

Leviticus and the Modern World

Over 20 years ago, while I was Associate Pastor at Toongabbie, I announced I was going to preach a series on Leviticus. I got some interesting reactions.

- Some were positive:
 - O good. I read Leviticus some time ago. I was really blessed by its emphasis on God's holiness.
- Some were neutral:
 - You're game. Trying to tackle a book like that.
- Some were fairly negative:
 - O yuk. All that blood and guts.
 - Why'd you pick Leviticus? With all those books in the Bible, couldn't you have picked something a bit easier and a lot more relevant?

I reckon there's a good chance that, in our congregation here at Bathurst, that same range of reactions is present. I also reckon there's a good chance the more negative reactions outnumber the more positive ones.

Why do we have such negative reactions to this book? Let me suggest two possible reasons. **First**, we in 21st-century Australia feel very remote from this book. It was written over 3500 years ago. That's a very long time. Much has happened in between. Things have changed. We've got electricity, lights, refrigerators, TVs, computers, running water, grocery stores, cars, planes, and so it goes on. The list's endless. These things make our lives very different from 3500 years ago. What can a book that ancient say to us modern people?

Secondly, their culture was vastly different from ours. They had different customs and practices. You don't get very far into the book before you find that out. The very

first chapter speaks of animal sacrifices. We don't do that today – at least, not in Australia. We may even think such things *primitive* – although, of course, we'd be too sensitive to use such a politically incorrect term. Then you turn over a few chapters and it has all these arbitrary distinctions between clean and unclean animals – and many meat dishes we consider delicacies today are put into the unclean category. How can you make any sense out of that? Then there's Leviticus 19:19

Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.
What would that do to our wardrobes?

Now, I should point out, both those reasons are true of the whole Bible. The whole Bible's an ancient document from 2000 years ago. The whole Bible comes from a culture significantly different from ours. It just seems so much more obvious when we come to Leviticus.

So what are we to do about it? We could cut Leviticus out of our Bibles – simply say "This bit's really not up to scratch – we need to ditch it". Think of the money that could be saved in printing costs! Most Christians realise that's not an option. Our job's not to tell God what He can or can't put in His word. Our job's not to stand in authority over God and judge what's up to standard and what's not. Whose standard would we use? Ours? Who are we to judge what God can and can't say?

So, we'd better leave it in our Bibles and mouth all the right platitudes about loving all God's word and submitting our lives to all His will. It's just that we won't bother to read Leviticus. We won't actually find out what God wants to say to us in this part of the Bible. It's just too hard – too foreign – too gory. And all preachers

should recognise that and stay clear of it. I hope you can see that such an attitude isn't consistent with truly honouring this book as God's word.

Yes, I agree – Leviticus isn't an easy book for us to understand. It's not the sort of book where some personal encouragement from God jumps out from every verse. For that reason alone, many modern Christians avoid this book – it doesn't easily fit into their system for getting a quick fix from God during their short devotional time. You wade through whole chapters about what animals to bring as sacrifices and what constitutes an infectious skin disease and what's clean and unclean food without having even one bit of a verse give you that extra encouragement from God to get you through the day. Is that an excuse for us to mentally cut it out of the Bible? Or should it be a challenge that perhaps there's something amiss with our expectations about what reading the Bible does for us?

This morning I want to look at some ideas or concepts that are important for us to understand this book. These aren't great innovations or new ideas – they're ideas that are fundamental to the Bible as a whole. The problem is they're concepts we have a tendency to forget – especially when we come to a book like Leviticus.

God's Holiness

The first is holiness – especially God's holiness. The basic meaning of the word *holy* is separate or different. To say that God's holy is to say He's *separate* or *different* from everything else.

Some religions see the world and the people of the world as somehow being part of God. God's simply the sum

total of all existence. There's nothing outside of God – nothing separate from God. That's not the Christian position. We believe in drawing a fundamental distinction:

- On the one hand, there's God.
- On the other hand, there's God's creation.

When God created, He didn't make the universe out of Himself – He made it separate from Himself. He brought into existence something that wasn't in existence before – something that wasn't Him.

From that it follows that God's unique. As we look at the universe – or at that part of it we can see – we classify various things into particular categories. We like to group things together and put labels on them.

- And so, if I mention the label spiders you can think of red-backs, funnel webs, trap-doors, tarantulas, and so on.
- If I mention the label birds, you can think of seagulls, eagles, ducks, kookaburras, lorikeets.
- If I mention the label politicians, you can come up with an appropriate list of people.

Yet, if I mention the label God, on the Bible's terms, you can only come up with one in that category. God's in a class of His own. But, you say, I can name all sorts of gods people have: Allah, Krishna, Zeus, Aphrodite, the thousands of Hindu gods. Even the Bible names a whole stack of other gods: Baal, Ashtoreth, Molech, Diana. How can you say God's in a category all by Himself? That's the point being made by saying God's *holy*. People may say these other beings are God – but they're wrong. They're false gods – gods with a little "g". They're not real. They're just made up gods – made up by people who don't want to recognise the real God.

