

September 14, 2014 by Steve Brandon



You Shall Be Holy

Leviticus

1. Thoughts on Leviticus

2. Thoughts on Holiness

Today we begin an exposition of the book of Leviticus, a wonderful book of the Old Testament. My message this morning will be an overview of the entire book. Next week, I plan on digging into chapter 1. I'm excited to begin.

I want to begin with some introductory thoughts. And then, I want to press the application of Leviticus home to all of us. So, let's begin with my first point:

1. Thoughts on Leviticus

Over the past several months, it has been very interesting for me to see the reaction of people who hear that I'm going to be preaching through Leviticus. I have had some sighs of disappointment. I have had some "OK's" of confusion. I have had some smiles of anticipation. I have had some wows of admiration at the courage it takes to undertake such an endeavor.

Some have professed their ignorance of Leviticus. A few have professed their love for Leviticus, especially some particular chapters in Leviticus.

One of my aims in preaching through Leviticus is that you would come to love Leviticus. There are many things in Leviticus that are helpful for us. In fact, it is here in Leviticus that the whole concept of sacrifice is explained. In many places throughout the Bible, an understanding of sacrifice is assumed. But, in Leviticus, it is explained.

In other words, without Leviticus, a full understanding of Jesus' death upon the cross is simply impossible. Without Leviticus, we have a Savior who died for us, but we don't know why! Leviticus will help to give us the explanation of the cross of Christ that we need in order to fully understand our redemption. What's not to love about that?

Furthermore, Leviticus helps us to understand the role of priests, especially the high priest. And as Jesus has become our great high priest, Leviticus helps to explain what this means. Oh, church family, may we come to love this book.

There may be books in the Bible that are especially dear to you. Perhaps they include the book of John or Romans or Ephesians or Hebrews or Psalms or Proverbs. Whatever your list of favorite books, my aim is to put Leviticus on that list.

Another aim is so that Leviticus might not trip you up in your Bible reading. I know the experience of many who resolve to read the entire Bible through, from start to finish. Genesis begins well, with the creation account, followed by the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Each of these men are fascinating in their own right. Exodus continues with the riveting story of the ten plagues and Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt. But, then, about halfway through Exodus, things change. Gone are the interesting narratives. In are the laws and instructions about building the tabernacle, a structure that doesn't even exist today. But, with the determination to get through the entire Bible, people often press on, hoping for brighter days.

Then comes Leviticus. A book filled with laws. It is a book talking about archaic things like sacrifices and priests and festivals and skin disease, and it often claims its victims. What began at the beginning of the year as a goal to read through the entire Bible ends in failure somewhere in Leviticus.

It reminds me of the television show called, "American Ninja Warrior." In recent days, my two youngest children have enjoyed watching the show. For those of you who haven't seen it, it is essentially a giant obstacle course competition, where the competitors are all trying just to complete various courses. The courses are filled with swinging ropes and cargo nets and giant rings to climb. Many of the obstacles test a competitor's upper body strength as they try not to fall into the water below. In any given round, there seems to be one obstacle that stands out as the most difficult to pass, as a high percentage of competitors fail at it.

Leviticus is such an obstacle. Many people breeze through Genesis. Exodus is a struggle, but many get past it. But, Leviticus is the difficult obstacle upon which many stumble. Few finish the entire Bible.

For this reason, many people simply neglect Leviticus all-together. It's too hard. It's too dry. It's too dull. In fact, one man said that Leviticus "... is perhaps the most neglected of the neglected biblical books." [\[1\]](#) One of my aims in preaching Leviticus is to change this opinion so that we would not neglect Leviticus.

Now, one of the challenges of Leviticus is that it is so foreign to us. It was written to a people who lived some 3,000 years ago, describing

many practices that seem quite strange to us. They seem strange, because we don't live there! This is true of any foreign land that you travel to.

