

YOU SHALL BE HOLY! FOR I AM THE LORD, YOUR GOD, AND I AM HOLY.

Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, 2017

Leviticus 19:1-2

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the first two verses of our First Reading from before, Leviticus 19:1-2: **The LORD told Moses: <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the whole congregation of the Israelites, and tell them: ‘You shall be holy! For I am the LORD, your God, and I am holy...**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your Truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The First Reading and Gospel for today mirror each other. In Leviticus 19, the Lord begins by calling us to holiness and ends with the exhortation to love our neighbour.<sup>1</sup> The Gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount contains the exhortation to love our neighbour, and ends with the call to be perfect, that is, to be holy, as our heavenly Father is holy.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly is holiness? When we think of what it means to be holy, we tend to think of holiness in terms of ‘being good.’ So, if we look at someone and see some kind of moral fibre in him or her, we call that person holy. Again, if we look and see that that husband loves his wife

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<sup>1</sup> (This verse, Lev 19:18, is the Old Testament reference most often quoted in the New Testament.)

<sup>2</sup> Lev 19:2, and also Lev 11:44; 20:7; and 20:26

and children so dearly, then he is a holy man. Again, what about him or her? They seem to always be either reading their Bible or praying. So you know they're holy.

What this really is though, is what the Lutheran Confessions call "civic righteousness." These are the good works that a person does and is recognised by his fellow citizens as such.

But what we might consider holy - a good work - is rather subjective. Some good works are considered better than others. Some people are thought of as being holier than others... perhaps even "holier than thou." Sometimes those labels are given solely based on what we think of that work or that person. So what or who may be good or holy one day may not be the next.

We are subjective people. What we need is an objective God. As our text for today shows us, God is very objective, and His definition of holiness does not change one iota. What does God require of us to be considered holy? We are to be like Him, for He says, **'You shall be holy! For I am the LORD, your God, and I am holy.'** As God continues to speak through Moses, He restates His Law. He commands us to keep His Law. He demands that we obey His Law - perfectly! Then we would be holy in the sight of God.

What does it truly mean to be holy? To be holy is to be free from sin. Yet who among us is holy? The Lord has commanded us to be holy. Earlier in Leviticus 11 God had said: *"I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy,"* (11:44a). The Apostle St. Peter echoes these same words when he writes: *"But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy,'"* (1 Pet. 1:15-16). The Lord has called us to holiness. He has commanded us to be holy, to

be set apart to live godly lives to His glory, just as He commanded those who died in the faith before us.

But we must be honest and ask: *“Am I holy? Have I set myself apart from the sinful world, so that I would live the life God wants me to live? Have I lived a life free of sin? Have I faithfully kept the Ten Commandments?”* We answer these questions when we pray, *“Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, helpless sinner, confess to You all my sins, and repent of all the evil I have done. I have deeply displeased You and deserve Your punishment in time and in eternity.”* The point is, all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. This is not the way of holiness. By and of ourselves, we are not holy people. We do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We have other gods than the one true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We misuse His Name, taking it in vain. We despise preaching and God’s Word and do not gladly hear and learn it. We dishonour our parents. While we might not have physically murdered someone, yet we are guilty of murder in the Lord’s eyes by hurting or harming our neighbour in his body, by not helping and supporting him in every physical need, and by our hatred of him. We are guilty of adultery, whether we have engaged in pre- or extra-marital sex or even lusted in our hearts. We do not help our neighbour improve and protect his possessions and income, and we even look to get some of what he has for ourselves. We tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, and hurt his reputation; we love to shoot from the lip and wound him, even if he is a fellow Christian, even if he is a member of this congregation! The devil does his best work in the Church, attacking her children, you and me, just as he did to the saints of yore, as he sought to keep them from receiving the holy things with grateful hearts.

You see, the devil does not concern himself with atheists, devil worshippers, or those who worship false gods. He has them already - though we still pray that the Holy Spirit would bring them to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Anyone who does not worship the one true God - the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - does in fact worship Satan. He is not worried about them. He focuses his efforts on the faithful, just as he worked on those who died in the faith before us, all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when he seduced Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, thereby bringing sin into the world. He wants to get as many of the faithful away from God as possible, to get them - to get us - to despise the holy things of God and, therefore, God Himself. As St. Peter writes, our “*adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour,*” (1 Pet. 5:8b).

