

The Call To Be Different

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Date: 28 March 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well folks, it's wonderful to see you this morning after about four or five months of preaching to an empty building. This is refreshing to my soul even just to see you today. And welcome to those who are joining us online as well.

Why don't we just pray, just really quickly as we come to God's Word. Isaiah chapter 66, God says, but this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit who trembles at my Word.

And Father, we just ask that you would help give us that spirit today as we come to your Word. Father, help us, challenge us, mould us, convict us, encourage us and spur us on, Father, as we turn to your Word this morning.

We ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Amen. Well folks, let me encourage you to grab a Bible and turn back to Leviticus chapter 17.

So we are ambitiously this morning going to finish our series that we've been in in this book of Leviticus. And we're taking our 11 chapters this morning. So buckle up, cowboys and cowgirls.

[1 : 1 0] It's going to be a heavy ride, but I hope we'll get there. But this is the thing that we need to see that kind of holds this together. Here today is the call that this holy God makes upon the lives of his people.

And you can think about it a bit like this. Okay, our little girl Grace, something that I've learned about her that she loves doing. She loves a spot the difference puzzle. And there was a spell certainly during lockdown where we read every night her Biff and Chip books.

If you remember these things when you were school, they're still going, Biff and Chip books. And amazingly, they're still the same age, the characters in it. But we read these every night, most of the nights. And they often finish with a spot the difference puzzle.

So she loves doing these little puzzles. So we'll be sitting there doing them. And you know how it works. You've got two pictures that are right next to each other. And one's the normal one, one's got the differences in it.

So the two of us are looking at this. And she's concentrating really hard. And she's looking at it really hard. And she says, Daddy, Daddy, there's a difference. There's a difference.

[2 : 2 1] Same routine again. Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. There's a difference. There's a difference. And then she turns to me and she would often say, Daddy, can you see any differences? And there's never a more humbling moment in life, honestly, when as an adult, you look at some of these pictures.

And you cannot fathom it. You have been defeated by a child's puzzle, right? It's why we don't do Where's Wally anymore in our house at bedtime. A humbling experience when you are defeated. But she loves these spot the difference puzzles.

And we keep on going until we've seen all the differences. And there's a ton of things going on in these chapters. But here's the big thing that kind of holds it together.

This holy, holy, holy God is calling his people to be different. If you remember one thing from today, remember that a holy God calls his people to be different.

And the key word in this section is the word holy. Probably picked it up from the themes this morning. Holy. We get it 28 times in these chapters. So if you want to think about it like this, if these chapters are like a stick of Blackpool rock, okay, I'm the son of a dentist.

[3 : 33] We're never allowed it. But this is what I'm told. Cut into it anywhere, these chapters. And you'll find the holiness theme running all the way through the middle. Now come with me to chapter 20 and verse 22.

And let me show you how this works. Chapter 20 and verse 22. Here's what God says to his people. Verse 22.

Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them. So that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you.

Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, you will possess the land. I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.

I am the Lord your God who has set you apart from the nations. You therefore must make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds.

[4 : 38] Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground. Those that I have set apart as unclean for you. And here is verse 26.

And if you've not followed the reading so far, jump in at verse 26 of chapter 20. You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy and have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

So hold on to verse 26 there. What we're going to do is we're going to use it almost as our base camp verse from which we're going to explore the rest of these chapters. So God is calling his people to be different.

To be holy. And the challenge is going to come at us today as God's people is to consider whether we are embracing his holy call in our lives.

And verse 26 gives us the two sides of the holiness coin. And these will be our two points for today. Here's the first side of this coin. Holiness is something that we're called to take in.

[5 : 46] Now here's what I mean by that. Verse 26 could easily be translated, You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy and I have holied you from the nations to be my own.

In other words, to be holy is firstly a verb that's describing an action that God has done for us. Before it's an adjective, this is to describe how we live.

And maybe at this point we need to tap back into the Bible story. God has made a promise to Abraham way back in Genesis 12.

It's a massive chapter in the Bible. That through him and his offspring, God is going to bless the nations of the world. This God has a missionary heart to reach the peoples of the world.

And if you want evidence of that, look around at us. And so here are Israel, the people who God has chosen to be the people that he will use, to be the vehicle by which this blessing is going to come to the world.

[6 : 47] Not because they are great or special or better than anyone else, but because this God is so good and great and abounding in steadfast love.

And he's rescued them from Egypt. He's called out his people. And he's led them to Sinai. And here is the way that he calls them to live as his people.

You know, my favorite creatures are in those little TV shows. You know, the nature programs you get on telly. I love the chameleons. Love the chameleons.

