

## AND NOW YOUR REWARD

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The LORD called to Moses, and then went on for 27 chapters in Leviticus, laying down the laws and rules to teach to the Israelite people. This entire book outlines the ways the Israelites should live and treat people.

This section of the Bible has been called “the Holiness Code”. It contains commandments which are intended to illustrate to the people of Israel how to live a holy life. This is concerned with practical actions with an emphasis on the importance of social justice and living in good relations with their neighbors and to always search for the common good.

In today's reading we begin the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter with God instructing Moses to tell all the people, I am the LORD your God. You must be Holy because I am Holy.

In our gospel reading we find Jesus still sitting on a mountainside and telling His followers basically this: You may have heard what Moses said, the laws he laid out, but you didn't get what he meant. You didn't understand what God was trying to get across.

Then He goes on to reveal the true meaning of some of those Holiness Code laws. Such as:

Resist evil.

Go the extra mile.

Love everyone – even those with whom you have differences.

Pray for those who hurt you.

Jesus uses these versus to teach his followers about revenge, retribution, about turning the other cheek, giving your cloak, not fighting back.

And then He gives this instruction: You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Be holy because I am holy.

Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Wow!

Why does God say this? And how do we do this?

Let's break it down and look at what the dictionary tells us about these terms and see if that gives us some answers.

Holy: characterized by reverence – having a divine origin – having spiritual and moral worth.

Perfect: without defect – flawless.

I don't think that describes me!

God must think it's possible or He wouldn't say it, but how can we be holy let alone perfect?

I've pondered this quite a bit and I have a theory. I might be way off base here, but bear with me a minute.

To find the answer I think we have to go all the way back to the beginning – to the first chapter of Genesis. God said, "Let us make man in our own image – male and female he created them". And chapter 2 tells us how he created them. It says – "God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being".

God breathed His own breath into Adam. We are all descended from Adam.

We are imprinted with God's breath – Divine DNA.

So the Bible tells us that we are made by the very breath of God in His own image. But again, what does it really mean?

First, I think we need to explore what God has revealed about himself and let that reveal how humans are created in God's image.

We will touch on just a few of the traits God breathed into us.

Number one, God creates.

The Bible testifies that the entire universe came into existence out of nothing! And God used His creativity to make all that we have today. And God is still creating.

God is a great artist. He made all things that are pleasing to the eye. He filled us with a great capacity to appreciate that beauty. It's all around us.

For instance, this time of year we lament over the bare trees and long for spring when the buds and leaves fill out and make the trees stately again. But have you ever looked, I mean really appreciated, the intricacies of the branches and twigs that we can only see when the leaves are gone? Only a true artist could make that. And then the leaves do emerge and the trees are transformed. Both versions are pure majesty.

Guess what! We are creative too because God is creative.

Human creativity is of a different sort from God's. But every human makes things – some with paint or clay, others with words, with raw materials, with fruits and vegetables, meats and spices, with yarns and cloth. Some use power tools. Some make other people healthier, some make businesses stronger. Every human has the capacity to make things, to create, because we are all made in the image of a creative God.

Here are some more things we got from our creator.

You communicate because God communicates. Humans are intelligent and have the ability to use language and symbols, to think and reason.

Mankind has the capacity for understanding and for rational thought. God is rational. Creation makes sense. Well, sure, He made the aardvark – but that just proves God has a sense of humor, and he passed that along to us too.

Man is a thinker and each person possesses a mind that is capable of learning, of being instructed and growing in understanding. He gave us minds to inquire and to reason. Remember Jesus commanded us to love God with our minds (as well as our hearts, our strength and our souls).

You are morally responsible because God is a moral being. Just as there are natural laws that govern the universe, universal moral laws govern human behavior. These laws are written on human hearts.

God created mankind to understand His moral character and purpose.

Most importantly, you are relational because God is relational. Being created in God's image has to do primarily with relationship. Man's chief relationship from the beginning was with God. And remember God said "It is not good for man to be alone". He created Eve for Adam for that reason. Eve was given an equal share in God's image, alike enough for companionship, different enough for relationship.

The dominant theme of human existence is, and has always been, about relationships. In a word – love.

Man at his creation was full of love.

Being made in the image of God means we share God's compassion, righteousness, and love.

Now, how do we live up to the image in which we were created?

We go back to Leviticus...

Don't steal – don't cheat – don't lie – don't make false promises – don't put stumbling blocks before the disabled – be fair – don't play favorites – don't seek revenge – leave the edges – respect God.

And back to Matthew...

Jesus calls us to obey His words and to follow His example.

We listen to him reinterpret the law of the prophets, and we hear a deeper message in the covenant, one that has the potential to transform not just us, but the entire world. We listen as he calls us to strive for a different way of being in this world – for righteousness that comes not through revenge, but through grace, forgiving love, and a deep commitment to reconciliation.

Jesus lays out for us what it really means to turn the other cheek – to give your cloak. He urges us to pray for those who harm us – give what is asked – that we should not seek revenge. Go the extra mile.

And he says love everyone, even our enemies.

Everyone? Really?

I have a real problem with that.

My family, sure, it's easy to love them. I have a great family. And it's easy to love you folks. When I look at you I see the face, the heart of God.

But when I hear news stories about a man blinded by road rage over a lane maneuver who starts shooting into the car of the grandmother who cut him off, killing her four-year-old grandson, I have a hard time feeling the love.

And I find it hard to love protestors who use the pretext of freedom of speech to start riots and inflict as much property damage as they can.

How do you love then? No, seriously, I'm asking, because I'm not there yet. Yet that's exactly who Jesus tells us to love. Tall order.

Love and pray for those who harm you, Jesus says. Turn the other cheek. Don't seek revenge.

Give, forgive, lend, love - even the enemy – because that is how God loves. And that is how He expects us to love – how He created us to love. God breathed into us the capacity to love like Jesus. The world has not found any better expression of the meaning of love than in the life, teaching and passion of Christ.

Love is such a precious commodity – one you want to hold on to like a lifeline in a turbulent, chaotic world. But you can only hold it – it only grows if you share it – if you give it.

When you take what God has infused you with and give it away you never run out.

Like the poor widow who had just enough oil and flour to make one last loaf of bread for herself and her son, but when Elijah asked for some she shared it with him. Because she gave all she had, all she had never ran out.

Like Jesus when he blessed the two little fishes and the five loaves of bread he gave it and it fed thousands of hungry people.

Grasp what God has given you – and share it with your neighbors. It brings joy to you and to the recipient and to God.

Your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

Our reward, then, is the joy we receive when we pour our love out on others.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Specifically, strive to love persecutors and enemies. When we do we gain the opportunity for and possibility of perfection, perfection in love in this life, and the reward to come in the next.

You've heard that we are the hands and feet of Jesus. Well, it turns out we are a whole lot more than that. We are his creativity, his mind, his intellect, his morality, his compassion, his love. Especially His love.

When God says be holy, be perfect, He is saying He wants you to be all that He created you to be. Be the image - Grab your reward.

AMEN.