

HOLINESS IS NO JOKE

LEVITICUS 1:1

M.I. SOMEHOW WE HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT LIVING IN GRACE MEANS THAT LIVING IN HOLINESS IS OPTIONAL.

I. GOD INITIATES RELATIONSHIP

GOD IS HOLY. HE EXPECTS US TO BE HOLY.

- A. THE CONTEXT
- B. THE COMMUNITY
- C. THE FOCUS

II. GOD LOVES PEOPLE

GOD WANTS TO BE INVOLVED IN OUR LIVES.

- A. GOD ESPECIALLY LOVES THE HUMBLE
- B. GOD ESPECIALLY LOVES THE FAITHFUL

III. GOD WANTS TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

EVEN THOUGH GOD WANTS TO LIVE IN US, AT THE SAME TIME HE REALIZES HOW DANGEROUS THIS IS TO US.

- A. GOD'S LOCATION
- B. GOD'S REQUIREMENTS
- C. OUR SAFETY

Holiness Is No Joke

Leviticus 1:1

About two months ago, I was trying to decide which book I would preach through when I finished Galatians. I chose Galatians because after preaching through the book of Amos, I needed to hear a little bit about grace. As I contemplated which book I wanted to preach through next, I thought about how summer is coming. I caught a touch of spring fever and decided I would preach through I & II Kings because the books are so easy to preach. In fact the stories are so rich in themselves, you could almost just read them, sing the doxology, pronounce the benediction, dismiss, go downstairs, eat doughnuts and drink coffee.

However, I felt God strongly urging me to preach through Leviticus. I had no clue why He was moving me towards Leviticus but I had that clear feeling. Kings would be easy to preach through. Leviticus would be very difficult and uncomfortable to preach through. My natural inclination is to gravitate towards the easiest book, but God's clear impression on me was that He desired Leviticus.

After a bit of resistance, I started to get excited about preaching through Leviticus. We finished Galatians examining what living free in Christ would look like. To sum that up we could say freedom in Christ means freedom to pursue holiness. We have lost a sense about what happens in the context of worship. Let me give you an example. You remember the church I used to pastor, the one that was so tough. (How tough was it?)

It was so tough that they had lost all sense of what gathering together in Christ was all about. A young, out of town visitor found our church in the phonebook and came to worship with us. The sermon was about holy living. As I was preaching, the young man would get excited when I made a point and shouted out, "Amen."

Everyone in the church turned and glared at him. Strangely enough, whenever I made a point, he continued to shout out, "Amen!"

Finally the head deacon went over to him and said, "You need to keep quiet during the sermon."

The young man protested, "I can't help it sir. I'm all excited. I got religion!"

"Well," said the deacon, "You didn't get it here!"

I think that we don't understand what holiness means to God and what it means in the Bible. I think perhaps we have misunderstood what grace means. I find myself often presuming on God's kindness to the point I forget about His holiness.

When Israel conquered the city of Jericho, God told them not to take anything. He commanded them to burn everything. A man named Achan couldn't resist. He took a robe, some silver and some gold.

The next day the Israeli Army went to fight another battle. Because of Achan's sin, God was angry. Israel lost badly and worse yet, 36 soldiers were killed in the battle. God revealed to Joshua that the reason Israel suffered such a humiliating defeat was because of Achan's sin. Listen to how tenderly Joshua approaches Achan:

¹⁹Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me."

²⁰Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them

and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath” (Joshua 7:19-21 / NIV).

And now, grace should be extended to Achan. Yes, he did something wrong, but now he publicly confessed. All should be forgiven and they should move on from there. Right? Not quite. They took Achan and his entire family, stoned them to death, burned them, and covered their ashes with rocks.

In our study through the book of Leviticus, we will see two young priests who want to be a little creative in worship. They mixed up a little of their own brand of incense to burn in worship before God. Listen to what happens when they burned the incense:

“So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” (Leviticus 10:2 / NIV).

We want to ask, “What’s up with God?” If you think that was brutal, what do you think about this? God forbid Aaron, the father of these two to even mourn their deaths.

We all know how God handled hypocrisy in the book of Acts. A husband and wife pretended to be giving more money than they actually were. God killed them on the spot: right there in church.

