

---

## LEVITICUS 19:9-10

### 1. TEXT AND TRANSLATION

9 “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. 10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” (NIV)

### 2. INTRODUCTION – LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There is ongoing debate regarding the authorship and recipients of the Pentateuch. The view taken here is to affirm the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch, and therefore the book of Leviticus, while also identifying the likelihood of others being involved in bringing the book to its final form.<sup>1</sup> An equally difficult question is regarding the recipients and their location. While the book records the interactions between God, Moses, and the people while they are wandering in the desert soon after their escape from slavery in Egypt and the giving of the Ten Commandments, the *audience of the book* is taken here to be the Israelites who have just entered the promised land and who have begun organising their nation around the presence of God in the tabernacle, under the leadership of Joshua. If this scenario is correct, it would yield an early date around the twelfth century BC.<sup>2</sup> Irrespective of exactly who wrote it, and even the date in which it found its final form, it can be said with more certainty that Leviticus addresses God’s people living in the promised land.

In short, the purpose of Leviticus is to *admonish* Israel *to be holy* as God is holy (19:2), and to *show them how* with practical directives. Gane highlights that the

---

<sup>1</sup> For a very brief of summary of key considerations regarding authorship of Leviticus, see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 27-28. For a more detailed, and very good discussion of the issues, in particular – an interaction with Source Criticism perspectives – see Gordon J. Wenham, *The Pentateuch* (Exploring the Old Testament; London: SPCK, 2003), 159-183.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham suggests a number of scenarios for possible audiences of the Pentateuch, from 12th century BC under the leadership of Joshua, to 5<sup>th</sup> century BC during the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. Wenham, *Pentateuch*, 187-195.

---

book of Leviticus achieves this purpose through establishing and maintaining enduring patterns which govern both divine-human and human-human relationships.<sup>3</sup> These patterns are both necessary and appropriate for the nation of Israel to remain centered around the divine presence.<sup>4</sup> Much of the instructions regarding how to be holy included ethical instruction. One aspect of Israel's ethical conduct is their concern for the poor. Given that they are God's chosen people, they are to reflect his concern for the poor.

The passage which is the focus of this case study (Lev 19:9-10) is part of a larger section which deals with prescriptions to Israel for practical holiness (chapters 17 – 27). In the wider context of the book, this section is the final of four sections. The three which precede it are: (1) laws on sacrifice (chapters 1 – 7), (2) the institution of the priesthood (chapters 8 – 10), and (3) uncleanness and its treatment (chapters 11 to 16).<sup>5</sup> Considering an even wider context, this book is part of Israel's Torah. The theme of concern for the poor found in this passage is not a major theme of the Pentateuch. In Leviticus this theme only comes into view in the final section (Lev 19:9-10, 23:22, 25:25-28, 35-43, 47-50).

The two verses which are being examined have a type of parallel structure where a similar command is repeated to speak to two slightly different agricultural situations. They are followed by a short explanation, and then underlined by the formulaic phrase "I am the Lord your God". The genre of these verses could be described as covenant stipulation.

### 3. VERSE ANALYSIS

**v9-10** These twin commands are a very concrete expression of how Israel is to care for the poor (the first is repeated in 23:22, see also Deut 24:19-22). Walkways

---

<sup>3</sup> Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Wenham, *Pentateuch*, 82-83.

---

through the villages and from one village to another would often wind their way besides agricultural fields and vineyards. The poor had easy access to these fields and vineyards and, if permitted by the owners of the land, could therefore survive off harvesting for themselves what they needed. A clear example of these commands in action is seen in the story of Ruth (Ruth 2:2-3). As a nation, if Israel obeyed these commands, and 'live rightly', they will be holy, just as God is holy (19:2). In addition, if they obey these commands they displayed the heart of Yahweh to the poor and the alien living among them, that is: that Yahweh cares for them.

In accordance with the fertility cults of the ANE, fields were often intentionally harvested inefficiently, and the portion which was left over would serve as an offering to the deities of the ground.<sup>6</sup> For the writer of Leviticus, this would have been considered a form of idolatry, and therefore have implications for the holiness of the people. These instructions in Leviticus give a very different purpose to this practice of intentional inefficient harvesting. The idolatrous aspect of the practice is eliminated and instead it is turned around to be a vehicle for providing for the poor. In a great reversal, upon comparing the theology behind this practice with that of other ANE fertility cults, rather than this agricultural practice being Israel's provision for the gods, it is reversed to become Yahweh's provision for the poor and the alien!

