



the heart of God

JUSTICE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

PART SIX

God's Justice and Holistic Flourishing

LEVITICUS





Part Six – God’s Justice and Holistic Flourishing

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

From Fragmentation to Holiness

Modern life is a bit like walking in a shopping mall. There are a multiplicity of voices saying ‘come, this way to the good life’. But their approaches are contradictory. The result is fragmentation. The answer to this is the book of Leviticus.

The statement that glues the book of Leviticus together is:

“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”^[1]
(Leviticus 19:2, see also 11:44-45, 20:7, 20:26)

Leviticus hangs together on the following premise: our holistic flourishing is a result of being wholly devoted to a holy God.

Puns intended.

1. Holiness is Distinction

North American millennials love fiddle leaf figs, often seen in trendy spots. We had one that barely grew in rainy Langley, but after a move to sunny Kamloops, it doubled in size. This highlights the idea that to thrive, you need to be near the source of life. In the biblical worldview, God is that source. The book of Leviticus reflects this principle, focusing on how people can draw close to God.

After the Exodus, the Israelites built the Tabernacle for God’s presence, but no one entered it. Leviticus opens with God speaking to Moses from inside the tent,^[2] emphasizing separation from His presence. The book serves as a manual for devotion, guiding people on how to live close to God, including rules for daily life, worship, and purity.

Leviticus demands total commitment—holiness means being “set apart.” The peculiar rules, like not mixing fabrics, reflect Israel’s distinctiveness. Just as couples maintain quirky rituals as signs of love, Israel’s practices set them apart for God. Ultimately, this devotion led to Jesus, the embodiment of God’s holiness and the perfect example of what it means to be wholly dedicated to God.

2. Holiness is Purity

Holiness in Leviticus is about being set apart, both in terms of God’s uniqueness and our call to follow Him. It involves purity and reverence. While these ideas are common in other faiths, the surprising aspect of holiness in the Judeo-Christian tradition is its connection to justice.

Leviticus mirrors the Ten Commandments, starting with vertical laws about our relationship with God and moving to horizontal laws about relationships with others. Holiness is justice—God’s righteousness leads to just actions.

^[1] Leviticus 19:2, see also 11:44-45, 20:7, 26.

^[2] Lev. 1:1

This includes sexual ethics, integrity, and care for the poor, aspects of holiness that remain essential even today.

a. Sexual Ethics

Levitical approaches to sexual ethics can be summarized in the following statement:

Sex is reserved for a covenant relationship between one man and one woman for life.[3]

Jesus and the New Testament affirm these realities, and this continues to be a point of distinction between us and the world, much like it was for ancient Israel. God knew this, and stated as such by saying:

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these [sexual] ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.”[4]

God gave us these rules to protect the vulnerable. Ancient cultures sometimes had a loose approach to sexual assault, using it to dominate and humiliate people.[5] God wants His people to be able to control their sexual drives and urges, and especially not to use them to harm people who are vulnerable.

God gave us these rules to protect the family. The sexual laws of Leviticus prohibit sexual activity in the family and also make a strange reference to not sacrificing children to Molek.[6] In an ancient context, this makes sense because sex is intended and designed to make children. Rates of unintended pregnancies have not dropped that significantly since our contraceptive methods have come into play.[7] Sex should be saved for a relationship that is open to children.

God gave us these laws to protect others. Paul argues that having sex outside of marriage is using or violating our brothers and sisters.[8]

And finally, God gave us these laws to protect ourselves.

Paul argues:

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’”[9]

Paul is not shaming sex workers here, as both then and now people in sex work are usually victims. But he is saying that sex is a unifying act in a mystical and spiritual sense. Many ancient cultures used sex as part of rituals, this is something we intuitively understood in pre-modern times.

Imagine if all these sexual codes were actually followed. Without sexual abuse, lust, adultery and where children were raised in homes with parents bonded in covenant love, what would our world be like?



[3] See Lev. 18:1-24

[4] Lev. 18:24

[5] See Genesis 19:1-11, 1 Chronicles 19:4—the reference to shaving beards and ‘cutting off garments at the buttocks’ is most likely a reference to sexual abuse.