There's only one God who is Creator. He's always been – from forever in the past to forever in the future. No-one else can make that claim. Nothing else can make that claim. All the rest is part of His creation. God's unique. He alone is God. That's fundamental to the Bible. It's fundamental to the book of Leviticus. It's a word that's repeated throughout the book.

God's Covenant

The second important concept when we come to Leviticus is God's covenant. The actual word isn't used much in the book, but the concept underlies the whole lot. The reason it's important is the historical setting. It may sound trite, but Leviticus follows Exodus. Some people tend to forget that. What's happened in Exodus?

- It starts with the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt – crying out to God because of the harsh circumstances of their lives.
- God hears their cry and sends a leader to deliver them from their slavery – namely, Moses.
- Moses goes to the king of Egypt – the Pharaoh – and politely asks him to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh politely refuses.
- Then there's a battle between God and Pharaoh. Since God's in a category all on His own – a category where He's the Creator and everything else is the creation – it's not surprising that God comes out on top.
- Thus, God rescues the people of Israel from Egypt and begins them on the journey to Canaan – the land God's promised them.
- In Exodus 19, they reach Mount Sinai. It's here God enters into covenant with them. They don't

leave Mount Sinai until Numbers 10. That is, the whole content of Leviticus happens at Mount Sinai – at the place of the covenant.

Now, many people get this covenant back-to-front. They think the whole basis of the covenant is to provide a way for people to enter relationship with God. They think God's saying something like this to Israel.

Here's my law. If you can be good people and keep My law, then you can qualify to enter into relationship with Me. Here's your big opportunity to get it right. Blow this, and you've missed out.

That's not what this covenant's about.

You simply have to look at the historical facts. By the time they get to Sinai, God's already well and truly in relationship with them.

- They already are God's people.
- God's already rescued them from slavery.

This covenant isn't about establishing the relationship – it's about how to live within the relationship already established. These people already are God's people – this covenant tells them what it means to be God's people.

Perhaps we could liken it to marriage.

- When a couple get married, they enter into a life-long commitment to one another – till death do us part. That's like God rescuing His people from Egypt.
- When the married couple start to live together, they begin to work out what it means in practice for them to live together as a married couple.
 - Whether you squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom or the top.

- Who gets up in the middle of the night to answer the phone.
- Whether it's acceptable to throw dirty clothes on the lounge room floor.

That's like what's going on at Mount Sinai. Israel's finding out what it means to be in proper relationship with the holy God.

This book is an expression of God's grace.

- God showed Israel grace by hearing their desperate cry while they were slaves in Egypt.
- God showed Israel grace by rescuing them from being slaves.
- Now God shows Israel more grace by telling them how to live as His people.

Sure, they won't be able to keep up to the standard. God knows that. He knows their rebellious tendencies. But He also provides for that. He gives them the sacrificial system so they can deal with the failures in their ongoing relationship with God. It's all part of the overall package.

God's Presence

The third important concept in Leviticus is God's presence. Much of the second half of Exodus deals with the tabernacle – the tent that symbolised God's presence with His people. It also deals with the Ark of the Covenant – that object kept in the most inaccessible part of the tabernacle that symbolised God's special presence with Israel. Leviticus as a whole deals with the subject of what it means in practical terms to have the holy God dwelling in the midst of His people.

What's it mean to say God's present? After all, isn't God present everywhere? Does not the psalmist ask: "Where

can I flee from Your presence?" And doesn't he rightly conclude there's nowhere he can escape God's presence?

- It doesn't matter what part of the world you travel to – even if it be the middle of the deepest, darkest jungle on earth – you can't escape God's presence.
- It doesn't matter what galaxy of the universe you travel to – you can't escape God's presence.

So what's it mean to say God's present with His people? Is God more present at that place than at some other place? Is more of God present at that place than at some other place? No. We need to be careful we don't think of God in material terms. I have a suspicion some people think of God like a gas. For example, scientists tell me there's a certain amount of methane present everywhere in the atmosphere. It isn't enough to cause problems for me if I light a match, but it's there. However, if I go down a coal mine and light a match where there's a concentrated pocket of methane, I'll run into some fairly significant problems. Some people think like that with God – that He's vaguely present everywhere and in more concentrated doses in some special places. That's not the Bible's picture. You can't dilute God like methane gas. He's fully present everywhere because He's not limited by space – He created space.

Rather, as Wayne Grudem puts it, God's present in different ways in different places.¹ Or, the purpose of God's presence isn't always the same in each place. The purpose of God's presence with Israel is to be in conscious relationship with His people – for God to be their God and for them to be God's people.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1994) 175.

God's Requirements

And that leads to the fourth concept for this morning – what it means for a holy God to dwell in your midst; what it means for the presence of the holy God to be with His people.

The key verse in the book of Leviticus is 19:2

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

The statement's repeated in 11:44-45 and 20:26. This is the governing principle behind the book.

- The people are to *be holy*. The book of Leviticus explains what that means in very practical terms and in very detailed terms.
- The reason: because their God's holy. If you're to have a holy God dwell in your midst – if you're to have an ongoing relationship with a holy God – then you need to become like Him. The holiness of God demands the holiness of His people. They're to be different, separate.

