

POWER TO DO

by Ray C. Stedman

This week someone expressed to me a little disappointment that we are still studying Leviticus. He suggested that perhaps we might move on soon to more captivating portions of Scripture. I would like to say two things about that. One is that I understand the feeling. I often feel that way myself and so I can identify. I have often felt the sense of wanting to move on to passages which perhaps are newer or more exciting in some way, especially when, as in this latter portion of Leviticus, we come to the whole realm of behavior. These "do's" and "don'ts" can seem a little tiresome, I grant you. These irksome details which concern our own behavior and our relationships with one another are sometimes rather difficult to handle and so we'd like to move on to other matters.

But I would like to say something else, too. I have found in my own life that it is wise to deal with this attitude because in some ways it is self-deceiving. We need to remind ourselves that this book of Leviticus is the word of the living God, just as much as John 3:16 or any other portion of Scripture more greatly loved. Infinite wisdom took infinite pains to give us this book for our own instruction, for our own benefit, and we need it very, very much. This book, as you know, is one of the books of the Bible which has been largely ignored by God's people. It has become quite unexpected that "anything good can come out of Leviticus." And tremendous blessing has been lost as a result. For there is a great deal to be learned here. This is the word of God to us. And if we believe what we so often quote from Paul's letter to Timothy: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness [right living]" {2 Tim 3:16 KJV}, then we must acknowledge that this passage is part of that "all scripture."

So let's look at the rest of the book (there are not too many studies left) as part of the tender discipline toward us of a loving Father. I have found that impatience with regard to the Scriptures is often disguised to mean: "I understand all this and I'm tired of it, so let's move on," when what it really means is: "I understand it and I don't like it and don't want to do it." If that is the case then of course we need to correct our attitude. Mark Twain said, "It isn't the portions of the Bible which I don't understand that bother me; it's the ones I do."

In Chapters 19 & 20, to which we now come, we have a series of miscellaneous instructions covering various situations and problems of daily life that were faced by the people of God in that day and, at one level or another, which we face in our own lives today. Each of these would be worthy of an entire sermon in its own right. We could spend the next year right in these two chapters because each item of instruction develops a basic principle which is fundamental to our lives. But this morning we will make just a quick survey.

First I want to comment on the striking format in which these instructions are given to us. There is something very unusual about these chapters that I would like to highlight for you. Then I'd like to point out the two types of prohibitions which are given here. Finally we will examine the two truths about man and God which are revealed in these chapters. That will be our program.

Notice a very remarkable phenomenon which occurs again and again throughout these chapters. It is the way God links his own name with these instructions. For instance, look at Verses 1-4:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy. Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods: I am the Lord your God." {Lev 19:1-4 RSV}

Then skip over to Verse 11:

"You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by

my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

"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. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord." {Lev 19:11-14 RSV}

Then look at the closing section of Chapter 20, beginning with the last part of Verse 24:

"I am the Lord your God, who have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." {Lev 20:24b-26 RSV}

Note how carefully God identifies himself with each one of these instructions. He signs his name, as it were, after each one. He gives us a practical admonition and then says, "I am the Lord your God." The name he uses here is his covenant name: "I am Jehovah." That is, "I am the Living One, the Eternal One, the Sufficient One. I am the God who is Enough." That is what *Jehovah* means.

What is God trying to impart to us by this format? Two things are involved. The first is authority, and the second is resource. That is what he is underscoring.

You see, the Israelites would read this, "I am the Lord your God" -- as distinct from any other gods, the gods of other peoples around them. Remember that in Chapter 18 the Lord had said, "You shall not live as they do in Egypt," and, "You shall not live as they do in Canaan." That is, "The Egyptians and the Canaanites have their own ways of life, their own standards of living, but not you, because of the relationship you have with me: for I am the Lord *your* God."

This underscores something very important. It is that we must discover how to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and error, on the basis of what God says -- if we are in relationship to him. There is a totally different standard for the people of God.

