

November 12th 2017

Scripture:

Psalm 136

Leviticus 19:1-2 & 15-19

Galatians 5:13-26

“God blesses us with so many good and beautiful things.”

Every year thousands of Christians the world over vow to read through the entire Bible in a year.

You know those great New Years resolutions that often quickly fall by the wayside --- well reading the Bible cover to cover --- is one of them for many people every year.

And many people every year are been stopped dead in their tracks when they come to the book of Leviticus.

You’ve got Genesis with creation --- Adam and Eve --- Noah --- and then there are the stories of Abraham and Sarah --- Isaac and Jacob --- and Joseph.

And then in Exodus there is Moses and the Plagues and the Passover --- freedom from slavery in Egypt with the parting of the waters at the Red Sea ----- the 10 Commandments and so on.

And then it’s as though all of this is broken up by Leviticus.

Leviticus ----- with all of its rules --- rules ---- rules.

And then in Numbers and Deuteronomy it’s right back where Exodus left off --- the great narrative of the Israelites --- a compelling story full of human emotion and divine directives.

But why Leviticus in the middle of this beautiful narrative of the Israelites and their journey to The Promised Land --- why Leviticus with all of its rules smack dab in the middle of all of this?

Leviticus ---- that book that has discouraged so many people from reading the Bible cover to cover.

Eugene Peterson --- theologian --- pastor --- and Biblical scholar ---- has gone as far to say that maybe readers ought to skip over Leviticus in reading the Bible cover to cover and come back to it at the very end.

Skip over Leviticus when reading the Bible cover to cover and come to it at the end he suggests --- except --- except he also says read verse 18 in chapter 19.

Verse 18 in chapter 19 --- we heard it earlier today -----

It begins ----- “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people” --- and then there is the key part --- one of the most famous verses of all --- “but love your neighbour as yourself --- I am the Lord.”

“But love your neighbour as yourself.”

It appears once in the Old Testament --- right here --- and then this phrase appears 9 times in the New Testament ----- including in our reading from Galatians today.

“Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Inserted among a whole rash of rules and laws and statutes in the book of Leviticus --- is this little gem of a verse --- that articulates the concept of love for the first time in scripture.

Love that word that pervades the Bible --- think of our Psalm today --- “His love endures forever” ----- “His love endures forever” ---- “His love endures forever” --- driving home just how much God loves us.

And it all begins here in this critical verse ---- this --- “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ----- verse.

Indeed not only is ---- “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ----- a critical verse --- but Paul says the whole of the law is fulfilled in keeping this one command.

Do this one command ----“Love your neighbour as yourself”---- and all the others are fulfilled Paul says.

And even more important than this --- Jesus says ----

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Love God ---- love others.

Love.

Listen to the context in which this verse is presented in Leviticus --- we’ve cut much of this out in our reading today on purpose --- to highlight the verse itself --- but listen now to the context ----- the surrounding verses --- picking it up at verse 9 --- and then skipping along

“‘When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen.

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not deceive one another.

Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God.

Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God.

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life.

Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart.

Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

And then it comes ----- “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people --- but love your neighbour as yourself.”

When we ----- “Love our neighbour as we love ourselves.” --- all of these other things are fulfilled according to Paul.

When we --- “Love our neighbour as we love ourselves.” ----- stealing ---- lying ---- deception ---- swearing falsely --- defrauding --- all of these things mentioned here ---- are covered --- fulfilled.

In other words we can't ---- “Love our neighbour as we love ourselves.” --- and also do these things ---- lie to them --- steal from them --- defraud them and so on.

Put another way it all begins with love.

And as Jesus makes it abundantly clear --- it's love God first --- and then love your neighbour.

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’

Everything hangs on these two things --- love God with all you've got --- and then love your neighbour as yourself.

And the order matters ---- until we love God we are never truly capable of loving our neighbour.

That's why our focus in worship is God first ---- huge gap --- us second.

If ever our focus is first on what we do and don't do --- without first falling on our knees in the presence of God we're practically hopeless.

Every good and beautiful thing of this world has God as its author.

All God and beautiful things begin in the heart of God --- and so if we neglect to go there ----- little good will ever come of us.

Simply put we're not capable of any good without God --- even if we can't always understand this it's true.

Our ability to love our neighbour as ourselves ---- as Jesus rightly notes --- grows out of our ability to first love God.

Yes we may do a good thing for our neighbour --- or respect our neighbour -- or help out our neighbour --- but we will never truly "Love our neighbour as ourselves" --- without first a profound love for God --- it just doesn't happen.

And the first sign of love for God --- is falling at His feet in silence.

When we have even a glimpse of just how much God loves us and has done for us ----- we are humbled as never before.

Words fail us.

We fall at His feet in silence.

As the psalmist notes --- Be still and know that I am God --- we sing it every week.

And remember it's not ---- "Be still and know that I am God." --- It's --- "Be still ----- and know that I am God."

Be still --- fall silent --- and know that I am God.

In Leviticus ---- amidst all of these rules --- and laws --- and regulations --- we have key to fulfilling them all --- "Love your neighbour as yourself."

It's arresting if you listen for it as you read.