In order to maintain their own holiness they must learn to make certain distinctions. Leviticus 10:10. This is addressed to Aaron, the high priest – but through him it's to be taught to the people.

You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses.

It looks like four major categories are distinguished:

1. holy;
2. common;
3. clean; and
4. unclean.

I think, however, Gordon Wenham's right when he says:

Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean.²

Thus we have three basic categories: the holy, the clean and the unclean.

How do you work out what falls into which category?

- The *holy* is anything set apart for sacred use – that is, anyone or anything given to God becomes *holy*; it's separated from the common for use by God or in the service of God. Everything that's not holy is *common*.
- Everything common is classified as either clean or unclean. There are great lists of various things to help the people work this out.
 - For example, Leviticus 11 divides the entire animal kingdom into either clean or unclean.
 - Leviticus 13 talks about when people are clean or unclean because of infectious skin diseases.
 - And so it goes on.

Why's it important for the people to know about these distinctions – distinctions that seem so strange to our ears? It's important because *the unclean* and *the holy* are two states that must never come into contact. If they do, disaster's likely to follow. Let me show you a couple of examples. Leviticus 22:3 – a statement addressed to the priests – the unclean must not approach the holy.

For the generations to come, if any of your descendants is ceremonially unclean and yet comes near the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate to the Lord, that person must be cut off from My presence.

² G.J.Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 19.

It works the other way as well – in general, the holy must not approach the unclean. Leviticus 21:1-4

A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband – for her he may make himself unclean. He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself.

A fundamental teaching of Leviticus is that holiness is incompatible with uncleanness. The two must not come into contact.

That leads to another question: Can things change categories? The answer is both *no* and *yes*.

- No – because some things can never change. A pig was in the unclean category as far as using it for food. There's nothing you could do to a pig to change that. There's no ceremony to turn pork chops into clean food and allow you to eat it. Some things couldn't change categories.
- Yet, for many other things – and especially for people – a change of categories was possible. And so, for example, someone who became unclean because of eating something they found dead could be cleansed by bathing in water. A person could move from clean to unclean and back again.

That raises a number of possibilities.

- First, it's possible for unclean things to move into the clean category by being purified or cleansed.

For example, Leviticus 14:8-9 spells out what's to be done by someone to be cleansed from the impact of an infectious skin disease – they had to wash their clothes, shave all their hair, bathe themselves and offer the appropriate sacrifices.

- Secondly, something could move from the clean category to the holy category by being consecrated or sanctified. For example, Aaron and his sons are consecrated into the priesthood in Leviticus 8.
- Thirdly, things could move the other way as well. Something could move from the clean category to the unclean category by being polluted – for example, by coming into contact with something unclean. Many unclean objects transmitted their uncleanness to other objects or people by contact. One example's in Leviticus 11:39-40 – a person becomes unclean by touching a dead animal.
- Fourthly, holy things could be defiled and thus become common or even unclean.

It all looks a very complex system and we'll unlock some more of it over the coming weeks. This morning, my main aim's to introduce you to the major categories. By remembering these basic categories, I hope you'll be able to get a better grasp of the book as a whole. You may feel your mind's spinning a bit from trying to take it all in. That's understandable – those four main points are huge concepts. We could quite easily spend a whole series on each of those concepts – so trying to cover all four in one brief sermon is a big ask.

The Big Lesson

I want to come to one final question for this morning to draw it all together: This great system God sets up – what

was the point of it all? We've touched on it several times on the way through, but it's important to come back to it.

God's unique. He's Creator – everything else, including Israel and us, is creature. This is His world. He calls the shots. God's called these people to be His special people. God's to be present with them with a purpose different from His general presence in the world. That's a great privilege. They've responded to that – they've said: Yes, we want to be Your people.

What's it mean to have the holy God present with them for His special purpose? It's a call to be in relationship with God – and to be in that relationship on God's terms. Those terms require them to recognise their unworthiness – their uncleanness. It's dangerous for the holy and the unclean to come into contact – for the holy's likely to destroy the offensiveness of the unclean. It's dangerous for an unclean people like Israel to have God dwell in their midst. His holiness is likely to break out and destroy them. Sin is serious – much more serious than the modern mind wishes to acknowledge.

Yet, God wishes to be in relationship with this people. Thus, He provides the means for them to be made clean. He gives them the sacrificial system – a system that provides them the opportunity to acknowledge their sin and request God's gracious forgiveness and so to continue in relationship with a holy God. The system teaches them that dealing with sin is a serious business – and it's a costly business. Yet, it also teaches them that God deals with them in a context of grace. It's possible to have God dwell among them because God's made it possible.

That remains the same for us today. This book points forward to Jesus – especially to what He did for us on the cross. In that way it points forward to how we today still relate to God.

- We relate only on the basis of recognising our own uncleanness – our own sin. We can't simply prance into God's holy presence as if we belonged. Our sin says we don't belong. We deserve to be wiped out.
- We relate only on the basis of God having done something to make the relationship possible – by sending Jesus to die for our sins.
- We relate only on the basis of His grace.