In a month and a half, I will be travelling once again to Nepal and India, which is very different than the United States where we live. The people look different. The language is different. The customs are different. In fact, in Nepal and India, there are some things that you simply shouldn't do. A man shouldn't touch a woman in public, not even to shake hands. Never eat with your left hand; they don't use toilet paper, they use their left hand. Also, it wouldn't be a good idea to bring Beef Jerky as a snack food, as cows are sacred animals to those in Nepal and India.

But, if we lived there, all of these things wouldn't seem so strange. The same is true with Leviticus. As we work our way through this book, we will find some things that are very strange to us. From sacrifices to priests to eating restrictions to the various feasts and festivals that they celebrate. Some of the laws seem very strange to us, like not reaping to the very edge of a field (Lev. 19:9) or like mixing fabric in clothing (Lev. 19:19) or like trimming your beard or cutting the hair on the sides of your head (Lev. 19:27).

But, none of it would have been strange to those in Israel. This was the rule of their life. This was the way that they lived! Furthermore, this was the rule of life for those in the times of the New Testament!

I think that we can get so used to the way that we live, that we can often miss the effect and impact of the life of Jesus and the lives of the apostles. Jesus touched the unclean leper and made him clean (Matthew 8:1-4). But, in Jewish culture, you would never do this! (Leviticus 13-14). Touching the unclean is an act of defilement (Leviticus 22:4-6).

So, when the woman with the issue of blood touched Jesus, (Matthew 9:20-22), you would have expected Him to be made unclean. Instead, she was healed instantly (Matthew 9:22). These are huge social customs that would have shocked the Jews of Jesus' day far more than it shocks us.

Or, when Paul writes, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4), it would have been nearly incomprehensible to the Jews who so looked up to the law of Leviticus!

Or, when Paul writes how the cross brought the (unclean) Gentiles near to the Jews to make them one new man, "by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances" (Ephesians 2:15), the Jews would have been utterly shocked to hear these words! A Jew couldn't imagine abolishing the law of commandments any more than we can imagine doing away with the supreme court.

We miss the impact of these words, because we have never lived under the laws of Leviticus. Stephen was brought to trial and eventually killed precisely because he was saying words like this (Acts 6:13-14). And Peter's mighty struggle in eating the unclean food and going to the house of Cornelius cannot be fully understood without grasping the truths of Leviticus, especially chapter 11.

The fact is, travelling back to Leviticus will help us to understand our New Testament better. The New Testament directly quotes the book of Leviticus more than 15 times. ^[2] Only five other books are quoted more often than Leviticus (those books are, respectively, Psalms, Isaiah, Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy).

And when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, He quoted from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Furthermore, there are hundreds of references to the "law" in the New Testament. Many of these are referring directly to the ideas contained in the book of Leviticus. So, over the next few months, let us travel through Leviticus to the days of Jesus. And I trust that your love and appreciation for Christ will grow.

Now, before we actually look at the book of Leviticus, I want for us to think about the difficulties in interpreting and applying Leviticus today. I want for you to keep this picture in your minds throughout our time in Leviticus.

One of the fundamental difficulties we have in understanding Leviticus is that it was written to Israel, some 3,000 years ago. It wasn't written to us. One of the problems that people often fall into when seeking to apply Leviticus is that they read it as if it were written to them. But, you cannot do this. Instead, you need to travel to Israel. Then, only when you understand what it meant to them, do you apply it to us today.

However, because we live after the cross. And Israel lived before the cross. You need to take your application through the cross. And when you take the cross into account, you discover some things that simply don't apply to us today at all.

For instance, the sacrifices stopped at the cross. Since Jesus was our ultimate sacrifice, there is no need for another. And so, all of those laws dealing with sacrificing bulls and goats and lambs are not needed any more, because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. He was the perfect sacrifice. There is no need for another!

Also, the laws about the priests also stopped. We don't need a priest to offer our sacrifices anymore, because we don't have any sacrifices. But also because Jesus is our great high priest, who always lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). The book of Hebrews explains this all in great detail.

