

God Values Justice

DOES GOD CARE ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Focal Verses • LEVITICUS 19:9-18, 33-37

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will IDENTIFY what it means to love one's neighbor as one's self, REFLECT on ways to act with compassion, and PRAY to live a life of justice and compassion.

In Focus

"Granddad, I heard that the Golden Rule, treat other people the way you want to be treated, is important in a lot of cultures. But what does that even mean? I mean, what if you don't know how to treat yourself well? And if America is such a Christian nation, why don't our laws treat people equally? I saw in a video online that immigrants are being put in jail for just trying to work like everyone else. And black folks are being shot just for walking down the wrong street. Why don't our laws reflect the golden rule if all these cultures agree on it?"

"Well, that's a lot of questions all at once; I'm glad you're so curious, Jaden. One of the important ways I learned the Golden Rule was from the Bible."

"The Bible has the Golden Rule in it?"

"Yes it does, but that doesn't mean that our country always does what the Bible teaches. People don't always act like Christians, and America certainly doesn't. But God calls us to care for the most vulnerable people in society--both as individuals and as a nation. We know America hasn't always kept all of its promises as Dr. Martin Luther King said. Most nations haven't. But that's why believers need to continue to advocate for more justice that reflects more of God's love for all people. When we care for the least of these, we are answering God's call."

"I've never heard anyone talk about that stuff in the Bible," Jaden said with surprise.

Have you talked about God's call for justice with anyone recently? Why or why not?

Keep in Mind

"But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:34, KJV).



Focal Verses

KJV **Leviticus 19:9** And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.

10 And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.

11 Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.

12 And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.

13 Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

14 Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.

15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

16 Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour; I am the LORD.

17 Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

33 And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him.

34 But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

35 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure.

36 Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have: I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.

37 Therefore shall ye observe all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: I am the LORD.

The People, Places, and Times

A Holy People. God's people have always had a special relationship with Him, one that is based on God's nature and character. When Israel agreed to be God's people and to obey His covenant—following His miraculous deliverance of them from the Egyptians—they bound themselves to ethical and religious responsibilities. These were delivered to them through legal codes (i.e., the Covenant and the Holiness Code), which included both positive and negative requirements. The vertical relationship of God's people was fairly simple and straightforward—they were to have no

other gods, they were not to use the Lord's name in vain, and they were to honor the Sabbath. The horizontal relationship was more complicated and came in the form of numerous specific commands, all provided as guiding examples and principles for how they governed themselves both at home and in the world.

Background

The Holiness Code of Leviticus 18:1–24:9 was given to the Israelites as a set of ethical and religious responsibilities, including positive and negative commands. John Rogerson and Philip Davies write, “The basis of the

regulations in 19:11–18 about fair dealing with one’s neighbors [sic] is not so much social solidarity as mutual religious responsibility” (145). A large part of Leviticus deals with priestly matters, while chapters 18 and 20 address sexual relations. Chapter 19, the focus of today’s lesson, deals primarily with Israel’s horizontal relationships with others, particularly addressing justice and fairness as examples of holiness.

At-A-Glance

1. Social Justice: Treating Others Right (Leviticus 19:9–16)
2. Social Justice: Starts in the Heart (vv. 17–18)
3. Social Justice: Cares for Strangers (vv. 33–34)
4. Social Justice: Being Fair in Business and Law (vv. 35–37)

In Depth

1. Social Justice: Treating Others Right (Leviticus 19:9–16)

Jesus summarized the horizontal part of a proper relationship with God as “love thy neighbour as thyself” (see Matthew 22:38–39; Luke 10:27). Inherent in every aspect of God’s holy nature and His laws regarding holiness is His heart of love. Every law in the Sinai Tradition reflects God’s love heart. Treating others right, or loving one’s neighbor, is the ultimate expression of social justice. Contained within this overriding principle are the following details:

Proper handling of the land (vv. 9–10). Inherent in treating others right is the matter of strangers (e.g., travelers), but also includes the ubiquitous poor and those who perhaps once were better off but have fallen on hard times.

The Israelites demonstrated a godly attitude toward others by generously leaving the corners of one’s fields or vines for those less fortunate. Today, one’s surplus can be shared with others in many ways.

Honesty with everyone (vv. 11–13). It might seem apparent initially, but the laws against committing perjury, stealing, and lying (which parallel the third, eighth, and ninth commandments) are sometimes harder to obey when the boundaries are unclear. The choices between right and wrong are evident when the cases are obvious. However, deception, deceit, and fraud often take subtle and more easily justified forms. The godly person avoids all such acts, however minor, that dishonor God and harm others.

Not taking advantage of others (vv. 14–16). Much like the previous laws, these specify taking advantage of the disadvantaged. Mistreating vulnerable people, such as those with disabilities or someone in a desperate situation, is injustice defined. The opposite type of person is also included—God’s holy people are not to act dishonorably toward the privileged. An easy example would be filing unjust lawsuits against rich people. In all cases, embodying social justice excludes all forms of gossip, backstabbing, and slander, as these are harmful to others and dishonoring to God.