It's --- "Don't do this" --- and "Don't do this" --- and "Don't do this" --- and "Don't do this" ---- and then it's suddenly ---- oh and by the way ----- "Love others as much as you love yourself." --- "Love your neighbour as yourself."

And if you've ever truly tried to love others --- you very quickly realize that you need help --- because people are messy --- and people make mistakes --- and people screw up and hurt us over and over and over again --- if you've

ever truly tried to love another you need help --- you need God's help to really succeed at it.

It's gifts from God --- blessings from God that allow us to carry on in this life ----- left to ourselves we self destruct.

We know this because the Israelites were self destructing before God blessed them with the rules for living in community --- the Ten Commandments --- without them they were unable to live side by side --- envy --- greed and so on ran rampant ---- tore them apart.

Paul does a pretty good job of describing society void of the love of God in Galatians today --- staring at verse 19 --- life without God includes ----

- sexual immorality
- impurity ---- and debauchery
- idolatry and witchcraft
- hatred
- discord
- jealousy
- fits of rage
- selfish ambition
- dissensions
- factions and envy
- drunkenness
- orgies
- and so on --- and the like as he says.

And the only way around ----- or the only way out of being driven and controlled by these kinds of things is to accept the gifts of God --- gifts of the Spirit of God.

If you live in the Spirit of God Paul says --- you will be blessed by God.

You will no longer be obsessed with or have your desires distorted into things like ----

- sexual immorality
- impurity ---- and debauchery
- idolatry and witchcraft
- hatred
- discord

----- jealousy
 ----- fits of rage
 ----- selfish ambition ----- and so on.

Instead you will be blessed by God with the good and the true and the beautiful
 --- with the fruits of the Spirit.

And just as he named all the desires of the heart that are not oriented to God
 --- so he names the desires of the heart that is oriented to God.

Beginning in verse 22 -----

---- love
 ----- joy
 ---- peace
 ----- forbearance
 ----- kindness
 ---- goodness
 ---- faithfulness
 ----- gentleness and self-control.

And no surprise --- love comes first.

Love first.

And as Jesus clarifies --- love of God first ----- and then love of neighbour.

Love is an orientation.

Be oriented to God first ---- and then think of others ---- God first --- others second.

Many good and faithful people --- jump to 2 --- loving others --- without first falling on their knees and loving God in humble submission.

And love here is not just an idea or a sentiment --- a feeling ---- it is not just a valentine's card cliché or poem.

The entire Bible ----- beginning with Leviticus 19 ----speaks of love as the dominant characteristic of God's people.

Love is a way of life that permeates and sums up the thinking and behaviours of everyone who authentically follows Jesus.

And it begins with the love of God --- which begins by humble submission before the awesome throne of God.

Few words are as misunderstood and misused as the word love.

The word love often simply falls into sentimentality --- preferences ---- chatter --- and gossip --- giddiness if you like.

Love here in Leviticus --- in Galatians --- in Jesus Christ --- is all about a fundamental orientation.

For God so loved the world --- from John 3:16 ----- means God was so oriented and concerned about the world -- that He sent His Son that all who believe in Him might have eternal life.

It's not God was so sentimental about the world that He sent His son.

And it's not God so preferred the world that He sent His Son.

It's not ---- love as in ---- "You know I just love the way Swiss Chalet does chicken --- or ribs --- or whatever."

And it's not ---

"You know I just love the way the Keg does steak or shrimp --- surf and turf --- or whatever."

Love is about far far more than just preference --- or sentimentality --- or tastes --- rather it is a submission --- and orientation to the goodness of God.

The ---- love ----- joy ---- peace --- forbearance --- kindness --- goodness --- faithfulness ---- gentleness and self-control ---- the fruits of the Spirit that Paul speaks of in Galatians today are NOT things that we arrive at by disciplining ourselves --- or working harder.

Human effort alone never blesses us with ---- love ----- joy ---- peace ---
 forbearance --- kindness --- goodness --- faithfulness ---- gentleness and self-
 control.

Instead these things --- the fruits of the Spirit---- are blessings that we
 receive from God --- when we are oriented to --- and submit ourselves under
 Him.

The truth is ----- God blesses us with so many good and beautiful things.

As we encounter the table today ---- and behold the crucified ---- risen ---
 and ascended one.

As we experience the profound love and reconciliation ----- the salvation of
 God ----- at the table.

We consider all of the good and beautiful things that God blesses us with.

And they are the big things in life --- the things that matter the most ---- and
 the things that last --- long after just this life ----
 ---- love
 ----- joy
 ---- peace.

And even deeper that these ----

Redemption.

Atonement.

Grace.

Mercy.

Salvation.

These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

These are the good and beautiful ----- cannot be touched or tarnished by the
 world things --- that God blesses us with.

These are the things that this table is all about.

And so we come ----- we who have been here often --- we who have not been here for a while ---- or ever --- maybe it's your first time today at the table ----- come.

And come ---- all of us --- not because I invite you ---- but come because God does.

It's God's desire that those who want Him should meet Him here. So come.

This table of our Lord --- is a good and beautiful thing that God has blessed us with.

And so we give thanks.

And so we come to taste and see that the Lord is good.

And so we come remembering that --- His love endures forever.

Amen.