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Leviticus 19:19. English Standard Version

¹⁹ “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material...”

1 Peter 2:1–5, 9-10. English Standard Version

² So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Leviticus 20:26. English Standard Version

²⁶ You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

Surely, this is irrelevant.

The Book of Leviticus is the third of five books traditionally attributed to Moses, and these are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Christians call these books by the Greek term Pentateuch, which translates to “five scrolls”. They also form the Jewish Torah. But no one really believes that Moses wrote them. In fact, they were created out of material that was originally written over a period of many hundreds of years, and the Pentateuch was put into its final form from about 538 to 334 B.C. But let’s begin with our first Bible passage today. It says: *You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.* It’s typical of Leviticus; it tells faithful Israelites (and later the Jews) to, among other things, never wear clothes made of out two kinds of material. It’s those cotton/poly blends, they were concerned with: you know how itchy they can be. But seriously, surely, this bit of biblical wisdom must be irrelevant to us, right? Who cares about wearing two kinds of cloth on one garment? Well, there’s actually a reason to think about it and I’ll get back to this.

But, first, what is the Book of Leviticus? Remember that Genesis, among other things, tells us about Creation, Noah, and Abraham’s family. Then Exodus

tells the story of the Israelites being freed from slavery and traveling out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, where Moses receives God's commandments. The word Leviticus means the Book of the Levites, which refers to the fact that this book contains material that is of instructional value to the priestly family of Israel known as the Levites. They were descendants of Jacob's son Levi, and the family contained a large number of Jewish priests. Because they were expected to be ready to step into the Temple serve with zero notice, they were forbidden to drink more than a little wine or to defile themselves by touching dead bodies, and they had to wear a specific uniform. They owned no land, and instead were scattered all over Israel and assigned with the task of serving the spiritual needs of the Israelites. They were supported through a system of tithes. It's no wonder the Book of Leviticus was important to them, as it laid out the laws of purity, which were so important to the priestly class. The Book of Leviticus as a whole helped the people of God remain holy in God's eyes. It is very much a book of religious law.

So, what about this issue of wearing two kinds of cloth? This rule is directed at the average Israelite. Here is the most likely accurate interpretation of this passage: most of the priestly garments were made from mixed materials, often wool and linen – polyester had not yet caught on with the people of God. Since non-priests were forbidden from performing priestly tasks, the prohibition

was symbolic and meant to remind the people that they must never head in that sacrilegious direction. They were to remember that the priests were set apart; the people must show respect for the authority that God had given them. By the same token, from here on out, I expect all of you to honor the fact that only I can wear two kinds of cloth at the same time – at least in the sanctuary.

Here's some more context. In Exodus, the Lord brings his people to Sinai, telling them that they are to be a holy nation. He confirms this blessed status by entering into a covenant with them. God is their king, and God's kingdom on earth has a legal system that must be followed. But remember, that although these are God's chosen people, they are still humans. So, this legal system, which is largely laid out in Leviticus, answers a critical question: How can God dwell among human beings, who are by their nature impure? How can God live in their very midst, with his holiness blending into the sinful world of his people? Leviticus tells the people how to live with God around them.

This takes us to our second quote, from the New Testament, from First Peter. It is a letter written to four congregations in various parts of Asia Minor, which is more or less modern Turkey. It is a "circular" letter that was read by one congregation and then passed on. Its major themes are 1) the new birth we gain through baptism, 2) encouragement for those being persecuted, 3) the church as

the true home of believers, and 4) advice on how to live godly lives in an ungodly world that is filled with non-believers. Although the letter is attributed to Peter, it is widely believed to have been written by a follower of his. The extremely literate Greek of the letter isn't something that would have been spoken or written by a fisherman from the Galilee, like the true Peter. It's also believed that Peter had died by the time this letter was written.