Do those examples agree with the theology we live and believe? We think that grace means we can do whatever we want, ... and as long as we say, “I’m sorry,” when we are caught, and then we can move on without any consequences. We have seen this attitude displayed in politicians when they have been caught involved in immoral acts. Recently, we have seen famous people act shocked that they may have to go to jail for committing crimes. Somehow our society has come to believe that there are no consequences to our behaviors. But God will not honor that kind of theology. The main idea of this morning’s text is this. **SOMEHOW WE HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT LIVING IN GRACE MEANS THAT LIVING IN HOLINESS IS OPTIONAL.**

We really do live and believe that theology. But nothing could be more false or further away from the truth. If we believe or even act like this, then we do not understand the God of the Bible. The theme that comes through loud and clear is that we must be holy because the God we are in relationship with is holy.

God initiates relationship. And because God is the One Who initiates this relationship, we must relationship according to His definition. **GOD IS HOLY. HE EXPECTS US TO BE HOLY.**

In order to get a feel for the book of Leviticus, we first need to understand the context of the book. Leviticus is our English name for the third book of the Bible. The word Leviticus means, “pertaining to the Levites.” The Levites were the priests of Israel. In reality, the book has very little to do directly with the priests. The Hebrew name for the book is “*wa yikrah*” which means, “And He called.” The pronoun He is later identified in the first sentence of the book as Jehovah or Yahweh, whichever pronunciation you prefer. The Hebrews set apart the first five books of the Bible and called them “The books of Moses” or “The Torah.” They named each book by the first words in the first verse of the book. For Example, Genesis was called, “In the Beginning,” Exodus “And these were the names,” and here, Leviticus, “And He called.” If you look at the very first phrase in your bibles, it starts out, “Then the LORD called.”

There are two things we need to point out. The Hebrew uses “and” instead of “then.” But linguistically, they mean the same. This is meant to connect this

passage with the events at the end of the book of Exodus. The end of the book of Genesis ended with Joseph as ruler of Egypt. Because of Pharaoh's love of Joseph, the Israelites enjoyed a favored status in Egypt. The book of Exodus began with a change in power with a new Pharaoh ascending the throne. This Pharaoh hated and feared the Israelites. As a result, he enslaved them. The Israelites cried out to God and so God sent them Moses. The book of Exodus describes God's deliverance of Israel from the bondage of their Egyptian slavery. At the end of Exodus, the community is all set up in the wilderness. The worship tent was set up. God came and occupied this tent with His glory. The presence of God was so thick and powerful, even Moses couldn't go in. Here, in this verse the book of Leviticus will continue the story with God calling to Moses.

The book of Exodus ends exactly one year after the Hebrews left their Egyptian Captivity. The book of Numbers starts one month after. So chronologically, these instructions are given within the period of a month. So the events in Leviticus seem to take place between the first and second months of their second year of freedom. They are still in the wilderness, headed for the Promised Land. The important thing to keep in mind as we study through this book is that God is living in the middle of the Hebrew Camp. His tent is set up in the middle with the twelve tribes surrounding it on each side.

And that brings us to the community. The community is composed of all the people of Israel. All the people in all the tribes of Israel were set free from their bondage in Israel. In Exodus God told them they were to be an entire community of priests. Listen to what God says to them through Moses:

"⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:6 / NIV).

They were to be an entire nation of priests. Every man, woman, and child was being set apart by God to be a priest to the God Who delivered them from their bondage in Egypt.

This is exactly how Peter describes us. Here is what Peter says:

"⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (I Peter 2:9-11 / NIV).

We are men and women; called by God and formed by God into a community He calls the church. Jesus is the head of the church and we make up the members of this body.

And that brings us to the focus of the book of Leviticus. God chose to live right in the center of the Hebrew camp. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night rested over the tent of God. When the pillar moved, the Hebrews broke camp and followed the pillar. When the pillar came to rest, the Hebrews set up camp. God was the central focus of the community. As we will learn later, the book of Leviticus spells out the rules of community: specifically a community in which God lives at the center. There are two things about the Hebrew God that may seem inconsistent to us. First of all, pagan religions offered religious sacrifices to try and twist a reluctant god's arm to get him to do something on their behalf. The Hebrews sacrificed as a grateful response to a loving, willing, and giving God.

