

UNFOULING THE WELL A Devotional Meditation from

Leviticus 19:1-20:27, 24:22; Amos 9:7-15; Exodus 19:5-6; Matthew 12:33-37;
John 4:7-14; Acts 15:1-32; Titus 2:11-14; James 3:1-18; 1 Peter 1:13-17

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Outlet of deep well in Abu Minqar, Farafra, Western Desert, Egypt. Photo by Alvar Closas, [via Flickr](#).

My difficult year in Iraq in 2008 was made bearable by the best boss I ever had. This Army colonel led by example and took care of his people, even if it meant denying himself and carrying heavier burdens. I wonder if he did that because of the burdens of his own troubled life. He did well enough shielding those from us, but the pain of his heart presented itself in unexpected ways, such as in his speech. I believe that's why he was the most profane man I've ever met. If the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart, then what came from his revealed a heart bruised, abused, and corrupted.

Yet he was still the best boss I ever had, and not beyond redemption. I could not talk with him directly about the salvation offered freely through the Messiah (after all, "Jesus Christ" was his favorite exclamation, but not as an Evangelical might say the Name). I could, however, quietly go about my days honoring my Creator and Redeemer by living as best I could according to His standards of social conduct. Apparently, that had more of an impact than I thought. One day, as my boss was talking with some other officers, he turned toward me and said, "Look at Al, here. I don't think I've heard him cuss once since I've been here."

It's true; he hadn't. That's because one of those standards I have purposefully cultivated since childhood is not merely avoiding profanity, but using words that uplift the hearer. I can't take credit for that; my Redeemer brought this to my attention through the pastor of our church. One Sunday, he preached from James 3, the passage where Yeshua's brother urges God's people to keep watch over their tongues. That sermon made quite an impression on my young heart. The apostle's exhortation still resonates with me in the language of the King James that our pastor used:

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

James 3:7-10 KJV

That's when, at the age of 11, I began to watch the words of my mouth. It wasn't an outward show of pretend holiness, but the sincere expression of a child of God who took His Creator seriously, and desired to have his heart transformed as our Redeemer promises. How far that transformation has progressed is something I leave for others to answer. All I can say is it's been my motivation for a lifetime.

This is where we get to a very touchy subject. Those who profess allegiance to Messiah Yeshua should be aware that we're called to be set apart from the rest of the world. That's what Israel is supposed to be, the holy people chosen out of all the peoples on the earth to be God's own possession. It's been easy to see that in the Jewish nation for millennia. They are the visible remnant of Israel, and the greatest evidence that our Creator God exists and is willing and able to fulfill His promises. Jewish people are set apart regardless whether they want to be, which sometimes can be a good thing, but usually translates to considerable ostracism and suffering.

But then there are the rest of us: we multitudes born in the nations whose only claim to be part of that set-apart nation is that we have attached ourselves to Israel's Messiah-King. It's so much more difficult for us to legitimize that claim because too often we don't understand the responsibility we incur as subjects of our Israelite King. Yet His apostles assert that claim on our behalf, and to back up their assertion they use the same language God used when He made His marriage proposal to Israel at Mount Sinai. He said at that time that if our Hebrew ancestors would listen closely to His voice and keep His covenant, then they would be His own treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). That's the same language Paul uses to describe us in his letter to Pastor Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, training us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live in a manner that is self-controlled and righteous and godly in the present age. We wait for the blessed hope and appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah *Yeshua*. He gave Himself for us so that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and so that He might purify for Himself a chosen people, zealous for good deeds.

Titus 2:11-14 TLV

Another way to explain this is that we are to be holy because our Redeeming God is holy. That's not just a nice phrase the apostles made up. They were referring to the heart of the Torah: those chapters in Leviticus that cover all the details of how a holy people are supposed to act. There's an entire section called "Holy Ones" (*Kedoshim* in Hebrew) that starts like this:

ADONAI spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to all the congregation of *Bnei-Yisrael* and tell them: You shall be *kedoshim* [holy ones], for I, *ADONAI* your God, am holy. Each one of you is to respect his mother and his father, and keep My *Shabbatot* [Sabbaths]. I am *ADONAI* your God. Do not turn to idols, or make molten gods for yourselves. I am *ADONAI* your God.

Leviticus 19:1-4 TLV

The LORD then gives instructions on His standards of proper social conduct, such as:

- Leave the gleanings of the harvest for the poor.
- Do not steal, cheat, lie, or swear falsely by the LORD'S Name.
- Deal honestly with neighbors.

- Pay hired workers their wages on time.
- Treat the deaf and blind kindly.
- Be fair and impartial in justice.
- Avoid unkind thoughts toward our brethren – which means don't hate them.
- Do not seek vengeance or bear a grudge.
- Avoid improper sexual activity, like adultery, fornication, and prostitution.
- Keep away from divination and the occult.

A great way to summarize all this is by saying we are to *love our neighbors as ourselves*. Which, by the way, is also in this section of the Torah.

These are the minimum standards we should strive to keep so we can honor our Redeemer and fellowship with the community of His holy ones. Which gets to another apostolic exhortation, again authored by James, our Messiah's brother. The occasion was the great Council of Jerusalem, called to discuss what to do about the multitude of Gentiles coming to faith in Yeshua. James came up with the solution:

Therefore, I judge not to trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God—but to write to them to abstain from the contamination of idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what is strangled, and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has had in every city those who proclaim him, since he is read in all the synagogues every *Shabbat*.

Acts 15:19-21 TLV

This specifies the minimum standard for fellowship with the community of saints, and the prescription for how these new community members can learn the way of holiness. Interestingly enough, James takes these requirements straight from the heart of the Torah, which specifies that there is to be one standard in Israel for both the native-born and the stranger.

This is the same James who says to guard our tongues and make sure we speak blessing instead of cursing. This is more than just polite speech; this is how we keep from fouling the well of living water placed in us by our Messiah-King.