

Filling Buckets

My sermon three weeks ago was rather long and this one has turned out to be long as well. Maybe it's not a good idea to give me two Sundays off in a row!

Prayer: *God, you desire for all your creation to thrive and for your people to live in a free and just world. Shape our hearts and minds to reflect those desires. Shape our words and actions to reflect your character in our homes, our community, and in this world. Amen.*¹

Although I've quoted individual verses from Leviticus over the years, this is the first time I've preached a sermon based on an entire chapter of the book. When you scan a list of the topics covered in Leviticus you get an idea why this is the case.²

We find instructions about how to worship God and offer sacrifices in the tabernacle: the burnt offering; the grain offering; the fellowship offering; the sin offering; the guilt offering; and unacceptable sacrifices. There are guidelines for priests: their ordination, their ministry, and rules they must follow. Leviticus contains commands concerning holy days and festivals: the Day of Atonement; the Sabbath; the Passover; Firstfruits; the Feast of Weeks; the Feast of Trumpets; the Feast of Tabernacles; the Sabbath Year; and the Year of Jubilee. Perhaps the book is most famous for its long list of rules for holy living: clean and unclean food; purification after childbirth; regulations about infectious skin diseases; regulations about mildew; cleansing from infectious skin diseases; cleansing from mildew; discharges causing uncleanness; prohibition against eating blood; and unlawful sexual relations.

The first verse of Leviticus tells us that God spoke to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, also known as the tabernacle. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Now they need to adjust to a new way of life. They must learn how to worship a God who is very near and present. In fact, after the tabernacle was completed, God's presence descended from Mt. Sinai and took up residence in the tent outside the camp. Moses and the people now must ask: How can we live in the presence of this holy God? At the end of the book of Exodus, God promised Moses that after the completion of the tabernacle, God would meet him there and give him "all of my commandments for the Israelites."³ The book of Leviticus contains those commandments.

Theologians believe that one of the primary purposes of these laws was to shape Israel into a distinct people, a people who worshiped only one God. The God of Israel was considered to be holy in terms of morality. The God of Israel was unlike other gods. Above all, Israel's mandate was to be a reflection of God's holy character.

Given this ancient context, it can be difficult to determine how to translate these instructions into our current context, thousands of years after they were given. Some of the laws aren't practiced by any Christian groups that I'm aware of. The laws concerning sacrifices were superseded by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We don't need to offer grain and animals to God in order to be forgiven for our sins. The rules concerning clean and unclean animals were dropped after Peter's vision in Acts 10.

Many other laws are viewed as irrelevant by most Christians, no matter where they fall on the theological spectrum. Consider the rules on getting rid of mildew or treating infectious skin diseases. Does

¹ The prayer and parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 8 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

² Background on Leviticus comes from Perry B. Yoder, *Leviticus: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 21-31, 41, 246-260.

³ Exodus 25:22

anyone insist that we follow Leviticus 19:19 “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” or Leviticus 19:27 “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard”?⁴

Some verses, for example Leviticus 19:28 “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves” are adopted by some Christians while ignored by others.

One verse is held up as immutable by many Christians while considered as nuanced by many others. Leviticus 18:22 states “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” The fact that the verse is included in a long list of unlawful sexual relations that most everyone would view as unchallengeable makes it a bit difficult to refute. You can refer to my sermon on gender identity and sexual orientation to see how I view this verse.⁵

There is one verse from Leviticus that I’ve quoted hundreds of times during my pastorate. Do you have any idea what it is? Of course, when I quote it, I’m usually quoting the words of Jesus found in Matthew 22:39 or Mark 12:31. Leviticus 19:18 reads “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus listed loving your neighbor as yourself as one of the most important commandments that we are to follow. The other one is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus stated that all the rest of the laws and everything uttered by the prophets hang on these two commandments. These are the verses that I come back to again and again and again as I try to live according to God’s ways and Jesus’ example.

I suppose I’ve never based an entire sermon on verses from Leviticus because much of it – with the exception of loving my neighbor as myself – doesn’t seem relevant to my Christian life. This week, though, the words of one Old Testament scholar have helped me gain some appreciation for the book. Perry Yoder lists two reasons – he calls them excellent reasons – why Leviticus should be read and studied today. First, the book teaches us important characteristics of God in relationship with humankind. From Leviticus we learn that God is gracious. Sacrifices aren’t motivated by an angry or hostile God. In fact, there’s no punishment for sins committed inadvertently. In addition, this friendly God extends extravagant grace by wiping away all past sins every year. Leviticus also emphasizes that God is holy. God’s holiness necessitates a certain way of life on the part of the people. Ethics – the moral principles that guide a person’s behavior - matter. And even though God is holy, God chooses to be present, moving into the very midst of the people. We too are called to worship this gracious, holy, present God.

A second value of Leviticus is that it helps us understand what it means to be God’s people. It helps us know how to be God’s people. Leviticus helps us to make sense of the five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It also helps us to understand the New Testament. It gives us the plain sense of items, expressions, and practices that are referred to symbolically and metaphorically in the New Testament. John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” recalls the presence of God that in Leviticus came to earth and dwelt in the tabernacle. When John the Baptist says, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,”⁶ reading about the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus can help us understand what he is saying. Leviticus also provides helpful background on understanding concepts such as purity and holiness.

How does all of this relate to today’s scripture, Leviticus 25? Sound the trumpet throughout the land and proclaim a year of jubilee! What a tremendous pronouncement given from God. Every 50 years, all land and homes were to be returned to their original inhabitants. All those sold into slavery were to be set free. Jubilee was one of God’s established ways of periodically “resetting” systems to ensure freedom and restoration both for people and for the earth.

But were these laws ever lived out? We don’t know. Regardless, these laws contain underlying core beliefs that should still be compelling to us as Christ-followers. The underlying impulses of the Year of

⁴ Verses in this sermon are quoted from the *New International Version*

⁵ Who Am I to Hinder God? delivered August 4, 2019

⁶ John 1:29

Jubilee—making sure that the vulnerable receive care—are consistent with other Old Testament laws and with Jesus’ words about the most important commandments.

The laws for Jubilee address God’s desire for creation to thrive, for freedom, and for justice. The God who created all things and called them good would of course desire that creation to thrive. The God who drew the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt would of course desire that those people remain free. The God who made a covenant with Israel and gave them the Ten Commandments to guide them to live in right relationship would of course desire them to live justly.

In our summer series about seeking justice, we’ve addressed some major issues – large, complicated concerns and societal ills that cause polarization and appear impossible for one person or group of people to address. It is exhausting to address a huge problem one week and another one the week after and yet another the week after that. For the next two Sundays, I’d like to step back from global issues and focus on personal ones. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily make them any less tricky.

The good news that Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4:18 addresses complex issues – good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. This good news is at the heart of the jubilee laws. Through these laws God’s people were given an opportunity to make things right. Above all, the people of Israel were to reflect God’s character. Yet over time that reflection became distorted.

The reflection is distorted in us as well. How might we align our hearts more closely with the heart of God? What practices – not only spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible study and worship – might help shape each of us in the way of jubilee?

We’ve finally arrived at the point where the sermon title makes sense. The concept of bucket filling and dipping was developed by Donald Clifton.⁷ He suggested that we all have a bucket within us that needs to be filled with positive experiences, such as recognition or praise. When we’re negative toward others, we use a dipper to remove from their buckets and diminish their positive outlook. When we treat others in a positive manner, we fill not only their buckets but ours as well. Subsequent authors have added the idea of a lid. Sometimes we need to step back from a situation or person to prevent dipping from our bucket or someone else’s.

Bucket filling “filosophy,” includes three bucket filling rules that lead to greater happiness.⁸ I’ll use a children’s book by Carol McCloud to illustrate these points.⁹

First rule, be a bucket filler. Be kind. Everyone in the whole world has an invisible bucket, dipper, and lid. Your bucket has been with you since the day you were born. It’s where you hold all your happiness. When you were little, you depended on other people to fill your bucket. As you grew, you started to fill your own bucket. You fill at least two buckets whenever you’re kind to another. You fill their bucket by being thoughtful towards them. Then, you fill your bucket because you feel happy when you help others feel happy.