[6] Lev. 18:21

[7] See <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide>

[8] 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6

[9] 1 Corinthians 6:15-16

b. Integrity

Chapter 19 of Leviticus is filled with laws about honesty—in business, court and daily life.[10] Including paying workers, telling the truth, not swearing against people, not holding a grudge in your heart without talking it out with someone.

Close your eyes and dream of a world where this is true. Dream of a political party where this would be true. A municipal government where this is true. A court system, police force or medical system where this is true.

Imagine a church where this is true.

It probably looks like a place that is flourishing.

c. Care for the Poor

Hebrew concepts of the ‘poor’ don’t always necessarily mean those who lack material means. They are catch all categories for those who are at some sort of social or economic disadvantage, the ones whose situations are oppressive.[11]

Provisions for those economically poor, differently abled people, young women—making your daughter a prostitute meant selling her into prostitution to pay debts, notice that you should be punished for using a female slave sexually—and provisions for the elderly, and immigrants. [12]

Liberation theologians argue that God has a ‘preferential option for the poor’. Meaning God’s special attention is on those who are at a disadvantage from the perspective of society and, as a result, God calls us to give our special attention to those people as well.

And imagine if we did. Imagine if everybody asked God’s Holy Spirit to put the cause of some of the poor and oppressed on their heart. Imagine if we listened and the Spirit led each of us to people, local and global, that we could support and encourage. If everyone in this room did that it would change our city. If every Christian did that, it would change our world.

Perfection, not Perfectionism

Both the Ten Teachings and the book of Leviticus have this movement from the vertical to the horizontal.

One of the most surprising moments in the Bible is that Jesus reverses that order. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about anger, lust, oaths and revenge before he talks about prayer and fasting.[13]

Why?

Because we are always at a danger of disconnecting our piety from justice. We are always at a risk, like the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, of taking righteousness out of our holiness.

But Jesus has done something new. With His resurrection and ascension, Jesus has given us the New Spirit that was promised by Ezekiel.

So, after hearing about all these things. Lists and lists of ‘to-dos’ and ‘to-do betters’. The danger would be just to get overwhelmed and become as fragmented and scattered as me running around in the mall. But it’s my hunch that as these concepts went by, something stood out. Something whispered in your heart, this is for you. That is God’s Spirit. That is Jesus’ Spirit, leading you.

One of my favourite authors once said that God demands our perfection, but he isn’t a perfectionist. He wants our wholeness and holiness, but he understands that it will take time. He is working on you and on me. Our flourishing is being wholly devoted to a holy God. A living God. A leading God. It is not about having it all figured out and the perfect system, but as Jesus put it: “...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

So, as you look at the holiness of God and see His justice, where is the Spirit calling you to engage? Prayerfully consider this .

[10] See Lev. 19:11-13, 15-18.

[11] See Lev. 19:9, 14, 20, 29, 32, 33.

[12] See Lev. 19:9, 14, 20, 29, 32, 33.

[13] See Matthew 5-6.



Open Up

What do you think of when you hear the word holy?

Better yet, who do you think of? What stands out about them?

Dig In

1. As a group, choose one of the three areas of 'justice' that you feel called to dig into—sexual ethics, integrity or care for the poor. Then read the verses from Leviticus in the footnotes above in that section. Consider the questions that pertain to that section:

- *Sexual ethics:*
 - What is it about the Christian approach to sexuality that makes it so distinctive in our culture?
 - How might we form a defense for this perspective to our culture? How can we help them understand the Christian perspective?
 - How do we hold to these distinctive and peculiar beliefs in a way that doesn't become prudish and judgmental?

- *Integrity:*

- In what places in our culture do you see consistent transgressions against the Biblical standard for integrity?
- What areas of integrity might the Spirit be calling you to a higher standard in?
- What's difficult about living with integrity? What are the benefits?

- *Care for the Poor*

- Who are some who might fit into the Biblical category of 'the poor' that aren't on the Levitical list?
- What do you think about the idea of God having a 'preferential option for the poor'? Where does it seem to fit, where does it fall short?
- We can't all be involved in every issue. Where do you feel called to engage with the poor?

Prayer

Feel free to pray into any of the concerns that have arisen in the above areas. Also consider taking a moment to listen to the Spirit quietly about where He may be calling us individually to a higher standard of holiness—if there's enough comfort, perhaps even share that with a group member.