Our passage says: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.* We see the author of this letter - this dedicated follower of Peter - echoing the language of the Old Testament. The author is saying that Christians, too, are God's people. We must read the laws of Leviticus in the context of the teachings of Jesus. We must live in a way that honors the presence of God's grace within us. The Old Covenant, the one between God and Moses, meant that God would eventually give his people three things: 1) he would deliver his Chosen People to their Promised Land, 2) God would give his people progeny (meaning descendants), and 3) God would give his people his blessing. But in return, his Chosen People must live godly lives. The New Covenant, brought to us by Jesus Christ, had a different deal in it. The New

Covenant means that God will forgive us and grant us eternal life, in return for our faith – and critically, the way we live, which is our outward expression of our internal holiness, indicates the depth of that faith.

This brings up a question that many people ask: is the Old Covenant and its laws fully relevant to us today, or is just part of it still relevant, or has it been replaced? The answer can be seen in our discussion of Leviticus vs. First Peter. Let's get to our third quote. We're back in Leviticus: *You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.* Notice how close it is to our second passage: *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* There is a strong sense of continuity between the moral lessons of the Old and New Testament, between the laws of the Old and the new Covenants. The answer is that some of it still holds, but not all. It's not the case that all that was old was wiped away and replaced with something entirely different; part of it survived. That is why the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible (with part of it written in a related language, Aramaic) is part of our Scripture, why the Bible is on the order of a thousand pages instead of under a few hundred. Much of what's in the Old Testament is directly reflected in the New Testament. That's why the New Testament quotes the Old so much.

What's really new about the New Covenant is that in both there is law along with grace, but the proportions have flip-flopped. In the Old, the focus was on law, with God's grace coming into the story periodically, filling people with a desire to live the way God wanted them to live and to be drawn toward God. In the New, we still have law. But grace has become overwhelming. Grace is within us each day. That is the lesson that Jesus brought us. Don't get me wrong. The Old Testament and the Old Covenant are our foundation. We can't stand without them. It's also not the case that we are somehow better candidates for God's grace than other people. Keep in mind that the Old Covenant was between God and a particular people, the Israelites. The New Covenant is offered to all people. That's the story that Jesus brought to us: God's grace is offered to everyone; it is active within everyone; all of us can respond with faith and commit to a life where we incrementally seek holiness - a state that we will never fully reach.

But okay, there's a lingering question that might occur to you. Why did some parts of the Old Covenant disappear? Why can we wear clothing that is made out of two different materials? From an academic perspective, two answers have been discussed at great length. One comes from something called Covenant Theology and it says that laws or rules apply until a new set of laws come along and explicitly do away with those laws. There are statements in the New Testament that say we

are not bound by all of these old laws. The second answer comes from something called Dispensational Theology and it says that when a new set of laws is put in place, any of the old laws that are not repeated in the new are no longer valid. And indeed, the New Testament repeats many of the holiness laws of the Old.

But this isn't the point. What matters is that whichever way you look at it, the context is different. Whether the old laws are explicitly no longer valid because they've been excluded or whether the old laws were replaced in a wholesale fashion but with some of the old laws the same as the new, the real point is that the folks in this congregation don't need to be careful about mixing polyester and cotton in order to not insult my authority as your pastor. A law like that would be silly now. God always makes sense. We must use our minds to interpret what we are taught in both the Old and the New Testaments. That's the bottom line.

My father was a Marine. I went to Catholic schools. I have made it through eleven years of formal education after high school. I don't want to jinx myself, but I have only had one traffic ticket in my life - and it was rescinded. So, I understand law. I follow law. But I am a Christian and so I have so much more than law. I walk every day with God's grace inside me, and that is far, far more important than my clean police record. I've borrowed a pastor's robe from this church to wear to my

commissioning next month, but I stand before you most Sundays in a pair of wool slacks, a cotton shirt, and a silk tie. I don't need to stand apart from you in God's eyes by wearing special clothes. And importantly, no wealthy, powerful, famous, or acclaimed person in this world stands apart from us in God's eyes. We are Christians, and we live, not bound directly by law. Rather, we live in the pure joy of being filled with God's grace, which rather than forcing us to follow the law, makes us happy to mimic the life that Jesus led.

So, the Old Covenant says follow the law if you want to receive God's Old Covenant promises of land, the birth of future generations, and God's blessing. But the New Covenant says that we have God's love and grace in a completely unearned fashion – and that drives us to want to live according to the godly guidelines taught to us by Jesus.