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Holiness Looks Like Love

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Bible Readings

- **Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18:** God calls his people to holiness through fair judgment, refusal of slander, and love of neighbour
- **Matthew 22:34-46:** Jesus teaches that the greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbour as yourself

Sermon

Last week we heard Jesus being asked questions about paying taxes to the emperor. Jesus asked them to show him the coin used to pay the tax. "Whose image is this?" he asked. "Caesar's," they replied. And Jesus told them to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God. And that left us with a question: whose image do we bear?

We were reminded that in Genesis, human beings are created in the image of God. Not just some human beings, but all people are created in the image of God. So if we bear God's image and our neighbours bear God's image too, how should that shape the way we live?

This week, we consider what it means to reflect the character of God. Jesus gives us a place to begin. A lawyer asks him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus responds with two commandments. First: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Then he adds: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. All the laws and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Love God and love your neighbour. It sounds simple, but living it out can be far more complicated.

Our reading from Leviticus helps us understand what Jesus means. Leviticus might not be the first book you turn to for inspiration. It can seem full of rules with little to do with our everyday lives. But in the passage we read today, God says: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." This command is addressed to the whole congregation, not just the priests or religious leaders. The call to holiness belongs to all of God's people.

And God makes it clear that holiness is not simply about religious rituals or private devotion. It reaches into the way we treat one another. The passage speaks about judging fairly, refusing to show favouritism, not spreading slander, not seeking revenge, and not holding grudges. Then comes the command: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

In other words, holiness is about how we live with one another. It matters how we speak about people when they are not in the room. It matters whether we treat people fairly,

whether we stand up when someone is mistreated, and whether we hold on to resentment or seek a way forward.

If every person bears God's image, then the way we treat people matters. When we diminish someone's dignity, when we show favouritism or refuse to see another person's humanity, we fail to honour the image of God in them. But when we act with compassion, when we pursue justice and treat others with dignity, we reflect something of God's character.

Holiness is not something we simply claim for ourselves. It becomes visible in the ways we love one another. This is what connects Leviticus with Jesus's teaching. Leviticus calls God's people to holiness and shows them what it looks like. Jesus brings the heart of the law into focus: love God and love your neighbour.

Our relationship with God cannot be separated from the way we treat people around us. But that raises another question. What does this kind of love actually look like when loving our neighbours is difficult? It's easy to love those who love us back, those who share our opinions and make us feel comfortable. But what about the person who frustrates us? The neighbour whose beliefs are different. The person who has hurt us. The person whose needs interrupted our plans?

It's one thing to say that everyone bears God's image. It is another to remember that when we are angry and impatient and confronted by someone we struggle to understand. That's why Leviticus connects love with justice and honesty and the refusal to take revenge. Love is more than a feeling. It shapes our actions.

This kind of love does not always come naturally. We can still know that we ought to do something and still struggle to do it. We can recognize the image of God in another person in theory and find it difficult to remember that when tensions rise. So how do we grow in this kind of love? How do we become people whose lives increasingly reflect the holiness of God?

This is where John Wesley's understanding of holiness has something important to teach us. John Wesley was one of the founders of the Methodist movement, and he famously declared: "There is no holiness but social holiness." We often hear this in connection with social action and the church's responsibility to address injustice. But Wesley was making a deeper point about how God's grace transforms us.

For Wesley, holiness was never simply about being a good person, following the rules, or keeping our own spiritual lives in order. It was about being transformed by God's grace until our hearts and lives increasingly reflect the love of Christ. Wesley believed that God's grace does more than forgive us. Grace works within us, changing our desires, shaping our character, and enabling us to love God and our neighbours more fully.

Wesley believed that transformation is not something we do alone. He placed great importance on small groups where people could pray together, talk honestly about their lives, encourage one another, and hold each other accountable. Wesley understood that we

could not grow in holiness if we separated our love for God from our relationships with other people.

We might pray every day, know our Bibles inside and out, and worship faithfully. These things matter. But if our faith never changes how we treat people, if we remain content with injustice, or if we refuse to recognise the dignity of someone different from us, then we have missed something essential about the holiness God desires.

For Wesley, holiness was not simply about avoiding sin. It was about being filled with God's love—filled with love for God and neighbour. And that love had to take a practical shape in the world. Methodist history includes not only prayer meetings and preaching, but also the care of people experiencing poverty, visits to the sick and imprisoned, and advocacy against injustice. Wesley challenged Methodists to put their faith into practice through works of mercy. These actions were not separate from spiritual growth. They were expressions of it.

