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## Introduction to Holiness

### Leviticus

**Intro:** Here at Grace Chapel, our goal is to understand and live by the whole counsel of God. In light of this, the specific text that guides our study and exposition of God's Word is **II Tim 3:16**. We believe the entire Bible is the Word of God and as such, all of it is important and, as Paul says, profitable. Now, I say we believe this is true but that doesn't mean the whole Bible is easy to understand or live by. You should be painfully aware of this if you have ever set out to read through the entire Bible. When you start in Genesis, everything is exciting! The narratives are dramatic and the spiritual principles hang in the text like ripe fruit that is just there for the taking. Then you move into Exodus and the excitement is even greater. There's extreme oppression and a futile attempt at deliverance. Then there are some devastating, supernatural plagues followed by an amazing, divine deliverance which includes the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea and the eventual arrival at the base of Mt Sinai, where Israel meets her God.

It's here that things start to slow way down. First you're hit with the giving of 10 Commandments, which are clearly important; both in their delivery and in their meaning. Then you come to what can only be called the schematics of the tabernacle along with a riveting description of the High Priestly uniform. It's kind of slow going but you know it's important because "every aspect" of the tabernacle is supposed to relate to Jesus in some way so you stick it out until the end when the tabernacle is completed and it is filled with the glory of the Lord (**Ex 40:35**). Yay! What glories and wonders are now in store for Israel and the student of the Bible?

Then you come to **Leviticus** and the first thought to cross your mind is: what in the world is this? Oh my goodness! It's so tedious, so repetitious – so boring! This is where most people lose their way and drop the ball on their reading through the Bible. I won't even argue the point because I actually agree – it is very **tedious** and seemingly repetitious but if Paul is correct in his assessment of God's Word in **II Tim 3:16** then the Book of **Leviticus** is also profitable! We mustn't simply *agree* with Paul's assessment, we must affirm that he's correct in declaring that the Book of **Leviticus** is inspired by God and thus, it has value and is helpful for our Christian walk.

Understand, when Paul wrote this verse, the NT didn't exist. He was writing about the OT Scriptures, which include **Leviticus**. So, all Scripture is not only inspired by God but all of it is also helpful, profitable. In the new covenant period in which we now live, the OT ceremonial and civil laws are not laws for us; our disobedience to individual laws is not punished as was the case in ancient Israel. However, these laws are profitable for us today in that they teach us about God, His will and how to live for Him in today's world.

**Leviticus** will be the focus of our next study and as a general rule, I just dive in and start reading the text but I feel that it's important for us to understand the critical place Leviticus holds within the Word of God before we begin to rightly divide it. So, we'll spend our time today just getting familiar with the book and discovering its importance both to Israel and to the characters and authors of the NT.

One Christian author has made this statement concerning the Book of Leviticus: "I believe it is more important to read Leviticus than it is for us to read the best Christian book ever published, because Leviticus has a quality and produces an effect that no book in the Christian marketplace can complete with. If we want to know the glory of God, if we want to experience the beauty of God, and if we want to be used by the hand of God, then we must live in the Word of God." This is not just one man's opinion because it appears that the NT itself agrees with this. A fact little-known by most Christians is that the commandment that Jesus says is the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest comes from **Leviticus (19:18** "Love thy neighbor as thyself"). This verse is actually the most quoted OT passage in the NT.

Additionally, the NT Book of **Hebrews**, one of the most beloved books of the Bible by NT believers, would be nearly impossible to understand completely without possessing a clear understanding of the content and intent of Leviticus. In fact, nowhere does the Book of Hebrews ever declare that the work of Jesus Christ has invalidated Leviticus; rather, the work of Christ fulfills it.