In the communion liturgy of the early Church, the priest, after speaking a prayer in a low voice, would call the faithful to receive the body and blood of the Lord, saying, “*Let us be attentive. The holy gifts for the holy people of God.*” The congregation, kneeling, would respond, saying, “*One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.*” What was holy about the gifts was that the Lord made them holy. He set the bread and wine apart, attached His Word to these elements, and made them holy, giving us also His body to eat and His blood to drink. The Hebrew root of the word for “holy” which our Lord uses in our text means “to set apart,” “to be sacred,” or “to be consecrated.” In the Lord’s Supper, all of these definitions apply. He has set apart the bread and wine and declared it sacred, consecrating it with His very words: “*This is My body... This is My blood.*” What is there in Christ’s body and blood? The holy gifts of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. When we by faith receive these gifts, we are being made holy, for God Himself has made us holy. He has

declared us holy on account of the blood His Son shed on the cross for us and now given to us in His Supper.

God has made us holy at the font, where the holy Name of Jesus and the sign of the holy cross have been upon our foreheads since the day of our Baptism, having become baptised into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Whether you became baptised at this font or at a font at another Trinitarian congregation, whether you became baptised as an adult or as an infant, you received the holy things of God because it is God who makes you holy, for He Himself is holy. In Holy Baptism God has given you the holy things: forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. He has done so through the application of holy water, water combined with the holy Word of God. He has clothed you, having robed you in the holiness of Christ. He has clothed you with His wedding clothes, so that you may come to the Feast.

Our gracious God continues to give us His holy things in the daily living of our Baptism, as *“we receive absolution, that is forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven”* (Confession I). Confession and absolution is the daily living of our Baptism, which *“indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”*<sup>3</sup> We lived our Baptism, and received the holy things this morning as the Lord forgave us all our sins in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the same name into which we became baptised. God makes us holy. He makes us holy, setting us aside

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<sup>3</sup> Baptism IV

to be His holy people, marking us at our Baptism. He makes us holy, forgiving our sins for His Son's sake. We thank God that He sent His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to be baptised by John in the Jordan River, for the Lord became baptised into His own death - for our sake.

There is a wonderful quality about water: it makes us clean. In Holy Baptism, we are brought before God dirty by our sins, and we are washed clean by water and the Word of God; our sins are washed away, for God makes us clean.

Before our Lord became baptised, He was clean, for He is holy and sinless. But when He came up out of the water, He was dirty, for He had taken all our sins and the sins of the whole world upon Himself. Why did He do this? Paul writes: *"For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,"* (2 Cor. 5:21). This is what we call the Blessed Exchange! Christ became our sin so that we would appear sinless before our heavenly Father. Christ was forsaken by His own Father so that we would be called children of the heavenly Father. Christ bled and died for us so that we would live. Christ cried from the cross on Good Friday, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* God said to Him at His baptism, *"You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased."*<sup>4</sup>

It pleased God the Father to give His one and only Son over to death because He wants us to live... to live with Him in heaven into all eternity. As Paul announces to us in Romans 6: *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life,"* (v. 4). That is why He made us. God did not create

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:22

us first and foremost so that we would serve Him. He created us to love us, in spite of ourselves. He loves us and forgives us. Our service to Him, and to one another, is the fruit of the faith He has freely given us. These are the holy lives that we get to live, for the Holy Spirit enables us to love one another, just as God has first loved us in Christ!

One day we shall see our Lord's face, but until then we get to behold Him as He comes to us through hidden means: Word, water, wafer, and wine. And, as Luther teaches us, *where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also eternal life and salvation.*<sup>5</sup> These are the holy things. We are the holy ones, made holy by the blood of the Lamb, who is holy, without blemish or defect.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood has set us free to be people of God! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Lord God, We adore You for being gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and full of constant love. You are good to all, and Your kindness is on all that You have made. We come before You with confidence, offering our worship, and bringing our prayers.

We thank You above all else for the love that You have shown us in Christ Jesus, who was put to death for our sins and raised to life that we might be justified before You. We confess our many sins to You, and acknowledge that we have not deserved Your great mercy. Grant us, who have confessed our sins, joy that You have given Jesus Christ,

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<sup>5</sup> Luther's Small Catechism, The Benefit of the Sacrament of the Altar

Your Son, the authority to win the forgiveness of our sins and to pronounce it.