This is very practical, because God is reality. What God says and what he sees and how he looks at life is the way life is. If you look at it in some other way then you are being unrealistic. You are out of step with reality and are trying to live according to an illusion, a fantasy, a figment of your imagination. Such ideas and standards may be widespread, as they were in Egypt and Canaan. There may be lies which are believed sincerely and devotedly by people around you and which govern their way of living. But God is saying, "Not for you. Not for my people. I am your God, and I am telling you the truth, the way life is, what will hurt you and what will not. So believe me, because I am the Lord your God."

That is so important to understand these days! There has never been a time when proper standards of life are so challenged as they are today. A thousand voices are shouting at us, telling us conflicting ideas and differing philosophies. How are you to know which is right, which one to follow? Well, not by looking around you, by referring to the way others are thinking, or writing, or living in your vicinity, nor by espousing the general philosophy of the age. People are telling us today that there is no right and wrong, that it is all relative. Nothing is hurtful in itself; it is only the way you think that makes it so. You have to change your way of thinking. But you see how this passage cuts right across that. What God has said must be your authority. God is saying to these people of old, as he says to us today, "Look, I am the Lord your God, and I am telling you the truth. This is the way life is." God himself must be your basic authority for life.

One of the reasons why the church has become so weak and ineffectual in the world today is that it has forgotten this simple principle. It has ignored the fact that it must exercise its life by means of its relationship with a living God in order to change the nations around it. The "Egyptians and the Canaanites" may be able to make a very rational, reasonable-sounding case for their mode of life, but, if God says something else, then that is what is right, because he is the ultimate basis of life. We live in his universe and we must conform to his

design for it. Any other approach to life bespeaks an unwillingness to face life as it really is.

This week I had a long phone conversation with a young man who is falling victim to one of the many false prophets of our day, a so-called "psychic counselor." This young man was being told that he could discover hidden and marvelous powers of his personality, secret reservoirs of strength lying undiscovered in his human life, through a knowledge of the stars and other astral bodies and of the philosophies of some of the leaders of occult thought in our day and in the past. He had experimented with this and, sure enough, it had seemed to release him in certain areas. It was obvious that he was being sucked in by a whole line of thinking which is basically contrary to the Word of God. And yet he was convinced that he had found a marvelous person with unusual power and ability to see into the human mind and heart and to bring to bear on his life remarkable, strange, and mysterious power that could give him a sense of liberty and freedom such as he had never known before. He was finding the claims of this individual true to some extent. It was very difficult for me to challenge that with him. None of these sorts of notions would have any appeal to the human mind if there weren't at least a modicum of truth to them. But I struggled to show him that these teachings were in direct contradiction to the authority of Jesus Christ, that, in the Scriptures, Jesus taught something else. That was where I rested my case. The issue he had to decide was whose authority would he accept, that of these cultists or that of the Lord Jesus.

All of life ultimately reduces to this question of authority. None of us knows enough about life to make all our own decisions. We cannot live long enough and have sufficiently broad experience to have an adequate basis. We sometimes kid ourselves to think we do. We say, "I want to make up my own mind." And we can, in some limited areas. But we can never live on that basis because we never can know enough. Ultimately we must begin to accept a lot of the precepts by which we will live on the basis of what someone else has said. So here is the great issue of our day: What is the ultimate authority? Whom are you going to follow? Whom will you ultimately believe?

In this passage, God is helping his people, whom he loves, to see that he himself is the ultimate authority, that he is their God, and that he loves them and will tell them the truth about life -- even if they don't like it. That is why it is so dangerous to challenge the authority of Scripture. When you face the ultimate issues of the Bible, it is not just good advice being given to you; it is a revelation of the way life is, of the way the universe is run. The reason why I am a Christian is not simply that I prefer it, as opposed to some other philosophy or religion. It is because I am convinced that this is the only explanation of the universe, and of life, that makes sense. And this is what God is saying by linking his divine name with these commands: "Here is the truth. I am the Lord your God."

But he is not only authority; he is also resource. This is the second reason why he gives his name right along with each command. He says, "Do this, or don't do that: I am the Lord your God."

What does he mean? He means, "I am available to you. I am the strength by which you can do what I command. I never tell you to do something without making available to you the power to do it."

