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Benefice Service of Light - Leviticus

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Leviticus 19:1-18

Leviticus 19:2 | “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

This verse basically sums up what we're going to explore this evening. And it's good to spend a bit of time in Leviticus. Maybe it's just me, but sometimes I suggest the Leviticus pages of our Bibles tend to be a little bit less dog-eared; a little less highlighted; fewer annotations perhaps. And I think it's understandable. It can be hard work. There are long sections on animal sacrifices, priestly duties, laws about purity and cleanliness, and a lot of seemingly obscure laws about tattoos and all sorts of things. And on top of that, there's some pretty sort of icky stuff about skin diseases and body fluids and things - not very pleasant. And therefore, I think it is easy for us to write it off, to skip over it, and conclude that it's not really relevant or especially helpful for our Christian faith today.

And yet, Leviticus sits at the heart of the first five books of the Bible, and it addresses a question that is not an ancient question really at all. It's a still very relevant question to us today, and that is: **“How can a holy God live among an unholy people?”** And that's really something I hope Leviticus will answer for us this evening. And what I hope as well is we'll see that Leviticus is not simply a collection of archaic rules. **“It's actually a book about a love for God a love for neighbour,”** and it reveals God's character. It reveals God's faithfulness and God's desire to dwell among his people.

And this call to holiness is something we can trace from Leviticus, all the way through to Jesus teaching the early church, and through to today. I suggest to understand Leviticus 19, let's perhaps remind ourselves of how we got here...

So, in Exodus (the previous book) God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt. He brings them through the Red Sea and leads them to mount Sinai. And there, in Exodus 19, God declares his purpose for his people:

Exodus 19:5-6 | 5“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Imagine that. Everyone a priest. A kingdom of priests. Note this calling is given to the *whole* people. A holy nation that will speak to all nations. And Moses then receives the commandments and the instructions for building the tabernacle, which is the place that allows God to live among the people at that time. And it's all going so well...

But as is so often the case, it goes so wrong. And while Moses is on the top of Mount Sinai, his brother Aaron, and the people, decide that it's a good idea to make a golden calf as an idol. Immediately they break two of the commandments - disaster. But Moses intercedes, and things are resolved, kind of. And as Exodus closes, the beautiful tabernacle is completed, and the glory of the Lord fills it.

But if you look at the last few verses of Exodus, you'll see that Moses is not able to enter the tabernacle, because the sins of the people still stand in the way. And this is where Leviticus picks up the account: a period of about a year sandwiched between Exodus and Numbers. And **the focus of Leviticus is about how these people can become this holy nation.** And they haven't really got off to a great start. However, God is faithful, and he perseveres. God is now living among his people and has this repeated call: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” And God wants his people to be this holy nation to be like him and to follow his ways.

So, before we go any further we should perhaps explore what holiness is and I think a challenge we have a bit in our culture today that the word holy has become this sort of religious word that often suggests sort of moral superiority perhaps a moral practice which misses the richness of what holiness really is. And the Hebrew word for holy is 'Kodesh' (שָׁדֶךְ).¹ It means to be separate, or unique. In other words, *set apart*. However, we'll see in Leviticus that holiness is not about just being withdrawn from the world, being morally superior, or privately intense in our spirituality. Holiness means being separate for God. Belonging to God. Reflecting God's character in everyday life.

And I found a sort of helpful analogy from *The Bible Project* team. They compare God's holiness to the sun: an overwhelming source of supreme power, unique to our solar system. And this is also a life-giving power, a warmth to enable crops to grow, fruit to ripen, and to bask, you know, it's lovely to bask in the sun on a winter's day. And we see something of this power in Exodus 34. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights fasting in God's presence. And when he returns, his face is radiant with the holy glow. Can you imagine? In fact, it was so sort of unusual that people couldn't kind of cope with it. They had to put a veil over him. And of course we have the story of the burning bush, this amazing account of a sudden surprising encounter in the middle of the desert.

However, stretching that power of the sun analogy further, the power of the sun is also dangerous. It's so powerful and so bright that you can burn up if you get too close to it. God's holiness is a paradox. It's good because we can experience the power and glory and it can bring us closer to God. But at the same time there is danger, because nothing impure can survive in that presence. And we've seen this example of this in Leviticus 10, where Aaron's two sons, who are priests, offered unholy incense to God in the temple, and they are consumed by this divine fire. So, it shows there is a difficult side to that holiness as well.

And yet, astonishingly, God wants to live among his people. This is the tension that is addressed in Leviticus. This amazing power that is life-giving, also has some element of danger to it.

¹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6944/niv/wlc/0-1/>

And so, we come back to this phrase, “be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Crucially, Israel is not told to become holy in order to earn God’s presence. They are called holiness because God is already their God, and he’s already living among them. **Grace comes first.** Obedience, conformity and holiness to God come second. And therefore, it is a response to the salvation already given, just as it is for us today.

So, what do we learn about holiness from Leviticus 19? So, this chapter sits in what is sometimes called ‘The Holiness Code’. It’s addressed not just to priests, but to the whole community. So, if you look in Leviticus, a lot of the early part of Leviticus is addressed to Moses and the priests. But this particular section is specifically addressed to *all* people. And the chapter repeats the Ten Commandments in some shape or form, but it’s possible to look beyond those rules. And you’ll see what’s striking about it, is how ordinary holiness actually is. It’s a practical guide for the community. It’s rather fitting for us as three churches, in our communities, coming together to listen to what this really means. What ordinary holiness looks like. People living it out in their everyday.

And what you see there is a portrait of a just and compassionate society. **Holiness, as described in this chapter, is not so much about ritual, but about how people treat one another, and how they love each other.** Holiness is worked out in their homes, in their fields, in their workplaces and in their relationships. It’s for all. It’s for women and men and children.

