

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

Holiness, Blessings, Dedications

Leviticus 17-27

INTRODUCTION

One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, came up to Jesus and asked Him a question to test Him. He said: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” In other words, from all 613 laws found in the Pentateuch (the first five books), which law is the most important? Jesus answered the lawyer by quoting from two different books of the Pentateuch. First, quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, Jesus said to him: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Deut 6:5). *This is the first and greatest commandment.* Then, quoting from the book of Leviticus, Jesus said: *And the second is like it:* “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18). *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.* (Mt 22:34-40, Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28).

It is important to note here that one of Jesus’ most famous teachings, the “second great commandment,” was taken from the book of Leviticus. In the New Testament, we find a total of ten references to the law from Leviticus, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (see Mt 5:43; Mt 19:19; Mt 22:39; Lk 10:27; Lk 10:36-37; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). To fully understand the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Leviticus is an essential key.

In review, the Book of Leviticus can be divided into seven sections.

1. **The Five Sacrifices** (Lev 1-7): whole burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings.
2. **The Priesthood** (Lev 8-10): the consecration and anointing of Aaron as high priest, the consecration of his sons.
3. **Ritual Purity** (Lev 11-15): laws concerning “ritual purity,” cleanliness and uncleanness.
4. **The Day of Atonement** (Lev 16): a holy day observed once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. The rituals of this day both cleansed and re-consecrated to God the priests, the people, and the sanctuary.
5. **Laws of Holiness** (Lev 17-25): laws concerning worship, moral purity, mercy, and justice.
6. **Covenant Blessings and Curses** (Lev 26): blessings promised for covenant faithfulness; and the consequences of unfaithfulness.
7. **Voluntary Dedications** (Lev 27): the voluntary offering of persons, places or things, voluntarily consecrated to God.

In our previous session, we studied the first four sections, ending with the “Day of Atonement” (Lev 16). In this session, we will study the last three sections of the book of Leviticus, beginning with the Laws of Holiness. (Lev 17-25).

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Laws of Holiness (Leviticus 17-25)

What is Holiness?

Holiness is first and foremost, an attribute of God. The word “holy” (in Hebrew *qados*, in Greek *hagios*) means “sacred, set apart.” God is “holy,” because He is set apart, transcendent, totally other. He is perfect in every way; He lacks nothing. He is eternal, set apart from all His creation.

Holiness is an important theme in the Book of Leviticus. Not only is God holy, He also calls his people to be “holy,” set apart from among the nations, dedicated to Him, sanctified by Him, and obedient to Him, living a life that is pure and pleasing to Him. Speaking to Israel through Moses, the Lord says:

“I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy... 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” (Lev 11:44-45).

“Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctify you” (Lev 20:7-8).

“You shall be holy unto Me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine” (Lev 20:26).

In the New Testament, Jesus confirms this Old Testament call to holiness. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). And in his first letter, the Apostle Peter writes: “As obedient children, do not conform to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

The Laws of Holiness

In Leviticus, Chapters 19-25, the word “holy” or “holiness” occurs some eighty-five times, and so the title for this section: “The Laws of Holiness.” Here we find a description of the kind of life the people of Israel are called to live, which sets them apart from all the other nations of the world as a “holy” people, pure, blameless, and consecrated to God. In essence, the laws of holiness are an extension of the two Great Commandments, to love God and neighbour, and an extension of the Ten Commandments – the “Ten Words” (Decalogue) that describe God’s people.

The *Laws of Holiness* are presented in the following order: holy and unholy worship sacrifices, the holiness of blood, holy and unholy sexual relations, holy and unholy actions, penalties for lawbreakers, holy conduct for priests, acceptable holy offerings, holy feast days, and holy years (the seventh year and the Jubilee year).

Holy and Unholy Worship Sacrifices (Lev 17:1-8)

Before the Covenant at Sinai, sacrifices in worship of God could be offered anywhere, by the first-born sons of Israel, who served as “priests” and “kings” of their households or family clans.

However, because of Israel’s constant temptation to sin by worshipping the pagan gods of other nations, the Covenant at Sinai made two important restrictions to set Israel apart, and to protect them from slipping back into idolatry.

The first restriction limited the priesthood to the tribe of Levi. The second restriction limited the offering of sacrifices in worship of God to one specific place – the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle). In the future, the Tabernacle sanctuary would be replaced with a more permanent structure, the Temple in Jerusalem.

In support of the first commandment, “You have no other gods before Me” (Deut. 5:7), the first set of holiness laws, as described in Lev 17:1-8, forbade the offering of worship sacrifices at any other place other than the Tabernacle.

The sacrificial animal could be killed in or outside the camp, but the ritual offering in worship could only take place at the Tent of Meeting. Anyone who refused to bring his sacrifice to the Tent of Meeting would be guilty and would bring about his own destruction.

These laws were specific to animals being sacrificed with the intention of worship. Any animals, whether domestic or wild, intended specifically for food, for all to eat, could be killed and eaten anywhere.

