

## Leviticus

- 1) Sunday of Service reminder
- 2) Open with prayer for Ken as he prepares to preach at City Church in San Francisco.

We're starting a brand new sermon series this week. And we're going to be talking about Leviticus, of all things.

Leviticus is one of those books in the Bible most of us, understandably, skip. If you start at the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, and you're reading through that and you get to the next book, Exodus, and you're reading through that, you've largely been reading a coherent story. A story about God creating the earth as his temple, about Abraham and his family, and then Moses leading the descendants of Abraham out of slavery in Egypt. It's this great story, an epic story, of the history of the Hebrew people.

And then you reach Leviticus, and it's like bumping your head against the wall over and over. It's like the Bible takes a megaphone and says, "**We now interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you an instruction manual on how to be an ancient priest!**" Where'd the story go? Suddenly it's chapters and chapters of ritual laws about how to chop up animals for sacrifices and where to sprinkle their blood, and what you should eat and not eat, and how to punish people who commit crimes ... including "crimes" like cursing their parents. Which is a "crime" that was punishable by death according to Leviticus.

Speaking of odd things in Leviticus, I'd like to start by addressing some elephants that may be in the room for those of you who have read this book, or who have attempted to read it, or who have heard things about it.

We're entering a different worldview when we read Leviticus. It's a world where women are the property of men and are treated abhorrently by our standards. On that level alone it can be incredibly offensive. As one example among many, it's a world where, when a female virgin is raped, **the rapist must pay her father a sum of money and then marry her**. Noting that an unmarried female virgin in that context is likely pre-pubescent. A child. A child is forced to marry her rapist.

And we also note that the offense of rape isn't against the girl, but against her father who owns her, and so the perpetrator has compromised her cash value. Therefore he owes her father money and must take her for a wife because the father wouldn't be able to get as much dowry for her otherwise, now that she's no longer a virgin. And then the man marries the girl and he's never allowed to divorce her. All this without any consideration of how the girl may feel. She's just property. I don't know about you, but reading things like that makes me almost unable to breathe, imagining my friends who have had this happen being forced to marry the person who hurt them. This is in Leviticus.

This is a world where the Hebrew people felt the need to outline for men exactly which women in their families they were forbidden to have sex with. It's almost comical if it weren't so serious. Don't have sex with your father's wife, for goodness sake! Whether that be your mother or one of his other wives (since men could have multiple wives, another worldview shift for us). And oh by the way, the reason for not having sex with your father's wife is because it would dishonor your *father*, not the woman, because she *belongs* to your father. Don't have sex with your sister, or your aunt, or your niece, or your grand-daughters. Because, essentially, they don't

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belong to you; they belong to another man. The sin in this context is more about harming a man's property than about dehumanizing a woman or a girl who has less power than the man.

This is a world where women are treated a bit like cattle.

This is also a world where slavery is allowed and regulated.

**Leviticus 25:44-45** - "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property."

I bet those verses haven't been read aloud in an American church very often since before the Civil War. They're not part of the lectionary. We well know how taking verses like that out of context led to our collective sin of slavery, of justifying dehumanizing and traumatizing entire people groups. The consequences of which we're still working through today.

If we pick verses here and there out of Leviticus and try to apply them to our lives in 2015 in order to try to be faithful to God, we're in for some real trouble.

There's another verse many of you will know well because it's often cherry-picked out of this book to condemn gay people, especially gay men. This is wrong. This is a poor way of reading Scripture. Leviticus 20 tells us to stone adulterers to death, which thankfully no one does anymore. Some people *were* still trying to stone to death adulterers in Jesus's time (at least, they were trying to stone the female and not the male), and Jesus put an end to that nonsense. *Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.* That's Jesus critiquing Leviticus.

I just want to name that Leviticus is probably an even more difficult book to read if you're female, if you're African-American, and/or if you're gay. It's a little overwhelming to have to sort through the history of the way this book has been used. And I want to acknowledge that this is a shock our Modern and Postmodern sensibilities—even if you're a straight, not-black, man. Leviticus doesn't seem to have any application for our lives today. It can even be a little embarrassing. How do we explain that this stuff is in our Holy Scriptures?

What we usually do is just not talk about it; we ignore it. But my hope is that we'll see in this series that there's actually a lot we can get from Leviticus, even things that could help us frame discussions about our modern lives. And it's good to have some understanding of the Law, since Jesus interacted with these texts, and he said he didn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. So let's hang in there with Leviticus!

**To delve in, let me offer a couple of thoughts** that have helped me grapple with this book in a big-picture sense of understanding it.

**One way of understanding** the Bible is to look at it as a gradual unfolding of the revelation of God to us humans. It's a gradual unfolding of the revelation of God to humans.