Many scholars and Bible teachers today attempt to discount or marginalize the OT and try to squeeze the teaching of the OT and NT into static formulas such as law v. grace, letter v. spirit, bondage v. freedom or bondage v. freedom. This is not just unfortunate for the congregations that sit under their teaching – it's also very short-sighted. Jesus and the apostles

lived in the world of the OT. It was their joy and delight. Jesus declared that these words from God were the very words by which we live, aptly demonstrating that to be the case as He quoted directly from Deuteronomy in His contest with Satan in the wilderness. In the last weeks of His life, Jesus made constant references to various books of the OT, citing at least a dozen different OT books.

It's interesting that the NT tells us almost nothing about the thought processes of Jesus but, if you want to know what went on in Jesus' mind, read the OT! The OT was the only Bible that Jesus, Paul and the earliest Christians had. Not only that; the Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets and the Psalms were known to them by heart in a way that we today can scarcely imagine. Among the "7 sayings" Jesus uttered as He hung from the cross, at least 3 of them (maybe 4) were direct quotations from the Psalms. There are many things that we don't know about Jesus, but of this we can be sure: His mind and heart were shaped by intimate, continuous interaction with the OT Scriptures. If we want to know the mind of Jesus, we need to read the OT. If we want to have the mind of Christ ([1 Cor 2:16](#)), we need to know the OT.

The NT authors frequently allude to the contents of Leviticus. At many points, the NT writers seem to have assumed knowledge of Leviticus and readers of the NT need this knowledge to properly understand what the writer was describing. For example, none of the following practices are explained by the NT writers: purification after childbirth, washing after the healing of a leper, journeys to the festivals in Jerusalem and separation from the Gentiles in eating. All of these find their origin in the Book of Leviticus, and these practices were so ingrained in the thinking of first-century Jews that they needed no explanation. If modern people are to understand such practices, they need to become familiar with the contents of Leviticus.

The location and focus of the book also alludes to its importance in Scripture. The Pentateuch covers roughly 1500 yrs of Israel's history. Genesis covers from Creation to Israel's entrance into Egypt. Exodus tells of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Within 3 months of their departure from Egypt they arrive at Mt. Sinai ([Ex 19:1](#)). All the events that follow, from [Ex 19:1](#) to [Num 1:11](#), take place within the next 10 months. [Ex 25-31](#) details the instructions the Lord gave Moses for the construction of the tabernacle. Then there's the whole golden calf incident in [32-34](#), which is an interruption that threatens to bring the entire Israelite nation to an abrupt end. The last

6 chapters of Ex (35-40) describe how the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle are carried out.

9 months into this period, just 2 weeks shy of the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Israel's departure from Egypt, the tabernacle is finally erected and dedicated. At this dedication the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle, signaling His move from the top of Mt. Sinai to take up residence in the tabernacle. At this point, the Book of Leviticus picks up the story by saying, "Now the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting..." (Lev 1:1). Now Yahweh no longer speaks to Moses from the top of Mt. Sinai but from within the tabernacle in the middle of the camp!

This fact alone has some serious ramifications for Israel that we'll get into later but the timeline suggests that the entire book of Leviticus, all of the Lord's instructions and the narratives of the book, take place within a month-and-a-half time frame (roughly). So, within the entire narrative flow of the Pentateuch that spans 1500 years, the Book of Leviticus is seen as occupying approximately a month and a half of the 40 yr journey of the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai. The narrative has almost come to a standstill and it does so for some very important reasons and those reasons are seen in the theological themes that are presented in and displayed throughout the book.

The Divine Presence – From previous accounts in Scripture: the garden of Eden story, the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant; it's clear that God desired to dwell among His people, that He would be their God and that Israel would be His people. Now, in a very special development, God has taken up residence among His people in a way that He hadn't before. He no longer merely dwells above them from the top of Mt. Sinai but He dwells among them in the tabernacle, in a tent that is squarely in the middle of the camp, surrounded by all the tents of the Israelites. The King is now in residence! God, as their covenant King who has taken up residence among them, is to be given all the respect, honor, glory and obedience that would be given to any earthly monarch. Failure in this area is not simply an act of disrespect. Intentional failures can only be regarded as acts of treason.

