**Approaching a Holy God**

A Sermon on Leviticus

By Matthew Pickens

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I think that we can all admit that Leviticus is probably one of the most difficult and inapproachable books of the Old Testament for most Christians. I know there are times in middle school or high school where my plans to read through the Bible in a year came to an end with this book and I’m sure many can say the same. If we were to say that the books in our Bible are our sixty-six favorites then most of us would place Leviticus as number sixty-six; and if not there at the bottom only because people know that Numbers opens with several chapters of a census and camp organization or that Chronicles begins nine chapters of genealogies. The Levitical rituals for sacrifice and regulations about cleanliness, including food laws, seem to have little relevance to us in 21st century America after the coming of Christ.

Yet this was the first book that Jewish children would have studied in synagogues. The Holy Spirit, in his perfect wisdom, sees fit to include Leviticus as the words that he spoke through the prophets and the apostles and still speaks through it today. This is going to be a different sort of sermon as rather than expositing a single text we are going to approach Leviticus as a whole and try to understand at a high level how this book applies to New Testament Christians today. So I am going to say our chief application up front: this week I hope you will learn to love what God says to us through Leviticus and be motivated not just to push through Leviticus in your Bible readings. We want to turn this book from being something we know we should love and be grateful for because we know theologically that the Holy Spirit breathed it out into worshiping and adoring the Holy Spirit for his wisdom in speaking these words through Moses.

Now I know that it’s odd to say the least that we’re going to study Leviticus with an opening passage from the very end of Exodus but this passage creates the crisis situation that Leviticus is designed to answer. The whole point of the Pentateuch is how a holy God redeems his people and then how he will dwell amongst them despite their sinfulness. The last sixteen chapters of Exodus are detailed instructions from God about how to build and outfit the tabernacle and then a detailed description of how Israel does everything as Yahweh commands. The tabernacle has a dual purpose in the midst of Israel as the dwelling place of Yahweh and as the tent of meeting between Yahweh and his people. Yet at the end of the book when the tabernacle is erected and God’s glory cloud descends on it there is a problem:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Exo. 40:34-35)

Do you see the problem? The question at the end of Exodus is that, given Yahweh’s holiness is so powerful that even the covenant mediator cannot approach it, how is it that his dwelling place can become the tent of meeting between God and man? Everything in Leviticus needs to be read from this perspective of the dwelling place of Yahweh becoming the place where he will meet with his people. With that in mind, we are going to divide Leviticus into several large sections to see how God cleanses and sanctifies his people to approach him.

1. The role of sacrifice (Lev. 1-9)
2. The role of cleanliness laws (Lev. 10-16)
3. The role of holiness laws (Lev. 17-25)
4. Blessings and curses (Lev. 26-27)

Because we’re going to try to get through this whole book, we will not be able to carefully engage everything. The insert in your bulletins has several key verses that we’ll look at and some charts and diagrams to summarize major sections or themes. If you have your Bible with you there are some other points where I will flip through and pull out some verses so feel free to follow along.

1. The role of sacrifice

First we will look at the role of sacrifice in Leviticus. Immediately after the close of Exodus where God’s presence has come to the tabernacle but Moses cannot enter the book of Leviticus starts with seven chapters of laws about sacrifices. There are five total sacrifices that were offered and each of them is addressed twice. Leviticus 1:1-6:7 are addressed to the laity, to regular worshippers; when they are supposed to bring sacrifices and what to do when they bring it. The rest of chapter six and all of chapter seven are instructions to the priests. The following table summarizes these offerings:

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| Leviticus | Offering | Sacrifice | Purpose |
| 1; 6:8-13 | Burnt | Cattle, sheep, goats, or birds | General atonement for sins |
| 2; 6:14-23 | Cereal | Uncooked or cooked grain | Tribute or worship to God |
| 3; 7:11-36 | Peace | Cattle, sheep, or goats | Confession, free will, or to fulfill a vow |
| 4:1-5:13; 6:24-30 | Purification | Depends on status of sinner | Cleansing from uncleanness |
| 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10 | Reparation | Ram or male lamb | Compensation for an offense |

Because of time and getting through the whole book we are not going to be able to speak about each of these offerings in detail. Each of them could be their own sermon to talk about what is done during them, how each of them are used or when they are offered elsewhere in the Old Testament (for example, many Psalms are specifically associated with each of these sacrifices or after the birth of Samuel Hannah comes to the tabernacle with three bulls to offer a burnt offering, a purification offering, and a peace offering), and how each of them is fulfilled in Jesus and applied to the believer. Instead we will keep our comments largely at a high level.