On the other hand, it is dangerous for humans to have God live among them. God is perfect and holy. Humans are sinful and by nature rebellious. If we really believe that Jesus lives in us, then our response is to live in a way that pleases Him. Yes, He is loving, and willing and desires to give us many good things. But He is also God and because He is God living with sinful human beings, He is also dangerous. If things went badly in the camp, God had a couple of options: 1. He could withdraw from the camp, 2. He could kill them in judgment, or 3. Both, He could kill them and withdraw from the camp. The laws and regulations in Leviticus are meant to prevent this from happening.

Let us never forget that Jesus is God and the same options exist for us. Our response to God's presence is to be holy. As we learn to practice God's presence, we need to practice holiness. It is the only way to be in a relationship with God as individuals and as a church.

Here is a good time to define this concept. When God says that He is holy, He means that He is different from all other gods. He is set apart from them. The main separation between God and the other gods is that God is alive, powerful, and true. All other gods are fake, impotent, and false. Holy in reference to us means that we have been set apart from the rest of humanity. We are set apart for the purpose of loving, serving, presenting the nature of God to the unbelieving world by how we live. What we say, think, and do, ought to reflect the nature of Who God is. So the concept that guides our relationship with God is this. **GOD IS HOLY. HE EXPECTS US TO BE HOLY.**

If there is one message that comes through loud and clear throughout the whole Bible, especially as we look at Jesus suffering and dying on the cross for us, it's this; God loves people. In other words, **GOD WANTS TO BE INVOLVED IN OUR LIVES.**

I think that because we were raised in the United States, we believe that God should love everybody equally. That's not true. The fact is that God especially loves the humble. Look at the second phrase. It was Moses that God called out to and it was Moses He chose to speak to. God chose Moses to lead the Hebrews out of captivity. He revealed His will for the community directly to Moses. Moses was then to instruct the community. Think about Moses' life. He was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as nobility in the royal family of Egypt. He had everything going for him. But when he realized he was a Hebrew, he was willing to give up the palace life to identify with his people who were slaves in the land. In fact, because Moses stood up for his people, he actually had to run from Egypt to live in the wilderness. The royal family found out about it and wanted him dead. In the wilderness, Moses met God face to face. During the encounter with God we get insight into Moses' humility. The Bible is very, very clear that God will lift up the humble, ... but He will oppose and destroy the proud. Please take my word on this. I have personally seen God bring down the proud. If you are a person who struggles with pride, ... just take a moment to reflect on how life is going for you. If we claim to be a child of God and are acting all proud and arrogant, we can be sure that God will take us down. And from what I've experienced personally, and in the lives of others, ... it's not very pretty. Oh, and by the way, false humility won't cut it either. Maybe others can't see through our false humility, or maybe we even have ourselves fooled, ... but God sees and knows it all.

In addition to humility the Bible is equally clear that God especially loves the faithful. Moses' life was threatened constantly from the people God sent Him to save. When things got a little difficult, the Hebrews wanted to rebel, kill Moses, and return to Egypt. But even when God wanted to wipe the Hebrews off the face of the map,

Moses interceded for them. Moses was faithful to God and faithful to the Hebrew people.

Let me just take a moment to read from the book of Numbers to show us how God loves the humble and faithful. During their travels, Moses' brother and sister got a little jealous and prideful:

¹*Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. ²"Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this.*

³*(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)*

⁴*At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out. ⁵Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, ⁶he said, "Listen to my words:*

"When a prophet of the LORD is among you,

I reveal myself to him in visions,

I speak to him in dreams.

⁷*But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house.*

⁸*With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.*

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

⁹*The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them" (Numbers 12:1-9 / NIV).*

GOD WANTS TO BE INVOLVED IN OUR LIVES. But in order to be in a relationship with God, as we have seen so far, we must be humble, faithful, and committed to living holy lives.

