

Our lectionary passages today cover far more ground than I can possibly preach on this morning, and so I want to us to consider the theme that I've summed up as *loving holiness*, stringing together the ideas that occur at the beginning and end of our passages from Leviticus and Matthew. I'm going to make a dozen or so points very briefly, which might make for a different kind of sermon than a 1-point sermon or even a 3-point sermon. Think of it this way:

There are two kinds of beauty in the snow: the beauty of a snowflake, and the beauty of a snowfall. Some sermons are looking for the beauty of an individual snowflake, putting one verse or one idea under the microscope so that the fine detail and magnificent patterns that make this particular snowflake unique can be seen and appreciated. And if we inspected each point that we find in the text this morning, it would be beautiful; each one of these point could be their own sermon.

But today, the effect that I want for us isn't the effect of seeing one snowflake under a microscope. Lessons about holiness and love will be coming down in a flurry, and the effect I want us to feel is that of standing outside in a beautiful snow shower as the snow blankets everything around in shining brilliant white as far as the eye can see. So don't worry so much if you aren't able to write each point down, just like you don't run around trying to catch every flake in a snowstorm. This morning, just stick out your tongue like a kid in the snow, and catch a taste of the cold sweetness of God's loving holiness.

So here we go: Point 1: **Holiness is an imperative for God's people.** You must be holy! And the stakes are high: Hebrews tells us to strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. No holiness, no heaven. It's that simple. Many people try to cheat on this one by saying that Jesus gives you all the holiness you need, and that's true in a sense, but it's misleading because it leaves out a step. Jesus gives you the Spirit of Holiness, and calls *you* to walk in holiness. If you are not striving for holiness, then you are not obeying God, and you will not see God. Now, unholy people tend to hear this command as God being harsh or demanding, but actually, there is nothing kinder that God could do for you. Think about it this way: if God allowed unholiness to enter His presence, it would immediately be destroyed, because our God is a consuming fire. If you are not holy when you enter His presence, you will be destroyed! And so when God commands you to be holy, He is saving your life when you enter His presence.

Here's my analogy for this: when deep-sea divers return to the surface, if they come up too quickly, they suffer from a painful condition called decompression sickness, because of what happens when the air they breathe passes through different levels of pressure. They need to be brought to the surface slowly, or they risk great pain or even death.

That's what God is doing by commanding us to be holy: He is depressurizing us so that we learn to breathe heaven's oxygen, so that we won't explode in His presence! He commands you to be holy because He *loves* you!

Point 2: **Holiness is a description of the character of God.** This means that His command represents an invitation for us to share in His life! How *kind* are God's commands!

Point 3: **God's holy character is revealed in His law.** (Epiphany!) Holiness is not an empty bucket that we fill up with our own ideas. God tells us what holiness looks like, summarized in the 10 and the 2: the 10 Commandments, many of which appear in Lev. 19:1-18, and the two greatest commandments, the second of which is in Lev. 19:18: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The 2 and the 10 are summaries, but throughout the law they get very specific, like here in Lev. 19: failing to pay your workers on time is theft. Penny-pinching business practices are theft.

Point 4: **We embody God's holiness by living according to His law.** You cannot break God's law and still be holy. Holiness is not a mystery; it simply means doing what God says.

Point 5: **God's law commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves.** Holiness is not only a vertical matter of our behavior before God, but a horizontal matter of love between us and our neighbors. We know what holiness is: obeying God's law. But when we don't know exactly how to apply it, we're given this principle: love *them* the same way you would want them to love *you*.

Point 6: **God's holiness is revealed in His love for His neighbor.** God isn't asking us to be holier than He is. God has *always* loved His neighbor as Himself, first of all between the persons of the Trinity, and then in the love He shows His creation. When God tells us to love our neighbor by saying "I am the Lord", He is referring to Himself as an *example* just as much as an *authority*. It's not just "love, because I say so"; it's "love, because I love". So as you think about how you should love your neighbor, think about how you have been loved by God.

Point 7: **Living a holy life according to the law (treating your neighbor lawfully) is how you love your neighbor as yourself.** (Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth – justice). Many people separate love and law so that the command to love starts to mean whatever they want it to mean. We see this in our political discussion when people argue that "loving your neighbor" means supporting free healthcare or college for everyone. Actually, since free isn't free, so that money must be taken from others by theft. God's law *does* say that loving your neighbor means don't steal from him, even for a good cause. So don't divorce love from the law. Treating your neighbor lawfully (according to *God's* law, not necessarily the law of the land) is how you love him.

This means that it is more loving to give *justice and righteousness* to the poor, the stranger, and the immigrant than it is to give them *preferential treatment*. Even if justice makes their life harder in the short term, it is better for everyone to live under justice than it is to *bend* justice in order to help others. Now, in just a minute, we'll move over to Matthew and see that holiness involves more than just justice, but holiness never involves *less* than justice.

Excursus: Psalm 119 and Loving Holiness. But before we move to Matthew, we're going to detour over to Psalm 119:33-40. It's printed in your bulletin as our Call to Worship, but I want you to consider that passage (and all of Psalm 119) as a model for how we should respond to

God's holy law of love. Everything that we've seen so far in Leviticus is what moved the Psalmist to pray this extended prayer praising God for the goodness of His holy law. "O, how I love your law!" This is how a heart that trusts God responds to His law: with deep love. Think about it: do you love anything as much as the Psalmist loves God's law? What's the longest poem you've ever written for your spouse?