If you've been on the path of following Jesus for many years of your life, then you know that the longer you're on this pilgrimage, as you've practiced spiritual disciplines over many years, and as you've learned to hear God's voice and let it guide you, your life and your thinking has been shaped and changed.

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For example, you came to faith at 18 years old, and you're now 60, you know that when you first came to faith as a teenager you couldn't possibly have had the understanding of God that you have now, like instantaneously, when you were 18. You couldn't skip ahead on the journey. You had to have life experience that allowed you to learn and grow and wrestle with God. And that's how you gained wisdom and how you learned to know him more.

And the same is true of the Bible. Humans are on a grand spiritual pilgrimage where God is depicted as teaching us as we go. Through the hard times as well as the good.

That's the understanding the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had when he said, "**The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.**" He understood the long unfolding revelation of God to humans, and though it takes a long time, the arc of that revelation we're growing in is always toward justice, because it's what we Christians call the kingdom of God breaking into our world. We're on a collective pilgrimage, learning and growing.

And there are certain moments on that arc - certain moments in history - when the Holy Spirit seems to activate a real switch in our human understanding. The seeds of which could be found in Scripture all along when we look back. There are "Ah-ha!" moments. Ah-ha! How did we not see that? How did we not see that God wanted to include the Gentiles in his family all along?

And those moments are still happening. Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, and if he is alive (and he is), then he's still speaking to us and teaching us today. There is a still-unfolding revelation of God happening, which should keep us humble. Because we don't fully understand God. We still see through a glass, darkly.

Taking it back to the early part of Scripture, we see this trend from the beginning. For example, in the ancient world, child sacrifice was rampant. All of the people groups around Abraham and his family practiced child sacrifice in Ancient Mesopotamia. And we see this God-of-the-Bible ask Abraham to go and sacrifice his son, Isaac. It's jarring for us to read that, because this doesn't seem like the God we know through Jesus. Why is child sacrifice in the Bible? But we notice that God *stops* the sacrifice and in doing so puts an end to child sacrifice for all time in the Judeo-Christian faith. He's not condoning it, he's condemning it. That's a big step for humanity, especially in the context of the Ancient Near East. God intervened and made a switch in our collective understanding of how God is to be worshipped. And it's not through sacrificing children. This is part of the discipleship of the humans.

So, too, with Leviticus in its context.

There's a highly-influential medieval Jewish scholar named Maimonides who talked about the Leviticus in this way. He wrote:

"It was through this Divine ruse [of the tabernacle and its system of sacrificing animals] that our ancestors gradually lost their memory of idolatry and that the most foundational belief of our religion---namely, the existence and oneness of the deity---was firmly established. Thanks to the Divine ruse of commanding the people to have a temple and offer sacrifices, our ancestors who left Egypt were able to learn and come to believe in the foundational lesson of monotheism, without feeling the shock or revulsion they would've felt had Moses commanded them to abolish

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the modes of worship to which they were accustomed and replace them with more advanced modes of worship which were not known anywhere in the world at that time.”

In other words, he's saying God entered into where humans were *at* in *that* moment in history, and used some of the current practices that they weren't ready to give up (like animal sacrifice), to help them understand another aspect of God. Instead of sacrificing animals to many, many gods, he had them sacrifice to the One God, over and over and over again until it was completely ingrained in their imaginations that there was only One God. Maimonides would say that this was a re-orienting of their current practices that took them one step deeper into their understanding of the Divine.

That's an intriguing thought to me.

In the same way, with the death of Jesus, we Christians would say God put an end to **all** human *and* animal sacrifice for **all** time in the Christian faith. Remember there was still animal sacrifice in Jesus's day - his parents went and sacrificed birds after his dedication as a baby. But Jesus's death ended the animal sacrifices for good for his followers, which we might say is a collective step forward in worshipping this God. He does not require that kind of sacrifice. That was a new revelation. The seeds of which could be found in the prophets.

The prophet Hosea wrote:

**Hosea 6:6** - “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus quoting this verse twice. He was well aware of that prophetic voice.

In the same way, most Jews today would say that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem a few decades after Jesus died did the same thing for Judaism. They also stopped sacrificing animals and evolved new ways of understanding and worshipping God. (The exception to this would be a segment of the Ultra Orthodox Jewish tradition, and that's an interesting conversation we could have because I visited a place in Jerusalem where some Orthodox Jews are currently planning to rebuild the temple and sacrifice animals again.) But the most common understanding is that this practice is done.

So we can take Leviticus where it is, and appreciate the new wisdom God was giving humans at that point in time. After all, that book has some treasures - it's the first place we're told to “love our neighbors as ourselves,” which is the gem Jesus pulls out of it to talk about the lens through which we should interpret the entire Law. Some of those buried treasures are things we'll focus on in this series and I'll outline more of what I mean in a moment.