Have you discovered what Paul discovered and recorded for us in Romans 7 -- that you cannot do all the things you'd like to do and know you ought to do, that you want to but somehow cannot? Of course all of us have areas of life which we know are not right and which, when we see them, we can change. And we do change them, and that deceives us into thinking that we can change in all areas if only we want to badly enough. But if you think this then you are quite wrong, because there are areas of life that you cannot change by your own effort, no matter how hard you try. This is the way Paul puts it, from his own experience: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," {cf, Rom 7:18-20}. I'm convinced that Paul was a golfer, because whenever I play golf, that's the way I feel. I know what to do -- I've been shown many times by pros -- but I don't do it! And I don't have any more control over certain areas of my moral life than I do over my physical life. There are things that I can't do, even though I want to. Have you found that to be true?

Have you ever had the experience of having someone in your life who sabotages your best intentions all the time? Somehow they irritate you. You can get along well with everybody else, but when you are with that person something they say or do just rubs you the wrong way and you get resentful or lose your temper. And

you simply can't seem to attain victory over the situation. Have you ever said to yourself, "Well, I'm going to handle this quietly and calmly now. I'm not going to let him get to me this time. I'm going to be calm and collected and keep my cool." And you have marvelous, imaginary visions of what is going to happen the next time, how absolutely unruffled you are going to be, how completely undisturbed by their strange and sinister words and approaches. You get into the situation and for awhile it goes along well and you do keep cool. But then sooner or later, sure enough, they say something aggravating and you begin to simmer and burn. Soon you just can't take it anymore and you let them have it! Then you are immediately remorseful. "Why did I do that again? I meant to handle it so differently." It's usually your children, isn't it, who provoke you to that? Or your parents? Well, that is what Paul is talking about.

And Paul says further, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it," {Rom 7:18b RSV}. If you feel that way, God understands that. It is the most common problem of life. What you are lacking is power, the power to respond. You must learn that there is another source of power, that you can reckon on "the God who is there," the God who is available to you. And that is why God signs his name this way again and again. "Here is something to do, or not to do: I am the Lord your God -- standing here, available to you, ready for you to draw upon my strength. When you start drawing on it you can do, or not do, what I command by the power of an available God, the God who is Enough. I am Jehovah."

If you understand this process by which life is to be lived, then you no longer can say, "I can't," in any situation. This is why Paul could say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {Phil 4:13}. If you understand that process and you still say, "I can't," then "I can't," has become a disguise for "I won't." That is the problem -- not "I can't," but, "I don't want to!" And God never changes your will -- you must do that. You have to choose to do what God wants. But the secret is to do it on the basis of the power he is ready to supply to you. You must do the choosing, but he will do the supplying. When you choose to act on that basis, then power to act flows to you and through you -- immediately.

Isn't that what Isaiah is talking about in Chapter 40 of his book? "They who wait upon the Lord [they who expect God to act] shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint," {Isa 40:3 RSV}. That is God's method of living. If you are not living on that basis then you are not living the Christian life. That alone is Christianity as God intended it. This is what we call the "New Covenant ministry." But here it is in the Old Testament, just as much as in the New. God is seeking to instruct his people that he is the power by which they are to act.

Now we need to examine the two types of prohibitions given in these passages. Let's look at the instructions themselves, or at certain of their characteristics. We can't take the time to go over all of them, but will just take a few samples. They fall into two general classes:

First, there are certain acts and attitudes which are inherently wrong, and prohibitions against them are eternally binding upon the people of God. As you read through this passage you can see that there are some things which, no matter whether you are living under the provisions of the Old Testament or New Testament, are always wrong and always to be avoided, by means of the strength that God gives. Read Verses 15-18 in Chapter 19:

"You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. [That is always right, never passes away.] You shall not go up and down as a slanderer [talebearer] among your people [you shall not be the neighborhood gossip; that never changes], and you shall not stand forth against the life [literally, the blood] of your neighbor [i.e., you shall not seek to get rid of him by conjuring up some false story about him so that he gets run out of the neighborhood. What does that say about racial prejudice, among other things?]: I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself..." {Lev 19:15-18}

Did you know that was in the Old Testament? You find those words quoted from the lips of Jesus in the New

Testament, but here they are in the book of Leviticus, under the Law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord," God said. These words never go out of date.

