

Leviticus Laws of Love

By David Feddes

What does it say on the top line of the Liberty Bell? “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10). A lot of people would not identify Leviticus as their favorite book of the Bible. For some of us who are reading it as part of our daily Bible reading plan, it might be the first time that some of you have ever read through the entire book of Leviticus. And yet, there are some very important statements in the book of Leviticus. They were all important because God gave them, and they continue to have a lot of helpful teaching for us today. One of those statements is right on the Liberty Bell.

The greatest commandment

When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” how did he reply? He said the greatest commandment is, “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” (Matthew 22:37–40).

So everything else that was written in the Scriptures hangs on these two commandments. Now, where did Jesus get that from? Was he just the Son of God with us who revealed for the very first time that we should love the Lord our God and love our neighbor as ourself? Well, no. Actually, when he said “Love the Lord your God,” he was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 6:5). When he said “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he was quoting from Leviticus 19 (Leviticus 19:18)—the chapter of the Bible that we're going to be reading from this morning.

We might not pick Deuteronomy and Leviticus as our favorite chapters or books of the Bible, but when Jesus was dealing with the devil, all of his quotes were from Deuteronomy (see Matthew 4:1–10). When he was asked to give the greatest statements, he quoted from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So we really can't afford to neglect any of God's revelation.

Abundant life

Just a few examples from Leviticus: “I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45). The apostle Peter in the New Testament quotes this again: “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16). Jesus said something very similar: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

If you were to take that as saying, “Well, I guess I have to be perfect in order to be right with God and to be saved,” you would be misunderstanding it. Notice what comes first: “I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Now you shall be holy.” The saving comes before the transformation. And so it will always be that God's grace comes first, and then he continues to transform our lives.

Leviticus shows a lot about holiness. I'll say more in a different presentation about how to understand and apply a lot of these laws for today, and which ones have been fulfilled in Christ and are no longer binding. That's not what I'm going to focus on today. I'm going to focus today on what Leviticus says about particular ways that we can love people around us.

Leviticus reveals laws of love. For instance, giving the law of Jubilee directed that every 50 years the poor get richer again. "And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan" (Leviticus 25:10). The poor who have lost their inheritance, who have sold themselves as slaves, who've given up their land, get freed from slavery and get their land back again.

Nowadays, politics gets divided between those who are in favor of applying biblical morality to sexual and personal behavior, and those who are really concerned about the poor and think that maybe a society should have ways of reducing the inequalities. There is a strand in the Bible about public life that says if the rich just keep getting richer and the poor get reduced down to nothing, you need to start thinking pretty hard about how you're going to deal with that. The law of Jubilee was a way of doing that in the Old Testament.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). The Old Testament already reveals God's ways of abundant living, and Jesus pours out a lot more. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that Jesus adds nothing to the commands of God except that he keeps them. That's the big thing Jesus added—he kept them perfectly. He kept them on our behalf. And now he works in our lives by his Spirit to help us more and more to keep them too.

Now, as we read about God's law of love in Leviticus, let's just look at some of these statements from chapter 19.

Help the needy help themselves

"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. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:9–10).

Is this a passage saying to modern farmers, "You shouldn't be having massive harvesting equipment that is super-efficient and cuts cut right up to the edge of your field"? The combine is even called a "Gleaner," and it takes all the grain, stores it in a bin, and you haul it off. Is that bad? Well, that's not exactly what the Bible is saying or applying to us today. But in Old Testament times, it was giving ancient Israel the message that there is more to being in business than pure efficiency and maximizing your profit.

If you were harvesting a field in those days and you were out there working with the grain by hand and getting sheaves, you might want to make sure you were absolutely as efficient as possible and have your workers go through a second time and clean up anything that got left behind and make sure you get every last bit. God's law said, "Don't do that. You should not clean

up too well after yourself, so that those who need food can go and get it.” That was God's principle for helping poor people to help themselves.

God didn't say, “Now, after you've harvested, grab some of your sheaves and haul them off to those poor people and give the grain to them.” People could do that out of generosity. But sometimes poor people aren't helped by a mere giveaway. Giving them the opportunity to go out there and work themselves and pick up some of the leftovers gave them an opportunity to feed themselves. That was part of God's law of love, that you deal with needy people in a way that gives them opportunity.