#### **4. CONCLUSION - GOAL OF THE TEXT**

Given that the purpose of the book is to admonish Israel to be holy just as God is holy, and to give them practical directives of how to achieve it, this passage works towards achieving this purpose by answering Israel's question: *How can we be holy, just as God is holy?* By purposefully leaving portions of a field or vineyard unharvested, and allowing the poor to harvest these sections for themselves, Israel was able to provide for the poor from their surplus, and thus reflect the heart of their God. In this way they could be holy just as he is holy.

---

<sup>6</sup> John H. Walton, and Victor Harold Matthews, *The IVP Bible background commentary : Genesis--Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 162.

## **5. APPLICATION**

Leviticus 19:9-10 is a passage which presents a significant degree of disconnect between the original and receiving audiences. It was chosen in order to challenge a different aspect of Greidanus' methodology which was not adequately tested in the previous case study.

### **5.1 Starting Point for Application – Exegetical Conclusions**

Given that the purpose of Leviticus is to admonish Israel to be holy just as God is holy (19:2), and to give them practical directives of how to achieve it, this passage works towards achieving this purpose by answering Israel's question: *How* can we be holy, just as God is holy? By purposefully leaving portions of a field or vineyard unharvested, and allowing the poor to harvest these sections for themselves, Israel was able to provide for the poor from their surplus, and thus reflect the heart of their God. In this way they could be holy just as he is holy.

### **5.2 Concentrate on the Original Message**

This passage is relevant for a Jewish nation who had a covenant with Yahweh, and who wanted to remain centered around the divine presence in the tabernacle. They had a vested interest in being holy, just as God is holy. As such, this passage is relevant for them because it gives two very concrete directives regarding *how* they can be holy. The holiness, or a kind of 'God-like way of living', which is in view here, is a practical expression of God's concern for the poor and the alien living in Israel.

### **5.3 Recognise the Discontinuity**

#### **5.3.1 PROGRESSIVE REVELATION**

Greidanus has in mind in this section to identify issues such as slavery, or circumcision which are significantly altered in later canonical writings. This original covenantal directive regarding leaving portions of a field or vineyard unharvested, and allowing the poor to harvest these sections for themselves, is not specifically

altered in any later canonical writings. However it could be interesting to explore the connections between the command in Leviticus to “be holy because I the Lord your God and Holy” (Lev 19:2), and Jesus’ command in the Sermon on the Mount to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” (Mat 5:48). It is interesting to note that both are given in the context of commands to act in a God-like way, that is, to love your neighbour (Lev 19:18; Mat 5:43-44), and to give to the needy (Lev 19:10; Mat 6:2).

### **5.3.2 STAGES OF KINGDOM HISTORY**

There is significant discontinuity between the original audience and the contemporary audience with regards to stages of kingdom history. The original audience is pre-Christ, living in the promised land, and under the Mosaic covenant. The contemporary audience is in the church age, long after the death and resurrection of Christ, and under the new covenant that he established. The binding covenantal stipulations addressed to the original audience under the Mosaic covenant do not have the same authority over those in the new covenant.

### **5.3.3 CULTURAL CHANGES**

There is also significant discontinuity between the two audiences with regards to their respective cultures. The original audience was Jewish, living in a largely agricultural society, where many people in the audience owned farmland or vineyards, and geographically these were readily accessible to the poor. The contemporary audience is not Jewish, living in suburban Melbourne, where geographically, the poor have little to no access to fields and vineyards, and even if they did, no one in the specific contemporary audience owns either farmland or vineyards.

## **5.4 Recognise the Overarching Continuity**

### **5.4.1 SAME FAITHFUL GOD THEN AND NOW**

The holy God who calls Israel to be holy in this passage is the same now as he was then. The loving and compassionate aspect of his nature as expressed in his concern and provision for the poor is the same now as it was then. God's desire today for his people to be holy, just as he is holy, also remains unchanged.

