

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: LEVITICUS."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Leviticus

Introduction:

Leviticus was the first book Jewish children studied in the synagogue. Today it is last book Christians take seriously. It seems incomprehensible and irrelevant to modern man. What do all these rituals for sacrifice and regulations regarding uncleanness have to do with us?

About the only memorable verse in an otherwise seemingly dull book is Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So the challenge is laid down, how can I help 21st century sophisticated post-modern American Christians pay attention to the third book of the Torah, which, remember, is the God-breathed, inspired Word of God and profitable "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16-17)?

The Book of Leviticus begins with the word "and."

Leviticus 1:1 (KJV) *And* the Lord called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying, ...

It picks right up where we left off in Exodus. During the whole course of this book Israel is still camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, still at the very beginning of what would be 40 years in the wilderness. God is continuing to give His instructions, His Laws to His people.

Exodus 40:17 tells us the tabernacle was erected the first day of the first month, and Numbers 1:1 begins on the first day of the second month. The revelation of God in Leviticus was given in one month at Mt. Sinai. God took six days to create everything but forty days with Moses on how to make the tabernacle and live holy lives. The work of grace is more glorious than the work of creation.

No other book in the Bible contains more of the very words of God. By that I mean, God is the direct speaker on every page of this book.

The phrase “And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, “.....” occurs over thirty times in 27 chapters.

The glory of the Lord filled the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, and out of the midst of His glorious presence the voice of the Lord came to Moses.

In Exodus God first spoke to Mose out of a burning bush, then from the mountain, now He speaks from His tabernacle, from the mercy seat between the cherubim. From that place where once a year atonement would be made.

In Genesis God creates the world and calls out a people for Himself who would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

In Exodus God rescues His people out of the bondage of slavery through Moses and begins to instruct them on how to worship Him, giving them the plan for the tabernacle.

In Leviticus God furthers that instruction, He gets specific and tells His people what kind of people He expects them to be.

Leviticus 11:45 For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

“In a sense, you could say *that it took one night for God to get the people of Israel out of Egypt but that it would take a lifetime for God to get Egypt out of the heart of the people* of Israel” (Nate Holdridge).

I can totally relate. In one night 52 years ago God delivered me out of the bondage of my sin, and saved me. I was born again. But for the last 52 years God has been at work sanctifying me to get the sin out of me, to get Egypt out of me.

Exodus leaves us with a burning question if you’re an Israelite. How in the world can the holy and pure God of the universe dwell among His sinful and impure people? How can He live in our very midst without His holiness melting us in our sin and impurity?

The answer is the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is about God making a holy people, a holy nation, a separated people from all the peoples of the earth. It will help us if we remember two things while we are reading.

First, God is present with His people when they worship Him, then in the tabernacle, now by His Holy Spirit in us. Rituals tell us what is important to a people, theirs did and ours do. God's greatest gift to us is His promise to be with us.

God is present in the entire book, speaking to His people and being worshiped by His people. Everything in this book takes place "before the Lord."

Sometimes He manifests His presence in special displays of His divine glory in the fire and the cloud. But God is also present in the mundane duties of life, in every aspect of life, religion, sex, relations with neighbors and those in special need.

Second, since sin cuts us off from God, sacrifices for atonement are essential as a means for pardon and forgiveness. All the great sacrificial system, with its priests and festivals, was meant to make it possible for sinful people to worship and serve a Holy God.

This book teaches us about the character of God, the sinfulness of our hearts and the great gift of a perfect sacrificial lamb who takes away the sins of the world and makes it possible for us to be reconciled to God and have fellowship with Him. Everything in this book points to Jesus and to the importance of worship.

Leviticus gives us the background to all the other books of the Bible. If we want to understand all the references to the sacrificial offerings, the ceremonies for purification, the institutions such as the sabbatical year and year of Jubilee, this is the book we have to turn to.

Leviticus spells out for Christians how seriously God takes sin and how God directly deals with sin, through blood sacrifice and purification.

Leviticus is the book of atonement and purification, it is the book of sanctification and seeking after holiness. It is the book about avoiding, combatting and removing sin among God's people.

These instructions remind His people they are not holy, but sinful and they cannot take lightly how they come before a holy God and worship Him. It can't just be any way they please. It must be the way He says. The grace in all of this is that God desires to be worshipped and He makes a way.

The question is how can we be holy when God commands "Be holy as I am holy."?

Holiness is not about perfection, it is about separation, being separated from what is unholy, impure, sinful, as we read in our text.

Leviticus 20:26 You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

The outline of Leviticus shows how a holy God can relate to a sinful, unholy people.

Leviticus 1-7 begins by explaining the five ritual sacrifices that address sin and enable them to worship this King rightly. (The sacrificial system reminds us of the cost of our sin and the grace of God in providing a substitute.)