This will take different shapes in our society than it did in that society a long time ago, but the principle is still there: How can you help people to have opportunity and do it in a way that doesn't just make them the recipients of giveaways and encourage laziness on their part? It takes a lot of thought as to how to do that in our own situation in society. But the principle is: profit and efficiency aren't everything. You also have to think about how the way you run your affairs and the way your society runs its affairs gives opportunity to people.

Be honest

““You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. ¹² You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:11–12).

Notice at the end of all these statements, he says, “I am the Lord.” Remember Jesus’ statement: “Be perfect as your Father is perfect.” The reason you are to behave this way is because your Father is this way. He is truth, and you must deal in truth. And so you cannot steal. You can't pull shady deals, deal falsely with others, lie, and do all those things.

We often regard love as kind of a feeling you have towards somebody. But the Bible very clearly teaches that it's not just these little inner vibes and warm fuzzies that you have for somebody else that make up love. Part of love is that you don't rip them off. You tell them the truth. You deal with people honestly. That's a big part of loving.

Don't bully disadvantaged or disabled people

“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. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:13–14).

If you are the owner of a business, if you're in a good financial position and jobs are scarce, you have people over a barrel. You can just fire somebody and hire somebody else if there are more workers than jobs. So if you mistreat people from time to time, or you're supposed to pay them their wages at the end of the day and you say, “I'll wait till morning. I'm not going to get around to it right now,” the law says you can't do that. You've got the money in your hand. You said you were going to pay them. You pay them.

In the New Testament, James says something similar: “Woe to you who are rich! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty” (James 5:4).

This is not just an old-fashioned Leviticus law that now, in the freedom of grace, we can ignore. Dealing with people who are at a disadvantage when you're in a better economic position—and using people—is something God doesn't like.

You talk to a deaf person, and maybe they haven't yet learned to read lips. So you're going to have a little fun with them and you say, “You are about the ugliest, stupidest person I've ever met. You are an idiot.” And you're smiling all the time because you're just having a little fun. You're cursing the deaf right to their face and they can't hear what you're saying. Or there's a blind guy walking along and you think, “That'd be kind of fun.” You grab something, run in front of him, put it right there, and then he trips over it. Everybody gets a good laugh out of it and thinks it's funny. But it's not funny when you're mocking somebody who's deaf, or tripping up somebody who's blind, or calling someone with mental disabilities insulting names.

That's bullying, and God is against it. When you're a bigger kid and you're trying to tell little kids to do something that you know will blow up in their face and make them look stupid or get them in trouble—that's the very same thing. You're using your advantage of being older and knowing what's going on, and then talking the littler kids into doing something really stupid just so you can laugh at them.

The Bible says that's not love. Love doesn't take advantage of your strength to harm somebody who's weaker.

One of the good things in our society in recent years is there's been more attention to helping disabled people enjoy their lives more. You have stuff like wheelchair basketball, seeing eye dogs, the invention of Braille, putting Braille by all the elevators, and opportunities for deaf people. One of the terrible things about our society is that if you find out any of these difficulties ahead of time by genetic testing, you might abort the kid. That's the horror of our society. But it is a good thing—and in line with what God teaches—that you honor the disabled and help the disabled to make the most of their lives, rather than putting stumbling blocks in front of the blind.

Seek justice

Seek justice. That's part of love: “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:15–16).

It's a very serious matter to go to court with a prejudice and say, “I'm on the side of the poor.” A few years ago the Duke lacrosse team was accused of a crime against a woman. Immediately the prosecutor had them all slapped in jail, and all the newspaper editorials were saying how horrible

those guys were—except it turned out the woman had lied. These were rich kids at an elite university. They had to be bad! But they hadn't committed this crime.

The head of the International Monetary Fund was accused of attacking a maid in his hotel. One person might say, “I can't stand rich French socialists who are the head of the World Bank. That guy's got to be bad. I know those rich people—they use people and abuse them all the time. This guy is a rat.” Someone else might say, “I know those poor people and those maids, the kind of trashy people who are always looking for an opportunity. They hear there's a fat cat in town, and I bet anything she tried to entrap him so she could sue and make millions.” Without knowing what actually happened, you think you already know what happened—depending on whether you like wealthy successful people better, or whether you like poor people who have a hard time better. The facts of the case still have to be determined, and that's what should determine the outcome.

In all of this, you have to examine your own bias. Rich people are not always wrong. Poor people are not always wrong. Sometimes you just have to figure out the truth first.

