

Farming Faithfulness In the Way of Hospitality

Leviticus 19:9-10

Farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality requires us to farm...

1. Social holiness.

Farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality will require us to...

2. Plant, water and grow.

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Farming Faithfulness In the Way of Holy Hospitality

It was the fall of 2009. I had just entered my freshman year of college at Northwest Nazarene University, NNU. I was feeling okay heading off to college. There was some hesitation about living more on my own and in an unfamiliar area. I grew up in Mountain Home and rarely ever visited Nampa. Boise, yes. Nampa, no. I was also unsure of how classes would go and how hard it would be. I had just graduated from high school three months prior at the top of my class and worked super hard to be valedictorian, so I was still expecting myself to perform at such a high level academically. But after a few weeks, the stress really got to me and it was SO HARD. The only thing that really helped me get through that first semester of school was encouragement from my advisor, Dr. Allen, who had some experience working with type A students (she herself was one), reminding me that my identity and worth were not found in my GPA, but in Christ. The other thing that helped during that semester was my mom helping me figure out how to manage my time better. My mom had me write down every hour I was awake and write down when I had classes, when I would eat meals, when I would wake up and go to bed; any hours I had left was time I could use to do homework. I got really good at this, and I felt relief as I realized I had more time in my day than I could imagine in my head, and I slowly became less stressed with school, and more confident in my ability to succeed.

The rest of my years at NNU were filled with so much fun, silliness, laughter, making friends, travel, and of course, learning. I thrived in school and loved it so much that I knew when Pastor Mike asked me four years ago what area I felt drawn to really help out in here at church, I responded with encouraging college students. I felt called to encourage them as I had been encouraged and help them tread this new and unknown territory of college life. But eventually this passion grew to not just helping college students, but young adults in general and walking with them as they figure out life, jobs, careers, and what God is calling them to. This is something I really feel God has gifted me with and given me a passion for, and it's a joy to be our Young Adult Pastor today.

Now, I also have the pleasure of being your Guest Services Pastor too, which means I get to oversee our hospitality team full of greeters, ushers, hosts and safety team members as they minister and serve you all as we gather here or online for worship. Yes, we even have greeters online, and they do a superb job. I also get to think through ways we can make sure we are doing our best to be welcoming and inviting for our first time or regular guests as they traverse new and uncharted territory for the first time visiting us here at church.

Somehow I get into these positions that help others tread new and unknown territories, as I pastor our young adults as they transition into new phases of life, and as I help guests feel more welcomed and able to find their way to things as they attend church for the first time.

As I was thinking about what I should preach on today, a verse from perhaps what you would call an uncharted book of the Bible came to mind, and so I thought, why not? So, today we're going to dive into a book of the Bible that perhaps we tend to stray away from and tread new territory in Leviticus!

I know what you're thinking. Leviticus? Isn't that a book full of laws? Yes, yes it is, but at the heart of this book, we learn about God's character, God's holiness, and how we are called to be God's holy people. In fact, it is in Leviticus where this concept of holiness appears the most out of any other book of the Bible, appearing over 120 times.¹ When we look at this book then, it becomes so much more than a book of laws, and we see it more so as God graciously revealing Godself and informing the Israelites on what it looks like to live as God's holy people as they tread new and uncharted territory in lands that were not their own and surrounded by nations who worshiped other deities. God gave Israel a guide for traversing this new and unknown territory of what it looks like to live as God's holy people. In chapter 19 verse 2, God explicitly reveals his holiness for the first time as he speaks to Moses and tells him to say to the entire nation of Israel:

“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2)

What a powerful statement, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” Does this sound similar? If so, perhaps because this is similar to what we hear Jesus commanding in Matthew 5:23:

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:23)

Same concept, different wording, and we see from the Old to the New Testament, throughout many generations and centuries, this same God, and this same concept of holiness repeated and consistently asked of us as we have chosen to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and pattern our lives after God. What we also see extending from Leviticus and informing the second half of Jesus' answer when asked what the greatest commandment is in Matthew 22 comes from Leviticus 19: 18 where God instructs the Israelites to:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)

When I think about what it means to farm faithfulness among our young adults and guest services, and as we begin to tread into new and uncharted territory by becoming multi-site, multi-generational and multi-ethnic, it is essential for us to take into consideration the call to be holy and the call to love our neighbors as ourselves; this call to farm holy hospitality.