Right? Chilled out little dudes, aren't they? Never seen a chameleon in a rush. But what are chameleons known for? They're known just for blending in. To their background, right?

Just blending. And what we need to see is that God's people are called to be the exact opposite. From the Egyptians, right? The people that they've just come from.

[7 : 48] Remember, they've seen that way of life. They've been brought out of it. And from the Canaanites who are in the land, who they will rub shoulders with in the not-so-distant future, who, if you look at the beginning of chapter 20, the Canaanites are all out in worship of Molech.

Right? You see, you get it quite a lot of times at the beginning of chapter 20. Molech, Molech, Molech. This is what the Canaanites worship. And God, in his goodness and sovereignty, knows that when the people go into the land, this is the God that they're going to come up against.

These are the people who are worshiping. And there's child sacrifice and all sorts of things caught up in the worship of Molech. And in contrast, Israel are called to worship the Lord alone.

Okay? The Lord, our God, is one. Right? We've only got eyes for him. We worship him alone. In contrast to the nations round about who are worshiping all sorts of different gods, we worship the Lord, our God, alone in the way that he has told us to worship him.

Or just any way. Or our way. The way that he has told us to worship him. And as they do this, what's meant to happen is the people from the nations round about, the people from the world, and I hope you see where this applies to us.

[9 : 02] Okay? The peoples from the world round about are supposed to look in at Israel and they're meant to say, how lucky are Israel, how lucky are God's people that they have their God dwelling right in the middle of them.

He dwells with them. He's not somewhere out there. He is right in the middle of his people. He lives with them. How lucky are Israel. How lucky are they to have the laws of this God and be able to walk in them to see the goodness of the way that God has called them to live.

Israel are to live with, and this is Chris Wright, what he calls a missional magnetism. Love that phrase, missional magnetism.

It's not just me that likes to alliterate, right? Missional magnetism. The world round about is supposed to see something and be drawn towards it goodness. In other words, the nations are like the moth and they're to be drawn to Israel's flame.

And God's taken his people to the promised land and it's why the Canaanites who are currently occupying the land can't live there anymore because they've defiled it with their practices against this God.

[10 : 08] Because if God's people are to dwell with God, in God's place, under God's rule, to God's glory, enjoying him forever, which is where the trajectory of the Bible story is going, then holiness needs to be everywhere in the land.

Everywhere in the land. And so bring that all together, friends. To be holy by God, to be his, to be called apart for him, by him and for him, is a privilege.

Maybe you want to take stock to remember that this morning. As a Christian, it's not just you made a call to make a lifestyle choice, but you did make a call to put your faith in Jesus.

God has called you out to be his own. You are his treasured possession. You are chosen in love by God the Father before the foundation of the world. To be his is a privilege.

So holiness, you see, is something that first and foremost, we are called to take in. And secondly, the other side of the coin, holiness is something that God's people are to live out.

[11 : 21] So here's the repeated frame that you get in this section. You shall be holy because I, the Lord, your God, am holy. So God's people are called like a mirror, sun shining off it, radiating it to the world, called to reflect the holiness of their God and the way that they live.

And what is striking as you read these chapters through is just how comprehensive a call this is on every person in society, in every area of their lives.

Right? There's a big Asda just down the road from us at Straighten. I remember being amazed, thinking that it was open 24-7. You got one of those around about you? Maybe it's, doesn't need to be an Asda, but something that's open 24-7, right?

I'm getting my head around that. It's open all the time. That is open all the time. I can go there anytime I want. You can go there anytime you want. Never closes. Never off duty. Never stops.

Never ceases. Always open. God, do you see, in such a greater way, is calling his people to 24-7 holiness. Every day of their lives and every area of their lives, he's calling them to 24-7 radical holiness.

[12 : 45] And so here's what we're going to attempt to do is dip in and out of these chapters. And there's so much going on here. You'll appreciate it. You don't get time to do any of it. Tons of justice.

But let me just pick out four ways that God's people really quickly are going to be different from the world around them. Four ways, four marks would be like of this holy community. Here's number one, mark one.

The poor will be loved. The poor will be loved. So God lays out commands, like the one we read, Hannah just read, chapter 19, verse 9. When you bring in the harvest, your crops and your fruit, what's God saying?

He says, if you own the land, don't plow all the way to the edges. Leave a bit. Right? Leave a bit. Why have you to leave a bit? So that the poor can come in.

Those who aren't as well off as you. And they can be provided for. Because remember, the land is the Lord's. Land is the Lord's. Do you see in that way, the poor are cared for.

[13 : 49] God has got the poor in his heart, in this community. Or take the year of Jubilee. You get that in 25, chapter 25. This year that happened, every 50th year.

