

How to act

People are clannish. We identify with our own kind, share the same traditions, ideas, expectations ... accents, racial characteristics, cultural



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background ... seeing others as different or even suspect. Shared humanity is an idea that sounds good but often does not translate easily into living. For instance, consider religion which is often the most isolating, contentious, and even violent marker of identity. Everybody has the ultimate truth!? In the context of Christianity, we argue about salvation, soul security, moral issues, the Second Coming, etc. Do you suppose the world would be more open to the good news of Jesus Christ if Christians would be less concerned about who is doctrinally pure and more into living out the actions and teachings of Jesus? What does your living tell the world?

Leviticus is a tough read with its rules about sacrifices, grain offerings, dietary codes, purification rites and sacred festivals. There are tithes and offerings, correct ways to wash your hands, restrictions on mixing fabrics, an overwhelming guidebook about the proper way to honor God. Leviticus takes its name from the Levites, Israel's priests, who were charged with guiding the people to honor God in every detail of living. God commands Aaron, the first High Priest, "You are to distinguish between the holy and common, between the clean and unclean ... you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses" (Lev. 10:10 NRSV). At the time of Israel's exile and return to Judea "Midrash" was developed, the careful explanation and detailed application of God's laws to the daily situations of life. The burden of the law increased! What is the unmistakable motivation to live out these complex laws? "I am the Lord" (19:12, 14, 16, 18 CEB).

These laws call for integrity, honesty, respect for others, compassion for the suffering, and celebration of God's goodness. For all the complexity, Leviticus makes sense if God's people are to reflect God's character and love. The trick is in keeping the rules!

Then Jesus shows up and declares an even higher standard! Luke 6 pictures Jesus standing on a broad plain where a multitude has gathered, including his newly chosen "Twelve," a crowd from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, all of them hungry for more miracles (Lk.6:17-19). The majority would have been very familiar with Leviticus 19 and could quote "you must love your neighbor as yourself," but Jesus' declaration to "love your enemies ... do good to them who hate you ... bless those who curse you ... pray for those who mistreat you" fell like thunder and lightning! Leviticus called God's people to act out justice, righteousness, and integrity when dealing with others, but Jesus laid down a pattern for living based on grace and compassion. Jesus turned the world upside down as he called for spiritual extravagance, a generosity that seems foolhardy, even dangerous! Lest there be any misunderstanding, Jesus says, "If someone slaps you on (one cheek, offer the other as well ... if someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. (v.29). Be generous, Jesus says, and don't demand what was stolen from you (v.30).

These extreme demands are then framed by the simple law of the heart that knows God: "Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you" (v.31). This same idea is echoed in Jesus' model prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12). Jesus takes Leviticus 19:18 and says he wants us to get beyond our comfortable limited thinking to model our faith in a way that will surprise others and give a clear picture of God.

As God's people, made whole by the

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gift of Christ, we are to live beyond self-protection, comfort, indifference to help others find God, because, as Leviticus says, "(he is) the Lord." Let's be clear, offering the other cheek is not about ignoring abuse or violence. It is about breaking the cycle of violence and not allowing evil to triumph. Offering violence for violence is no substitute for living a different example and helping those who suffer. Matthew 18:15-19 offers guidelines on how to confront those who cause harm. We must do our best to offer healing and a new way to live rather than vengeance or duplicating the world's flawed actions.

But what about justice? Vengeance is God's work, not ours (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). We cannot make all things right. We are not called to bow down before evil and do nothing. We must do all in our power to stop injustice and violence, to stand for the protection and rights of others. We know from the Word of God and life that good can come out of tragedy and healing out of suffering. God is our example and source of grace. We must trust God for wisdom to do what is right and what will honor him.

Our human tendency is to control, to make things work and to change people. Only God can change the human heart. Someone will always be there to slap us, demand our coat, steal from us or cause heartache. We cannot make this world perfect, but we can live a faithful witness for God's love and we can offer the hope of his grace to the lost world. Our testimony is seen in a consistent faith and how we treat others.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.