First, we must note that throughout this section there is an emphasis that animals brought for sacrifice must be without blemish. This Hebrew word is used eleven times in these chapters. This word is also the same word that is translated as “blameless” elsewhere in the Old Testament, for example when God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision and commands Abraham to “walk before me and be blameless.” The idea here is that the sacrificial animal is blameless and without blemish while the worshipper is not. The worshipper is in need of atonement, purification, or to repay a wrong.

Second, the idea of being without blemish is then emphasized as the worshipper lays his hand on the head of the animal. This word “lay” has a stronger meaning in Hebrew as it actually means “press.” The idea is that the worshipper presses his hand down onto the head of the animal to identify with it. We should not assume that this was all done in silence as presumably the worshipper would confess why he or she brought the sacrifice or would pray one of the appropriate Psalms.

Finally, the animal would be slaughtered or the grain would be accepted and the appropriate parts would be burnt on the altar with the blood sprinkled or splashed in the appropriate locations based upon which sacrifice was offered. The clear implication of all of these offerings except the cereal offering is that there is no atonement or forgiveness of sins without death. The animal dies in the place of the worshipper.

All of these leads to chapter eight, which is the ordination service of Aaron as High Priest and of his sons as priests and then to a monumental worship service in chapter nine. All of the offerings are performed exactly as God has commanded and then we have a stunning scene:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. 23And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. 24And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:22-24)

The first set of daily services in the tabernacle end with God’s presence again descending on the tabernacle with his glory shining forth and fire consuming all of the sacrifices. When this happens, Moses and Aaron are now able to enter the tabernacle. The way that an unholy people may approach the dwelling of a holy God is by having their sins atoned for through sacrifice.

As we turn toward the New Testament we see that this idea of sacrifice is fulfilled in the work of the Lord Jesus. We really must stress the context of the sacrifices. God’s people in Leviticus have already been redeemed from slavery in Egypt by the Passover sacrifices. The sacrifices in Leviticus are not about that previous redemption but rather about continually living in the presence of a holy God. So we need to understand that in the context of Old Testament law, sacrifice was given by God as a gracious means of staying in fellowship with him. We can also see that this could only be apprehended by faith. There was no logical consequence that someone could say because I press my hand on the head of a bull and then sacrifice it that it will die in my place so that I can live before God. It was trusting by faith that God would do what he promised.

The writer of Hebrews describes how all these ceremonies pointed forward to a heavenly reality:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

(Heb. 9:11-14)

Look at how the writer of Hebrews describes the Levitical sacrifices. The purpose was to cleanse and to sanctify. The writer says that all of those was just a shadow of what God always planned to provide through Christ. Christ entered the holy places and cleansed both them and his people forever so that we might serve the living God. Based upon what Christ has done, the Scriptures urge us to live as those who have been redeemed, cleansed, and sanctified by the blood of Christ. Paul tells the church in Corinth that they are temples, tabernacles of the Holy Spirit so they should flee sexual immorality and not profane the Holy Spirit’s temple. He tells the church in Rome that only in light of all of God’s mercies to justify, sanctify, and adopt them through his grace that they should offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, the idea being that are lives will be the pleasing aroma that the Levitical sacrifices symbolized and pointed to. We do not do this in order to be saved but because we have been saved and we want to live in a way that pleases God and honors him just as Israel did not sacrifice to be redeemed from Egypt but rather to continual approach the presence of the Holy and Living God who had already redeemed them from Egypt. Leviticus teaches us that God has made a way for us to dwell with him by the sacrifice of Christ and then encourages to live as those who are always before the holy presence of God.

2. The role of cleanliness laws

The second thing we’ll look at in Leviticus are the laws for cleanliness. It is important to note that this section, chapters 10-16 is bracketed by the narrative of Nadab and Abihu and then the Day of Atonement. That is to say that the laws given here are in the context of what happens in Israel’s history of dwelling in the presence of God. To see what happens with Nadab and Abihu the very same day that Moses and Aaron are finally able to enter the tent of meeting it is worth comparing to beginning of services in chapters eight and nine. In chapter 8 Yahweh commands Moses to “take.” In chapter 9, Moses commands Aaron to “take.” In chapter 10, Nadab and Abihu “took” without any command to do so.