In a similar way, the eating laws stopped with Jesus as well. When talking to the Pharisees about sin and evil, Jesus said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him" (Mark 7:15). Thereby, Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19).

But, Jesus didn't filter out all of the commandments of Leviticus. There are others that carry on right through the cross. I've already mentioned one of them, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). That law is fully in effect today as it was in the days of Jesus. And there are others. For instance, Peter quotes from the book of Leviticus when he said, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

That commandment is also as fully applicable today as it was in the days of Jesus. In fact, I have taken this phrase from Peter as the theme we will be working with throughout the book of Leviticus. "You shall be holy, for I am holy." It is the theme of the book. It occurs several times in the book.

Let's look at a few. Turn over to chapter 11 and verse 44.

Leviticus 11:44

For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.

Turn over to chapter 19, beginning in verse 1.

Leviticus 19:1-2

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Look over at chapter 20:26, ...

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.

Leviticus is all about holiness. It is all about approaching a holy God. It is all about coming to him as a holy people. The title of the book, "Leviticus," is named after the Levites, the tribe of Israel that was responsible for the tabernacle and for the worship of the Lord.

Let's move on to the main theme of the book, that is "Holiness."

2. Thoughts on Holiness

The word, "holy" is used some 80 times in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus speaks of the holy offerings, the holy place, the holy crown, the holy food, the holy coat, the holy garments, the holy sanctuary, God's holy name, the holy priests, the holy convocations, a holy gift, the holy land. At this point, you might say, "What does it mean to be holy?"

Fundamentally, the idea of holiness is the idea of separation. It has to do with being different and pure. You can see it right there in verse 26, ...

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.

I trust that you can see that there is a connection between God's holiness and our holiness. So, let's begin with God. But, what does it mean that God is holy?

I love the way that A. W. Tozer says it in his excellent book, "The Knowledge of the Holy." He writes, ...

Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is the standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Neither the writer nor the reader ... is qualified to appreciate the holiness of God. Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds.

...

We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God's power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot imagine. [\[3\]](#)

When you encounter the holiness of God, you will be undone like Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5). You will fall on your face, like Ezekiel did (Ezekiel 1:28). You will fall down and say, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8) as Peter did. You will be like Martin Luther, who as a Catholic priest was unable to utter the words of the mass, but froze at the altar, struck by the holiness of God, thinking, "Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that.' For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God." [\[4\]](#)

And if you have truly come to know the LORD, you know what I'm talking about. You have experienced similar feelings. This is why the Proverbs often say, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Seeing the LORD in His holiness and seeing ourselves in our brokenness is the first step to finding peace with God.

We all must approach the LORD like the tax-collector in Jesus' parable did. He was unwilling to lift up his eyes to the LORD. Instead, he beat

his breast and cried out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This is the first step needed in coming to the LORD. And Leviticus is all about coming to the LORD.

This is what Leviticus is all about. It's a book of worship. It's a book describing how we come to God. That's why we have the sacrifices explained in chapter 1-7. To come to a holy and pure God, we need to have our sins forgiven, which can only happen through a blood-sacrifice. That's why chapters 8-10 detail the need for the priests to be holy. To come to a holy and pure God, we need to have a pure representative to offer the sacrifices for us. That's why we have so many rules and regulations in chapters 11-27. God was establishing a law for the people that would set them apart as distinct from the other nations.

In fact, in Leviticus the idea of being "clean" or "unclean" is mentioned even more than the idea of being "holy." God's desire is for a clean nation. He wants a holy people. For the nation of Israel, they needed such instruction. They were coming out of the land of Egypt, having lived there for more than 400 years! Certainly, many of their practices were more in line with the Egyptian gods than they were in line with the holy and true God.

Look back at verse 22 (of chapter 20).

Leviticus 20:22-24

"You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. But I have said to you, 'You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.' I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples.

