

# “How to Love God” based on Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-19 and Matthew 22:34-40

Sometimes things are complicated, things like trying to build the kin-dom of God for example. This feels especially complicated when trying to hold together awareness of many people, with many different needs, and many varied experiences of oppression. When Rev. Dr. Traci West was here talking about “Grace and Race” she reminded us that when we look at things intersectionally, the same people can be both oppressed and oppressor, in different roles or realities they live. Actually, it is more that we are all both, which we have to keep in mind while also trying to get clear on how the systems work that create and enforce the oppressions, so that we can be part of changing them.

Sometimes things are really complicated, like when we try to identify the driving forces that are important in building a more just society, and when we look at how deeply embedded how intricate the forces that keep the status quo in place are. Sometimes things are really complicated, like when we try to imagine a world without hungry people, and then we think about all the changes that would require.

And then, in the midst of all the complications, come the simplest and clearest commandments of the Bible. They can easily be remembered. They leave minimal space for interpretation, and there isn't any wiggle room in them. Love God, and love your neighbor. Follow up question: who is my neighbor is easily answered: everyone. Done

The commandments offer a very simple explanation of the sort of love that God wants from us: to love God the way God wants to be loved is to love God's people. It's all very simple.

Yet, every one of us who has tried to live these commandments knows they get very complicated to live out, very quickly. How is it that something so simple and understandable is also so very difficult?

Thanks goodness for Leviticus (things you might not have expected to hear - ever). As it is written in the New Interpreter's Bible, "Leviticus 19 is one of the grand chapters of the whole book of Leviticus. In American Reform Judaism it is one of the most quoted and most often read chapters, especially since it is assigned as the Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon in that tradition."<sup>1</sup> If you are not familiar with Yom Kippur, it is the Holiest day in the Jewish tradition, and is focused on atonement and repentance. The Yom Kippur prayer of atonement is so vast and inclusive that I find it exceptionally healing, by the time it is over it truly feels as if the slate of past wrongdoings is wiped clean and we can start anew.

The part of the chapter that we are focusing on today reflects on what it means to love one's neighbor, and the commandments it contains seem to clarify what tends to go wrong! By noticing how people are instructed to do right, we can see what has gone wrong too frequently.

The first part of the set of instructions are about how to care for people who live in poverty, and they are consistent with other passages in the Torah. As one commentator puts it, this set of instructions

"seeks to help poor people by legislating that the three chief products of agriculture – the grain, the product of the vine, and the fruit of the trees, are not to be harvested entirely; some is to be left for poor people to glean. ... the Lord is the ultimate owner of everything; thus the land is a gift from the Lord. If the landowners are only stewards of the land and all that it produces, there is no reason to be selfish and stingy. ... Disadvantaged persons have a right to harvest the edges of the fields; they are not to depend on voluntary gifts alone."<sup>2</sup>

In modern terms, I wonder if the comparison is to be made to welfare, and other assistance that comes through the Department of Social Services. The comparison isn't perfect, gleaning the field was seen as a human right, however it does compare well to the idea that there needs to be a way to provide for the basic needs of life for all people, and that on top of those very basic needs there will be need for further support. (Please note the video on Sustain and the idea that

those who are getting help from DSS are still struggling to access basic necessities of life.)

That idea that all that is, is God's, and that we are to use it appropriately is one of the most humbling ideas in our faith. Do we do it? How well? What would God have us be doing with our resources that we aren't doing? How have things gotten to where they are?

The second bit of instruction deals with truth; there are commands not to steal, not to deal falsely, not to lie, and not to swear falsely in the name of God. Apparently these are also common issues in all of humanity, the temptation to take what isn't ours or tell untruths for our own benefit. Their inclusion in this passage is notable though: to seek a benefit from an untruth means taking that benefit from someone else. It is not to act as we would wish others would act towards us.

The third set of instructions seems to focus on balancing power. In particular the instructions are against fraud and against stealing. Then comes yet another instruction that seems to be timeless: "you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning." Laborers were usually living day to day, using the labor of the day to buy the day's bread. By keeping it for just a bit longer, the person who didn't pay on time would be keeping a person from their daily food. This has compassion for the poorest workers. Finally, the instructions condemn taking advantage of a person's disability (and I'd expect this expands to any weakness). Specially it says not to speak harshly to a deaf person nor attempt to trip a blind person. In summation, this part of loving our neighbors as ourselves seems to be about not taking advantage of anyone just because we can.