The cancellation of debts, the release of slaves, the reallocation of property to its original owners, that they can buy it back. Again, what's at the heart of the year of Jubilee? This year that almost acted like the great reset in the life of God's people.

So that there doesn't, surely it's this, if you think about it, so that there doesn't become a huge gap between the rich and the poor. So that there doesn't exist a society where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

And because of that, envy is existing between these two groups. And who primarily benefits from the year of Jubilee? Surely it's the poor.

Who's given opportunities? Who's given options? Who's provided for? It's the poor. Do you see how God's community are to care for the poor?

[14 : 55] Or to do right by them? Or to have an eye for them? They care for the poor. The poor are in God's heart. So way number one, mark number one, the poor are loved.

Mark number two, sex is honored. God calls his people to have a different sexual ethic from the nations, the peoples of the earth round about them.

As God reaffirms that to engage in sexual activity outwith the good contours of a marriage between one man and one woman is sinful. And yes, homosexuality is mentioned here.

Got to see it. But let's ensure that because of the times in which we happen to be existing at this moment, we're not so drawn to see it that we miss out on everything else that God is saying because he's got so much more to say in this regard, in this area.

Because if you read it through, he's got stuff to say about adultery amongst his people, polygamy, incest, sex with animals, and uncovering another person's nakedness probably means just to sleep with them casually, could just mean looking at them lustfully.

[16 : 12] As God said, you will be different from the peoples round about in the way you think about sex. And I take it, friends, that we all need to feel the weight of that.

And I'm very conscious that two things will be happening as I'm mentioning that. Number one is that the Holy Spirit, as he moves amongst us, will be challenging us in ways that we need to be different.

The things that we need to repent, the things we need to say sorry for, the things that we need to stop doing and start doing. I'm also aware that the devil will be prowling around looking for people to devour.

And maybe right now, even as I mentioned that, there's a lot of pain that's coming back to mind or mistakes or shame. And that's why I want us just at this point to come to John chapter 8 and marvel, all of us, because we have all fallen short here at some point in our lives, marvel at the grace of Jesus Christ.

Marvel at what God is like as we see God in the flesh in his person. For all of us have failed here. The Pharisees, what do they do in John chapter 8?

[17 : 25] They bring a woman who's been caught in adultery and it's almost like they bring her to Jesus and they gang up on her. I'm always reading that, thinking to myself, where is the guy? Right?

It takes two to tangle. Where is the guy? They're not interested. I love how Jesus treats women with such dignity. He should meet them in the Gospels. What do they say about this woman? She has broken what?

The law of Moses. They take Jesus right here. She is guilty. What are you going to do about it? What does he say? He says, let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

And one by one, they start dropping off. Love it how it's the elders who start dropping off first as if to say, we know we cannot throw that stone. Jesus doesn't condone the woman for what she's done, but neither does he condemn her for what she's done.

He meets her with grace and he says, sin no more. Sin no more. Change. Do you see, friends, repentance is always a response to Jesus, the grace that we find in him.

[18 : 34] It's almost as if Jesus steps into this woman's situation and says, yes, she deserves to die. We all deserve to die. I'm going to take her death. I'll take it. That's what he does as he goes to the cross.

Those, all of us, who deserve to die, I'm going to die in their place. I'm going to die in their place. Friends, God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance.

This is Jesus. Feel his heart here in this moment. The heart of God for people to come to put their faith in him. He changed. And all that you see, if you look at chapter 18, all the different people and relationships that you get in Leviticus 18, this list of people who you are not to uncover their nakedness.

There's that phrase. The reason is that these people belong to somebody else. Do you see it? Verse 16, chapter 18, for example, do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife that would dishonor your brother.

In other words, there's other people involved here who are going to be hurt by your actions. People are not just your playthings to satisfy your appetites.

[19 : 44] People are image bearers of God's. And you need to understand that because of that, they are worthy of the greatest dignity and respect as you love your neighbor as yourself.

Let me just say, that is the culture that we always want to be creating here. Right? Just a culture where we view people differently.

Differently. Where we talk about the other sex differently. And as you think about everything that's going on in our world over the last number of months, friends, we should be setting the pace here in how we relate to one another as people.

Setting the pace. Striving to create a safe place where people can come in and not be judged but can heal and be loved and know the grace of Jesus Christ.

Where we can be honest with our struggles. Where we have a safe place to practice repentance as together we deny self, take up cross, and follow Jesus.

[20 : 57] God's community will be a place where sex is honoured. And Mark 3, and these will be a lot quicker, these two. Mark 3, God's community is a place where justice is done.