But, Leviticus explains how things ought to be different with the people of God. They were not to be like the Egyptians. They were not to live like the Egyptians. Their clothing was to be different. Their diet was to be different. Their morals were to be different. Their sexual ethics were to be different. Their worship was to be different. They were to celebrate different holidays than the nations surrounding them. They would care about being clean before the Lord.

And in the broadest of applications of the book of Leviticus, this comes to us. God calls us to be a holy people. "You shall be holy."

God calls for us to worship Him in holiness. Psalm 24 says, "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who does not lift up his soul to what is false And does not swear deceitfully" (Psalm 23:3-4).

In recent days, Yvonne has come to know a woman who leads worship at a church in town. And as she has talked with her for a bit, she has discovered a few things about her. One of which is that she has a dirty mouth. She is free with her profanity. On several occasions in Yvonne's presence, she has sworn and she has taken God's name in vain. Now, I am sure that on Sunday mornings when she's standing before the congregation she leads in worship, that her mouth is clean. In fact, her words are probably holy-sounding.

But, that's not what God wants of us. He doesn't want for us to play a game on Sunday morning, as if our lives are devoted to God, but, in fact, our mouths betray us. No, God wants for us to seek Him with all of our hearts for all of our days, not just on Sunday when it's time to put on a show. Shame on us for our hypocrisy in coming here on Sunday morning and putting on a show. We may fool others. But, we will not fool the LORD.

God knows when we are putting on a show. "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3). And so, as we look at this book over the next few months, my prayer is that it would make us better worshipers, because this book will seek to bring us to God. So, you say, "How can I be holy?"

Again, I turn to A. W. Tozer, because he says it far better than I can say it. He says, ...

God is holy with an absolute holiness that knows no degrees, and this He cannot impart to His creatures. But there is a relative and contingent holiness which He shares with angels and seraphim in heaven and with redeemed men on earth as their preparation for heaven. This holiness God can and does impart to His children. He shares it with them by imputation and by impartation, and because He made it available to them through the blood of the Lamb, He requires it of them. To Israel first and later to His Church God spoke, saying, "Be ye holy; for I am holy." He did not say "Be ye holy as I am holy," for that would be to demand of us absolute holiness, something that belongs to God alone. [\[5\]](#)

In other words, there is a holiness that God gives to us. And there is a holiness that God imputes to us. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. "God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is, God giving to us an alien righteousness that we neither earned nor deserved. But, beyond the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, there is another righteousness that God works in us. It is the fruit of God in us.

Galatians 5:22-23 describes the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is called the "fruit of the Spirit," because it is what God works in our lives. It is the fruit of God in our lives. God creates these things in our lives.

See, when God saves us from our sin, He saves us with a purpose. He saves us to be holy. 1 Peter 2:9 says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." This wasn't written to Israel. This was written to the church. Like Israel of old was called to be holy and set apart for God, so also the church is called to be holy and set apart for God.

As J. C. Ryle said so long ago, "We must be holy, because this is one grand end and *purpose for which Christ came into the world*. ... Jesus is a complete Saviour. He does not merely take away the guilt of a believer's sin, he does more--he breaks its power." [6]

God's will for our lives is that we be holy. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "This is the will of God, your sanctification." The word, "sanctification" is from the same root which we translated, "holiness." You could even translate this, "this is the will of God, your holiness." In other words, God's will for your life is that you live a righteous and pure life. And that's the path that all of us are on--all of us who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ have signed up for this path. This isn't optional for the Christian. It's not something that you might say, "Well, that's all fine and well that you are into that 'living righteously' thing. Go ahead; if it makes you happy, pursue it. But, it's just not for me."

I think about amusement parks. They aren't for me. At one point in my life, I enjoyed them. But not now. I know that I'm different than many people. Many love a day at the amusement park. Riding the roller coasters, driving the bumper cars, eating the corn-dogs. There are people who love the thrill of riding upside-down and spinning round and round and round and round.

