

The Bible in One Year Week 9: Leviticus (Pt. 1)
(Leviticus 11:45, 20:26; Psalm 15:1-5; Romans 12:1-2)

- **Stepping into the Presence of Greatness**

- Today we're starting the book of *Leviticus*. And where do you begin when you try to talk about a book like Leviticus? It's one of the most challenging, weird, confusing books of the Bible—and one of the most difficult to apply to our lives. So many New Year's resolutions to read through the whole Bible *die* in Leviticus! Where do we begin? If you want to even *attempt* to grasp the meaning of this book, you have to begin by talking about *Holiness*.
- That's what we will focus on today: *Holiness*. The word "holy" appears more often in Leviticus than any other book of the Bible. We say God is *Holy*. And arguably the central message of Leviticus is repeated frequently, where the Lord says to Israel, "*Be holy as I am holy.*"
 - What does that mean? Well, if we're going to grasp God's desire for *us* to be holy, we have to first grasp what it means that *God* is Holy. Do we know today that *God* is *holy*? Not just with our heads, but with our hearts, with our experience? Do we know what that means anymore?
 - The best analogy I can think of for the experience of God's holiness is with an earthly experience that is fairly uncommon today: imagine the most *powerful* person you can think of. Imagine coming into the presence of a great world leader; imagine in olden days, or even in fantasy stories, a great King or Queen of valor and majesty. Imagine what it would feel like to enter into their presence and stand before their throne.
 - It makes me think of a scene from the 2008 HBO miniseries on the life of John Adams, one of America's founding fathers. A scene from that show has stuck with me ever since I first saw it.
- To give just a little brush-up on American history so you have the context of this scene: remember that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 and the Revolutionary War ensued between the American Colonies and Britain, until the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The scene you're going to watch here is from 1785 when John Adams comes into the royal court of King George III as the first official ambassador from the now *independent* United States of America. This is a really significant and tense moment in the history of these nations: Adams had just over a year prior still been a subject of King George as someone living in America, but he was actively part of the *rebellion* against this king's rule over them. Now, he's coming for the first time into the presence of said king, no longer as his subject, but as a representative of the people who successfully revolted against him. Very dramatic, right? Watch all the emotions as John Adams enters the king's court. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ye7z5>
 - Wow! What a great scene and remarkable moment of history. I share that simply to give us an illustration of what it feels like to approach the presence of great authority—the feeling of *reverence*, even "fear" or awe we might have. When you think about it, a sense of genuine "reverence" for anyone or anything has largely been lost in our culture today: something about the modern world seems to have "cheapened" how we appreciate much of life, don't you think?
 - But, how would *you* feel stepping into the room with someone *like that*? How would you feel if you were standing there in John Adams' place?
- Think of any of the great kings, queens, leaders of the world—truthfully there haven't been *many* really "good" ones through history (too often power is abused). But think of the good and great leaders, and going to stand in their presence like Adams in this scene—how you would feel, how you would act.
- And now think of the fact that all of these people are *just people*—*dim reflections* of the One: the true, the worthy, the forever King of kings and Lord of lords. God, the uncreated Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer and King of the Universe. The One true authority from which anyone else that has any authority derives it. Consider that. And ask yourself, *how do you think and feel about standing in the Presence of that King? How do you feel and how should you feel about meeting with Him?*