Right? Did you hear it as Hannah read it? Do not steal. Do not defraud your neighbour. Don't cheat in your weights and your scales. Pay your labourers their wages. Verse 15, you shall not render an unjust judgment that benefits either the rich or the poor.

In other words, God really cares that justice is done amongst his people. Why? Because again, it just reflects his character. He is a God of justice.

And Mark number 4, real quick, the days are special. Days are special. Chapter 23 and into 25, the times of year that are to be special to the Israelites. the Passover, the Sabbath, the festival of weeks, the day of atonement, these rhythms of life that God tells them to build into their calendar, many of which will only happen once they're in the land where they're going.

These days are designed to help them remember who their God is and what he's done for them and to be able to pass it on to the next generation. This is who our God is. This is who he is.

[22 : 11] Right? One of the reasons, if you want an example, chapter 23, sorry we're jumping about here but it's the nature of the exercise. Chapter 23, verse 43. One of the reasons they are to celebrate the Feast of Booths, 23, 43.

So your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. You picture that. You're celebrating that one together.

Child, ask the parent, why are we doing this? Why are we living in a tent? What is going on? Because this is who our God is. This is what he's done for us. This is what happened. This is what he did. This is how good he is.

Let's worship him and celebrate him together. You see, they're just built into the life of God's people, passing on to the next generation so that they don't forget this is who our God is.

In chapters 26 and 27 that kind of end the book here, chapter 26, God saying, I will bless you if you live a life of covenant faithfulness.

[23 : 17] You will be fruitful and multiply. There will be an abundance of grain, verse 12, chapter 26, and I will walk among you. Now, if you're on the ball, biblical theology, you'll feel there in that language, echoes of Eden.

Yeah, I will walk among you. What was God doing in the garden? He was walking amongst them. Be fruitful and multiply. Again, you hear the echoes of Eden in the language. This is where God is taking his people.

But you will incur the covenant curses if you don't. Most importantly, I think for the story, verse 33, God is saying, I will scatter you among the nations.

I will expel you from the land where I am taking you just like I did the Canaanites because if you're going to live as my people, my place, you must be holy. And I think just as we maybe bring the chapters to a close, friends, we need to see how seriously God takes the holiness of his people.

If you're going to represent me, you need to be holy. I remember when I was a lawyer, one of the clients that we had was an apple reseller.

[24 : 30] Not as in an apple, as in apple. Apple got in contact, I remember, and sent us this hugely detailed document of everything that they expected us to do if we were going to sell their products.

Everything from the texture of the surfaces, the type of marble they had to be made of, the gaps between the products as you put them on display, and how the shop was to be set up and the lighting. I have never seen so much attention to detail in my life.

But it is why when you go to an apple store, you will see the same layout all the way through. Because they are saying, if you are going to represent our brand, this is what we expect of you.

And in the same way, friends, these chapters exclaim to us as we read about incident after incident of people just abusing God's holiness. And what happened to them, just how much it matters to a holy God, what kind of people represent him.

because this God, the Lord, who is three times holy, he will not be mocked. He will not be mocked. And you want proof of that when Jesus turns up 2,000 odd years later?

[25 : 43] The tragedy is that Israel have swerved off the track so far that they are no longer being this holy people. You know, I never, you make these connections as you read scripture through.

I'd never noticed before in Mark 11. Mark 11. You know, Jesus is into the temple and he's flipping the tables. What's one of the things that he sees there? What's one of the things that causes such holy anger in his heart?

What are the people selling? They're selling doves. What is it in Leviticus we learned at the start? What do the poor people who can't afford a bull, what did they come bringing for their sacrifice?

They bring a dove or a pigeon, but a dove. And so here are the people in the temple selling these things and trying to make money. And who are they making money off? The poor.

Do you see it? And there's money changers there as well. People from outside coming in to worship God need to change their currency. Again, probably people making money off of that. Who are they exploiting? The foreigner.

[26 : 44] The outsider who's coming in to worship the Lord. Do you see how Israel at this point have gone so far, so far off the tracks? Matthew 5, the Pharisees are teaching that we're keeping the law because we are not committing adultery.

What does Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount? Yeah, but you're burning with lust in your hearts. They say we're keeping the law because we are not murdering. What does Jesus say?

Yeah, but anger rages inside of you. You've missed it. You've missed the point. I love the analogy that Jesus uses for them. What does he call them? He calls them whitewashed tombs.

I just picture a cave where the body would go and they've painted it white, given the impression of life, but inside is death. Whitewashed tombs. I love how, and we should see this, that Jesus has some of his strongest words for religious hypocrites.

And he has some of his sweetest words for those who are religious failures. When he says, do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets.

