

# biblestudy: march 2021

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## March 7, 2021 Text: Leviticus 19:1-18 “Living as Holy People”

About a year ago, we started getting nervous about something new in our midst: coronavirus. Now, I am writing in late June 2020. What is March 2021's news about COVID-19? Sometimes, I think it is not wise to write this far ahead. How can we relate the Scripture to what we cannot yet see? On the other hand, there is value in seeing that the Word of God is good for all days, no matter what the 6:30 network news anchor reports.

There is indeed a kind of “universal application” to these verses from Leviticus. I don't know about you, but I seldom dig in Leviticus for my daily spiritual nourishment, but here is a strong “fits all sizes” lesson from this strange Old Testament book.

It is about living holy lives (Leviticus 19:1). Holiness is a strong part of the Wesleyan tradition. Sometimes, we call it “sanctification.” Wesley spoke of “personal holiness” (individual) and “social holiness” (relational). These verses get summarized in words that Jesus put back before us: “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Who is this neighbor? (Jesus answered with the story of the good Samaritan—Luke 10:30-37.) The priestly writers of Leviticus also name some people we are unlikely to consider as our neighbors: the poor (Leviticus 19:10), the immigrant (Leviticus 19:10), laborer (Leviticus 19:13), deaf or hearing impaired (Leviticus 19:14), blind (Leviticus

19:14), your own people (Leviticus 19:17-18), and the wealthy (Leviticus 19:13). That's enough to catch my attention!

Don't you wish God would not get so specific? I look at that list from Leviticus and I'm not sure I'm batting a winning average. Add to all of that the verses that remind me to keep the sabbath (Leviticus 19:3), to learn from my heritage (Leviticus 19:3), and not to allow my worship to become routine (Leviticus 19:5-8). Holy living ain't no easy road!

Before I despair over this difficult life of holiness, let me note how this text ends. God speaks, “I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18). In other words, we are not on this journey by ourselves. The grace-giving, supportive, encouraging God is with us. And that is why we seek to be holy...because God is holy (Leviticus 19:1). And that holy One is with us.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. (John Wesley: *Holiness of Heart and Life*, Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries) reminds us: “Genuine inward holiness must show itself in outward holiness. ‘Works of piety’ were worthless without ‘works of mercy.’”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy One, move to make me holy...”

## March 14, 2021 Text: 1 Peter 2:1-10 “Nourishing Holiness”

This letter was written to support Gentile Christians, because in some settings they were seen as second-rate believers. Over and over again, the writer draws on Old Testament images to reassure the Gentiles that they are now indeed part of God's chosen people. “Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people” is a “welcome to the family” kind of statement (1 Peter 2:10).

To be invited and called into God's family is to be moved toward a life of holiness. Jesus Christ is the One who shapes that holiness (1 Peter 2:6). Jeannine K. Brown has noted that a cornerstone determines the shape and strength of a building. Jesus Christ is that cornerstone for our spiritual lives.

If our journey to holiness is based on Jesus Christ, what does that look like? Different translations find different ways to depict such a holy life (1 Peter 2:1). It does not have ill will, deceit, pretense, envy, and slander (Common English Bible), malice, guile, insincerity (New Revised Standard Version), hypocrisies, evil speaking (King James Version), back-biting (Twentieth-Century New Testament), recrimination (New English Bible). In all of that I can find a few that let me know that my journey is not complete!

Even though there are scars on our holiness faces, we are still God's people, “God's own possession” (1 Peter 2:9). Notice how many

Hebrew expressions that the writer borrows to incorporate the Gentile believer into the family (Isaiah 43:20, Exodus 19:5-6, Hosea 2:23).

Many, if not all, to whom this letter is sent were new to Christian faith, so it is not surprising that the author would use “newborn baby” (1 Peter 2:2) as a model for how one is to grow into the fullness of life: drinking “the pure milk of the word.” No matter where we are on our spiritual journey, that is still the nourishment for holiness.

During these days of Lent, let us be grateful that God's grace has formed us, called us, and blessed us with life within God's household. How does it feel to be part of a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9)? It is a gift for the living of these days.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Part of the United Methodist search for holiness is told in Paul Milhouse's book *Philip William Otterbein* (Upper Room): “In 1789, Otterbein called fourteen ministers to a conference at his parsonage in Baltimore to unify the work of those seeking spiritual renewal for the church through emphasis upon purity of heart and conduct.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Pour Your word into my heart...”

## March 21, 2021 Text: Corinthians 6:12-20 “Physical Holiness”

This week's study is about sex. Now, do I have your attention?

