

The Way We Choose to Respond 2024  
 Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-11, 17-28 James 2:1-9

### Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-11, 17-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

### James 2:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,<sup>3</sup> and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

A road-weary vagrant, dirty, very hungry and down on his luck,  
 came to a small inn, went around back, and knocked on the door,  
 hoping for work, enough for some food and a place to rest.

When a woman opened the door, and gave him a suspicious once over.  
 She growled angrily, "go away, you no-good, lazy bum,  
 go away – we'll have none of the likes of you around here,  
 and with that, she slammed the door in his face.

Glancing up at the sign, *The Inn of St. George and the Dragon*,  
 he knocked a second time, and when she opened the door,  
 he said, "if he's in ma'am, may I have a word with St. George?"

**What distinctions – what judgments do we make about other people?  
 What assumptions and personal biases do we let affect our attitude  
 and how will they hold up in the light of eternity with God?**

Sometimes we allow trash from the world to blow in on us,  
 but Jesus calls and guides us toward much better than that!

As we read earlier, vs. 1,

My brothers and sisters, do you with **your acts of favoritism** really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

Continuing, James explains, vs. 2-4,

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," **have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?**

Our treatment of other people does matter to God,  
for it reveals how well we're responding to God's grace,  
and the authenticity and practical integrity our faith,  
by our openness to being **the Good News to our neighbors,**  
for that is our mission, **Go and make disciples of all nations...**

There is a critical connection  
between our faith, and what we do with it in life,  
between our spirituality - and our willingness  
to relate to others with openness, kindness & respect.

All through the Bible God has shown consistent and constant interest  
in social justice & **a public ethic of compassion & balanced equity.**

When the former slaves were freed from Egyptian bondage,  
they had to adjust and learn to live together in community  
**as a free people,** chosen, equipped and called by God.

Having lived through several generations of harsh slavery in Egypt,  
they had had to learn lessons enabling them to survive that bondage,  
including a selfish, **me-first-self-interest-perspective.**

A slave, intimidated by fear and the threat of violence learns that  
it's better not to get involved in other people's problems & needs.  
**So these former slaves had a great deal to learn before  
they would be ready to settle into the Promised Land.**

So God also gave them commandments, as directions and instructions  
to teach them how God's people can live together well  
by attending to the needs of **all** within a caring community.

These commandments were not intended as a burden to trip them up,  
but were **God's gift & guide toward good and meaningful living,  
as the way to live into God's promises, purpose & blessings.**

For having been brought out from Egyptian bondage by the Lord,  
**I will be your God,  
for I have chosen to set you apart to be my people...**

... so that in responding to the Lord's gracious love and blessings  
you too will take care of the poor, the powerless and needy...

... so that you can live together with integrity and justice  
by providing for the widow, the orphan and the alien,

**for I am your God and you are my chosen people.**

**You were chosen to live as a tangible expression of that grace,**  
so that **by the way you live**, the world will see my love and holiness,  
as you live serving together in compassionate community  
**as an expression of the grace you've received from me.**

**God's Law is the light that reveals how dirty the room is,**  
**and God's grace is the broom that sweeps the room clean.**

In the Leviticus 19 passage, God makes very specific demands,  
demonstrating and illustrating the Lord's deep concern  
for ethics and social justice in the life we share, vs. 9-10,

**When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.**

The text is very clear, don't be stingy when your harvest comes in,  
don't gather every bit of grain or pick every single grape,  
but leave some for the poor and for the needy among you.

The bulk of your crop -- the just fruits of your land and labor,  
are certainly yours to gather, and to do with as you wish,  
but along the edges and that which drops to the ground,  
let that remain for those who are less fortunate.

You don't need every bit of everything you can possibly produce,  
so leave some of the excess to those with no land of their own,  
or for to those whose own crops and gardens have failed,  
for those who are unable to grow enough for themselves.

This is not a free hand-out to the lazy or the irresponsible,  
but it is allowing those without to gather for themselves.

**Through their own efforts** at gathering for themselves,  
they can glean enough to provide for their families.

**Through their participation** in the hard work of harvesting,  
they can keep their self-respect and sense of achievement,  
while being helped to provide for and feed their loved ones.

