

The Reason for the Rules

Leviticus 17-22

We're back in Leviticus this morning and we probably have 2 or 3 sermons left in this book. As we've already seen and will see again today, Leviticus is full of a bunch of rules and today's theme is about the reason for God's rules and why he wants us to follow them...

When Amy and I became parents, we soon came to realize that we had rules we wanted our children to follow. It's not like we sat down and created a bunch of rules, it was more like one of our kids wanted to do something we didn't want them to do, so we told them "No," and a rule was born. When they wandered down to the end of the driveway and wanted to play on the street, we'd say "No," and a rule was born: No playing on the street. When they wanted to drop something in the toilet that wasn't supposed to go there, we'd say "No," and another rule came into being. One of my favorite rules was when Amy had to shout out the back door when our kids were playing in the backyard: "No more pooping in a bucket!" And a rule was born. I won't say which kid that was.

Getting them to follow rules worked out pretty well when they were little. With a little training and discipline they would usually change their behavior and didn't really argue. But then they got bigger and started thinking for themselves and asking annoying questions like, "Why?"

"What do you mean, 'Why?'? I'm the parent and I told you so!"

Well if you're a parent, you know that answer doesn't work very well. It didn't work well when our parents used it on us, and it doesn't work for our kids either. There's something inside of us that wants a reason for the rules. And if we don't get a reason it makes us want to rebel. Rules without reasons encourages rebellion. You see it in kids at home. You see it in students at school. You see it in adults in society. We don't like rules without reasons.

The Bible is full of rules, and even though God has every right to enforce rules without reasons because he's our Creator and can do whatever he wants to do, it's still really hard for us to obey rules if we don't have the reasons. And if

you turn that around, the opposite is also true – it makes it a lot easier to obey rules, when you know the reasons. Does God have reasons for all the rules?

When I became a Christian, I remember that was one of the big questions I had: How did God come up with all his rules? What was the standard by which he created them? How did he decide what was right and wrong for us to do? I didn't have a clear answer for several years, and even though it didn't lead me to rebellion, it did leave me with confusion. So it was very helpful and clarifying when I came to understand the primary reason behind the rules. It made me more eager and willing to follow them. You may already know what that reason, but if you don't, that's what we're going to look at today in the book of Leviticus.

We're cruising our way through, and this morning we're going to cover 6 more chapters that are in a section of the book that's full of a bunch of rules – do's and don'ts. The Israelites were still at Mt. Sinai and Moses was still receiving all the rules and regulations that would govern God's new community. After giving instructions about what was to happen on the Day of Atonement, which is what we looked at last time, God gave Moses a bunch more rules for both the people and the priests to follow. And these rules covered a wide variety of topics ranging from where they were to offer sacrifices, to not eating meat with blood in it, to prohibiting detestable sexual practices, to helping the poor, harvesting fruit, child sacrifices, idolatry, honoring parents, cutting your hair, breeding cattle, cutting your body, tattoos, visiting a medium, and so on.

Lots of rules. And some of them seem to make sense, but some of them don't, so these are good examples of the kinds of rules you find in the Bible. These were rules given to the Israelites, but they resemble some of the rules given to churches in the New Testament. Some of them make sense, some of them don't. And the question is: Why did God give them? What's the underlying reason behind all the rules?

If you read these chapters, not only will you find the rules, but you will also find several times when God takes a break to explain his primary reason for them and that's what I want us to look at because it's the same reason behind his rules for us today.

In chapter 17 you find rules about where to offer sacrifices and to not eat meat with blood in it. Then in chapter 18 there are rules prohibiting a number of sexual practices including incest, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality. But chapter 18 begins and ends with some explanation of why...

Read Leviticus 18:1-5.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. ³You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. ⁵You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.

They were not to follow the practices of the nation they had just come out of and they were not to follow the practices of the nations where they were going. These nations were indulging in all kinds of fleshly lusts, giving in to sinful cravings, but God had called them out of that to follow his rules and practices. They were his people now. The people of Yahweh, and they were to be different and distinct. After giving the rules about sexual practices he continues to explain his reason at the end of the chapter.

Read Leviticus 18:24-30.

“Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, ²⁵and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you ²⁷(for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), ²⁸lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. ²⁹For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. ³⁰So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God.”

Again you can see that God is calling his people to be distinct from the nations around them and he makes the reason clear in that last phrase: I am the LORD your God. I am Yahweh Elohim. He wanted them to be distinct – to follow the ways of Yahweh. He was far different than the gods and practices of the sinful nations and his people would be far different as well. And then at the beginning of chapter 19 he brings it all together...

Read Leviticus 19:1-2.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² “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.

There it is. This is the primary purpose behind his commands: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Because Yahweh was holy, he called his people to be holy – so that the people reflected their God. That’s what was going on with all the other nations and their gods. Their wicked practices were reflecting their wicked gods, but Yahweh was different, set apart, distinct. He was holy, good, pure, right. He was a completely different standard. And that was the standard to which he was calling his people to live. Be holy for I am holy. The people of Israel were to be a representation of Yahweh in the midst of the sinfulness of earth.

This goes back to Exodus 19 when they first arrived at Mt. Sinai and God began the process of entering into a covenant with them where he would be their God and they would be his people. In Exodus 19:4-6 he says: *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

They were to be a kingdom of priests who would represent Yahweh on earth and a holy nation, set apart and distinct from all the other sinful nations. That’s the primary purpose behind all the rules that would follow. He continues to make that clear throughout the chapters we’re looking at today. At the end of chapter 20, after giving them many more rules to follow, we read this...

Read Leviticus 20:22-26.

“You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. ²³ And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. ²⁴ But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples. ²⁵ You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. ²⁶ You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

And finally, we see again at the end of chapter 22...

Leviticus 22:31-33

“So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the Lord. ³² And you shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, ³³ who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord.”

It is clear that there was to be a definite correlation between who Yahweh was and how he wanted his people to be. Be holy for I am holy.

And that’s the reason for the rules. That’s the standard. You see this same reason all throughout the Old Testament and into the New. It’s stated in different ways, but it comes back to this very same idea. In fact, you can see it very clearly in one of the verses we use to guide us in our purpose here at East Lincoln. It’s posted on our webpage and on the display in the Fellowship Hall and it comes from 1 Peter 2:9-12: *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the*

Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

That’s the reason for the rules. That’s the standard. It’s for the honor and glory of our God – the same God who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. We are God’s people and we have been given the unique privilege and honor to be his representatives here on earth, that through us, people who don’t know him, may see what he’s like in us. May our God and Savior be honored and glorified by the way we live our lives.

That leads to the obvious question we need to consider in every situation we’re in, whether we’re at work among people who are filled with sinful practices or at school or maybe even at home – are you honoring Christ by the way you’re living? By the way you’re acting? By the words you’re saying? Are you distinct from unbelievers or blending right in? Are you walking in obedience to Christ as he calls you to live in a way that reflects what he is like?

Under the new covenant, we not only have the rules and commands that teach us the will of God in Scripture, but we also have God’s Spirit living within us, bringing us conviction and the desire to live in a way that honors Christ. As God’s people we need to be diligent to read the Bible and listen to the promptings of the Spirit so that by God’s grace we will live holy lives for his glory and honor.