When you consider God's law, you need to see it as an expression of God's holy love towards you. God's law is what leads you in the paths of life. God's law is what enables you to survive in God's presence. God's law is what keeps you from stumbling into hell! You should love God's holy law! You should *rejoice* in it! And the practical point I want to make here is that if you say you delight in God's law, there is a simple test to back that up. You say you *love* it; do you *know* it? Really, even knowing God's law is not enough. Do you use it? Does it guide your life? It can't guide you if you don't know it!

So here's the challenge: memorize the 10 and the 2. Memorize Exodus 20:1-17, and Matthew 22:37-39. You can't love holiness if you don't know what it is, so write holiness on your heart by memorizing and meditating on these verses. But first, examine your heart: are you excited to memorize God's law? Or is this an assignment? What does that say about your delight in God? Maybe start with confession, by repenting of a lack of love for our Holy God's holy law.

Point 8: Perfect holiness goes beyond justice. Holiness is expressed in justice toward your neighbor. But what happens when your neighbor acts unjustly towards you, and becomes your enemy? Jesus quotes a common proverb, half of which comes from Leviticus and half of which doesn't show up anywhere in the OT. The OT never commanded us to hate our enemies, but it didn't clearly teach us to love them, either. But Jesus does, and by telling us to love our enemies, He takes holiness *beyond* justice, because justice doesn't require you to love your enemies.

And so we come to Point 9: **Gospel love reveals more of God's character than the law.** In v. 48, Jesus transposes the formula of Lev. 19:2 – "Be holy, for I am Holy", into a new key: Be perfect, for your Heavenly Father is perfect." Leviticus strongly connected holiness and loving your neighbor by obeying the law, but Matthew's focus is on the perfection or completion of holiness found in showing love to your enemies. Keeping the law and living justly accurately displays God's holiness, but it doesn't display the *fullness* of that holiness. Holiness is made perfect in *mercy*.

Point 10: God's perfection is revealed in His love for His enemies – sending Jesus to die for sinners. (Epiphany!) We see this perfection of holiness in Jesus Christ. Our heavenly Father sent His only Son to die for His enemies, and there is nothing more god-like, more holy than that. If God had punished sinners with perfect justice without ever sending a savior, that would have been completely holy, but something about holiness would have remained hidden. And so here in Epiphany season we celebrate the full and complete revelation of God's holy love in that He sent Jesus to die for sinners. The cross teaches us more about holiness than the law did. Mercy reveals the complete perfection of God's holy love.

Now, point 11: **Jesus commands you not just to love your neighbor, but also to love your enemies.** The mercy of God towards us makes us shout with joy; the command to be merciful like God causes us to clear our throat and shuffle our feet. It is so much easier to do justice to our neighbor than it is to love our enemies! But remember, when Jesus calls us to be perfect, He's calling us to *share in the life of God* – He's calling us to blessed happiness and perfect peace! *Jesus' command is not a burden for you: it is freedom; it is an invitation to enjoy God's life.*

Point 12: **Loving your enemies means not only not resisting the one who is evil, but actively seeking their good, especially through prayer.** You may not join them in evil – if they steal your cookies, don't help them steal more cookies – but you can give them *more* than they were trying to steal. Or more practically, how about this: many people regard illegal aliens as enemies, since they steal jobs and resources from rightful citizens. Since they are illegal, justice means deporting them. What would mercy look like? It wouldn't look like helping them break the law; but it would probably look like helping them become legalized.

Point 13: **Loving your enemies embodies God's perfection; it is more than merely human.** Insisting on justice for your enemies keeps you from being unholy, but it does not enter into the fullness of holiness. Even pagans appreciate justice. But you are called to a higher perfection; you are called to be more than merely human. Laying down your life out of love for your enemies is more than merely human, and this means that loving your enemies shows the character of God more clearly and more fully than anything else. It is the gospel in action. The more you are uncomfortable and bothered by the idea of loving your neighbor, turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile, the more uncomfortable you are with the gospel. But the opposite is also true: the more you embrace this idea of loving your enemies, the more evidence you have that the gospel has taken deep root in your heart, the more you are perfect, like your Heavenly Father.

My final word goes back to Psalm 119. That Psalm expresses the Psalmist's love for the holiness of God's law; it's a celebration of justice and righteousness, and what a glorious Psalm it is. So here's my question: if the incomplete holiness of the law deserves that much praise, how much more praise does the perfection of holiness revealed in the mercy of God in Christ deserve? Let your life write a new Psalm 119 celebrating the glories of a God who loved His enemies so much that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but forever enter into the holy life of God Himself for all eternity.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray: "O God, help us to love holiness. Help us to love your law. Help us to love our neighbors. Help us to love your gospel, and help us to love our enemies. Help us to be perfect as you are perfect. Fill us with your Spirit so that we can write a new Psalm 119 with our lives until you make us eternally and perfectly holy when Jesus comes again in glory. We ask for this in Jesus' name, and Amen."