And so it goes down all through this passage,  
each section describes what it means to live faithfully  
with justice and integrity, with compassion and generosity,  
**to be a society that takes care of one another's in needs.**

Each section of this Leviticus passage illustrates  
practical public ethics and equitable social justice,  
each followed by the declaration: **"I am the Lord your God."**

Because I am the Lord your God, this is how you are to live,  
with justice and integrity, with compassion and generosity.  
You are to be a society that takes care of one another  
**for your religion and social ethics, are inseparable...**  
**... which means that there is a critical connection**

**between what we do and our faith, and what we do because of it.**

Because you have freely received from God's grace and blessings,  
and know that you are loved, blessed and sustained by your God,  
there is also an awareness of God's abiding presence,  
that permeates and pervades all areas of your life.

God's presence extends far beyond just our worship and prayer,  
as it overflows, spills over and spreads out everywhere  
into the common and mundane details of our daily living.

But notice that when God gave these instructions to Moses,  
it was **only after** having rescued them from slavery in Egypt.  
It is an important truth that their salvation – **God's gift**,  
preceded **God's demand** for righteous and faithful living.

When God rescued them from Pharaoh, God's love came before the Law,  
**and it had nothing to do with** any worthiness on their part,  
**and it had nothing to do with** any good deeds they'd done.  
**God's grace always comes first, totally unearned and undeserved.**

We are called simply to reply, to react, **to answer God's love**,  
for it is by our faithful and obedient behavior  
that **we respond** to what God has already given & accomplished.

When Jesus comes into our lives, although usually gradual and subtle,  
**God's Holy presence will bring deep change into our lives,**  
**which is visible, which is practical, tangible and real.**

According to James, an area where the presence of God in our lives,  
**most visibly** brings change is in our treatment of other people,  
especially our evaluation of a person's worth and importance...

... as James explains with uncomfortably blunt language: vs. 1, 8-9

**My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ... You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.**

Naturally we notice the signs of someone's success and status,  
but if that gets translated into favoritism and partiality,  
**then it's incompatible and inconsistent with a life**  
**of Christian faith, obedience and faithfulness.**

One time when I was playing volleyball with some friends  
our team was just tearing them up – we were playing so well.  
Every serve and spike went to just the right spot,  
it seemed we couldn't miss – and we could do no wrong.

**We won and celebrated our victory and obvious athletic prowess.**

Then, for the next game, the two teams switched sides,  
and suddenly the other team was playing incredibly well,  
and our team couldn't seem to do anything right.

As it turned out the court was on a very slight incline, that was

almost imperceptible – you'd need survey equipment to detect it.

So, it looked like one team could play much better than the other,  
but it really wasn't the players' skill or ability at all.

The winner was determined by whoever had the uphill side.

It was a subtle yet tremendous advantage...  
**and sometimes, so it goes in life, in this world.**

I find that most human behavior and the motivations behind it  
are generally **far more complex than I first supposed and assumed**,  
- with secret things that went tragically wrong in their past,  
- terrible hurts and wounds that have not yet been healed,  
- fear, guilt, insecurities, issues not yet resolved  
that can still affect and **have power to influence**.

There's almost always far more going on with human behavior and bias  
than we can appreciate or recognize on their external surface,  
**and if we knew more about their hidden wounds and struggles,**  
**we'd be far more compassionate, gentle and understanding.**

**Truth is, we really don't know how we would have responded,**  
**if we'd had to cope with their obstacles & circumstances,**  
**the stuff someone else had to contend with & overcome,**  
**or if we would have risen to the challenge that someone else faced.**

Part of our call is to work toward leveling life's playing field  
by seeking to correct this world's imbalances & discriminations...  
**...for human advantage, status, favoritism, distinctions & partiality**  
**will almost always favor the team winning on the uphill side.**

Our call is to reflect God's unrestricted love **for all of humanity**,  
by being equitable and charitable in our treatment of **all people**,  
regardless of outward appearances or the biases we carry,  
... and being willing to give others **the benefit of the doubt**,  
**as a reflection of God's own mercy, compassion and hope.**

**We're called to live & reflect God's own gracious kindness & mercy,**  
and one measure of our faith, the authenticity of our faith,  
and a test of our church as a faith community of Christians,  
is in **how well we treat one another, and the outsider.**

As Jesus explained in *Matthew 25:40*,

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

**If we really have received and accepted God's love and blessings,**  
**then some of that mercy and grace will surely overflow,**  
**and just have to leak out in the way that we live our lives.**

As we breathe in the grace of God, so we exhale our faithfulness,  
by our attitudes, compassion and service as our faith in action.

**We cannot separate mercy, justice & truth from our spirituality,**  
**for they are the practical & authentic expressions of our faith,**

not for us to earn God's grace, but for us to respond with gratitude,  
for that is our mission, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*