Now 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. 2And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. 3Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace. (Lev. 10:1-3)

When people read this passage everyone wants to know is, “What was the ‘unauthorized fire’?” Some commentators suggest that because similar words are used to the Day of Atonement in chapter 16 that they tried to enter the Holy of Holies. Some others note that incense was used in the tabernacle services but that the coals for it had to be taken from the altar and perhaps they used coals that were from somewhere else. Still others suggest that it was from the wrong time of day based on what had been commanded in Exodus 30:7-9. I don’t think that this passage gives us enough information to state what it is for certain but the key is that it was fire “which [Yahweh] had not commanded them.” Fifteen times in chapters 8-10 there is a focus on Yahweh commanding, or doing so through Moses, and then the command is obeyed but here the focus is on them doing something that was not commanded. It is this action that now profanes the tabernacle so that it has to be cleansed. The focus for the rest of this passage through the Day of Atonement ritual is on how to cleanse. God gives Aaron this command:

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, 11and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.” (Lev. 10:10-11)

Immediately after this come five chapters on the cleanliness laws. There are laws on clean and unclean foods, cleansing after childbirth, skin diseases, unclean garments and houses, and for bodily discharges. There are a lot of suggestions about what drives these laws. (1) Some suggest that these distinctions are arbitrary and only a test of Israel’s obedience. (2) Some say that unclean animals were tied to those used in pagan worship. (3) Some argue that there are hygienic purposes. This is probably the most common one as pork can be a source of trichinosis, the coney and the hare are carriers of tularemia, and fish without fins and scales tend to burrow into mud and becomes sources of bacteria. While this last may be partly true it is not a full explanation because there was not sufficient advancement in medicine by the New Testament times to explain Jesus abrogating the food laws.

Instead of these explanations, the main purpose of these cleanliness laws within the book of Leviticus is theological. The concern in Leviticus is that the center of the tabernacle is the Holy of Holies, then the Holy Place, then the outer court. For something unclean to approach the holy is to profane it and God’s judgment for that can be death. So these cleanliness laws are designed to drive the attention of God’s people to the extraordinary blessing but also the extraordinary danger of dwelling in God’s presence. The laws focus on what is “common” and so illustrate the pervasive effects of sin. Animals are unclean because something about them shows different from the norm. So land animals are “common” when they have hooves on which to run and they ruminate. Animals that do not have hooves or ruminate are unclean for eating. Fish are common and clean when they have fins and scales but unclean if they do not. Birds should have two wings to fly and two feet to walk and these are clean but flying creatures that have more than two wings or two feet are unclean. Childbirth results in being unclean, not because having children is bad, but because a painful and bloody childbirth process is part of God’s curse upon sin. Skin diseases (note that none of the diseases referenced here are leprosy – Hansen’s disease) mar and disrupt the normal human state of being and so make unclean. Abnormal bodily discharges show disruption and make someone unclean. The basic Levitical model of how these states work look like the below:

 🡨 Sanctify 🡨 🡨 Cleanse 🡨

Holy Common/Clean Unclean

* Profane 🡪 🡪 Pollute 🡪

Of all the times that the words for holiness are used in the Old Testament about 20% of them are found in the book of Leviticus. The holy and the unclean must never come into contact. When Nadab and Abihu brought uncommanded, unclean fire into a holy place they were immediately judged and put to death. The warning throughout Leviticus is that people may only approach God under the conditions that he has commanded.

This section closes with how the sanctuary will be cleansed. Because God’s demands are perfectly exacting it is assumed that people may profane or pollute the tabernacle inadvertently and so God provides for a ceremony to sanctify the tabernacle and the whole people once a year. The reason that the High Priest takes the risk of entering the Holy of Holies is to make God’s continued presence with his people possible. Two goats without blemish would be brought to the tabernacle. The High Priest would draw lots and one would be dedicated to Yahweh and the other would be the scapegoat. The goat dedicated to Yahweh would be sacrificed with the blood sprinkled in the Holy of Holies, the Holy Place, and the outside of the sanctuary. The scapegoat would have the sins and uncleanness of the people placed upon it and would be taken outside of the camp to an unclean place and released.