#### **5.4.2 ONE COVENANT PEOPLE**

Those in the audience who are part of the church, the body of Christ, are God's covenant people today. This message is not addressed to those outside of God's covenant people, but to those who are part of it. Therefore this text is to be heard as a relevant message by God's covenant people today – the church.<sup>7</sup>

#### **5.5 Focus on the Goal of the Text**

The question behind the text is "*How* can we be holy, just as God is holy?" The goal of the text then is to give Israel two concrete stipulations of *how* to be holy. The goal of the text is to motivate the people of God to intentionally harvest their fields and vineyards inefficiently so as to provide for the poor, and in so doing, they will be holy. However the obvious problem which presents itself is that if these commands are applied rigidly to the contemporary audience, motivating them to inefficiently harvest their fields and vineyards (if they had any) would not achieve its goal of giving the people of God concrete ways of *how* to be holy. This wasteful use of resources would not reflect the heart of God, least of all his concern for the poor, and does not achieve the purpose of the command. Today's people of God could not be considered holy for literalistically following these commands.

In such situations, Greidanus' method suggests following a more complicated procedure. This more complicated procedure was not required in the previous case study, and therefore was not tested, but will be tested now as part of this case study. The key aspect of this alternative procedure is to search for an underlying principle.

---

<sup>7</sup> This text could have a secondary relevance for those outside of the church who 'overhear' this message, in that they will discover one way in which the church today should reflect God's heart for the poor.

Greidanus suggests achieving this by answering the question “Of what principle is this a culturally conditioned expression?”<sup>8</sup> Cosgrove adds weight to the validity of this quest for an underlying principle. He proposes a hermeneutical ‘rule of purpose’ which suggests that “The purpose (or justification) behind a biblical moral rule carries greater weight than the rule itself.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, that which should be taken as authoritative and brought to bear on the contemporary audience is the purpose of the rule, not the rule itself. The current passage is a good example of this concept. This is because if the *literal rule* were taken as authoritative for the contemporary audience, then the *purpose of the rule* (which is also explicit in the biblical text) would *not* be achieved. Instead, in this situation where the rigid following of the command does not achieve its original purpose, the *purpose* of the command (rather than the command itself) should be considered authoritative for the contemporary audience. As such, in light of Cosgrove’s contribution, the underlying principle must be shaped by first answering the question: (1) “What justification (or purpose) does the author give for this command?” and then (2) “What principle would achieve that purpose in the contemporary audience?” So in summary, first, the justification or purpose of the original command should be identified. Then, the principle should be constructed and applied such that its application achieves the original justification (or purpose) of the command.

In the case of the Leviticus passage, there are purposes acting on two levels. The most immediate purpose for the command ‘do not reap to the very edges of your field’ is explicitly given in the text as: to provide for the poor and the alien (Lev 19:10). The secondary, and deeper purpose, is: to show the Israelites how to *be holy* (19:2). Therefore, ideally the principle needs to be constructed and applied such that it achieves this twin purpose, or at least the deeper, more fundamental purpose.

---

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text : Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 174.

<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate : Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 12.

The principle can be constructed with varying degrees of abstraction from the original situation.<sup>10</sup> For example, at the closest level to the original situation, the principle which achieves the twin purpose could be constructed to be “be holy by purposefully harvesting your field inefficiently and allowing the poor to live off what remains.” This principle could be applied to an audience whose life setting is very similar to that of the Israelites in this passage, for example an audience in an agricultural village in a developing country. At one further level of abstraction, the principle could be “be holy by providing for the poor from the surplus of your resources”. Principles which are progressively more abstract (and therefore less concrete) are: “be holy by providing for the poor”, “be holy by acting as God would”, and finally “be holy”. These levels of abstraction are presented in figure 4.5 below.



**Figure 5.5 Levels of Abstraction**

The best principle for the contemporary audience is the most concrete principle which will still achieve the purpose behind the original command. In the case of this contemporary audience, the best principle will be the one on the second level.