Worship – This may be surprising to most Christians today, with our modern definition of worship inextricably linked with music, but worship is in fact a

main theme of this book. 7 times in the early chapters of Exodus, God reveals the reason why Pharaoh should release the Israelites and allow them to leave – so that they may worship Me (4:23; 7:16, 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). In the course of the discussion between Moses and Pharaoh, it becomes clear that Pharaoh recognizes that this worship will involve offering sacrifices. Moses reinforces this understanding in 8:26 and 10:9, saying that they must go out to worship the Lord, “with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to the Lord.” At one point, even though Pharaoh knows this worship is to involve sacrifice, he tells Moses they can go out and worship in the wilderness but they have to leave their flocks and herds behind (10:24). Moses replies with a no-can-do as they will need their flocks and herds because they must offer some of them as sacrifices and they won’t know exactly which ones to offer until they get there (10:25-26).

So, all the elements are there. The Israelites must be allowed to go because they are to worship the Lord. They must go out into the wilderness to do this. They must take their animals with them to make sacrifices in the wilderness. They won’t know which animals to use until they get there. And they will indeed celebrate a festival to the Lord. All of these elements are fulfilled in the Book of Leviticus. They arrive at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness. They worship and celebrate a festival to the Lord. We can very appropriately say that Leviticus is the goal of the Exodus! Exodus happens so that Leviticus will happen. The true purpose for the Exodus was so that Israel might worship her God in the wilderness. This wasn’t just some deceptive ploy to get Pharaoh to let Israel go. No, the heart, the middle point, the focus, the purpose, the goal of the Pentateuch is – Leviticus!

Ritual – Ceremonies and rituals of worship were by no means regarded by the ancients as meaningless acts of repetition devoid of any real value or devotion simply because of their lack of spontaneity, as they often are today. It’s a common complaint in modern Christianity: “I don’t like organized religion!” You prefer it disorganized? Instead, the rituals described in Leviticus were an important part of the faithful response of the Israelites toward God. There are several reasons why these rituals were important:

- 1) God was the One who commanded and authorized them. When the Israelites observed these rites, they were simply obeying God’s commands.
- 2) Even today there are protocols that must be observed when coming into

the presence of royalty, government officials and even courtroom judges. Ancient Israelite rituals can be seen as royal protocols in which the people showed proper respect, not only for the One who was King of Israel, but King of the universe. These rites were intended to assure proper behavior and decorum in the presence of the King.

3) Ritual was an exercise in world formation. The priestly ministry constructed a ritual world that was designed to foster the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. When the Israelites went through their rites of worship, they were led to acknowledge that the outside world, the world of Egyptian oppressors, pagan Canaanites, godless empires – a world in which injustice may often seem to prevail, was something less than full reality. In fact, these rituals presented them with an alternate reality, a world in which God was King – not Pharaoh, not a Hittite, Assyrian or Babylonian emperor, nor any of the oppressive rulers of the neighboring countries. Ritual provided a vision, a worldview, a guide for faithful living for those who were the special possession of this great King.

4) Ritual enables corporate participation in a single act, which then creates community around the act of worship. We experience these same truths whenever we partake of the Lord's Supper or have a baptism. It's something we all experience together in the presence of the Lord and these rituals (ordinances) remind us of the world that is to come.

Sacrifice and offerings – Exodus ends with an extended description of *where* the Lord was to be worshipped – in the tabernacle. Leviticus describes *how* the Lord was to be worshipped – through the sacrificial system. Sacrifices were necessary because sin and impurity were inevitable. In order for the presence of God to be maintained, sin had to be taken away and Israel had sinned. Even before the covenant stipulations had gone into effect and before the tabernacle had been erected, the Israelites had sinned against the Lord by worshipping a golden calf. How could the people be assured of the continuing presence of a holy God in light of the reality of their sin? The worship regulations described in Leviticus answer that question.