Leviticus then says you can't just be a slanderer or stand up against the life of your neighbor in court. It's a very serious matter. Exodus says something similar: “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd” (Exodus 23:2). Don't side with the many just because they happen to be the many. Keep looking for the facts. “Do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit” (Exodus 23:3). That's the same principle we just saw: just because he's poor doesn't mean he's right. He might be right, but the fact that he's poor doesn't make him right.

“If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime... the judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party” (Deuteronomy 19:16–19). Now that would reduce the crowding in our court system. That would definitely reduce the number of lawsuits in America. If you went to court against somebody and you lost your lawsuit, then all the consequences came upon you. Or if you were a witness against somebody of a serious crime and they didn't do it, and it was found out, and perjury meant not just that you got punished for a little bit of lying under oath but that you got punished with the penalty for the crime you accused the other person of. That's what Leviticus is saying. If you're going to go after somebody and try to get them even though they're innocent, then then the penalty they would have received falls right back on you.

Love without grudges

Here's the actual love commandment: “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:17–18).

You don't get to nurse grudges against people or harbor hatred in your heart toward somebody. If you are upset with somebody or they are upset with you, get together and talk about it and make

clear why you're upset. "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). Be honest with others about the things that have upset you.

Jesus says, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24). He says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15).

Love is honest. The worst thing you can do is hold a grudge or talk to everybody about that person—but not to them. When you're mad at somebody, isn't it tempting to just get madder and madder, and then finally when you reach a certain boiling point, you've got to talk about it—and so you talk about it all right—to everybody except the person you're mad at? That's the opposite of love. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18).

"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26–27). Holding a grudge is inviting the devil, "Come on in and do your thing with me." And he will. Satan will take you up on that, because anger and hate are his specialty.

There's a phrase "against the sons of your own people." Aha—a loophole! Who are the "sons of my own people"? By the time of Jesus, expert interpreters of the law were saying, "Yes, love your neighbor, that is the essence of the law. And hate your enemy." But Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43–45). Jesus was not saying something new. The law of Moses never said to love your enemy. Instead, it said, "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it" (Exodus 23:4–5).

So if you're walking along and you say, "Hey, I think I know that donkey—and it belongs to Bozo. And I can't stand Bozo. I hope that donkey just keeps on wandering. I hope it gets so far away that he never finds that donkey again. I wouldn't mind if a lion attacked that donkey and ate it. That'll teach old Bozo a lesson." The law says no. If you see Bozo's donkey, you go, you rope that donkey, you get that thing back to Bozo and you say, "Bozo, here's your donkey."

That's called loving your neighbor. You don't have to pretend that Bozo is your favorite guy. But when you see his donkey, you bring it back. When you see that ox, you bring it back. When you see that donkey under a load and Bozo's trying to help the donkey up again and he's not succeeding, you go over and you say, "Can I help you?" And you try to lend him a hand.

You might say, "Whew! I'm glad there are no oxen and donkeys in my life. Now I can just let Bozo suffer." Well, I hope you're not that stupid—that you don't understand how the principles of the law apply even when you're beyond the society of donkeys and oxen. We're not beyond the society of Bozos, and we're not beyond the society of us preferring to see somebody suffer when we don't like them, rather than looking for ways to help them out. But love seeks to help out even the enemy.

Honor old people

Another thing our society isn't that wild about is old people. What does Leviticus say? "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:32). The honoring of the elderly is very important. In a society that tends to glorify youth and which sells gobs of Botox and hair dyes and all of that, we don't honor the gray head. I'm not saying that it's evil to dye your hair. I am saying that it is evil to have a society that dishonors old people. There is a lot that we can learn from old people, and we owe a lot to many of the old people that God has sent into our lives.

This past week, my Aunt Nellie died. She was my dad's sister. She was 90 years old and she passed away. It's a great blessing to have extended family who have loved the Lord and walked with him, and those gray heads are to be honored. She and my Uncle Wally were married about 67 years. Not bad! Now, do you really want to honor the latest Hollywood person who's working on their fourth marriage, or do you want to honor the gray head who's been around the block a few times, who managed to stay married for 67 years, and whom you can really learn from and trust? Part of love is seeing people who are worth honoring, seeking to be like them, and building them up rather than just ignoring and neglecting them.