**A second thought** I can offer is that the Bible is made up of a diverse group of voices who witness to who God is through history. It's not one voice.

Leviticus is part of a tradition called the Law - the priestly voice of the Old Testament. There are also narrative voices, and prophetic voices, and poetic voices. And these are sometimes in tension with each other. That tension isn't something to be afraid of, nor is it a cause for us to write off the Bible as inconsistent. One of the ways we grow is to wrestle with those tensions, asking the Spirit to help us gain wisdom and understanding.

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One of the themes where we see perhaps the greatest amount of tension in Scripture is surrounding the theme of purity, which is a chief concern of Leviticus. Leviticus has a *lot* of things to say about purity, but it's not the only voice on the topic in the Bible. The later prophetic voices, and certainly Jesus's interpretation, stand in tension with the priestly voices of Leviticus on this topic.

What do we even mean by purity? That's a good question, because the biblical voices disagree. Essentially it's what makes you acceptable to come before God. In the case of Leviticus, it's what makes you acceptable to enter the tabernacle to worship and offer sacrifices, and to live in full community with the rest of the people. And there were lots of rules and regulations regarding what made you clean or unclean.

A short response to that is that Jesus comes on the scene and he and his followers start saying that the only thing you need to be acceptable before God is to believe he died to make that so. Which kind of blows all of the purity categories of Leviticus out of the water.

Either Ken or I will talk more in depth about purity in this series, and how Jesus seemed to side with the prophetic voices in this regard, and to reinterpret Leviticus. Not to get rid of Leviticus or make it irrelevant - so far as we know Jesus ate kosher, which is outlined in the Law. But to reinterpret and fulfill the Law, which he claimed was summed loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

That said, as we think about this book I find it helpful to know it's not the only voice in Scripture on this matter.

### Looking Ahead

Looking ahead to the next few weeks, I've been really excited to teach on Leviticus because I read a book by a Reconstructionist Jewish rabbi that opened my eyes to some key Blue Ocean themes in the book that I hadn't connected before. And I was surprised by how energizing I found it. My hope is that you'll find it energizing as well.

Here are some of the themes we may be touching on in the coming weeks.

1) The first is that Leviticus shows us, in its own way, that God partners with humans to create a space for the Divine Presence to dwell on earth, and that as people with free will we can act in ways that support or hinder God's ability to take root within us and among us. Which sounds a lot like how we talk about the kingdom of God. The idea that God partners with us humans to bring his peace and justice and love and joy to the world around us. And that doing so is a choice. The ways Leviticus tells us we can do this might seem odd to us, but the basic idea of God's presence dwelling on earth and of God partnering with humans is germinating there in the beginnings.

One of the nine Blue Ocean perspectives is: *there really is something going on out there*. And Leviticus seems to exemplify that perspective. The Hebrew people felt like *there really is something going on out there, and we're invited to be part of it*.

2) Leviticus also talks about how ecosystems and economies need to function in cycles that are in some sort of balance to ensure health for the land and basic fairness and compassion for the weakest members of society. It's the ancient world, so it's different than our context and we're not looking to it for a prescription for how to set up a system of government that is good for all

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time, but it certainly has food for thought that may hint at God's imagination for how to help humans maintain that balance between economics and care for the world around us. Which could be helpful for conversations today about how money and our desire for natural resources like oil and gas are throwing our ecosystems out of whack. Or, on a level closer-to-home, it might give us food for thought about how we manage our own resources and land (if we own land).

It reminds us of another Blue Ocean perspective, and that one is *everyone is us, and we need to understand how we're all connected more than we need answers*. If we understand that we're connected, we'll be more inclined to care about others and the world around us.

3) A third theme in Leviticus concerns the restoration of people to the full life of the community if they've been removed for some reason. Whether it's because they committed a crime, or they suffered from something like a skin disease, which in the ancient world was considered a serious thing. I think Leviticus could maybe offer us wisdom about how to think about our penal system and how we could make changes and better integrate people who have been in jail back into our society.

When I was talking to a friend of mine about this, she said, "Yeah, I could also see that with people who suffer from mental illness. We don't always have a way to welcome people who have gotten really sick and had to be hospitalized back into the life of a community."

I honestly haven't had a chance to explore that thought further yet, but I think we might get some insight chewing on it together.

The way Leviticus talks about restoration reminds us that *our drive to judge other people is a big problem. And, again, that everyone is us*. If we remove people from the central life of our communities for a time, whether because they could harm someone or make others sick, then we need to have ways to them as "us" for the sake of everyone.

4) Now, we won't do a whole sermon on this this last theme, but I'll just offer a thought or two on this to wrap up because it struck me as something maybe profound enough to think about. And it has to do with animal sacrifice.