For me, it's awful. Every time that I go to an amusement park, I go home with a head-ache. Even the merry go-round is too much for me. In fact, it's so bad now that just walking into the amusement park and hearing the music is enough to make me nauseous, because I know of everything that it represents.

Now, it's not that I have anything against amusement parks. Nor am I on a crusade against them in any way. It's just that it's not for me.

Some people can have the same attitude when it comes to personal holiness, when it comes to living a life of righteousness and purity. They may say, "It's good for you that you are really pursuing hard after God. it's just not for me. Sunday church is fine for me. It's good for you that you read the Bible every day, it's just not for me. I'm not a reader. It's good for you that you are devoted to prayer, it's just not for me. I'm just not that devoted. It's good for you that you are committed to serving those at church, it's just not for me. I've got other friends. It's good for you that have made some righteous choices regarding your lifestyle; it's just not for me. I'm interested in other things. It's good for you that you have disciplined your life for the sake of purity, it's just not for me. I just don't think it's important."

But, listen: when it comes to holiness, we all are in the game. It is not an optional thing. It is, "you shall be holy." Not, "some of you shall be holy." Every single one of us is called to be holy.

The book of Leviticus is going to bring us back to this theme over and over and over again. The book of Leviticus is all about how to live a righteous and holy and pure life. And my prayer in preaching through the book is that God would do a work among us to purify us; to give us a passion for him. May we seek His face with our whole heart.

Furthermore, you will find your greatest joy when you pursue holiness. Passions of the flesh are short-lived! Your sports-team will lose. Your toys will break. Your vacation will soon be over. Your technological gadgets will be soon be obsolete. Age will diminish your beauty. Age will diminish your strength. But, a life devoted to the LORD will find joy forever.

As Paul said, "while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). Never underestimate what God will do with a holy people.

I remember years ago at Kishwaukee Bible Church, I had the opportunity to preach. This was long before I was a pastor, preaching regularly like I do now. I can't quite remember my text, but it was something along the lines of loving the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And I remember a high school friend of mine visiting the church with his wife. They had been attending another evangelical church in town.

But, there was something different about the family of believers at that church that attracted her to the church. She would later tell me that she found the people of Kishwaukee Bible Church to be strange. Strange in the sense that they were serious about the Lord. They really loved His word. They really loved to talk about Him. And it changed her life, as she saw how attractive such a life can be.

My testimony is similar. My wife's testimony is similar. Such is the testimony of some of you as well. I know that you have come into this church and found us to be different than where you came from. God has done a work in your life here.

And I'm simply praying that our time in Leviticus might have a similar effect upon us, to create a strange and different people. Not strange because we are offensive or dress strangely or have such strange customs, but because we genuinely love the LORD. Because we hate our sin. Because we love our Savior.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 14, 2014 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus, Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2002), 1-2, as quoted in a Sunday school lesson given by Dr. William Barrick (<http://drbarrick.org/files/studynotes/Leviticus/LeviticusIntro.pdf>).

[2] Here is a partial list:

Leviticus 12:8 is quoted in Luke 2:24;
Leviticus 18:5 is quoted in Romans 10:5;
Leviticus 18:5 is quoted in Galatians 3:12;

Leviticus 19:2 is quoted in 1 Peter 1:16;
Leviticus 19:12 is quoted in Matthew 5:33;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Matthew 5:43;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Matthew 19:19;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Matthew 22:39;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Mark 12:31;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Mark 12:33b;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Luke 10:27b;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Romans 13:9b;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in Galatians 5:14;
Leviticus 19:18 is quoted in James 2:8;
Leviticus 23:29 is quoted in Acts 3:23b;
Leviticus 24:20 is quoted in Matthew 5:38;
Leviticus 26:12 is quoted in 2 Corinthians 6:16

[3] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pp. 103-106.

[4] Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, as quoted by R. C. Sproul in *The Holiness of God*, p. 107.

[5] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 106.

[6] J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, p. 49 (emphasis his).