The writer of Hebrews takes the Day of Atonement ritual where the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and applies it to Christ.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22let 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. (Heb. 10:19-22)

The writer draws on the gospel accounts that at the moment Jesus dies on the cross the curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place is torn in two. In the Old Testament once a year the High Priest had to risk his life to enter the Holy of Holies and purify the tent of meeting. Hebrews shows us that this was just a picture of what happens in the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus draws back the curtain forever and gives all believers continual access to the very presence of God. Jesus fulfilled the role that both goats pointed to. He was the sacrifice that opened the path. He was also the scapegoat who died outside of the city, outside of the camp. Based upon that look what Hebrews exhorts us to: (1) hold fast our confession of hope, (2) stir one another up to love and good works, (3) and not neglect to meet together.

It is this understanding that allows us to see how these cleanliness laws apply to us. Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Acts with Peter clearly abrogate the food laws that applied to Israel. We do not apply the laws about childbirth, skin diseases, and discharges for barring people from coming to church. Yet we do recognize that the only way that the New Testament allows someone to draw near to God is through repentance and faith resting upon Jesus Christ. So when people come to join the church and have a membership interview with the elders we aren’t looking for what they can contribute to the church or how much they know but just to see, from a limited human perspective, do they repent of their sins and rest upon Christ alone for their salvation? When someone is barred from the sacraments or excommunicated that is not the church saying definitely that they are unsaved but rather noting that their life and behavior deny what they verbally profess. So church membership and church discipline are one way that these obscure cleanliness laws apply to God’s people today. It is important because Paul warns the church in Corinth that eating and drinking at the Lord’s table in an unworthy, an unholy manner brings judgment upon someone and says that many are ill and some have died because of abusing the Lord’s Supper so this is one of the ways that we protect people from coming to the table unclean and so bringing God’s wrath down upon them.

Another important thing we should draw from this is the idea that the priests were commanded to teach the people about what is holy and common, clean and unclean. Keep in mind that the New Testament calls God’s people a “kingdom of priests.” So I think there is a sense in which all of God’s people are commanded to do this. That is to say that we have an obligation to tell people what makes them unclean and unable to draw near to God and then also how to be cleansed and sanctified through the blood of Christ so that they can approach the throne.

3. The role of holiness laws

The last major section of Hebrews before the closing chapters are the holiness laws. These sections cover laws against sacrifice outside of the tabernacle, against eating blood, laws about legitimate sexual relations and marriage, laws against child sacrifice, punishments for sexual immorality, and priestly activity and works. We won’t have time to look at each of these laws closely so we’ll look at three key themes and then ask how the Levitical laws apply to God’s people today.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2“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.” (Lev. 19:1-2)

The first point to draw is that the Levitical laws are designed in order to be like God. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” could be described as the theme of Leviticus. Everything that follows about the laws is based upon this principle being lived out in submission to Yahweh, who redeemed Israel. Especially in chapter 19 this is explicitly intended to echo Exodus 20 because all ten of the commandments are either directly quoted or alluded to so the context of the laws is in response to redemption.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Lev. 19:18b)

The second point is that almost all of the laws in this section are taking the Ten Commandments and applying them to day-to-day life. Since all of life is lived in the presence of God then all of life ought to be holy as God as holy and that is done by loving neighbor as yourself. Laws that are given about false dealing, being just and honest in court, not bearing grudges, and so far are loving your neighbor as yourself, living out God’s law in specific circumstances.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.” (Lev. 23:1-2)

The rest of this chapter is about the feasts that Israel observes. It starts with the Sabbath every seventh day. The Passover begins with the feast of unleavened bread and ends the seventh day with a special holy feast. The feast of the first fruits is the day after the Sabbath during the harvest. The feast of weeks is seven Sabbaths after the feast of first fruits. The feast of trumpets is the first day of the seventh month. The Day of Atonement is the tenth day of the seventh month. The idea is that the regular Sabbaths mark time for God’s people and focus their attention on entering the rest that God entered when he finished his work of creation. The sevens marking the other feasts break up the monotony that could come with this routine and again focus attention on future confirmation. So all of this is to say that the holiness laws in Leviticus were still looking forward to a greater end than just redemption from Egypt when God would get rid of sin and unholiness forever.