We grow in holiness as God's grace teaches us to love, and that love becomes visible in how we care for our neighbour and work for their wellbeing. This brings us back to our question from last week: whose image do we bear? If we bear the image of God and our neighbours bear the image of God, then growing in holiness must change the way we see them and treat them.

We cannot claim to become more like Christ while ignoring the dignity of the people Christ calls us to love. Social holiness means that our spiritual growth cannot be separated from our neighbours' wellbeing. It means we cannot be indifferent to another person's suffering and pretend that faith is only a private matter. It means learning to recognise God's image in people whose experiences, backgrounds, and circumstances differ from our own.

We need the church to help us do this. We need a community that encourages us when loving others is difficult, that challenges us when we cause harm and helps us recognise the people we might otherwise overlook. We need to practise forgiveness, patience, generosity, and justice together, because none of us gets it right all the time.

We do not gather because we have already become holy. We gather because God is still shaping us together into a people whose lives reflect God's love. That is the gift of Christian community. We are loved by God as we are. And through grace, we are continually invited to grow into the people that God is calling us to be.

When Jesus says that the greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbour, he is describing the very life Wesley believed God's grace makes possible. Jesus begins by telling us to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind. This is wholehearted devotion to the God at the centre of our faith. But Jesus immediately connects that devotion with loving our neighbour.

Love of God gives our love of neighbour its foundation. Love of neighbour gives our devotion to God a tangible expression in the world. How do we show our love for a God we cannot see? Jesus points us to the people we can see. We love God when we take seriously

God's concern for justice. We love God when we treat people as made in God's image rather than as problems to solve. We love God when we make room for those who have been pushed to the edges and refuse to let another person's dignity depend on whether they are like us.

Jesus is not rejecting the Jewish faith or replacing a legalistic religion with a religion of love. The command to love our neighbour comes directly from Leviticus. Jesus is drawing on the scriptures of his own tradition and identifying the heart of the law. Love is not an excuse to ignore God's commands. It is the lens through which we understand what faithfulness requires.

When we ask ourselves: what should we do? How should we respond? What does God require of me here? We can begin with some simple questions. Does this honour God? Does this treat my neighbour with dignity? Does it move us towards justice and mercy and faithfulness? Am I recognising the image of God in the person before me?

These questions will not always give us easy answers, but they can help us recognise the direction in which Christ is calling us to walk. Wesley's understanding of sanctification gives us hope. We are not expected to manufacture perfect love through sheer willpower. We depend on God's grace to change us. And we participate in that work through prayer, worship, acts of mercy, and life together in Christian community.

We will not get everything right today, but we can keep growing. We can keep learning to love. We can keep allowing God's grace to reshape our hearts and relationships. Bearing God's image is truly a gift. Growing in holiness is our response to that gift—allowing God's love to shape who we are and how we live.

What might holiness look like for us this week? Perhaps it means refusing to join in a conversation that diminishes someone else. Perhaps it means listening more carefully to someone whose experiences differ from ours. Speaking up when we witness unfairness or offering an apology we have been putting off. Perhaps it means asking whether our church is as welcoming in practice as we want to be in principle.

Or perhaps it begins at home with a little more patience, a little more generosity, or a willingness to let go of a resentment we have been carrying. These actions may not look dramatic, but they are part of the everyday work of holiness, learning to honour God's image in others and allowing God's love to shape our own lives.

And we will not get it right every time. We will fall short. And that is why we need grace and forgiveness and each other. Holiness is not about pretending we have already arrived. It is about allowing God to keep shaping us day after day.

Perhaps the two questions we have considered belong together. Whose image do we bear? And how does that image shape the way we love? We bear the image of God. And we are called to reflect God's holiness through love. Love that seeks justice and shows mercy and protects dignity and recognises our neighbours as people created in God's image.

Wesley reminded us that there is no holiness but social holiness. Leviticus reminded us that holiness shapes how we treat one another. Jesus reminds us that love of God and love of neighbour belong together at the very heart of our faith. May our worship lead us into compassion. May our faith lead us towards justice. May our community help us grow in grace. And may the love we receive from God become the love we offer the world. Because the question is not only whose image do we bear. It is how we reflect that image in the world. And in the end, holiness looks like love.