- *“For now we see in a mirror, dimly,” says Paul, “but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known,” (1 Corinthians 13:12). And elsewhere Paul also said, “...we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written...‘Every knee shall bow...and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us shall give account of himself to God,” (Romans. 14:10-12).*
- I mean, how would we stand a chance in that moment without some kind of Mediator and without mercy? We wouldn’t even begin to understand how to stand in the presence of this God unless He came and showed us. Is there anyone thinking about this with me right now who doesn’t feel compelled to just fall on our faces before this God and say, “Lord, have mercy!” No, we will not stand, we’ll all fall to our knees—not because He compels us but because we will not be able to help ourselves—and if you think you could stand, then you’re not imagining the real, Holy God, but a false, counterfeit.
- I’m not trying to manipulate your emotions here or manufacture some experience, I’m just trying to help us see the obvious fact that God is *THE GREATEST* and that most of us, most of the time, probably take for granted being able to have the access to His presence that we do in Christ. It’s a free gift of grace, but it is not cheap. And if we don’t grasp this, then most of Leviticus and most of the Old Testament and most of the Bible just won’t make sense.
- **Holiness**
 - What we’re getting at here is God’s *holiness*. God’s *otherness* and *set-apartness*. That’s what the word “Holy” means—in Hebrew, *Kadosh*, to be *set apart*.
 - Eugene Peterson in his reflections on Leviticus wrote: *“One of the stubbornly enduring habits of the human race is to insist on domesticating God. We are determined to tame him. We figure out ways to harness God to our projects. We try to reduce God to a size that conveniently fits our plans and ambitions and tastes. But our Scriptures are even more stubborn in telling us that we can’t do it. God cannot be fit into our plans, we must fit into his. We can’t use God—God is not a tool or appliance or credit card. ‘Holy’ is the word that sets God apart and above our attempts to enlist him...Holy means that God is alive on God’s terms, alive in a way that exceeds our experience and imagination. Holy refers to life burning with an intense purity that transforms everything it touches into itself...The book of Leviticus is a narrative pause in the story of our ancestors as they were on their way, saved out of Egypt, to settle in the land of Canaan. It is a kind of extended time-out of instruction, a detailed and meticulous preparation for living ‘holy’ in a culture that doesn’t have the faintest idea what ‘holy’ is.” (The Message: Remix)*
 - Another pastor and theologian, A.W. Tozer, spoke with power and conviction on God’s holiness: *“Because God is self-existent, His love had no beginning; because He is eternal, His love can have no end; because He is infinite, it has no limit; because He is holy, it is the quintessence of all spotless purity; because He is immense, His love is an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoreless sea before which we kneel in joyful silence and from which the loftiest eloquence retreats confused and abashed...Holy is the way God is. To be holy he does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Because he is holy, all his attributes are holy...whatever we think of as belonging to God must be thought of as holy.”*
 - God is *holy*—and we are made in *His image*. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement from which we have come, said that he believed his mission was to *spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land*—and in doing so, see the world become transformed.
 - The book of Leviticus concerns the theme of having access to God’s presence, and if we’re going to talk about people having access to God’s presence then we have to deal with the fact that God is *holy* and we, in our now fallen condition, are not.
 - We were *made* holy, made to *be* holy, but sin has marred all of that and broke our relationship with God. In this Biblical story God has been making a way to get back to *that*. God has been making a way for people to *be holy as God is holy*, again.
 - See, here we are again: it’s about getting back to the Garden. In the Garden of Eden, people didn’t need to *know about* holiness, because they lived in it! They didn’t need to have a word for it because they just had God! It wasn’t until they fell and left that place of perfect communion with God that they had to have a word to describe this *otherness* of God, this *distinction* of God from ourselves and everything else.

- When God says, “Be holy as I am holy,” what He’s doing is trying to restore His image in us. I mean, that is pretty majestic. In Leviticus, God was giving His people a whole new way of life, showing them how to live in the constant reminder that they are *set apart* from the world, for the sake of showing the world who God is. To be a Kingdom of Priests is to be *ambassadors* between this King and the world.
- **Making Sense of Leviticus**
 - If you can grasp that big idea of Holiness, so central to the Bible, then you can see the big picture of Leviticus. But how do you make sense of all the details when it comes to actually reading it?
 - The NIV Study Bible summarizes Leviticus like this: *“Leviticus is a manual of regulations enabling the holy King to set up his earthly throne among the people of his kingdom. It explains how the Israelites are to be the Lord’s holy people and are to worship him in a holy manner. Holiness in this sense means to be separated from sin and set apart exclusively to the Lord for his purpose, in his service and for his glory...Israel represented God’s kingdom on earth and as its king the Lord imposed his administration over all of Israel’s life. He so regulated Israel’s religious, communal, and personal life as to establish them as his holy people and to instruct them in holiness.”*
 - Next week, we’re going to get into more of the specifics of Leviticus just to help us see some of the *meaning* of what’s going on in all of these strange details: we won’t understand *everything* but we’ll get the big idea of *why* it matters.
 - For now, let’s just wrap up by bringing it to the fulfillment of the New Testament. I know it’s easy to write all of this stuff off because we’re in the *new covenant*, but remember that Peter wrote to *Christians* in the Church, *to us*, when he picked up these themes from Leviticus and said, *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do: for it is written ‘Be holy, because I am holy,’”* (1 Peter 1:15-16) and he also said, *“...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light,”* (1 Peter 2:9).
 - The methods and the means have changed—thank the Lord, thank you Jesus!—but the purpose has not. God has taken the meaning of “be holy” from a set of external, culturally-specific practices and observances, to an inside-out transformation of your life, through the saving work of Christ and the power of the *Holy Spirit* who *lives in you* if you are a Christ follower. The whole purpose of Christ’s saving work was to fulfill what was spoken in Leviticus in *your life: be holy*.
 - Do you want to be Holy as He is Holy? Do you realize what a privilege and joy that is? Being Holy means *having abundant life* and being *made whole*. It means *being alive like Jesus*. Do you want that? It starts with *repentance* and *surrender* (turning from the old and embracing the New), and it continues by grace through faith, one day at a time.
 - Let’s finish this with what Paul said in Romans 12, the Message Translation: *“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”*
 - *That*, brothers and sisters, is what it means to live a holy life by the power of Christ. *That’s* what God calls us live in. Let’s surrender again to Him today so that He can do it in us. Amen.