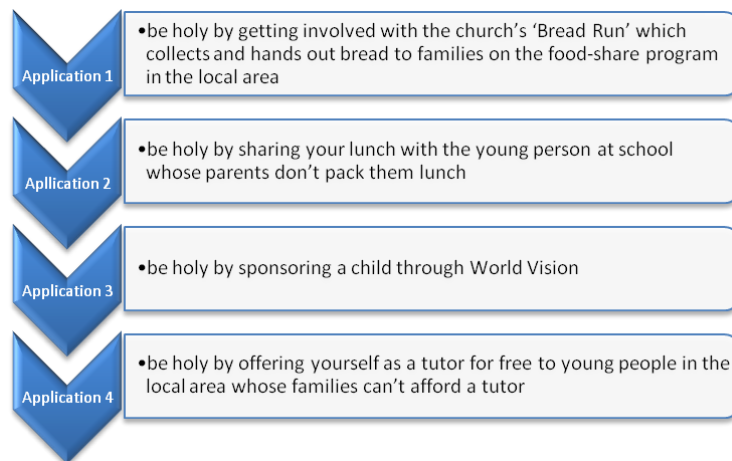
<sup>10</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, ‘The Heresy of Application’ in *Leadership* (1997), 23-25.

Perhaps in a situation where an audience is experiencing a serious economic recession, where there are very few or no surplus resources, the principle on the third level of the ladder of abstraction would need to be used. If preaching to patients in the Anandaban Leprosy Mission Hospital in Nepal, another level of abstraction would be required. These patients are the poorest of the poor in the world and after being rejected by their family and community because of their disease, they literally have nothing except the clothes on their back. In order to apply Leviticus 19:9-10 to this audience, the principle on level four would need to be used.

### **5.6 Relevance for Today: The Application**

When Jesus during his sermon on the mount says “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mat 5:48), what does he actually mean? How can a follower of Jesus *be perfect*? Assuming that Jesus is alluding to Leviticus 19:2, then our principle is relevant today for those in the church because it gives a concrete answer to the question “How can a Christian *be perfect*?”, or at least a very similar question, “How can we be holy?” The answer which the principle gives is: Be holy by providing for the poor from the surplus of your resources. This is not about salvation. It is not suggesting that a person is saved by caring for the poor. But for those who are saved, one way to reflect the heart of God, one way to ‘live rightly’, one way to be holy, is to provide for the poor from the surplus of your resources. When someone says “be a man, stand up for yourself”, they are not implying that by standing up for themselves that person will *become* a man, rather what is meant is that by standing up for themselves, that man will be better reflecting *who they really are*. In the same way, by providing for the poor from the surplus of their resources, the church is better reflecting *what it really is*: holy. Set apart for God. Reflecting the heart of God. By acting in this way, the church is being the hands and feet of Jesus in this world. It is expressing God’s heart of concern for the poor and alien.

Having transferred the original relevance to the new audience via this principle, even more concrete expressions of this principle can be developed for this particular audience. Some key resources that these young people have are: time, money, skills and abilities.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps some of the more concrete contemporary expressions of the principle “Be holy by providing for the poor from the surplus of your resources” could include: (1) be holy by getting involved with the church’s ‘Bread Run’ which collects and hands out bread to families on the food-share program in the local area, (2) be holy by getting involved at ‘Little Angels’,<sup>12</sup> (3) be holy by sharing your lunch with the young person at school whose parents don’t pack them lunch, (4) be holy by sponsoring a child through World Vision, (5) be holy by offering yourself as a tutor for free to young people in the local area whose families can’t afford a tutor. These are tabulated in Figure 4.6 below. As far as Leviticus 19:9-10 is concerned, being holy is about acting in the world in such a way that it is in line with, and demonstrates the heart of God. For a young person, answering the famous question “What would Jesus do?” will give practical guidance on how to *be holy* in a hurting and broken world.



**Figure 5.6 Concrete Applications from Principle**

<sup>11</sup> Some of the younger people who don’t have jobs don’t have much of their own money.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Little Angels’ is a clothing-exchange run by the church which gives free kids clothing and support to single parents in the community.

## 5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balentine, Samuel E., *Leviticus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002).
- Cosgrove, Charles H., *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate : Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).
- Gane, Roy, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004).
- Greidanus, Sidney, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text : Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988).
- Harrison, R. K., *Leviticus : an introduction and commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1980).
- Robinson, Haddon W., 'The Heresy of Application' in *Leadership* (1997), 20-27.
- Walton, John H., and Victor Harold Matthews, *The IVP Bible background commentary : Genesis--Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
- Wenham, Gordon J., *The Pentateuch* (Exploring the Old Testament; London: SPCK, 2003).