Forgive us especially our sins of despising and neglecting Your Word. In Your grace, do not take Your word from us. By Your Holy Spirit, lead us to treasure it more, and to use it with sincere and open hearts. Grant that it may take root in us as good seed in good ground, grow up, and bring forth much fruit to the glory of Your name.

Save and defend Your Church from all evil. Bless all preaching and teaching of Your Word of life. Grant that all believers may be obedient to Your truth, conscientious in their daily work, and patient in sufferings. Uphold them by the hope of everlasting life. We ask Your blessing on the AELC and ULMA as together we proclaim the message of forgiveness. Give us joy in Your service, and bless our work with an abundant harvest.

Let Your light shine forth in all places of learning and study, in hospitals and homes for the aged, and in all other welfare services. Grant that all that serve in them may experience Your goodness and grace.

We pray for our government. Give us unselfish and trustworthy leaders, and a society that reflects high moral values.

Bless our homes, and make them dwelling-places of Your Spirit, places where Christ is honoured, as parents teach and show love, and as children obey in the Lord.

We ask Your mercy on those who are sick. Grant that they may rejoice in the grace and healing power of Christ. Comfort the sorrowing; be with the lonely; and support the aged and infirm. Give faith in Your power, mercy, and wisdom to any who are struggling with doubt, depression, and other temptations. Teach them to know that the grace of

Christ is always sufficient, and remind them that Your power is strongest when they are weak.

Let the word of Christ in all its richness live in our hearts, and grant that we may all receive the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Saviour and for His sake. Amen.

## SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

<sup>1</sup> The LORD told Moses: <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the whole congregation of the Israelites, and tell them: ‘You shall be holy! For I am the LORD, your God, and I am holy...

<sup>9</sup> “When you harvest the grain on your land, you shall not finish harvesting the edge of your field, and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest! <sup>10</sup> You shall not pick your vineyard a second time, or pick up the fallen grapes in your vineyard! You shall leave them for the poor man and the stranger! I am the LORD, your God.

<sup>11</sup> “You shall not steal! You

shall not tell lies, and you shall not deal falsely with one another! <sup>12</sup> You shall not swear by My name in order to deceive anyone, or profane the name of your God! I am the LORD.

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not oppress your neighbour, and you shall not rob him! You shall not keep the wages of your hired labourer with you overnight until morning! <sup>14</sup> You shall not curse a deaf person, and you shall not place an obstacle in front of a blind person to make him stumble, but you shall fear your God! I am the LORD.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not deliver unjust verdicts! You shall not show partiality to poor people, or give preference to important people! You shall judge your neighbour

fairly! <sup>16</sup> You shall not go about spreading slander among your people! You shall not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life! I am the LORD.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not hate your brother in your heart! You shall be sure to correct your neighbour, so that you may not be guilty of sin because of him!

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take revenge! You shall not hold a grudge against any of your own people! Instead, you shall love your neighbour as yourself! I am the LORD.

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the grace that God has given me, I have laid a foundation as an expert master-builder, and somebody else is continuing to build on it. However, each one should be careful how he builds on it! <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If anyone builds on

the foundation with gold, silver, or precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, <sup>13</sup> each one's work will become evident. For that day will show it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If anyone's work that he has built on it survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burnt, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through fire. <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple. <sup>18</sup> No one should deceive himself! If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this world, he should become a fool, that he may become wise! <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For Scripture has said, “He catches the wise people by

their own craftiness”;<sup>20</sup> and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of wise people are futile.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore let no one boast about human beings! For all things are yours,<sup>22</sup> whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future. All are yours,<sup>23</sup> and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

Matthew 5:38-48

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’<sup>39</sup> However, I tell you, do not resist an evil person! Rather, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him also!<sup>40</sup> If someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat as well!<sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go two kilometres, go four kilometres with him!<sup>42</sup> Give to the person who asks you for something, and do not turn

away from the one who wants to borrow from you!

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall love your neighbour, and you shall hate your enemy!’<sup>44</sup> However, I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting you,<sup>45</sup> that you may be the children of your Father in heaven! For He makes His sun rise on evil people and on good people, and sends rain on righteous people and unrighteous people.<sup>46</sup> For, if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?<sup>47</sup> If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others are? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> Therefore you shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect!