



Levitating Leviticus

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-118

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Several prominent literary figures were invited to an open forum where someone interviewed them and asked them questions. One question that came up was this: "If you were stranded on a desert isle, and you could only have one book, which book would you bring with you?"

The first person said without hesitating, "The complete works of William Shakespeare"

The next said, "I would bring the Bible with me"

They turned to the last writer and said, "How about you? What book would you bring with you to a desert isle?"

He responded, "Thomas' Guide to Practical Ship Building"

There is a book in the Bible that is probably the least read book of the Bible because at first glance, it doesn't seem very practical. As you can tell by my sermon title, it is Leviticus. I hear this time and time again: a person decides to read through the Bible, and with enthusiasm, they begin with Genesis, start to slow down towards the end of Exodus, and eventually, become bogged down in the third book of the Bible: Leviticus. Before you know it, the Bible is put back on the shelf.

Leviticus appears to be the least useful book of the Bible – at least, for our times. However if you want know what parts of a sacrificial animal are to be burned and what parts of its entrails are to be washed and what's to be done with its blood when making a burnt offering, or if you want to live a nomadic lifestyle, or if you want to follow strict kosher dietary restrictions, then this book is for you! For most of us today, it doesn't appear to be a very useful book.

But let's rethink this. This morning I want to levitate Leviticus.

In the New Testament, Leviticus is quoted several times, including by Jesus himself. When Jesus was asked about which commandment was the greatest, he answered by citing two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and

mind,” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That second one — “Love your neighbor as yourself” — is a quote directly from Leviticus 19, and Jesus said that upon those two commandments hang all the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures (Matthew 22:40). So a very important commandment is in this book.

The apostle Paul also quotes that verse from Leviticus in his letters to the Romans (13:9) and to the Galatians (5:14). What’s more, the New Testament book of James, which almost everybody agrees is a helpful and important biblical book, actually seems to be a sermon based on Leviticus 19:12-18.

So, with all this attention being paid to Leviticus, it might benefit us to take a closer look. Turn with me to Leviticus 19, verse 1: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.’”

God is speaking to the Israelites. God has chosen to live with His people, and the people must somehow learn how to live with a Holy God. Leviticus shows the people how to demonstrate holiness and to live with a holy God.

Guess what? We live with a holy God, too. This is what the NT says:

From Corinthians: “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.” (I C 1:2)

From Ephesians: “For God chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy.” (1:4)

From Hebrews 12:14 “Make every effort to live in peace with all people and to be holy.” (12:14)

From I Peter “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” (1:15)

God calls us to be holy, then we must find out what that means. The book of Leviticus helps us understand the concept of holiness.

Holy is a word that indicates God’s otherness. God is not some kind of super human; rather, God is set apart from the ordinary. Holiness is not an attribute of God, rather it is the sum total of God’s characteristics.

I have this big, thick book that I bought while in seminary called “The Existence and Attributes of God” by Stephen Charnook. I thought about this book as I prepared to study holiness. I thought for sure there would be chapter on holiness. I found chapters on knowledge, wisdom, immutability, omnipresence and eternity of God. No chapter on holiness, which really surprised me. So I went to the index in back, and looked up holiness. There I discovered that holiness took up a full page listing of everyplace holiness was discussed in the whole book. This demonstrated that holiness is not just one part of God but the very essence of God’s character.

Because of the innate holiness of God, anything associated with God or touched by God’s presence became holy. When Moses saw the burning bush, God told Moses to take off his shoes because he was on holy ground. When God was on the mountain, because of His presence there was thunder and lightning and smoke. Moses wanted the people to meet God, but the people refused because

they thought they would die in presence of God. When the people traveled, they carried the Ark of the Covenant which contained the tablets with the Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God which made them holy. If anyone touched it in the wrong way, they died.

In the Temple was a place called the Holy of Holies – it was the place where God was said to dwell. It was the most holy of places. No one could go in there except for one priest, who was chosen each year to go in and make atonement for the sins of the people. This priest had to go through an elaborate cleansing process because no one could approach God unless they were holy or cleansed. This priest would tie a robe around his waist, just in case he didn't survive the presence of God. If he died, other priests could pull him out of the Holy of Holies without going into it. Approaching a holy God was serious stuff.

And now God is calling His people to be holy. The law was given to make them a holy nation and prepare them to be a blessing to the world. This was the purpose of the book of Leviticus. It told them how to order their lives because now the holy God dwelled with them. It told them how to maintain a relationship with God so that they could enter his presence to worship him.

So, Leviticus was very important to the Israelites, but what does this book have to say to us today? We don't have to follow all the regulations in Leviticus. We don't have to do all the sacrifices, deal with all the blood and burning. We don't have to fulfill all of these things because Jesus did that for us. We say that Jesus fulfilled the law; he was the final sacrifice. We don't have to do all of these things to make ourselves holy to approach a holy God because Jesus already makes us holy by association, and therefore, we can approach the holy God with boldness and confidence (Ephesians 3:11-12).

However, we still need to understand the concept of holiness, and we are still called to behave in a certain way in our holiness. Leviticus 19 shows us what holiness looks like. I'm going to read verses 15-18 as an example. This is holiness...

“You shall not render an unjust judgment;

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great;

With justice you shall judge your neighbor.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people,

And you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the Lord.

“You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin;

You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”

This is holiness....loving your neighbor as yourself. Have you ever thought of it that way before? Most of the time, we think of holiness as not sinning, which is part of it, but holiness also includes an active love for one's neighbor and treating

them fairly. Neighbor is defined in Lev. 19 as your fellow-countryman, the foreigner, those who are weak and vulnerable, and your enemy. This is beginning to sound like Jesus who told us to love our enemies. In fact, after Jesus said love your enemies, he said, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48). Perfect is another word for holiness.

If God is holy and holiness is the essence of his character, holiness includes: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exodus 24:6-7).

We are to demonstrate the same thing. Loving our neighbor is not just a really nice thing to do and do it because it makes our community run better (although it includes that), rather we observe it first because loving our neighbor is the essence of holiness. God says to be holy because he is holy, and that means to express it in our daily acts of thoughtfulness, kindness, justice, mercy and generosity. We are to live out the holiness of God as a natural part of our lives.

Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy.

The University of Georgia football team is called the Bulldogs. Their coach is Mark Richt. I watched a documentary on him one day on TV. As they interviewed the family, it was obvious they were Christians. The family was reading the Bible one day, and read about taking care of the orphans. They already had two boys, but decided they could do more. They saw a picture of a little girl from the Ukraine whose face was disfigured. The family decided to adopt her.

They flew to the Ukraine, and while at the orphanage, they saw another little boy. They decided they had room for one more, so they came back to the United States with two little children. They felt God calling them to dedicate the rest of their lives to these children. This is holiness. (and we all know families who have acted with such grace and love)

Bringing this closer to home:

When we raise money at the patio sale for missions, this is an act of holiness.

When people from our church go down to Crossroads and make lunch for the homeless and hungry, this is an act of holiness.

When we raised money for Haiti, this was an act of holiness.

When women from our church make quilts for babies, this is an act of holiness.

When you visit a friend in the hospital, this too is holiness.

In a few minutes, we will be commissioning several Stephen Ministry Leaders. What the Stephen Ministers do as care givers is an act of holiness.

Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Love your neighbor as yourself.