Did you know that what keeps young adults plugged in at church is how welcoming the church is? Not only is this research published in multiple books on young adult ministry, but I've heard from several young adults who started attending church in the last few years

¹ Kenneth Collins & Robert Wall (Eds.), *Leviticus*, Wesley One Volume Commentary (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 66.

that they didn't know church could be so welcoming and friendly, and that really impacted their decision to keep coming. Did you also know that we only have the first four minutes and the last 10 minutes of a person's interaction at church to make a good impression on them before they make their decision whether they will return? The first four are taking in our church and the last 10 are seeing if the smile and warm greeting in the beginning was genuine.² While it seems so insignificant, the way we live in the ordinary times, the way we live and act when we think no one is watching, is really what speaks the most to others about our faith. Therefore, our faith must show forth authenticity in the ordinary affairs of life, and good news for us, sandwiched right in between Leviticus 19:2 ("be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy") and Leviticus 19:18 ("love your neighbor as yourself) are laws that help us understand how to do these two things better, and where we will land today is in Leviticus 19:9-10. If you are able, please stand in honor of the reading of God's word.

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

If we look at this verse from a business perspective, it doesn't really make sense, right? Who wouldn't want to gather everything from the field to sell? The more you harvest, the more you can sell and the more money you will make, right? Likewise, with the grapes. Leaving perfectly good grapes on the ground doesn't make sense. Those could be used to make more wine, and thus, more money. Another way you could look at it is that if you don't reap the edges of your field, is that going to stop those edges of the field from growing more if they're never harvested, or harvested as well? Don't you need to prune in order to keep growing? And if the grapes fall on the ground, does that mean those grape seeds are going to start growing more grapes in the spots you don't want grape vines? This doesn't really make sense, and it didn't make sense to those around Israel. It was a distinctive practice that stood out to others.

It's important to note that the Israelites (and us) are not called to do things just to stand out to others or show others how distinct we are with no reason, but to communicate who God is. One biblical commentator writing on Leviticus noted that, "Things done and things purposefully left undone – is to engender personal and social holiness, to remind God's people that they are God's and to ensure that they are a light to the nations."³ With this in mind then, leaving food on the ground is not done just to be weird, but for our own sake to practice trusting God and living this holy life that images our creator, God, and to reveal to the world who God is: welcoming, inviting, hospitable.

These are things we say we do here at church through our Guest Services team and it was one of the things our young adults wanted to be known for when we first started a young adult ministry three years ago. But we can't just have specific ministries being welcoming

² *Building Church Leaders*, 2015.

³ Collins & Wall (Eds.), 84.

to new guests or to young adults, just like God didn't only call the Levitical priests to be holy. God expanded it to all of Israel, and we as West Valley Church are all called to engage in these practices. As we engage and practice being welcoming, inviting and hospitable, we will live into who God has called us to be (holy) and what God has called us to do (love neighbor).

What does it look like to farm faithfulness in the way of hospitality according to our two verses in Leviticus? While we don't have literal crops growing behind us for us to harvest here at church, we can apply this metaphorically and see that farming faithfulness is not only about harvesting everything we can, but more about sharing with others and letting others "taste and see that the Lord is good."⁴ Farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality will require us to farm...

1. Social holiness.

Let me break it down a bit. Holiness is living our lives in a way that is reflective of and images God, who above all is holy. We are not holy apart from God. Only God can make us holy, and for us today who live on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection, that looks like accepting what Jesus did for us (dying on the cross for our sin so that we could be reconciled to God) and then living into that resurrected new life with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is something we do day after day. We keep pursuing Christ and pursuing holiness. While it is important for us to grow in our faith and relationship with God through personal spiritual disciplines, such as daily prayer, reading the Bible, fasting, tithing, things that help us grow in holiness, it is equally important that we live in communion with others, for when we do so, we are living into and reflecting the fullest image of God – God as triune – as God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit are all in relationship with each other. We too then, are created to be in relationship, not just with God, but with others, and as we love God and love others, we live in the way that farms holy hospitality in the way of social holiness.

This is what Leviticus is calling us to in chapter 19:9-10. God calls us in verses 9 and 10 to share the harvest with others, not to keep it for ourselves for our own gains. "God is the ultimate landowner, and as stewards of that land, there is no reason to be selfish and stingy. Grasping, covetous, and stingy personalities are not holy persons"⁵ (NIB, 1133), nor are they hospitable, inviting and welcoming persons.

What it looks like to share the harvest is proactive not reactive. The example God gave the Israelites was an example of action, of doing and being something. We don't see God saying here, "When the poor and the foreigners come to you *then* start reaping the very edges of your field and leaving grapes on the ground." God says, "Reap *now* to the very edges of your field and don't pick up the grapes that have fallen to the ground so that the poor and the foreigners can harvest them." God is expecting the poor and foreigners to come; God is awaiting the arrival of the poor and the foreigners and is excitedly anticipating them to

⁴ Psalm 34: 8, NIV.

⁵ *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1133.

come so that they can know God's love through the Israelites, through God's chosen holy people.

As our Young Adult Pastor, I'm often in conversations that make me feel proud of what we have going on here at church. So far, I'm the only Young Adult Pastor on our district, and across our USA/Canada region, I've met others who are more often starting a young adult ministry rather than have something going already, so I'm put in a position where I get to excitedly share how our ministry here has grown and what we're doing, and I get to help encourage and mentor others as they start out. But there's another conversation that I hear often too, and it's the one where young adults just don't show up. I have a friend who's ministering to young adults and she mentioned to me that she had rented out a whole theater for her group to watch a movie at; the night came and no one showed. However, she's still ministering to young adults and offering a place and community for them to belong and connect with others of a similar age. I think that's the point here too. Even if no foreigner came by these fields, God would still require the Israelites to do what he commanded, because there's a chance maybe one person would show and be able to be fed. We're called to live in community, but we're also called to anticipate and prepare to welcome community.

Same is true for young adult ministry and even some of the things we do here at church for young adults. Sometimes we don't get huge crowds at Sunday class or small groups, but having our young adults know there is a place for them and a place that welcomes them is practicing this holy hospitality God is calling us to. Being prepared and being ready to welcome young adults, or really anyone who walks through our doors is farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality.

Farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality also requires us to...

2. Plant, water and grow.

While it's necessary to harvest in order to be fed, we can't forget the important first steps to plant, water and grow in order to get a harvest in the first place.

If you're into gardening or know anything about gardening you would know that to grow anything, you need to plant seeds, water them, and tend to them as sprouts begin to grow. Without these basic steps, there will be no harvest. This is why droughts were so devastating in Old Testament times. Drought brought famines; famines meant no or little food from crops...aka...no harvest. So instead of worrying about what we're harvesting, what if we paid closer attention to plant, water and grow so we can offer a harvest and an overabundance of a harvest to where there is plenty to be left on the ground and not harvested? This is what young adult ministry has looked like here at West Valley Church, and what it is starting to look like here on our district and across our USA/Canada region.

Our young adult ministry started in April of 2018, a little over three years ago. We started with a Sunday gathering before church service and planted the seed. We watered this

ministry by adding a few more things to our rhythm, such as planning monthly events to encourage fellowship among our young adults and be something our young adults could invite unchurched friends to. As we started to grow, some natural and organic relationships began to grow and build to where we were having small groups forming for women and men. We have kept tending to what has grown, and there has been some really good fruit produced from it. We have young adults who have been baptized, grown closer to God, and who have even invited friends to join at monthly events or on their own free-will invited friends to their houses for food and fellowship. Things are happening among our young adults and this ministry, and the only thing we can do is continue to be faithful to farming what was planted and what God continues to keep planting among us.

Lastly, farming faithfulness in the way of hospitality means that we practice...

3. Leaving food on the ground.

We call this “practicing” leaving food on the ground because I think for most of us, it’s hard to do that. It’s counter-cultural to what we’ve been taught. It was even counter-cultural to the Israelites too. God had to make a law that basically said, “do not pick up after yourself.” How many of you kids or teens would like to hear that from your parents? But we don’t, right? If we did, we may wonder if something was wrong! I think picking up after ourselves is also so engrained in our understanding of hospitality too. When we invite people over to our houses, we want it to be cleaned and in really good shape. But here, hospitality involves leaving food on the ground.

Now before I get in trouble with all the parents in this room today, let me be clear that there is a distinction of what is being left on the ground. The food that is left on the ground is good food. It’s not junk or trash. It is part of the crop that *should* be harvested. It’s part of the crop that the field owners and their workers see as being really good fruit that fell to the ground when getting too much of a handful when picking or because the fruit was just so ripe and ready that it fell off the vine. The food that is left behind is food that the harvesters want to pick up but are instructed not to.

Leaving really good food behind for others to eat is what makes this practice an act of holy hospitality. It’s taking into consideration the other and sharing what is best for the other rather than keeping it for oneself. It’s also inviting as it is leaving a trail behind for others to follow so others may know the way to God’s love, forgiveness, grace, and holiness.

Each thing we do as a young adult ministry is intentional and always looking to live into what we are called to be and to do, even though half the time it looks like we’re just having fun. Each thing we do, whether it be meeting for Sunday class, a small group, or an event, is like a grape left on the ground just waiting to be picked up by others, as it invites others into the fellowship, into a community made up of God’s holy people where they can experience first-hand how much God loves them through the hospitality they receive.

One of my favorite events coming up is our annual Friendsgiving where we all eat together at one long table and share in a meal and give thanks for friends and fellowship. It's a reminder of the community that has been built and grown over the years and a reminder to me of how faithful God has been to this ministry as I sit back and watch all the different conversations take place and relationships continue to build and form. The last time we gathered for this event, I led us all in receiving communion and being reminded of God's love for us, and that, ultimately is what we give thanks for. There was a young adult there that had a rough past you could say, and she wasn't even planning to come, so when she arrived and there was a name card for her with a small cracker and cup of juice, she was reminded that she was known, that she was accepted and invited to partake in this gift of new life Jesus offers us. To her, it was like finding a grape on the ground, picking it up, and internalizing just what it means to be accepted into a community of faith and receive the type of hospitality Leviticus calls us to.

Leaving little grapes on the ground isn't just for our young adults or young adult ministry to do or for any of the other ministries to do, even though I know they do a great job through other events we plan like Trunk or Treat, Breakfast with Santa, Easter Coffee and Fellowship time. We all as West Valley Church – each and every one of us – are called to be inviting, leaving food so others know the way and can taste and see the Lord is good. What kinds of things are we leaving behind for others to follow? How are we living in such a way that others see the holiness of God in us? The holy love of God in us? May we all do our part to farm faithfulness in the way of hospitality through living a life of social holiness, planting, watering and growing and leaving food on the ground.

Let us pray.

Benediction

As we go out today, may we remember to live into the command Jesus gave us in Matthew 22:37-39 which we learned has some of its roots in Chapter 19 of Leviticus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...[and] Love your neighbor as yourself."

Now go and do.