There are certain other prohibitions here which also are eternally binding, but the penalty for their violation is no longer in effect, because of the grace of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. For instance, Verses 12-16 in Chapter 20:

"If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed incest, their blood is upon them. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them. [These are always wrong, but here the penalty was death.] If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is wickedness; they shall be burned with fire, both he and they, that there may be no wickedness among you. If a man lies with a beast, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the beast. If a woman approaches any beast and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the beast; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." {Lev 20:12-16 RSV}

That is an interesting paragraph, in view of the recent action of the California Supreme Court to abolish the death penalty. Here God insisted upon it, said that it was absolutely essential, because that was the only way of impressing upon these people the seriousness of these evils. They were commonly accepted by the people around them. Practically everyone among the Canaanites and the Egyptians was living like that. But God said, in effect, "You mustn't do any of these things because they are very, very damaging. They will destroy you as individuals and as a people. Therefore, in order to show you how serious these are, you must put to death those who do them. That will shock people, awaken them to how damaging this kind of evil can be."

These things are just as damaging today as they ever were. But the remedy, the degree of punishment, is no longer the same. God has come in, in Christ, and has graciously mitigated the penalty, and has provided the opportunity for repentance and change. We no longer need to require death for these offenses, and I want to state very emphatically that I am not arguing that the death penalty should be applied to them. But there is a purpose for the death penalty. Applied in the right circumstances it has very great validity. But here, though these deeds are as wrong as ever, the penalty is changed -- and quite properly so. It is mitigated by grace.

The second general class of prohibitions in this passage regards certain symbolic practices and rituals and ceremonies. They no longer need to be observed, but the attitude which they illustrate never changes. So underlying each item in this category is an unchangeable truth. For instance, consider Verse 19 in Chapter 19:

"You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall there come upon you a garment of cloth made of two kinds of stuff." {Lev 19:19 RSV}

How many of you are observing that last law? You're all lawbreakers, aren't you? Almost all garments today are made of mixed stuff, of blends of natural and synthetic fibers. A literal adherence to this stricture is no longer of any significance, because it is dealing with substances which never were inherently wrong. Whenever God employs things symbolically and says that something connected with them is wrong, they are no longer tended to be taken literally but are meant to illustrate attitudes of mind and heart which are dangerous. The Israelites had to obey these literally, because that is how they learned what these attitudes were. But as we study them now we need to understand that God is teaching in a graphic way here that there are certain unmixable principles which are unalterably opposed to one another and that we are not to try to put the two together.

As an example, a believer in Christ should not marry an unbeliever, the New Testament says. To do so is to mix two ways of life which are categorically separated and this only creates confusion and hardship and pressure and problems. Therefore it is very important that a believer not marry an unbeliever. This is an application of the teaching of this kind of truth in our present life.

Similar prohibitions are found in Chapter 19, Verses 26-28:

"You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord." {Lev 19:26-28 RSV}

The Israelites were to observe all this very literally, because God was teaching an attitude of heart by these external restrictions. Some of these things are eternally wrong while others are wrong only symbolically.

First, they were not to eat flesh with blood in it, as we saw in our last study, because the blood is the life of the flesh, and the life belongs to God. What God wants his people to learn is that life can never be handled properly unless it is related to God. Everything in life must relate to God. That is the great truth illustrated here. The New Testament clearly tells us that these restrictions on food are shadows which have passed away. But the meaning abides.

The meaning of the rest of the section is given in the next sentence. "You shall not practice augury or witchcraft." There is nothing symbolic about that. That is eternally wrong, because it exposes you to demonic powers which can influence your mind and, though you may be unwitting of what is happening, can gradually seize your personality and possess it. Therefore God warns against this.

The practices which follow were simply part of the pagan ceremonies which accompanied their witchcraft and augury. They cut their hair and beards in certain ways, and cut and tattooed their bodies. These things are not wrong in themselves today unless, of course, they are connected with practices which lead into pagan worship and control by demons. That is what God, in love, labors to prevent.