The last time I saw Aunt Nellie was this summer. We went to visit, and I thought it was going to be the last time I saw her alive because her caretaker had said, "I don't think it's going to be that much longer." Her life was just fading. She didn't have any particular illness—she was just fading. And she went to be with the Lord this week. But this principle of love means you don't say, "Oh, those people are old. We ignore them." What are ways that we can honor the gray head? Some people who are in nursing homes are neglected by everybody else, perhaps even people in your own family.

Love foreigners

"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:33–34).

If you're anti-immigrant, you might want to give think about how you got here. Everybody here—somebody in your background was an immigrant. The Lord reminded the Israelites, "You yourselves lived in Egypt for a while as foreigners." They treated you well for a while. And you didn't like it so well when they treated you badly, did you? Well, keep that in mind. Love the foreigner as you love yourself.

This is one of the dangers of politics. Politics divides things into two parties. One party tends to be a little more immigrant-friendly in some cases, and the other one wants strong anti-immigration policies. The Bible does not always divide things up so neatly. The Bible is quite clear that there is something badly amiss with us if we are against immigrants just because they happen to be immigrants, or if we dislike foreigners just because they happen to be foreigners.

When Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39), the law expert who had asked him, “What’s the greatest commandment?” said, “But who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus didn’t give a direct answer. He just told the story. A man was going up from Jerusalem to Jericho, and some thieves beat him and left him for dead. Then along came a nice Jewish priest who walked across the other side of the road and let the guy lie there. Then came along a nice Levite Jew, and he left his fellow Jew lying there. Then came along one of these stinking Samaritans—whom you guys can’t stand—and he helped the guy out, bandaged up his wounds, and took him to an inn and paid for the guy to be there long enough to recover. Now, said Jesus, which of these was the neighbor to the man in need? The law expert couldn’t even bring himself to say “the Samaritan.” He said, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise (Luke 10:30–37).

Instead of saying, “Who is my neighbor?” or “Who is the brother from among my people?” you say, “It seems like all the bases are pretty well covered. My enemy’s donkey—I’ve got to help my enemy. Those strangers and immigrants—I’m supposed to love them the way I love myself. I’m running out of loopholes here.” And we’re meant to run out of loopholes. Instead of asking, “Who is my neighbor?” or “Who is my brother?” Jesus directs us to ask how we can be a neighbor or a brother to anyone who needs help.

Leviticus helps plug at least some of the loopholes—Exodus and other books of the Bible too—giving us examples of love in action. I wanted to concentrate with you on some of the aspects of love that don’t have as much to do with our family members as they do with the wider circle of people that God puts in our lives. Besides giving hugs to loved ones, how do you deal with people justly? How do you deal with it in the court system? How do you regard disabled people? What do you do in regard to immigrants and the elderly? This is all part of God’s pattern of love.

Let me remind you again: our Lord Jesus added nothing to the commandments except this—he kept them. And so this law of love, among other things, drives us to say, “Lord Jesus, I have fallen far short of that kind of love. Please forgive me for your sake. And dear Father, credit to me the perfect love of Christ and the perfect obedience of Christ, and then work in me by your Spirit to create more and more of that kind of love within me.”

The law of God gives us the shape of love. Love is not just a sentiment—it has a definite shape. It is not a fog bank. And that’s one of the reasons why we continue to study the law of God even after we’re saved people in Jesus Christ who aren’t under the penalties and condemnation of the law. We still want to know the shape of love and be guided by the Holy Spirit through the teachings of how exactly it is that we love our neighbor—how exactly it is that we become a neighbor to everybody whom God places in our path.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for your law. We thank you for your gospel. We pray, Lord, that you will help us as your children and heirs in Jesus Christ to fulfill the law of Christ. We pray, Lord, that we will more and more realize that love is the fulfilling of the law, and the law is the shape of love. Help us, Father, to become more and more like you—our perfect Father in heaven—through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Abundant life in Leviticus

I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy. (Lev 11:45)

Love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev 19:18)

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. (Leviticus 25:10)

Help the needy help themselves

^{19:9} When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. ¹⁰ And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

Be honest

¹¹ “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. ¹² You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

Don’t bully disadvantaged or disabled people

¹³ “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. ¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

Seek justice

¹⁵ “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

Injustice in court

You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.” (Exodus 23:2-3)

If the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. (Deut 19:18-19)

Love without grudges

¹⁷ “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor,

lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Hate your enemy?

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies. (Matt 5:43-44)

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him. (Exodus 23:4-5)

Honor old people

³² “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

Love foreigners

³³ “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴ You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Love fulfills God’s law

Love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8-10)