With this context we can start to apply the laws to God’s people today. A lot of times when you read about Old Testament law you’ll hear theologians talk about the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. The idea is that ceremonial laws were about Israelite religious practice such as sacrifices and clean food and those no longer apply in the New Testament. Civil laws refer to Israel’s theocratic government and would include things like capital punishment for blasphemy or idol worship. Many people will say some of these might still apply but most do not. The moral laws refer to things like the Ten Commandments and most people will say these laws apply to all people at all times.

While well meaning, the problem is that these are not really categories known in the Old Testament itself or in Scripture as a whole. We need to keep in mind that Peter quotes Leviticus, “You shall be holy as I am holy,” and applies it to the church and our Lord commands us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Mat. 5:48). The standard of morality is the same in the New Testament as it is in the Old. The beginning of morality as we saw is recognizing that, because of what Jesus did, we can approach the presence of a holy God. That includes gathering with his people on the Lord’s Day. The fourth commandment is no less enduring than the commandments not to murder, steal, or commit adultery. Just like with Israel gathering on the Lord’s Day reminds us that in his humanity Jesus has entered God’s rest and so we live out the rest of our week knowing that we also will enter into that promised rest.

As we apply the law it is key to look at the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Rather than simply divide the law into moral, civil, and ceremonial we should recognize that some laws are broad and generally applicable to all people at all times but others are more specific and narrowly addressed to the problems of ancient Israel. The moral principles that underlie this latter category still apply to all people but the specific application might not. So I encourage you when you read through these sections of Leviticus or law sections of the Old Testament, think through how narrowly applicable laws to Israel have broad principles underneath them that apply to all people. Here’s an example.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. 10And 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: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:9-10)

If this law was narrowly applied today it would be a mistake. It certainly does not mean that combine harvesters, which efficiently gather up every stalk of grain, are contrary to the law of God. The aim of this law is very clear, to provide for the poor and landless and allow them to gather some food for themselves. Inefficient combines would be no benefit to the poor and homeless in our society who rarely live in farm areas. But the moral principles under this law still apply in requiring those of means to find wise ways of providing for the poor. It requires God’s people to think about how best to do this between charities, community kitchens, food stamps, or what have you but this allows us to see how we should read this law and apply. This is how we ought to approach all of these Old Testament laws and think about what God commands of us living three thousand years later.

4. Blessing and Curse

Leviticus’ strong conclusion in chapters 26-27 focuses on promises of blessing for obedience or curses for disobedience and then a focus that what is dedicated and near to God, as Israel now is because God has redeemed them, is holy before him. We will not look at the blessings and curses in detail today but what is described here can also be seen at the end of Deuteronomy and then the prophets repeatedly warn about these curses coming upon the people for their disobedience. Interestingly, Revelation describes these judgments carried out against sin as God vindicates his people and destroys his enemies. Leviticus 26 three times describes a “sevenfold” increase in judgment; used by John in Revelation for the seven seal, bowl, and trumpet judgments. So when you study Leviticus on your own recognize how these curses point forward to God’s final judgments on those who reject his appointed means of drawing near to him.

To close today, we want to focus most on the blessings. The chief blessing that God promises is this:

I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. (Lev. 26:12)

The dramatic movement in the book of Leviticus is from how the dwelling place of God becomes the tent of meeting. Even with all of the sacrifices, cleanliness laws, the Day of Atonement, and the holiness laws the book still ends with the people only being able to enter the outer courtyard of the tabernacle under exacting conditions and only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies once a year. Yet the book closes imagining a day when God would walk among his people. This obviously points us forward to the Lord Jesus. In Christ, God took true humanity to himself and, accordingly to John 1:14, literally tabernacled among his people. God was with us. But that is not all. After Christ ascends to heaven he sends us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us, as we already saw. So that is to say that God’s dwelling is not just among us but within us! And Scripture ends with this promise:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev. 21:22-27)

All this is to say that the reason we ought to love Leviticus is because its promise is that of all of Scripture and it is what was lost when Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit and sinned. It is perfect, unbroken dwelling before and communion with the holy God. It is that city which is to come that has no temple, sun, or moon because God’s very presence is its temple and he is its light. The lamp in the tabernacle that the priests had to always keep lit, symbolizing God’s presence, is replaced by the immediate presence of the Lamb of God. And look at the promise, nothing unclean will ever enter into this holy city. God himself, because of Christ’s perfect work, will keep us always holy and clean before him. Are you longing for this city? Do you pray that this day would come soon? This is what Leviticus is all about.