The editors and translators of the Common English Bible made an interesting decision when they put the Greek word *porné* into English. Traditionally, that word has been translated as “prostitute,” because that was the main sexual impurity of those biblical days. Now, in a twenty-first century context, casual sex seems more prominent, so the CEB puts 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 as “sleeping around.” That is an effort to put the word *porné* into today's experience, even though it might not be a literal translation.

Similarly, some students of the Bible today note that although the Scriptures speak of male with male sexual relationships, there is almost no similar constraint on female with female sexual contact. Are we to conclude that one is okay and the other is not? Is Romans 1:26-28 about pederasty rather than loving relationships? What is natural for one person is not natural for another (Romans 1:26-27). We can begin to see what seems simple gets so complicated!

The United Methodist Church seems on the precipice of separating over these issues.

One thing is clear from our Corinthian text: part of holiness is what we do with our physical bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20). The word translated “sexual immorality” in 1 Corinthians 6:18 is *porneia*, and was used to depict prostitution, incest, and adultery. It was used sometimes in a figurative sense of “idolatry.” To give our bodies privilege is a form of idolatry.

No matter what one understands to be the biblical truth about human sexuality, one thing is clear: holy living—holiness—includes how one lives out the gift of sex. The body is demeaned by unholy sexual relationships. The body is intended to be a “temple of the Holy Spirit”: (1 Corinthians 6:19). Sexual immorality competes with the Holy Spirit for control of the body.

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People who disagree on interpretations of human sexuality often agree on one thing: We must take the Bible seriously. Now, no doubt, the conclusions may differ, but there is a common intent to hear what God is saying in the Word. Let us listen.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *God Loves Sex* (Baker Books), Dan B. Alexander and Tremper Longman II say: “Holiness is not our achievement’ it is a gift from our holy God. No one is sexually holy—married, single, gay, straight, or

celibate—but we are gifted with holiness just as we are with faith...We must then approach the gift of sexual holiness with fear and trembling, knowing that our sin cannot cause us to be discarded, nor can it turn (God) from seeing us as (God’s) beloved.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of all good gifts, help me to be a faithful steward of your gift of sexuality. Keep me reminded of the indwelling presence of Your Holy Spirit that moves to shape me into a house of holiness...”

**March 28, 2021 Text: Matthew 6:5-18 “Prayer and Holiness”**

Do you remember how we washed our hands for twenty seconds to reduce the risk of the coronavirus? As I best recall, there were two primary ways of keeping track of those twenty seconds. One way was to sing “Happy Birthday” through twice and the other was to pray the Lord’s Prayer through once. Looking at today’s study texts makes it clear why that trivial knowledge came to mind!

The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) is one of the most familiar texts in the Bible. (If you are into bragging, you could say to someone, “Yes, I know the Bible. I can quote long passages from memory.” Then, you say the Lord’s Prayer. Sorry. Some of my commentaries are useless.)

The phrase “for Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever” was added by the Church in later tradition. (Because of that, some worshiping communities do not add the non-biblical text.)

Notice that the prayer itself is surrounded by admonitions about not showing off when you pray or when you fast (Matthew 6:5-8, 16-18). Sometimes, I think we may have the opposite problem. Rather than showing off, we are embarrassed to be seen praying in public. (I remember a time when I was in college. A group of us were having supper together in the dining hall and, as was our custom, bowed our heads for a brief “thank you” prayer. When we opened our eyes, there was a rather stern-looking woman standing there. Rather than being

harsh, she gushed about how wonderful it was that three college boys would take the time to pray. We were mortified by this unexpected attention.)

When we talk to God, we are talking to and listening to a Divine Parent (Matthew 6:9). I have to wonder if I really want life on earth to be like life in heaven (Matthew 6:10), because God’s kingdom is one of justice for everyone, no favoritism, forgiveness for some folks I don’t like, and peace even with those with whom I disagree. Nevertheless, I pray for that Kingdom on earth. (Some people these days use the term “Kindom,” which is both gender-neutral and suggests family.)

It’s one thing for God to forgive me, but do I really want to limit that forgiveness to how well I have forgiven others (Matthew 6:12)? Be careful what you ask for.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Allen Verhey (*The Christian Art of Dying*, Eerdmans) says: “The Lord’s Prayer was modeled after the (Jewish prayer) Kaddish.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Our Father, who art in heaven...”

All the flowers of all tomorrows  
are in the seeds of today. *Unknown*

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