[27 : 51] I have not come to abolish them, I have come to fulfill them. Now, what does he mean? Fulfill them. What does he mean? How do we understand the law? What are we supposed to do with this?

Well, commentators generally agree that you can divide the law into three categories. You've got the ceremonial laws, the rituals that Israel were told to do.

So, sin offerings, etc. The kind of things that make you unclean and clean, like eating prawns, all those kind of things, right? Which were all pointing to Jesus and his work on the cross, what he would do.

Dies on the cross, atones for our sin. He is the atoning sacrifice that we need. He's the one that can make us clean. And therefore, because we stand at this point in the story, we don't need to go back.

Now that we've got the full picture, we don't go back to the play thing. We don't go back the way. And the civil law, the things that specifically apply to the nation of Israel, particularly when they're in the land, keeping up special days, etc.

[28 : 56] All these things fulfilled in Jesus. Paul in the New Testament talks about Christ as our Passover lamb. Jesus is the one who gives us rest. That is everything the Sabbath was pointing to.

And moreover, God's people are no longer one nation in the land. We are now people from every nation. Every nation. But friends, the third category is a lot more interesting.

It's the moral law. In other words, this is God's heart. And not only do we see so much of this picked up in the New Testament, all these things that God requires us to do, he wants us to do as his people, but there's another way that Jesus fulfills the law.

And if you want to see what a holy life looks like, if you want to see what a life of joyful obedience and glad submission to God the Father looks like, if you want to see what a perfect law keeper looks like, whether that makes you sad or happy, look at Jesus.

Look at Jesus. And in that sense, you see how he has fulfilled the law. It's often what people say about Christianity, isn't it? It's just rules, rules, rules. You know, if I wanted life in a straitjacket, I don't want it, thank you very much.

[30 : 11] I remember reading C.S. Lewis's book years ago, his spiritual autobiography, it's called Mere Christianity. He talked about before he was a Christian, he used to view God as a grand interferer in his life.

I viewed God like that before I became a Christian. He was like a referee. He was just out to spoil my fun. It would be so much better if you weren't there. But that's not what you see when you look at Jesus.

Not only is he the perfect law keeper whose righteousness we need, we can't do this, he did it. But if to be a Christian, if to be chosen by God the Father, and to have Jesus formed in us through the power of the Spirit, friends, and we should begin to look more like him.

You see, the gospel of free grace is never about turning over a new leaf and saying, I'm going to try harder. It's about God by his grace taking out our heart of stone and putting in a new heart of flesh.

It's about being given a new heart. And therefore, friends, if you bring those together, holiness should be the desire of every child of God. In the words of William Cowper, to see the law by Christ fulfilled, and hear his pardoning voice, changes a slave into a child, and duty into choice.

[31 : 36] This is a privilege to worship and follow Jesus. And so the challenge to us today as we bring this to a close as God's people is are we living in such a way that the God we claim to worship attracts admiration from the world around us?

And I think back just where we started to spot the difference. Spot the difference. Friends, how are we doing it being different? How are we doing it being different?

I remember hearing a story of a guy called Mark. Mark got baptized at Charlotte Chapel back in 2017, and how he came to hear about Jesus was simply that somebody new started at his work.

She was called Kirsty, and in her Mark saw something different. And he said this in his testimony, because I've got a transcript of it. He said, she brought our loving God to my attention, and my interest was piqued.

And so the two of them get chatting, they start reading the Bible together, Mark encounters Jesus, he's convicted of his sin, and he finds forgiveness in life in Jesus.

[32 : 47] Why did it start? Because Mark saw something different. There's always God's plan for holiness, that we would make him attractive to the world. Friends, how are we doing at being different?

Here is the call that this holy God makes on our lives, as we respond to his grace, to be holy, to be holy. Holiness is something that we're called to take in, and holiness is something that we're called to live out.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we just thank you so much for your grace. Lord, where would we be without your great love for us?

And so we just thank you for your precious word, Lord, and everything that we've learned this morning. And I pray particularly, Father, for those who are perhaps struggling with something that we've read this morning. Or, Father, in their heart are feeling perhaps a sense of guilt.

Lord, would you just remind them particularly, Father, of your love for them, of your Son who gave your life to save them. Father, we just thank you for your wonderful love for us.

[33 : 55] We thank you just for this last number of weeks we were able to study this book of the Bible called Leviticus and seeing its relevance and its challenge for us today. And so, Father, we pray that as we leave this, that this church, this people that gather here, would continue to be a light to the nations, a city on the hill, a community of salt that makes the Lord Jesus attractive to the world.

Father, help us, we pray, in Jesus' worthy and precious name. Amen.