

The Bible in One Year Week 10: Leviticus (Pt. 2)

(Leviticus 16:29-34; Hebrews 10:1-23)

• Cross-Cultural Experience

- Well, everyone, we're talking about Leviticus again! How is the reading going for you? I know some of us are struggling, but hang in there, it'll be worth it! Last week, we focused on the big idea of *holiness*: I hope came away with a better understanding of what it means that *God* is holy and that *God* calls *us* to be holy.
 - Today, I want to give you more of an overview of Leviticus to help make sense of the details we all struggle with. If all goes well, you'll get a better understanding of what this book means and why it matters for us. We're going to do a good bit of teaching today—I want us to work through some ideas that will help make sense of this book, but stick with me: it *will* get practical and applicable by the end. The truth is, there are things about Jesus, with the way the New Testament talks about his ministry and his redemption that we *will not understand* unless we know something about Leviticus. And that alone makes it worth it, right? So, let's do this.
 - There are two ideas we should unpack, two “lenses” that will make the message of Leviticus clearer: we need to think a bit about *cultural differences* and about *rituals*. So, first: culture.
- How many of you have ever spent time in a different culture from your own? I've shared with you before that Emily and I were privileged at Messiah College to study abroad: Emily spent a J-term in Kenya and I spent a spring semester in Thailand. It was life-changing for us both.
 - Emily got to venture into the wilderness of Kenya to be among the beautiful Maasai people: for many in that particular village, it was their first time *ever meeting a person with white skin*—let alone a person with *red hair and freckles*. The children were fascinated with Emily and would try to rub the freckles off her skin! It was also the first and only time she drank *raw camel milk*.
 - In Thailand, I got to eat fried pig intestine and frog. I got to tour ancient temple ruins. I got to dialogue with monks in the city and live with villagers in the hill tribes.
 - When you're immersed in a totally different culture, you realize that as an outsider coming into someone else's “world,” what seems really strange to you is just normal for them and what seems normal to you is often weird to them! All cultures have language, expressions, and symbols that are unique to their story—things that hold a particular meaning.
 - There are certain hand-gestures that if you walked down the street here would mean nothing, but in another part of the world would be a huge insult!
 - Or think about symbols: did you know that the infamous *Swastika* used by the Nazis is actually a much older symbol used for thousands of years in India and Asia? Believe it or not, it represents *good fortune*. But obviously today for many in the West, *it means something very different*.
 - The point is that symbols, words, and gestures have *meaning*—it's what cultures do. And meanings can be different in various times and places. There are certainly things all humans share in common; otherwise, we couldn't relate to each other at all. There are transcendent truths and revelation from God that stand for all time. But there is also a rich diversity of human cultures that is particular to each context. The world is an interesting place!
- Enter *Leviticus*. It's difficult to understand because it comes from a very different time and place from ours—maybe more than we realize. When you read this book, *you are entering a cross-cultural experience*.
 - Yes, we believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God! Everything that's in there is in there for a reason. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped...*” Yes, there is a message from God here for us even in Leviticus!
 - But God didn't beam it down out of thin air; He collaborated with people, His covenant people, to bring it about over time. He used humans to help write it—real humans with a specific language, culture, and history.