What fills your bucket? My bucket is filled by Sunday morning worship, potlucks, Zoom calls with friends and family, spending time with my dog, watching “Good Mythical Morning” on YouTube, listening to Father Mike Schmitz read through the Bible in a year, and “painting” pictures on my iPad. Two weeks ago, I added to my bucket by participating in MennoCon21 from the comfort of my office. Five worship services, three Bible studies, five seminars, and one delegate session inspired me, challenged me, and helped me feel connected to our wider church family. I’ve also filled my bucket by doing difficult things like spending time in the nursing home with my mother, attending or officiating a funeral, and attempting to help someone with computer problems. It’s important to fill your bucket even with activities you might consider to be frivolous. Learning to fill buckets is the first secret to happiness.

Second rule, do your best not to dip. Don’t be mean. Dippers are what dip into buckets and remove some happiness. There are many ways to dip into buckets. Why would anyone have or use something that takes

⁷ Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton, *How Full Is Your Bucket? Positive Strategies for Work and Life*, Gallup Press, 2004.

⁸ <https://bucketfillers101.com/>

⁹ Carol McCloud, *Buckets, Dippers, and Lids: Secrets to Your Happiness*, Bucket Fillers, 2018.

happiness away? No one knows for sure. It's possible you don't know that you're bucket dipping. But when your bucket is dipped, you'll feel it. And when you dip into someone else's bucket, you don't fill your bucket. You empty it more. Your dipper can't take someone else's happiness and put it in your bucket. Everyone must learn not to dip because everyone has a dipper and bucket dipping hurts everyone.

When have you dipped from someone's bucket? When have you dipped from your own? There are times when difficult things must be addressed. There are times when bucket dipping might lead motivate someone to lasting change for the better. However, it's not unusual for bucket dipping to defeat your intended purpose. I recall an incident from my teaching days. I complimented a struggling student on some work he had done. He beamed. But then I ended the conversation by suggesting that he should always complete his work on time. His face fell and I was dismayed. Any bucket filling from the praise was undone by a comment that didn't need to be said at the time. Learning to resist the urge to dip is the second secret to happiness.

Third rule, use your lid. Protect your bucket and the buckets of others. Your bucket holds your good thoughts and feelings. You need to keep them. That's why your bucket needs a lid. Your lid gives you time to stop and think. It keeps you from losing more happiness while you try to understand why someone is dipping. You can be sure that if someone says or does something to hurt you, it's probably not about you. It's about them and their bucket that isn't full! However, if you don't know the problem is their less-than-full bucket and you dip back or remain hurt or angry, how will your bucket stay full?

You can dip into your own bucket and take away your own happiness by what you tell yourself. One way you do this is by comparing yourself to others. Use your lid to stop and remind yourself that every person is valuable, including you. The people who love you and you love the most can dip into your bucket and you can dip into theirs. Your lid helps you to understand, forgive, and protect the good feelings in your bucket.

But, don't keep your lid on your bucket all the time. If you do, how can people fill it? Most people are awesome bucket fillers and, most of the time, they help to make your life terrific. Your lid can help others and their lid can help you. You do this when you stand up for one another.

In what situations have you used your lid? With the overwhelming amount of information available to us from an overwhelming number of sources with an overwhelming cascade of facts that support diametrically opposed points of view, sometimes using a lid means turning off the television, radio, computer, and cellphone. We need to use our lids to protect ourselves even from sources with which we agree. Sometimes using your lid means changing the subject even when talking about important issues. Sometimes using your lid might even mean staying away from church for awhile.

In what situations have you protected the buckets of others? Standing up for each other in large and small ways is the essence of Jesus' proclamation of good news in Luke 4. Learning to use your lid is the third secret to happiness.

The bucket filling "fillosophy" states that when we are aware of each individual's bucket, dipper, and lid, including our own, we can live happier lives by growing in kindness, self-control, resilience, and forgiveness. This connects with God's grace, holiness, and ethics as outlined in Leviticus. It connects with the Year of Jubilee which boils down to the notion that God wants everyone's bucket to be full. It also connects with the two greatest commandments. When my bucket is full, I am best able to love the Lord my God with all my passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence. I can best offer love to my neighbor when I'm operating from a full bucket. My prayer is a full bucket for everyone so that we all may live in the way of jubilee.