How do these laws reflect or challenge our society today?

2. Social Justice: Starts in the Heart (vv. 17–18)

Don’t hate, and don’t seek revenge. Jesus was clear when He commanded to love even one’s enemies in Matthew 5:43–44, which would more than encompass these verses speaking primarily about “neighbors.” Jesus knew that murder started with hate and frequently originated with a grudge that morphed into vengeance. A law against this evil root would

avoid much trouble, grief, and heartache, not to mention it would spare lives. God is fully capable of exercising vengeance. Judgment belongs to God and God alone.

Love your neighbor as yourself. The second greatest commandment is reiterated in both Testaments and reinforced by Jesus and others. This is presented as one of several positive laws, but it captures the heart of the Holiness Code—all the law codes. Nothing better defines the child of God or social justice than loving one's neighbor as one's self.

How does having the right heart intentions to keep God's laws help us to keep them?

3. Social Justice: Cares for Strangers (vv. 33–34)

Strangers are sojourners (travelers). Strangers may also be immigrants or foreigners, and God's children are to treat them as they would be—again invoking the second greatest commandment. This clarifies beyond question the New Testament rhetorical question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). The answer is abundantly clear—everyone! None are excluded from the law, as the various specific examples clarified. Whether they are visitors just passing through, settlers from another culture, or foreign outsiders, all are to be treated like blood relatives and loved as one's self.

Israel once was a stranger in Egypt. Considering that the great Exodus from Egypt had not happened very long before the time of these laws, the reminder should have been a very familiar example. Nothing drives a point home better than a personal example, especially a recent one. For Christians, the parallel is with their deliverance from the bondage of sin, which, more often than not, is remembered with great fondness, no matter how many years pass. Occasionally, however, some need to be reminded that they once had been delivered from oppression and bondage, and they

should not even consider mistreating others or inflicting them with any injustice.

4. Social Justice: Being Fair in Business and Law (vv. 35–37)

Just scales, righteous dealings, and fairness toward all. Some Old Testament laws occasionally translate perfectly into modern society without needing any cultural filter. The law about unjust scales is preceded by a general command of not doing any unrighteousness in “judgment” or weighing any matter. Still, specifically, when scales determine values, deception is difficult to detect. This could find countless modern applications, such as gas stations not setting their pumps accurately, taxi drivers “running up the meter,” expense accounts or invoices being “padded,” and accountants doing “creative” bookkeeping.

Obedying God's just ordinances is evidence of righteousness. Even where there is an unbridgeable cultural distance between the laws of the “Sinai Tradition” and today, God's people are still called to a standard of holiness measured against God's. Nothing demonstrates personal righteousness more than being faithful to living in a way that honors God. Nothing more explicitly defines such a life as one committed to loving others through practical expressions of social justice.

Search the Scriptures

1. Where is the Holiness Code found in Scripture?
2. Were the laws in the Holiness Code exhaustive?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Think about some of your personal experiences with injustice or unrighteousness. How did these experiences make you feel?
2. Now, contrast these memories and feelings with a memorable time when you witnessed holiness, justice, or righteousness. How did those make you feel?

Liberating Lesson

Often, the idealistic matters of holiness and justice become elusive when confronted with complex, emotional, and controversial events and circumstances—such as a nation’s concern for border security or access to healthcare and how that should be translated into laws and actions. As much as one wants to obey God’s Word and love one’s neighbor, how are those realities impacted when a neighbor breaks the law? Do we want God’s justice against others but God’s mercy for ourselves? How should the thinking of Christians be balanced to reflect God’s commands while respecting the rights of non-Christians? These are not easy questions or simple issues. God’s people must be careful to weigh (judge) the issues, allow themselves to be driven by principles of biblical justice, and not let our faith be confused by the vested interests of politics.

Application for Activation

God’s people are to be in the world but not of it. Theirs is a higher calling to the kingdom of God and holy living as defined by Scripture—which translates to a timeless command to treat others as we would be treated, to love others as we would be loved, and a determination to be just and fair in all one’s human relationships. Surely, there are enough challenges in this one paragraph to last a lifetime.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

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Say It Correctly

Decalogue. DEK-uh-log.
Ephah. EE-fuh, EE-fah.
Leviticus. Lih-VI-tih-kuhs.
Zechariah. Zek'uh-RI-ah.

Daily Bible Readings

DAY 15

Genesis 43–45

Psalms 8

DAY 16

Genesis 46–47

Psalms 9:1–6

DAY 17

Genesis 48–50

Psalms 9:7–12

DAY 18

Exodus 1–3

Psalms 9:13–20

DAY 19

Exodus 4–6

Psalms 10:1–6

DAY 20

Exodus 7–9

Psalms 10:7–11

DAY 21

Exodus 10–12

Psalms 10:12–18

Notes