The Holiness of Blood (Lev 17:10-16)

The prohibition against consuming blood is an old one. It goes back to the Covenant that God established with Noah after the Flood. “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen 9:3-4).

Blood was believed to be the source of life in a living creature, and therefore, something that belonged to God. It had to be drained, pour out upon the earth, as a sign the flesh of the animal is a gift from God, but that the life of the animal must return to God. Respect for the sanctity of blood was a sign of respect for God, the Giver of life.

Blood was also considered to be sacred because it had an *atonement value*. The animal sacrificed took the place of the offerer, and the blood sprinkled before the veil of the Tabernacle and poured out at the base of the altar would atone for any sins committed.

In the New Testament, at first, Jewish Christians continued to keep this practice of not consuming blood. They were scandalized by the fact that Gentile Christians did consume meat together with blood. To prevent further scandal, the first council held in Jerusalem wisely laid down the ruling that Christians were to abstain from blood (see Acts 15:20). However, this ruling was only a temporary one. Jesus had pronounced all foods to be clean, including the blood of animals (Mark 7:18-23). This was confirmed by the vision the Apostle Peter experienced, in which he saw heaven open and a great sheet bound at the four corners, being lowered to the earth, filled with all kinds of

animals. And a voice spoke to him, saying: "Rise, Peter, kill and eat... What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:13-15). The vision confirmed not only that God had pronounced all foods clean, but that there would no longer be any separation between Jews and Gentiles. As the New Israel, the Church would include all the nations of the earth.

Finally, since the Perfect Sacrifice of Christ replaced all Old Testament sacrifices and the Blood of Christ brought atonement for all sin, once and for all, the sacrifice of animals were no longer necessary and their blood no longer carried any atoning value.

Holy and Unholy Sexual Relations (Lev 18:1-30; 20:10-21)

The Ten Commandments upheld the sacredness of marriage, defined as the union of a man and a woman, and the sacredness of sexual relations within the bounds of holy marriage. In support of the commandments "You shall not commit adultery" (Deut. 5:18) and "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife" (Deut. 5:21), the *laws on sexual morality* made it clear that all sexual actions outside of marriage were sinful, "morally unclean," and an abomination before the Lord. This included sins of incest (sex with family members), fornication (sex before marriage), adultery (sex outside of marriage), sodomy (homosexual acts), and bestiality (sex with animals).

The Lord said: "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes" (Lev 18:3). In other words, you will not follow the immoral sexuality practiced by the other nations. As a holy people, set apart for a special relationship with God, the people of God must not imitate the practices of other peoples.

The Lord said: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live; I am the Lord" (Lev. 18:4).

"None of you shall approach any one near of kin to uncover nakedness (to commit incest). I am the Lord" (Lev 18:6). None of you shall uncover the nakedness of any family member: whether father, mother or stepmother, sister or stepsister, aunt, or brother's wife.

"You shall not lie carnally with your neighbour's wife" (Lev 18:1).

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev 18:22).

"You shall not lie with any beast and defile yourself with it, neither shall any woman give herself to a beast to lie with it: it is perversion" (Lev 18:23).

"You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech, and so profane the name of the Lord your God" (Lev 18:21). The pagan ceremonies of the Canaanites involved sexual acts, "ritual prostitution," and even the sacrifice of children.

"Do not defile yourselves by any of these things... lest the land vomit you out, when you defile it... For whoever shall do any of these abominations, the persons that do

them shall be cut off from among the people... never defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God” (Lev 18:24-30).

In the New Testament Jesus confirms that *sexual immorality* defiles a person. He says to His disciples: “What comes out of a man defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, adultery, coveting (covetousness), wickedness, deceit, licentiousness (lewdness)... foolishness... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man” (Mark 7:20-23).

St. Paul also confirms Jesus’ teaching on *sexual immorality*. In his letter to the Galatians he writes: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness... those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:19-21). In his first letter to the Corinthians he says: “Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Holy and Unholy Actions (Lev 18:21; Lev 19:1-37)

In this new section, Chapter 19, we find a variety of different moral laws and religious obligations that reaffirm the Ten Commandments, and several laws of mercy and justice concerning the poor and those in need. The following are some examples:

“Every one of you shall revere his mother and father” (Lev 19:3).

“And you shall keep my Sabbaths” (Lev 19:3).

“Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods” (Lev 19:4).

“When you offer a sacrifice of peace offering to the Lord... it shall be eaten the same day, or on the morrow; and anything left over until the third day shall be burned with fire” (Lev 19:5-6).

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to the very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner” (Lev 19:9-10).

“You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God” (Lev 19:11).

“You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning” (Lev 19:13).

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour” (Lev 19:15).

“You shall not stand forth against the life of your neighbour” (Lev 19:16).

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him” (Lev 19:17).

“You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people; **but you shall love your neighbour as yourself** (Lev 19:18).

