

What More Are You Doing Than Others?

Leviticus 19: 9-18 Matthew 5: 38-48

It seems somewhat unfair to compare what people do and don't do, and how much one person does compared to others. We really don't know many of the circumstances of people who might be held up for comparison or set up in some ad hoc competition. Unless allowances are made to ensure that comparisons and competitions are among relative equals, it doesn't seem fair or reasonable.

Comparisons and competitions are such a major part of modern life, from sports to reality TV to red carpet fashion chic to education test scores, it seems like that's our favorite thing to do. But each of these has relative value since, in an area like pro sports, these are all athletes of the highest training and capability. They are justifiably comparable. However, comparing their capabilities with mine would be an unfair comparison. I'm a much better preacher than any of them are likely to be.

That's the way it is for most other comparisons and competitions that get defined in a random manner or an unweighted manner or with a narrow focus or relationship. We start comparing apples and oranges quickly - both fruits but with no real basis of comparison. You wouldn't compare Ryan to me, or Lori to me, or Riley to me, for a host of reasons.

Yet we find this broad application of standards upon all of God's people in Leviticus, and then the same thing happening with Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount with the added aspect of comparing people quite broadly as well. Let's dig into this.

Oh, boy – let's start with Leviticus. This is a rare occasion when the lectionary turns to this work that contains lots of prescriptive legalisms. Leviticus is best known for having the line that condemns homosexuality – literally one line (18:22) – that comes amid a raft of sexual prohibitions. People fond of quoting this one line in Leviticus typically know nothing else about Leviticus. That's called proof texting – picking out one line to the exclusion of context, history, customs, and the like simply to make a narrow point of your own – and it's dumb. Don't do that.

For Christians who obviously have ignored its content, except for that one line, Leviticus is one of the most mind-numbingly boring books of the Bible. It isn't the only one we ignore, but it's definitely the largest. It certainly was written long after Moses, unsurprisingly by a member of the priestly class. Priests didn't emerge until around the time that the Temple was built. Most scholars figure Leviticus was compiled *after* the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, close to 1000 years after Moses.

Blessedly, the lectionary has given us passages in chapter 19 which our pew bibles have helpfully called "Various Laws" as if that distinguishes it from the rest. But we do have some rather forward looking and unusual commands. These aren't purity laws, or laws regarding ritual or sacrifices or festivals or priests. They have to do with things that Micah might have meant when it was stated what does the Lord require – do justice,

love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. These verses in Leviticus 19 reflect ideals and values of the Kingdom.

It begins with a focus on the society's weak, poor, and vulnerable. Farmers are instructed to leave gleanings *quite deliberately* for the poor. (The bulletin cover shows peasants digging in a field in snow, quite possibly gleaning potatoes or the like.) This command to give allowance to the poor can cause problems, particularly in lean years for the farmer who is looking to gain as much as he can from his season's crops. That hardly seems fair. The farmer starts to grouse: 'Let these people get a job and stop loafing around.' Then comes the line that's rather ominously repeated several times: **I am the Lord your God.** This rather clearly sends the message that *your* opinion is irrelevant; **just do it!**

What follows is a series of prohibitions against stealing, lying, deceiving, swearing falsely, or claiming divine authority. But the merchants complain that this reduces their profits and their well-being, and their competitiveness in the marketplace will be undercut. And **I am the Lord your God.** *I really* don't care. **Do it!**

Relations with others in the marketplace should make it a just place; no defrauding, no robbing, no holding up wages, no exploiting the deaf and blind. Again, the grumblings from those who wonder how they will ever be able to make ends meet. Then they hear it again: **I am the Lord your God.**

No perverting justice, no showing partiality either to the poor or the rich, but being fair, and not slandering others or endangering others' lives are noted. **I am the Lord your God.**

The law's prohibitions are getting to the basis of human relationships the way that God expects them to be, what we'd call values reflecting the Kingdom of God. No bearing grudges, although you are supposed to declare your rebuke. Telling your neighbor you've been offended **is** expected. But don't seek revenge, which was the common practice, the "get tough" approach. Finally God says, *Love your neighbor as yourself.* Wait, didn't Jesus say that? You're right; he did - only Jesus was directly quoting this Hebrew scripture. (Okay, now that wasn't really proof texting.) And what does God say after *Love your neighbor as yourself.* You guessed it: **I am the Lord your God.**

God is trying to get his people to engage in relations that are just, fair, equitable, positive, and promising. The ways of the world – getting tough, maintaining the upper hand, and demanding that people jump through *your* hoops – get overturned with a new approach to social life and standards. The community that God wants fulfilled is contained within the Torah-Law. Jesus even quotes it.

