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A Bible Study on Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-10

Joshua Ulm

Introduction

As he wrote, spoke, and marched in the name of civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr. constantly addressed the issue of poverty. It was his opinion that equal rights can never be fully realized until poverty and financial inequality are eliminated. Toward the end of his 1967 Southern Christian Leadership Conference Presidential Address, King said: “[L]et us go out with a divine dissatisfaction. Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.”¹

Poverty was a major factor in King’s life and work. Poverty is also a major theme in the Scriptures. The “innocent poor”² in the Old Testament were highly valued by Yahweh and would be avenged when his day arrived (Am 8:4,7–8). Mary welcomed the pre-born Messiah by singing that the Lord “has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk 1:53).

When exploring the work of Martin Luther King Jr., the topic of poverty is given great importance, and King is not shy about offering specific solutions to what he sees as the problem. When approaching King’s work on the subject, a biblical perspective is helpful. Remembering that B.C. Israel is a unique case in human history. (Israel’s divinely given policies need not be the policies of twenty-first century America.) This study will look at one example of how Israel handled the poor in her midst.

To guide you through this study, I encourage you to read the Scripture passages and pray the prayers I have listed.

Opening Prayer

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.³

The Text: Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–10.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “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.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, 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.”

The Essentials of the Text

Who is speaking here? Why is he speaking? Who is he speaking to?

Moses is speaking here. Moses stands between the people and God, interceding for the people (Ex 32:7–14) and speaking Yahweh’s words to the people (the phrase “speak to the people of Israel saying” appears multiple times in Leviticus, emphasizing this role). In Exodus 20, the people ask Moses to speak to them because they cannot bear to hear the voice of Yahweh (Ex 20:19).

Moses is speaking to the whole assembly of Israel. He speaks in the second person plural. The words Moses speaks on God’s behalf apply to all the people of Israel, as they are a people set apart for Yahweh.

What is Israel to do on the basis of verses 9–10?

The first portion of the text calls Israel to *complete* holiness, holiness that reflects the holiness of Yahweh himself. The second portion calls those who have fields not to harvest the entire field, leaving unharvested crops on the edges of the field for sojourners. The part of the field that they do harvest is to be harvested once. They are not to go over the field again and again to get every last bit of return, but they are to leave leftovers for those who need them.

Where does God lead his people after the Exodus? What sort of place will it be?

God leads them to the land of the Canaanites, driving out the land’s previous inhabitants to make room for his people. Yahweh swore to give the promised land to his people. He picked a fertile and plentiful land for them, which he called, “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:8).

Why are the Israelites to act in this way?

They are to be holy because Yahweh is holy. John Kleinig describes this relationship saying that “Israel’s holiness derives from [Yahweh’s] holiness.”⁴ Yahweh is the source of all holiness and the only one who is truly holy. His people are to imitate, reflect, and live their lives in light of his holiness.

The Theology of the Text

What do verses 9 and 10 tell us about the character of God?

Verses 9 and 10 tell us that God is merciful, compassionate, and cares for the poor, lonely, and outcast. All things are Yahweh's, and his people are to reflect his priorities in their use of his creation. God does not showcase who he is in his treatment of the high in status but in his treatment of the lowly. Deuteronomy 7:7 says, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples." This verse reminds us that Israel was not a powerful or numerous nation. Throughout Israel's history it is clear that Israel would have been overrun without Yahweh's protection.

God's regard for the sojourner and poor specifically is shown in Deuteronomy 10:18, "He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." Mercy and compassion were frequently used in creedal descriptions of the character of Yahweh, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).⁵

How does God's command (rooted in his divine mercy and compassion) not to harvest the entire field play out within salvation history? Read Ruth 2:1-7; 4:13-22.

The specific mandate not to take the gleanings from the harvest given in Leviticus 19:9-10 was followed by Boaz. Ruth followed behind the reapers gathering the leftovers that were for the poor and sojourner. She used this opportunity to meet Boaz who would marry her, saving her and Naomi and leading to the birth of Obed (Ru 4:17), the grandfather of David and ancestor of Jesus.

Are Christians obligated to keep this section of the Torah? Why or why not?

Christian farmers and landowners are not obligated to follow these cropping regulations given to Israel. They were given to God's people at a specific time for a specific purpose. Even if a Christian farmer were to leave some of his yield for the poor, the practice of gleaning by the needy is not commonplace in the United States, and the produce would likely go to waste. While we understand that the cropping regulations given in this text were for Israel, not for us, Christians are not to ignore God's call to holiness. Peter cites Leviticus 19:2 when he writes "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pt 1:14-16). While we understand that our holiness will always fall short and that we must rely on the holiness of Christ, the call to "be holy" remains. This text also calls us to remember that the lowly of this world have value in the eyes of Yahweh. As Yahweh's holy people, we should value them as well. "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation" (Ps 68:5).

Leviticus 19 and related themes elsewhere in Scripture

As mentioned above, Leviticus 19:2 is cited in 1 Peter. An early creed of ancient Israel (used when offering tithes to Yahweh) mentioned the sojourning of Israel when recounting the deeds of God, “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous” (Dt 26:5).

God’s value of the lowly culminates in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2). Jesus came from Bethlehem, which was “too little to be among the clans of Judah” (Mi 5:2). Jesus’s hometown caused Nathanael to say, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46). The Jews rejected Jesus saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:42). Perhaps most of all, Jesus died in a shameful and despised way. Scripture says, “for a hanged man is cursed by God” (Dt 20:23). But in Jesus, the lowly, despised, scorned, rejected man from Nazareth, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor 1:27–28).

For Further Consideration

What is a sojourner? A sojourner is one who is not a part of the nation of Israel but journeys about in its midst. This person (and his or her family) would have no established place in society, no rights under the law, and no family ties in that place. In most nations, the sojourner was often looked down upon and seen as a nuisance or intruder. In Israel, the sojourner was to be cared for (Dt 10:18–19) and even to keep the Sabbath (Ex 20:9).

Questions for Meditation and Application

Why is it important that God values the lowly?

Who are the lowly in today’s society?

How are the lowly treated by those who are of high status?

How can I reflect the mercy, compassion, and priorities of my God towards those who are outcasts, downtrodden, or oppressed?

In what sense am I poor and lowly, and what did God do for me in my poverty? (2 Cor 8:9; Rom 5:8).

Read Psalm: Psalm 68:1–10

Closing Prayer

Lord of heaven and earth, you are gracious and merciful to all. You showed your mercy as you led Israel into the promised land and as you instructed your people to care for the poor in their midst through simple means. Most of all you showed your mercy as you sent your Son, lowly, despised, and rejected. Grant that we, looking to Christ as an example and beacon of your mercy and compassion, might show mercy to others. Guide us by your Holy Spirit to strive to be holy as you are holy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Endnotes

- ¹ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Presidential Address" Hartford Web Publishing: World History Archives, August 16, 1967, accessed December 31, 2017, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/628.html>.
- ² The Old Testament also deals with those who are poor due to sloth or laziness. The primary use of "poor" refers to those who have been abused and oppressed by "the rich" For example, Psalm 10:2 says, "In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor."
- ³ "Collect for the Word," *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 308.
- ⁴ John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 407.
- ⁵ See Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).