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Sin can be forgiven, but a penalty must be paid. Remember none of these sacrifices fully forgave sin.

Hebrews 10:1, 4 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ... 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Leviticus 8-10 provides for priests to intercede on their behalf and lead them in worship before the king. (The priestly system reminds us of God's grace in providing a mediator.)

The picture here of course is of our great high priest, Jesus. Hebrews 4:14ff.

In these chapters Aaron and his sons are ordained, the first service in the tabernacle is held. And Aaron's sons are disciplined by God for their presumptuous worship, not worshipping the way God said. Just as the people broke the first laws with the golden calf, so the first priests broke the first worship laws.

Leviticus 10:1-2 Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

It is a serious thing to fall into the hands of the living God who is holy and a consuming fire.

Leviticus 11-15 gives them laws to teach them how to deal properly with impurity. (This reminds us of how Christ takes us from being unclean to being clean.)

God is unapproachable holy. Nothing unclean or imperfect or sinful can enter His presence. Being physically clean before the Lord pictures a moral and spiritual reality.

Leprosy is a shadow, a picture of indwelling sin. Leprosy paints a horrible picture, to remind us of the horror of stinking, festering sin.

Psalm 38:5-7 My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness,
6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.
7 For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.

Leviticus 16 provides a yearly ceremony to remove every last ounce of sin and impurity from the kingdom. (This points to Jesus who takes away our sins.)

The Day of Atonement occupies the central place in the entire book. It is the greatest and holiest day in the Jewish year, when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year to atone for the sins of the people.

This was the only day, one day a year when only one man, the High Priest, was allowed by God to enter into the Holy Place of His presence. God is God and God is separate by His holiness from man. It had to be repeated every year.

What an anticipation to that great day when the once for all perfect sacrifice was made and the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and we are given access by the blood of Jesus into the presence of God.

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The ceremony of the two goats reminds us of God's promise, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

Leviticus 17-27 provides a whole series of laws in other areas to direct them in living like a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (This reminds us of how we are to be holy.)

Here we have instructions for the seven feasts of Israel, including Sabbath, Passover, Weeks (Pentecost) and Atonement. The sacrifices picture the blood that saves. The feasts picture the food that sustains.

Most of this section deals with moral laws and how to be set apart and holy in comparison to the surrounding pagan nations. This is the section that the enemies of God and His Word love to find ammunition to make fun of Christians.

They will cite verses about eating pork or shellfish, wearing polyester, getting tattoos, putting adulterers to death. They will say things like since we do those things, then homosexuality must be OK also. They don't fear God and they don't care to discern God's ways, His moral laws and the laws that separated the people from the Canaanites.

Jesus.

This book should have a special place in the heart of every person who feels deeply his own sin. This book really is in a way the Gospel of God's grace, God's glorious provision for a relationship with sinners.

All the redemptive realities of Christ's person and work on earth are pictured in Leviticus. Everything in Leviticus is a shadow pointing to the reality of things to come.

Colossians 2:17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Hebrews 10:1 The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities.

Every day the Israelites could behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

While Moses and the people of God didn't know it, God was revealing them the secrets of Christ and the nature of His person and the manner and meaning of His death and resurrection.

Leviticus contains the full system of truth for how sinners may be reconciled to a holy God. Our heavenly Father has condescended to us His children to instruct us in the path of righteousness and holiness.

As the sacrifices had to be pure, without imperfections and just as the priests had special rules for purification and had to be without physical deformities or handicaps, so we need a perfect sacrifice and a perfect priest to offer it. Jesus fulfilled everything, He was the flawless sacrifice and the sinless priest.

Hebrews 7:26-27 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Without holiness, no one will ever see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). So how do we get from the righteousness of the law to the righteousness of faith? In the gospel of Christ, something mysterious happens.

Hebrews 10:14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

When we honestly confess and acknowledge our unholiness and put our total trust and faith in Jesus, His sacrifice and His righteousness are credited to us, and achieve for us everything the countless sacrifices in Leviticus could only point forward to.

Christ's holiness makes it possible for us to be adopted into the family of God and into the presence of God. Christ is our holiness. Christians are called saints, which is to say, holy.

If I were to ask you to pick one adjective to describe yourself, I have a gut feeling holy would not be the word. But by faith in Jesus that is what we are in God's sight. God achieved it for us, and is now making it true in us.

We need the Old Testament to sober us about how holy God is, and we need the New Testament lest we despair of any hope that we could survive in the presence of such a holy God, let alone enjoy him forever. Unapproachable holiness and overflowing mercy and grace.

How much more than the OT Jews should we worship and glorify God and His Christ, how much more should we love our revealed Savior, whom we know, not veiled but unveiled to us.

No wonder the true Israelite was stirred in his soul to say,

Psalm 84:1-2 How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
2 My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.