- So, if you want to understand Leviticus (and the rest of the Bible), you have to study it and do your best to understand the original context it came out of so that you can interpret its message and apply it today.
- For example, Leviticus 19:28 says, “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.” This verse has been used in the past to forbid Christians from getting tattoos. But the context of Leviticus 19:28 isn’t referring to creative self-expression, but pagan religious practices. Marking the skin with tattoos was not only associated with the branding of slaves and property, but with the worship of idols and cult practices. The action of tattooing had a totally different *meaning* in that culture than today—although, by all means, we should use wisdom and discretion.
- We see some strange commandments in this book, but we have to realize the situation Israel was in: they were surrounded by cultures of idolatry. For some, the permitting of *child sacrifice* was normal. Elsewhere, it was a normal act of “worship” to go to the temple and sleep with the temple prostitute. In an environment with these kinds of demonic and dehumanizing influences, it was obviously super important for Israel to be *set apart*. That’s often what’s happening with some of the strange, seemingly arbitrary rules we see in Leviticus.
- So, remember you’re reading about an ancient culture in this book and often, you need to consider the context in order to appreciate the timeless truths it contains.
- **Rituals**
 - Now, on to *rituals*: Leviticus contains lots of elaborate rituals and symbols that are particular to that time, but strange to us. Let’s take a moment and think about what that means. All people and cultures have rituals. But what is a ritual?
 - Here’s my definition: Rituals are interactive symbols that make the *intangible* tangible and help us to participate in the reality of what the symbols represent. That’s maybe a lot to process. Rituals are symbols that we act out that help engage our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies with things that are intangible.
 - Think of the *ritual* of the wedding ceremony. Weddings are beautiful rituals that help to make *tangible* the *intangible* realities of a husband and wife’s loving relationship and spiritual union. All these outward signs of their love help to formalize and legitimize this sacred covenant.
 - If you were coming from an alien planet to observe a traditional wedding here, you’d be pretty perplexed. Like, “*What are these metallic bands they’re constricting their phalanges with? Why is the female wearing a billowing white garment and a thin piece of fabric over her face? Why did everyone get rowdy when the subjects pressed their faces together? How bizarre!*” We take for granted the meaning of these things, but they’re not necessarily self-evident. They’re specific to our culture; but they matter, they mean something real and they affect our reality.
 - You’ve got to approach the rituals of Leviticus with the same perspective: as strange it may seem, it’s not just arbitrary nonsense. They *meant something* to the people and to God. They gave the people the opportunity to participate in the intangible realities of God’s holiness and righteousness: they represented forgiveness, purity, morality, and distinctness from surrounding cultures. God gave Israel this whole new, all-encompassing way of life so that out of all the peoples of the world, they could become His people. God gave them these rituals to help work out the reality of His holiness in their everyday lives.
 - So, as you read Leviticus, be aware of cultural differences and the purpose of rituals.
 - With all that setup, let me show you a Bible Project video about “Biblical Law.” This will give you a lot of perspective on Leviticus. And then we’ll be ready to drive it all home with the ministry of Jesus and figure out why it matters for us today. <https://youtu.be/Sew1kBle-W0>
 - Let’s summarize. Leviticus provides the answer to the problem of a sinful people dwelling with a Holy God by focusing on three distinct areas: the *Rituals* that connected people to God and His Story; the *Priesthood* that mediated between the people and God; and the ways of ethical and ritual *Purity* that set people apart from corruption and brought them in alignment God’s heart. 3 solutions to the problem: *Rituals, Priesthood, Purity*. The fact that all of this was given in such a

different time and culture from our own makes it hard to understand, but the main point is that these practices and moral codes helped people to work out the holiness of God in their lives.

- **And then, there is Jesus**

- The question is: why does all of this matter for us, and how do we apply it to our lives? This is where Jesus comes in. All of these aspects of the Law—the rituals, the priesthood, and the purity—are fulfilled in Jesus. Christ fulfills it all. What that means is, whatever the Law was aiming people at, where they missed the mark again and again, Jesus picks it up and takes it to its intended purpose. As the saying goes, “He lived the life we couldn’t live and died the death we should have died.” Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, the Great High Priest, and the Way.
 - Hebrews shows Christ's fulfillment of the Law with these amazing words: *“For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy...since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for...and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with full assurance that faith brings...”* (10:14, 19-22). We have a perfect priest who is also the perfect sacrifice, and therefore we have full assurance before our Holy God!
 - And Jesus told us *everything* we really need to know about the Law when he said: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,”* (Matthew 22:37-40).
- So, if you’re looking for a specific application in all this, here you go: *Love God, Love Others*. Everything you read in Leviticus, in the Torah—in the whole Old Testament—it's aiming us at loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves (or, in other words, loving other people the way God loves them.) There are many head-scratching parts of the Old Covenant, but whatever you read, whether you understand it or not, Jesus said it all hangs on this: *Love God and Love Others*. Once we have that worked out, we can recognize two things:
 - First, recognize Jesus is the perfect answer and provision to *all* of our needs before God. He’s the One; He’s the Way. So, trust Him *completely* and rejoice in Him *abundantly*.
 - Second, recognize that God cares about the details of your life. Not because He wants to micromanage! But because He created you in His image and your life is *sacred to Him*: He wants us to learn to be holy as He is holy, *because holiness is the only way that is actually going to make life work for us!*
- Leviticus shows us that living a holy life means living a life of worship and justice—love God, love others. Consecrate *your whole life to God*; that’s true worship. And because God is passionate about justice for the poor, the oppressed, the stranger, *we should get passionate about it too*.
- In conclusion: 2 Peter says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature...”* (2 Peter 1:3-4). We have something the Israelites didn’t have: we have Jesus and His Holy Spirit. He makes it possible to be holy: *He is the Way*. So, walk with Jesus and be holy. *Amen*.