

“Be Holy! Serve God!”

The dictionary presents us with two confusing and perplexing definitions of “*holy*.”

“1. *set apart for the service of God...*”

“2. *characterized by perfection and transcendence:  
commanding absolute adoration and reverence.*”  
(*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* {1973}, p.546.)

These two definitions are confusing because the first one describes human beings (or human creations) and the second one describes God. A human being who serves God, is often called “*holy*,” a priest for example. God is also called “*holy*” in second definition. God is perfect. God is transcendent. (That means set apart and beyond our experience.) God deserves worship, praise, and adoration.

The problem is that we sometimes get these two understandings of holy confused. People who have been “called” to serve God sometimes come to believe that they are perfect and then demand adoration, praise, and obedience. Often, we comply because...that’s the way it is. Then when they are exposed as less than perfect, even sinful, a backlash develops. We resent these “*holy*” people who claimed divine insight and demanded obedience and special privileges. Who among us wants to be “*holier than thou?*” To say that about someone is an insult. We don’t want to holy!

Instead, we will say, “*Only God is holy.*” Surely this is true, especially when we are considering the second definition: God is greater than any human being, existed before creation, and is set apart from human life. God is awesome and deserves our worship and praise. And yet...sometimes we domesticate God. God becomes our friend who walks and talks with us; God then becomes the neighbor next door, or the still small voice within us. When this happens, God’s holiness begins to fade away. God is no longer “*the Holy Other*,” but a supernatural friend who gives us what we want. We no longer worship and serve the Holy God, but expect God to serve us!

Of course, one of the most basic Christian affirmation is: “*God comes to us in Jesus Christ*”. We believe that the Holy Other comes into our lives to give us instructions and show us God’s way. This is one of the mysteries of the Christian faith: God, the Holy Other, comes us as a human being in Jesus Christ. This mystery reminds us there is always a tension between God as Holy Other and God as our friend who walks and talks with us. We often try to manipulate our friends to serve us and we do the same with God. God in Jesus Christ defies this manipulation and is always calling us into holy service for God’s purposes.

With all this in mind, let’s examine today’s scripture readings. The Old Testament lesson is the from *Leviticus*, most well-known for it’s many laws. It is called “*The Holiness Code.*”

God gives these laws to us through a human being.

God spoke to Israel through Moses:

**“*Speak to all the congregation...of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy...*” (Lev. 19: 2.)**

God is saying, “*Be holy, because I am holy.*”

Remember the two different definitions of Holy? If we keep them straight, there will be no confusion.

God's people are to be "*holy*." That means serve God. Why? Because God who is Holy demands it. God is greater than we are and demands obedience and empowers us to serve the divine purpose. God is not asking us to become holier than everybody else, but empowering us to serve others in God's name.

This becomes clear as we examine the rest of this passage. These verses are the ethical heart of the Old Testament, maybe even the entire Bible. To be frank, many of the 600 plus laws of Leviticus are old fashioned and irrelevant for us today, even though some misguided Christians quote *one* of them to justify exclusion and harsh treatment of homosexuals. Nevertheless, these verses as a whole are the ethical foundation of the Old Testament, often quoted by the prophets and later by Jesus. What is the main theme? Serve others, especially others less fortunate than you, and deal with your neighbors justly.

Let me review some of these ethical commands. The very first one concerns "gleaning."

Gleaning is allowing the poor to walk through land that has been harvested and pick up the left overs. God is telling the Israelites: Do not harvest every last ear of corn from your field, or every last grape from your orchard. Leave some for the poor. Today we have more sophisticated procedures for helping the poor and downtrodden, but the message for us is clear: We have a sacred duty from God to help the poor, hungry, and dispossessed. At the very least, we have the responsibility to share with them our leftovers.

I will make a bold claim: this is the number one ethical command of the Bible.

This even includes sojourners or aliens, and I don't think it makes any difference if they are legal or illegal. Back in Biblical times, God's commands to help the poor and hungry included people who had lost their land and were wandering through the desert. There were no border crossings and security fences, but there still was a lot of fear and hatred of people from other tribes and nations. Often displaced by war and famine, they were forced to wander from place to place looking for food and shelter. God told the Israelites: Be holy and help these people. This human problem and God's message to us has not changed.

Let me mention some of the other subjects of this passage: Stealing, lying, and fraud, fair and timely wages for your workers, mistreatment of the deaf and blind, and slander.

Our responsibility all boils down to one well known command in the last verse:

***"...you shall love your neighbor as yourself..."***  
(Lev. 19: 18.)

Jumping ahead to the New Testament, Jesus quotes this exact verse, but with a twist:

***"You have heard that it was said,  
'You shall love your neighbor  
and hate your enemy.'  
But I say to you..."***  
(Matt. 5: 43-44a)

I get back to what Jesus said in a moment, but I think it is interesting to note that there is no record in the Bible of a command to hate enemies. Jesus seems to be refuting some Old Testament law, as he often did, but it's not clear that there was really a law commanding hate. My guess is that over the years some good Jews, just like many good Christians nowadays, said something like, "*Sure I love my neighbors. It says so in the Bible, but surely that doesn't mean we have to love those terrorists who attack our nation and cities and kill our families. That just doesn't seem right.*"

Over the years, this kind of reasoning leads to the conclusion that God endorses hatred and even the killing of our enemies. Jesus spoke out to refute this false claim:

***“But I say to you,  
Love you enemies and pray for those  
who persecute you.” (Matt. 5: 44.)***

This is one of those hard sayings of Jesus. We don't want to believe that Jesus would command us to do that; it is so contrary to human nature. Today's gospel lesson also includes another, even harder, saying of Jesus:

***“But I say to you,  
Do not resist an evildoer.  
but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,  
turn the other also.” (Matt. 5: 32.)***

These sayings are hard because we want God to endorse human inclination to vengeance and hate. Instead, God, through Jesus Christ, is laying on us unreasonable expectations for peaceful restraint and coexistence. When we resist this command, we have misunderstood God's basic command to be holy. Holiness is to serve God's purpose on earth. We often confuse our self-interests with God's purpose. We become convinced that human needs and inclinations are the same as God's will. Serving ourselves can become “holy” at least in our own minds.

To be sure, God calls upon us to serve others for the common good, but often we confuse our self-interests with God's intentions. When this happens, we can make serious mistakes. We can vastly over-estimate the power of our opponents and engaged in pointless and deadly wars. We can become so wrapped up in our emotions, believing that it is righteous anger, that we walk away from neighbors in need and fail to live in peaceful coexistence. God asks us to love our enemies, but this is not always easy, Jesus is calling us to lives of love and forgiveness, even for enemies. This is not always easy, but it is holy.

Let us pray.

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom  
and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are God's judgements  
and how inscrutable God's ways!  
For from God  
and through God  
and to God are all things.  
To God be glory forever."  
AMEN