While the thought of sacrificing animals is pretty gruesome, Leviticus reminds us that animals and humans share the life force - we share the breath of life. We breath air to exist. Especially humans and mammals share a kinship because, in the Genesis creation story, the human and the mammals were both created on the sixth day. It's what the German theologian Helmut Thielicke calls "the solidarity of the sixth day," which I kind of love. And Leviticus asks if the taking of animal life might deserve awe and ritual because of that shared life force.

Now there's a thought.

In this book I was reading by a Jewish rabbi, he was talking about how he was teaching a bunch of middle school kids about the animal sacrifices in Leviticus. About how the ancient Israelites often incorporated an element of ritual every time they slaughtered an animal for meat. These were kids who had to study the Torah before their bar or bat mitzvahs. And the kids were completely grossed out by the idea of ritual sacrifice. As most of us are. A bunch of them were talking over each other, and asking, "Ew, why would people ever do that? That's disgusting and barbaric." And this poor rabbi was trying his best to help them understand the ancient worldview and to help them have compassion on their ancestors.

And then he described one particularly sullen and snarky boy named Evan, who mostly sat in the back corner of the classroom saying nothing.

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But on this day, as they were boisterously discussing animal sacrifices, the rabbi wrote this. Let me read it to you from the book:

“That's when Evan's voice rang out from his chair in the corner of the classroom, with his familiar notes of outrage and disdain. “You think animal sacrifices are gross?” he snarled, eyeing his fellow tweens with steely contempt. “Well which do you think it's more moral? Doing a sacred ritual and dealing with God every single time you kill an animal for its meat, or anonymously shoving millions of animals into crowded pens and cages so that they're growing up in their own feces on factory farms, and filling the animals up with drugs that makes them sick just to fatten them up some more, and then shipping them out and slaughtering them by the million without even thinking about how they feel, and then cutting up their body parts, shrink wrapping them in plastic and lining the walls of grocery store refrigerator cases with a horror show of dead animal body parts from factory farms while you and your parents stand there talking about soccer and gas prices in front of this wall of death and animal body parts, acting like there's nothing wrong? Please people.” And then he said no more.”

When I read that, I was taken aback. Not because of the young man's brazen-ness, but because I'd never thought about it that way. That the sacrifices in Leviticus could prompt us to think about the sacredness of taking animal life. The Hebrew people would take an animal, try to ensure a minimal amount of pain in taking its life, and then they'd use their hands to separate the animal's innards. Which would serve to remind them on some level of their own mortality. And maybe it's worth considering that those animal sacrifices were less barbaric on some level than the way we treat many animals we eat today.

If any of you in here are hunters, maybe this rings true. And it helps me appreciate hunting more than I might have, since no one in my family hunts and I didn't grow up with that culture.

For whatever that's worth.

So, I hope I've whet your appetite some to think a bit more about Leviticus and its place in Scripture.

### **Two Minutes of Silence**

We're going to have two minutes of silence. I invite you, if you want to and are willing, to take a couple of minutes to meditate on something that has nothing to do with Leviticus. Many of us have a lot of things going on in our lives right now, so I'd like to take the first minute to give us the opportunity to lay out something we're anxious or stressed about before God. Spend the first minute confessing it to Jesus and picturing him sitting here with you in that anxiety. And then we'll spend the second minute making ourselves available to receive the peace of God in that space. I'll keep an eye on the clock and will let you know when the second minute has started.

### **Offering**

Let's have the ushers come up to receive our offering, and the band will lead us in the doxology. First, let's pray for the offering.

### **Group Prayer**

“Let's remember together, by name, our loved ones with needs. We will simply speak each name aloud together in unison. Lord, hear our prayers for ...

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Phyllis, Matt, Fred, Stan, Mel, Adam, Pam, Sam, Mac, Chris, Shelley, Gloria, Brandi, Amanda, Clark, Amy, Emily, Juwon, Terrell, Melvin, Betty, Debbie, Sarah, Grace, Ian, Michaela, Sherry, Don, Colton, Vaughn, Dawson, Rowan, Sharon, and the family of John Loring. And those we lift up in silence:\_\_\_\_\_. (VICKY?)

**[cue communion ushers to go up during communion instruction]:** I'll ask our ushers to come to prepare for communion, and invite Traye to come forward to do our call and response.

Communion Instructions: Everyone is welcome to take communion. For communion, the server will hand you a piece of bread. You can dip it in the chalice of wine, or take a small cup of juice to drink with it. No one drinks directly from the chalices. There is a gluten free bread option if you ask your server.

**Emily: Let's all stand if we're able, and look at the call and response.**

**Traye: The Lord be with you!**

People: And also with you.

**Traye: Lift up your hearts!**

People: We lift them up unto to the Lord.

**Traye: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.**

People: It is right to give him thanks and praise.

**Communion Prayer (Emily):**

**Corinthians passage:** For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

**Lord's Prayer**

**Form two lines down the center.**