The fourth part of this set of instructions worries about "just judgements" and in particular the availability of justice to people who are poor. This is practically an obsession of the Torah. It is as if there is something inherent in human nature that biases people toward partiality, towards giving the rich and powerful more wealth and more power while taking it away from the impoverished and disempowered. I don't much like thinking about humanity that way, but I can't see any other reason why the Bible would spend SO much effort trying to correct for it. Furthermore, I suppose, that when dealing with justice in combination with wealth and power, any human could come face to face with a self-preservation

instinct. A wealthy person who is displeased might be capable of significant harm. Perhaps it is just self-preservation that makes it possible that all justice systems need constant reminders and corrections to ensure that justice serves the poor and the wealthy equally well. It is distributing however, that the issues that exist today in our nation's justice system are neither new nor unique, but reflect a problem with humanity itself. That may mean it is will be quite reticent to correction. [#Schooltoprisonpipeline](#) [#privateprisons](#)

The final set of instructions about neighborliness in Leviticus 19 is a bit surprising. It explicitly states that to love your neighbor means you can't hate them. That may be a lot harder than it sounds. It also says that you have to call them to account when their behavior isn't loving. That's definitely harder than it sounds. Then we're told not to seek revenge AND not to hold grudges. Then this part of the passage seamlessly draws itself to a conclusion, the one we already knew was coming, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

One thing seems true, the last few millennia haven't seen much change in human behavior. The explicit instructions in Leviticus about what loving our neighbors looks like hold up well to the test of time.

So what do we do with these easy to understand, difficult to enact commandments? We could discuss further instruction, but that hasn't yet proven productive. We could offer inspiring stories, but I think that's been done enough. I wonder if our time is better spent considering what holds us back from loving our neighbors, and what we might do to overcome those barriers.

Now, this list is just my best guesses (I'm a little sad we don't have a sermon talk-back so I can hear what you'd add or remove), the things that make it hard for us to love our neighbors: fear of our own deaths ("existential anxiety") and an instinct toward self preservation, combined with believing in the myth of scarcity; in-group thinking and fear of others; and finally a lack of love for ourselves. (If the commandment is to love our neighbors AS ourselves, it implies we are also supposed to be good at loving ourselves!) That isn't a terribly extensive list, I was attempting to be as clear like the commandments themselves 😊 ;)

If you are willing to take a homework assignment, I'd encourage you to spend some time considering if the list above feels true in your experience, and then to

consider what things make you more susceptible to those challenges to loving our neighbors and which make it easier for you to overcome them and love your neighbors well. The answers to those questions are pretty important, especially if we're all willing to work on them.

For me, there are two key pieces to overcoming those challenges, two things that help me truly love our neighbors. The first is quiet time to soak in God's love and hear my own inner voice, and the second is having opportunities to learn about the world and to connect with people – especially those whose lives have been radically different from mine. To start at the beginning for this, when I'm tired, or drained, or anxious, I'm not very loving – including to myself. While sleep and also good food matter, the key to keeping myself from getting drained is taking time for my spiritual well-being. For me, at my best, this means an HOUR a day spent in contemplative prayer, although the particular form of the prayer isn't consistent. When I stop all the doing and just listen – both to God and myself – I'm more centered, more loving, more focused, and waaaaaaay less anxious.

At the same time, one of the great dangers of trying to “Love our neighbors as ourselves” is misunderstanding what love looks like for a particular person or group of people. If I don't understand the problem, and if I don't take the time to listen to the one(s) struggling, then the love I try to share may end up doing more harm. Also, I really like learning, connecting, and trying to understand the world and its people.

What guides you? What helps you be more loving? I know some of you need forests, others need music, others need exercise – and for many of you, I don't know! If you do know what you need to be more loving the next question is: are you DOING it? I think God would appreciate it if we spent our time doing the things that help us be more loving toward our neighbors, in fact, I think that's how we best love God. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, “Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections on Leviticus” in *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume One*, Leander E. Keck, editorial board convener (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) p. 1131.

<sup>2</sup>Kaiser, 1133.

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