One other example of this sort of prohibition which is rather outstanding is found in the first five verses of Chapter 20:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, Any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all hide their eyes from that man, when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his family, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in playing the harlot after Molech." {Lev 20:1-5 RSV}

As we saw in our last study, Molech was a fertility god, represented by a great iron or stone statue which was heated until white-hot by a fire built within it. People would take their infants and lay them in the outstretched arms of this idol and stand by as the children screamed in agony, cremated alive as an offering to Molech. Why would parents do a thing like that? -- because they believed that this would increase the yield of their crops, and therefore their own prosperity. God was not only intent upon ending this cruel practice, with its insane sacrifice of human life in this horrendous manner, {but} what he really wants to convey is the evil of the principle involved -- parents sacrificing their children for their own benefit.

When you read this that way you can see that many parents are offering their children to Molech today. Lots of parents are sacrificing their children on the altar of their own ego, in order that they might have the pleasant things of life. They give up their responsibility to love their children, and to spend time with them and raise them. They shunt them off to baby sitters and boarding schools to be raised, so that they (the parents) might work longer and make more money so that they can enjoy a higher standard of living. And the children wind up terribly, grievously scarred by this neglect. How is that any different from offering your child to Molech? That is what God says is wrong -- that you are willing to sacrifice your children on the altar of parental pride, and let them suffer in order that you might be more prosperous.

In these chapters there are two great revelations concerning God and man, and with these we close:

The first is the revelation of the enormity of the evil of which man is capable. Consider again just Verse 14 of

Chapter 19:

"You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind." {Lev 19:14a RSV}

Why would anybody want to do that? But God does not issue these warnings unnecessarily. He knows the depravity of which the human heart is capable.

And how many of us have felt impatient because somebody couldn't quite hear us and so we have had to repeat our words in a louder voice? Soon we have found ourselves muttering against them under our breath. What is that but cursing the deaf?

Who would put a stumbling block before a blind person? Well, it's amazing what humans, even children, will do to just amuse themselves. None of us is guiltless of these sorts of evils.

What does this reveal? It reveals what God seeks constantly to tell us: that there isn't one of these things of which the flesh in any one of us is not capable. Winston Churchill, writing his record of history, said that he was impressed by the fact that human nature has never changed. He put it something like this:

"Modern man, despite all the veneer of civilization, when put in the proper circumstances and under the proper conditions, will do anything -- and his modern wife will back him up."

But, in contrast, look at the tender, loving concern of God for the weak, the poor, and the strangers. Read these words from Verses 9-10 of Chapter 19:

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. 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." {Lev 19:9-10 RSV}

That is, "Don't greedily grab everything that you can lay your hands on and try to take it for yourself. Leave some for someone else. There are those who haven't had your opportunities, and they need help, too."

You can see how tenderly concerned God is for the poor. Remember how beautifully this is brought out in the book of Ruth. Ruth returned to the land as a poor woman without a family and gleaned in the field of Boaz. Boaz instructed his reapers, "Drop a few handfuls on purpose for her," {cf, Ruth 2:15-16}. Of course, she was a beautiful woman -- that helped! But he was simply obeying this admonition of the law not to glean everything from the field but to leave something for the poor. Generosity is to be our mark.

Then look at Verses 32-33:

"You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. [Do not take advantage of him] The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to 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." {Lev 19:32-34 RSV}

Do you see what a high standard is set for us?

Let's close with these words of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the sixth chapter of Luke. How instructive they are! This is God's level of life. This is where Christians are to live:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you. For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much

again. [You are no different from anybody else, if this is the height of your morality.] **But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. [Therefore] Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."** {Luke 6:32-37 RSV}

The same standard of life is proclaimed in the Old Testament as in the New. God's character is to be revealed through his children, by the power of an available God, ready to live through us to do these things. We can't do them by ourselves. But God stands ready to do them in us, as we draw upon his grace and strength.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for these truths. We ask you to instruct us deeply in them and impress them upon our minds and hearts. Help us to see that simply being moral, being fair to someone else and treating them as they treat us, is not the level of life upon which you expect us to live. Your level is much higher. We are to be loving in return for evil. We can do that only by the grace that is in you, Lord Jesus. Help us to obey you in this and to expect to see your life at work in us. We ask in your name, Amen.

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