Too often it’s easy to think holiness is reserved for when we’re in church, or thinking about God. For example, in verse 3 holiness starts in the home as they are called to honour and love their parents.

Leviticus 19:3 | “Each of you must respect your mother and father.”

A foundation of holiness is found in how they live together as families.

And holiness goes throughout the whole of the week as they observe their Sabbaths and have a pattern of regular worship.

Leviticus 19:3 | "...you must observe my Sabbaths."

And just as God observed that Sabbath in Genesis, God expects the same of his people.

And then verse 4 we come on to that reiterates the commandment: not to worship false gods or idols.

Leviticus 19:4 | "'Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves.'"

And then verses 5-8 touch on sacrifice. And perhaps it's worth just pausing. We can't really talk about Leviticus without talk about animal sacrifices. It has a lot about animal sacrifices in Leviticus. And to modern ears this can sound barbaric, and disturbing. But within the Ancient Near East, some three and a half thousand years ago (which would be about the beginning of the Bronze Age), animal sacrifices were common in that culture of the time. However, in Leviticus, sacrifice was not about appeasing an angry deity, which is what the case was for many of the cultures in that area. It was about restoring a relationship.

Sacrifice addressed the reality that sin disrupts the communion with God. Sin creates a distance, where God intends closeness. And crucially, as Leviticus 17 verse 11 explains, it's God himself who provides the means by which that distance can be healed or restored.

Leviticus 17:11 | "'For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.'"

It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. We often think of these gifts as being gifts from the people, to God. But actually, what it's telling us is that the lifeblood of the animal is the gift from God to the people, which then people give back to God.

And these sacrifices teach Israel that **forgiveness is costly**. These would have been valuable animals to them. And obviously, for us as Christians today, these sacrifices have been superseded by that once-and-for-all-time sacrifice by Christ. And we read in Hebrews chapter 10 an explicit connection between Leviticus and today. The sacrifices of Leviticus were never meant to be the final answer. They were just signs and shadows of what was to come. And in Christ, now, God has not abolished the logic of Leviticus. Leviticus tells us a lot about the context of sacrifice. But through Christ, he fulfils it. **Jesus becomes the sacrifice that God has provided once and for all, completely.**

And then we get to the second part of Leviticus in verses 9-18. And these contain five concrete ways live holy lives. They can seem a little random, so we need to look at them through the eyes of someone living in the community in the Ancient Near East. Perhaps through the eyes of a farmer, as many of them were to become farmers on the land that God promised them.

So, verses 9-10,

Leviticus 19:9-10 | "9 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.'"

1) Holiness is about being generous.

By leaving the gleanings for the poor and the foreigner. This was about leaving a strip of land around, a strip around the edge of your land, and always leaving some grapes on your vines. This was not about charity, because the people still had to gather the grain or the grapes. They had to work for it. And it wasn't seen as a kind of optional extra. It was this kind of generosity that was written into the fabric of their economic life.

And what God wanted them to do was limit their own profit so that they would be able to provide for the vulnerable and they may be able to live with dignity. The poor are not forced to beg, they are given space to work and survive. Themes which are echoed in Jesus' teaching.

And then secondly, in verses 11-12:

Leviticus 19:11-12 | ¹¹“Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. ¹²Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.”

2) Holiness is about being honest.

The people were told not to steal or lie, but to be honest in all things. This is an important statement about how we live our lives. We are told, “do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God.” It reminds us that as Christians, we bear the Lord's name, and therefore we reflect God through our actions.

And then thirdly, verses 13-14:

Leviticus 19:13-14 | ¹³“Do not defraud or rob your neighbour. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. ¹⁴Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling-block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord.”

3) Holiness is being fair.

This is about paying your workers' wages promptly. Many workers who didn't own land, perhaps, or they did not have enough to make a living from their land, would work on a day rate, expecting to be paid at the end of the day. But some less scrupulous employers would hold the wages back to the following day. And this was to address that. And in the same sense, holiness is also about treating the blind and the deaf with respect. For they cannot see or hear if they're being cheated. So, people could get away with it. But God will see. Perhaps we can try to get away with things that no one else can see, but God sees all.

And then, fourthly, in verses 15-16:

Leviticus 19:15-16 | ¹⁵ “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly. ¹⁶ Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life. I am the Lord.”

4) Holiness is just.

Favouritism is rejected. The rich and the poor are treated alike. Everyone deserves justice. We should be fair in how we judge others. We should not slander. We should think about how we defend those who are not able to defend themselves, those who need our support. And particularly, do we do that if there's a cost to ourselves?

And finally, verses 17-18:

Leviticus 19:17-18 | ¹⁷ “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in their guilt. ¹⁸ Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.

5) Holiness is love.

This is the most directly quoted line in the New Testament. And of course, this is the command that Jesus would later place at the centre of his teaching. And this is the key message that brings us around to today: that Leviticus is just as relevant to today as it was back in those times. It is looking for a society which looks after itself. It loves its neighbour. It isn't about archaic rules. It isn't about just following things for holiness from a point of moral superiority. It's about how we live out our lives every day. It's about how we see God in all the things that we do around us, and it's in the everyday things. You heard today how it's about being in the home, in the workplace and in the fields around us. And this is the same for us. It's about how we see holiness in the way we behave to others and how we treat others and in all the things that we do.

Closing Prayer

“Heavenly Father, we thank you for this example of holiness that we've heard about today. We pray that you show us how we can live this out in our lives. That we can, by your Holy Spirit, look around to our neighbours - to the communities in which we live - and seek to live our lives in a true and just way that seeks out to be generous, fair, honest. And provide hope to others, those in this society that need love and care, that are not able to look after themselves. And I pray that we can seek this holiness out and live this out in our everyday life. In your mighty name, Amen.”



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