“You shall not practice any augury or witchcraft” (Lev 19:26). This included summoning up the dead, or any pagan mourning customs, such as shaving the head and self-mutilation, ritual cuttings in the flesh and tattoo markings on account of the dead (Lev 19:26-28).

“Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled” (Lev 19:31).

“You shall rise up before the gray head, and honour the face of an old man” (Lev 19:32). Old people deserve to be respected and honoured for their wisdom and experience in life.

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong... you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:33-34). Foreigners, along with orphans and widows, were under God’s special protection.

“You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin” (Lev 19:35-36).

Penalties for Lawbreakers (Lev 20)

The penalties for lawbreakers, as outlined in Leviticus 20, were quite severe. In many instances, offences were punishable by death. The death penalty could be imposed by Israel’s civil authority, and not by individuals. However, when you compare the penalties with other laws and customs of that period, other legal codes impose similar or even much heavier penalties. It is important to note that the penalties were designed to act as a severe deterrent. The ancient peoples of that time-period favored that form or style of law – clear and severe.

Holy Conduct of Priests (Lev 21)

Greater holiness and ritual purity were required of priests; and even more was demanded of the high priest than of other priests.

Holy Feast Days

The Sabbath. The first and most important holy day to be observed by the people of Israel was the Sabbath. The seventh day was to be a day of rest, a day dedicated to the Lord.

Passover and Unleavened Bread. Passover would begin with the memorial Passover meal in the evening of the 14th day. The first day of Passover (15th day) was a high and solemn day of rest. The feast would be celebrated for seven days (15-21 Nisan).

First Fruits: First Sheaf of Ripe-Barley. This feast was celebrated on the 16th day of Nisan, or on the first Sunday after the Passover Sabbath (March-April). A sheaf of the first ripe barley was brought to the Tabernacle and offered with a whole burnt offering and a grain offering.

Pentecost: First Fruits of the Grain Harvest. This feast was celebrated seven weeks after Passover (May-June). Two loaves of leavened bread made from the first grain

harvested was brought to the temple and offered as a grain sacrifice, together with a whole burnt offering, a sin offering, and a peace offering.

Trumpets: The New Year. The first day of the seventh lunar month (September-October) was celebrated as the beginning of the new year. It was announced by the sound of trumpets and designated as a solemn day of rest. A whole burnt offering was offered to the Lord.

The Day of Atonement. This day was commemorated on the 10th day of the seventh month (September-October). It was a solemn day of fasting, abstinence, and penance. With the ceremony and rituals of this day, the priests, the people, and the sanctuary were cleansed, purified, and re-consecrated to God.

Tabernacles: The Fall Harvest of Grapes and Olives. This feast was celebrated for seven days plus one additional solemn day of rest (an eighth day), beginning on the 15th day of the seventh month, and ending on the 22nd day. During the seven days of the feast, the people would dwell in tents, in remembrance of the time that Israel dwelt in tents for forty years after their Exodus from Egypt.

Holy Years (Lev 25)

The Sabbatical Year. Every seventh year was to be observed as a year of rest for the land. No work was to be done on the land, which was designated to rest for a year.

The Jubilee Year. Every seventh Sabbatical year (the forty-ninth year) was to be observed as a special Jubilee Year, during which anyone enslaved because of debt was to be set free to return to his family; and any land that was sold because of debt, could likeness be “bought back” or “redeemed” by the original owner. The goal was to “reset” or “reboot” the economy, and to assist any poor family in Israel to recover their lost property and to gain economic stability. It was meant to help maintain a good and healthy distribution of wealth among the people of Israel. The land belonged to God, the rightful Owner, and He entrusted it to whomever He had given it. The land was not to be amassed into the hands of a small group of wealthy and powerful people.

Covenant Blessings and Curses (Lev 26)

The Laws of Holiness end with blessings, promised to those who remain faithful to the Covenant; and a series of divine warnings and curses upon those who do not remain faithful to the Covenant Law. There are consequences to how a person chooses to live his life.

Voluntary Dedications (Lev 27)

The last chapter in the Book of Leviticus serves as an epilogue. The subject matter is quite different from the rest of the book. It deals with the issue voluntary religious vows or the consecration of persons, places, or things to God. It is important to note that such vows or consecrations are completely voluntary, free gifts, not required by the Law.

Some things and places vowed or consecrated to God could be returned to the original owner during a Jubilee year. Animals appropriate for sacrifice could not be

redeemed. However, houses and lands, vowed to the Lord, were redeemable. The booty collected in a holy war was devoted to God and could not be taken for private or common use.

KEY VERSES

“Now the Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of cattle from the herd or from the flock’” (Lev 1:1-2)

“He shall offer it at the door of the Tent of Meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord; he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Lev 1:3-4).

“When one has become guilty, he shall restore what he took by robbery, or what he got by oppression, or the deposit which was committed to him, or the lost thing which he found, or anything about which he has sworn falsely; he shall restore it in full, and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to whom it belongs, on the day of his guilt offering” (Lev 6:4-5).

“Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting” (Lev 10:8).

“For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44).