As we re-join Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we find that he's still trying to overcome what everyone in his audience supposes is righteous and good. Within Judaism, some of the best and worst intentions have created competing schools of thought, layered with over-emphasized traditions, together with manipulated

authorities, generating legalisms that bear little resemblance to what God intended. Law and legalism were not providing God's desired direction toward equitable outcomes. When these legalisms weren't being obscure and irrelevant, they were compromised and re-defined to suit the ways of the world.

As we listen to Jesus, we hear him heightening the contrast once again with statements that are shocking, even today. He starts with what's accepted and commonplace in people's minds, and then deliberately shakes their tree to awaken them from complacency.

In today's passages, we hear the radical demands of love. What we heard in Leviticus – *love thy neighbor as thyself* – gets a full treatment in Jesus' preaching.

He starts with the cultural tradition's practice of justice: *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. That's what these people in his audience know and accept as legitimate, indeed as the honorable way to settle a dispute. It's a mandate for legal or legitimated but **limited and proportionate** revenge. That's how justice gets achieved; revenge, but limited and proportionate. It's a big improvement from: 'Two eyes for one eye, or two hands for one tooth.' Compared to that, the notion *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* seems downright liberal. That's a fair measure, right?

Jesus nullifies that whole concept of limited revenge as equaling justice when he says, *Do not resist an evil person*. Surely he can't be serious, that you should just let yourself be a victim, that you shouldn't even defend yourself.

The listener expects Jesus to clarify this startling statement and make it bearable. Not so fast. Jesus goes ahead and gives specific examples, like: *If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, give him your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles*. Jesus is quite content for people to lay down and become **victims**, passive in the face of oppression. How can that be about justice? How can that be fair, or even reasonable? He must be kidding again.

Not at all. Jesus isn't finished yet. He slams them with this one: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons [and daughters] of your Father in heaven*. Whaaat?!

He'll explain further that there is nothing special about loving those who love you. God brings both sun and rain to the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Will you, sisters and brothers, take God's place and determine who or what is good or evil, rendering **your** judgment? Will your resistance to evil be a sign of love and compassion, or a demonstration of the evil in yourself? Difficult questions.

Here Jesus is just as radical, and even irrational, as he was last week. But he brings the issues to a very common, personal level. Unlike previous teachings, like earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, **you** yourself may not be murderous and have **no** need to take that teaching too personally, or an adulterer, or in divorce, or a dingbat who

claims divine authority for themselves. But it will be **very** hard to find someone who has not been a **victim**, who has not resisted evil in one way or another, who has not felt anger seethe within their breast at the personal experience of injustice and exploitation. Oh, yes: Jesus gotcha covered on this one.

Remember in the beginning, we talked briefly about comparisons and competitions, how the comparisons needed to occur among relative equals for it to be fair. Here we have Jesus challenging his disciples with his teaching and asking: *What more are you doing than anyone else?* He did this last week, too, when he told his faithful followers that their righteousness needed to **exceed** the (dingbat) scribes and Pharisees.

This week, he takes the common level experience and asks whether there is any discernible difference between the **faithful** and the **faithless** in several ways. If there really isn't any difference, then maybe the faithful have missed the whole point. Maybe they're not so faithful after all. Maybe they're simply wearing the veneer of religiosity, practicing empty rituals and meaningless devotions, but not serious enough about the Kingdom to actually live and practice its faithful demands.

Jesus asks this question to disciples of every age. Have you sold out the Kingdom for the world? Have you reduced the power of the good news of new life, and the sovereignty of an amazing and gracious God into mere puppetry for your pet beliefs and assumptions? How can you attain to new life when you're simply living the same old life, a life that looks remarkably the same as everyone else, regardless of faith? Is it enough for us to be polite, have good manners, chew with our mouths closed, hold the door for the ladies, wave the flag, vote on Election Day, and go to church on Sunday? Jesus responds in the Sermon on the Mount with a resounding "NO."

The Sermon on the Mount is the latest update on God's desire for humanity to live in community as God intended, truly caring for each other like a family, in peace and equity, with love and grace as a priority to bring healing and reconciliation. The teachings were already difficult to hear in Leviticus. Then Jesus came along and gave us directions that are even *more* difficult. (Thanks, Jesus!)

As our scriptures remind us, being faithful to the way of God is a big haul on a hard road, not a cakewalk on a sunny day. Indeed, it's radical stuff that we can wrestle with for a lifetime. The radical love and grace of God is the radical love and grace that sits at the heart of the kingdom of God itself, the binding force that brings together the family of God. May we be willing to wrestle with the challenges, and walk the journey to embrace and give witness to such sacred and radical love and grace.