5th year, the people could enjoy the fruit produced by the tree.
 - (5) Whereas the surrounding pagan nations might see themselves as entitled to all of the crop, this law called Israel to consecrate their lives and labor to Yahweh. It also ensured that they recognized God alone—not any of the pagan gods—as the giver and sustainer of fruitfulness in the land.
- d) Distinction from pagan practices (19:26-31)

The final laws of this section pertain to certain pagan customs which were commonly practiced by the nations which currently occupied the land.

- (1) The laws of ch. 17 pertaining to the consumption of blood are reiterated. As was already addressed in that chapter, blood was to be used solely to make atonement for sin at the tabernacle.
- (2) Interpreting omens and telling fortunes represented a distrust of God and the guidance he provided. The pagan nations frequently relied on these in decision making. As the revelator of Israel, when God spoke they were to listen and obey. When he was silent, they were to walk in faith rather than seek diviners to tell them what to do.
- (3) Rounding the hair of the temple and the edges of the beard was a common custom of pagan cultic leaders. Israel was to maintain a clear distinction from these pagan practices.
- (4) Cutting the body for the dead was a part of pagan mourning rites. Similarly, tattooing was prohibited. In these instances, they represented a distortion of the created order by marring what God had created.
- (5) The laws prohibited giving one's daughter to prostitution, which may refer to religious prostitution, but could simply refer to prostitution in general. In fact, it could refer to a father's desire for financial gain through the exploitation of his daughter. Such a practice profaned the daughter, and would give rise to depravity in the land.

- (6) The one positive command was to observe the Sabbath and reverence the tabernacle. God's people were to recognize God's sovereignty over them, in complete contradistinction from the pagan gods to whom the nations gave their allegiance. The loyalty of Israel was expressed through faithful observance of the Sabbath day as the holy sign of the covenant he made with them and the honor and respect due to the tabernacle as the holy dwelling place of God among his people.
- (7) The final law prohibits Israel from turning to mediums and necromancers—those who commune with departed spirits for the purpose of gaining information or direction. Such actions would defile the people and keep them from being the holy nation they were supposed to be. Later in Israel's history, Israel's first king would seek out the witch at Endor to summon Samuel for guidance (1 Sam 28).

2. Love through care for the vulnerable (19:32-37)

This final section of the chapter reengages the principle of love in the details of the law. The focus moves from one's fellow citizens to encompass anyone—even the stranger and alien. There is no one to whom God's people are not obligated to demonstrate love and so display the holiness of Yahweh.

a) Love for the aged (19:32)

- (1) Standing up before the gray head and synonymous with demonstrating honor and respect.
- (2) Here, fear of God is the underlying motivation for honoring the aged. When God's people love and fear God, they will recognize the vulnerability of the elderly and pay them proper respect.

b) Love for the sojourner (19:33-34)

- (1) Sojourners are foreigners who dwell in the land and, to some extent have placed themselves under the authority of Yahweh.
- (2) Since foreigners were required to observe the laws of God, they were to be treated the same way as native Israelites.
- (3) Israel was to love the sojourner in the same way they were required to love fellow citizens—with a selfless love that looked out for their best interest and met their needs.
- (4) The motivation was the memory of being foreigners in Egypt, mistreated and maligned. They were to remember their time of sojourning and live in light of it. They could not allow their freedom and presence in their own land to numb them towards the plight of the foreigner who chose to make Israel their home.

c) Love for honesty and justice (19:35-36)

- (1) Business practices need to be conducted with honor and integrity.

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(2) This meant using standard and ethical measurements for dealing out payments and debts to others. Crooked business practices involved altering scales, lengthening or shortening rulers used to measure length, and modifying measurements of volume for grain and other commodities.

(3) These laws are reinforced by the reminder that they are given by Yahweh, who had brought them out of Egypt, where their labors were exploited.

3. Final appeal to obedience to the details of the law (19:37)

The entire section concludes with a command to observe God's statutes, which is reinforced by the addition of "all my rules." In other words, no law could be neglected. They must all be practiced in faithful obedience.

III. Conclusion

- A. Ross summarizes well the heart of this chapter: "God's people must conform to his holiness by keeping his commandments (the letter of the law) by dealing with others in love (the spirit of the law), by living according to his standards of separation in the world, and by demonstrating kindness and justice to others" (Ross, 365).
- B. The NT Christian walks a tight balance between obedience to God as an expression of love to him and legalism as a means of pleasing God in the flesh.
- C. Legalism does not recognize the point of the law. It sees it as a means of being made right with God.
- D. True Christian obedience flows out of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. Thus, Paul says that the new covenant gives life because it is energized by the Holy Spirit, not the letter of the law. Left to itself, the law is a list of rules that can only kill. But when energized by the Spirit, the law is the outflow of one's love for God.
- E. The overarching thrust of the law aims to direct the true believer's spiritual energies toward what it means for God's people—whether Israel under the old covenant or the church under the New Covenant—to love God and love others.
- F. When believers fail to love others, they have effectively missed the point of the law.
- G. Likewise, when believers try to serve God's people, but love isn't the primary motivation, their labors are useless and they serve no genuine spiritual purpose (1 Cor 13).