Holiness – The theme of holiness is paramount in Leviticus. The word holy is used 91 times in the book and words connected with cleansing are used 71 times. References to uncleanness number 128 so there's no question what this book is all about. Unfortunately, happiness, not holiness, is the chief pursuit of most people today, including many professing Christians.

They want Jesus to solve their problems and carry their burdens but they don't want Him to control their lives or change their character. It doesn't disturb them that 8 times in the Bible, God said to His people, "Be holy, for I am holy," and He means it!

Part of the problem stems from our modern concept of holiness. We associate holiness with purely religious acts. But holiness is not so much what you do but rather, it is who you are. The Hebrew word for holy that Moses uses in Leviticus just means: that which is set apart and marked off, that which is different. The Sabbath was holy because God set it apart for His people ([Ex 16:23](#)). The priests were holy because they were set apart to minister to the Lord ([Lev 21:7-8](#)). Their garments were holy and could not be duplicated for common use ([Ex 28:2](#)). The tithe that the people brought was holy ([Lev 27:30](#)). Anything that God said was holy had to be treated differently from the common things of life in the Israelite camp.

Our English word holy comes from the Old English word halig which meant: to be whole, to be healthy. What health is to the body, holiness is to the inner person. The related word sanctify comes from the Latin sanctus which means: consecrated, sacred, blameless. We use the word sanctification to describe the process of growing to become more like Christ, and holy to describe the result of that process. Jonathan Edwards wrote, "He that sees the beauty of holiness, or true moral good, sees the greatest and most important thing in the world." Have you ever thought of holiness (or likeness to Jesus Christ) as the most important thing in the world? In God's kingdom, holiness isn't a luxury; it's a necessity ([Heb 12:14](#)). Yes, God wants His children to be happy, but true happiness begins with holiness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." ([Mt 5:6](#)).

Leviticus tells the NT Christian how to appreciate holiness and appropriate it into their everyday lives. "But wasn't it written for the priests and Levites in ancient Israel?" Yes, but the lessons in it aren't limited to the Jews in ancient Israel. The spiritual principles in it apply to Christians in the church today. The key verses of Leviticus, "Be holy, for I am holy" ([11:44-45](#)) are applied to the NT church in [1 Peter 1:15-16](#) and the book itself is quoted or referred to over 100 times in the NT. Since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, then all Scripture is profitable for God's people to use in developing godly lives. Jesus said that we should live by every word that God has given

us ([Mt 4:4](#)) and that certainly includes Leviticus.

Atonement is another major theme. The whole sacrificial system declared to Israel that the wages of sin is death ([Rom 6:23](#)) and the souls who sins shall die ([Ez 18:4](#)). God hates sin, but because He loves sinners and wants to forgive them, He provides a substitute to die in the sinner's place. This has been God's way from the very beginning. When Adam and Eve sinned, they discovered that they were naked and God had to kill animals to use their skins to make coverings for them both. Their sin led to the death of an innocent animal. Atonement began all the way back in Genesis but it was codified in Leviticus. All of this is a picture of the promised Savior who would lay down His innocent life for the sins of the world.

Though the book of [Leviticus](#) is tedious in its details and seems to be outdated in its statutes, the laws in it governing marriage, birth, diets, personal cleanliness, the quarantine of diseased persons and the burial of the dead, while they all certainly involved hygienic benefits to the nation, mainly serves as reminders that God's people could not just live any way they pleased. Because they were God's holy people, Israel had to learn to put a difference between the holy and unholy, and between the unclean and clean.

God's church is also supposed to be a holy nation in this present evil world, and we're called to proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light ([I Ptr 2:9](#)). The holy nation of Israel, within the land of Canaan, with its holy priesthood, was to reveal to the pagan nations around them the glories and excellencies of Jehovah, the true and living God. The church in today's world has both the same privilege and responsibility. Just as Israel had to beware of that which was unclean and defiling, so must believers today cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God ([II Cor 7:1](#)). God wants us to be a holy priesthood and a holy nation so that we will advertise His virtues and glorify His name. ☺