The rules in Leviticus were meant to protect the Hebrews from dying. God wants to live in community. But since God is so holy, it is dangerous to have Him living in the community. The point we tend to always forget is this. **EVEN THOUGH GOD WANTS TO LIVE IN US, AT THE SAME TIME HE REALIZES HOW DANGEROUS THIS IS TO US.** Because this is the case, God laid out the rules of community in the book of Leviticus. And we as Christians should remind ourselves that this dangerous God lives in each one of us, and in the community at large. As we study through the book of Leviticus, we can learn about things that can push God over the edge.

First of all, we need to restate God's location. God spoke to Moses from the Tent of meeting. This tent was known as the tabernacle. The tabernacle was placed in the very center of the camp and it was the tent God chose to live in. There was no confusion as to where God was at all times.

Let me read to you from the Gospel of John:

Referring to Jesus, John says, ¹⁴"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 / NIV).

That phrase "made His dwelling" means set up His tent or in Bible terms "tabernacled." Jesus came down from heaven to pitch His tent up with us.

In the very last book of the bible, John describes how God will comfort the martyrs:

"Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them" (Revelation 7:15 / KJV).

In other words, God will comfort the martyrs in heaven by having Jesus tabernacle with them. The whole point of this is that God has always wanted to live with His people. God is always present. There is never a time that we are out of God's presence. And if that is the case, then God should be the center of our attention at all times. If the Hebrews wanted to be safe in God's presence, then their focus had to be on the tabernacle of God. If we want to be safe in God's presence, then our focus of attention must be on the notion of the ever-present God. In fact, the Holy Spirit has used us as the holy tent. The Holy Spirit tabernacles in us. That's why in Galatians Paul insisted we avoid immorality of all sorts. We are the tabernacle of God; as individuals and as a church.

And since the center of camp life for the Hebrews centered on God, they had to be aware of God's requirements. Look at the last word in verse 1. The word is "saying." Walter Kaiser noted that the phrase, "God called to Moses or God said to Moses" appears 56 times in the book of Leviticus. People want to say the Bible is a human book, written by human authors. But there is no clearer indication that this book comes from the heart and mouth of God. Paul told Timothy, ¹⁶"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16-17 / NIV).

Paul said, "All Scripture," not just the New Testament but all Scripture. That means this book of Leviticus as well. Pastors and teachers avoid the book of Leviticus like the plague. We think it is such a difficult book to preach. However, the book of Leviticus is the first book Jewish children study. This book lays out the blueprint on which they will build a society, build a nation, and build a priesthood. The civil, ceremonial, and moral laws are all intertwined. For the Jew all of life is either a movement towards God or away from God. Every choice we make either carries us closer to God or further away from God. There was no difference between religious life and everyday life for the Jews. There is no difference between our church life and our everyday life. I'm sure that is why our Christianity is so pathetic. We separate our church life from our everyday life. When we are at church we talk and act one way. We are holy. But as soon as we walk out the door, we live our everyday life. We may make that distinction, but God doesn't. God lives in us while we are in church and He lives in us when we walk out those doors. There is no sacred/secular distinction for believers. Why is that so important to understand?

This book was written for our safety. There are two main purposes for these laws. The first is that by following these laws, individuals could stay alive while living in God's presence. In other words, since God was living in the camp and since God is so holy, they had to avoid offending Him to the point He would kill them. God actually did this several times.

Secondly, these laws were meant to keep them alive as a community. This community was set apart by God to preserve the Messianic promises and to ultimately produce the Messiah.

Jesus created the church by sending us the Holy Spirit Who indwells us as individuals and as a church. The church is the community Jesus created to preserve the message that He is offering salvation to all who will receive Him and to continually proclaim the message He is coming to judge the living and the dead.

We as Western Christians are very far off the mark. In fact we believe that our God-given right is to pursue happiness. That kind of attitude is dangerous. It could kill us. God set us free in Christ Jesus to pursue holiness. If we really believe this, then we should be diligent in our study through Leviticus and pursue holiness with every breath. **EVEN THOUGH GOD WANTS TO LIVE IN US, AT THE SAME TIME HE REALIZES HOW DANGEROUS THIS IS TO US.**

Let me just leave you with this thought. God spoke to the people of Israel from the tent to Moses in order to reveal His heart to the people. Today, God has chosen us to reveal His heart to people. We are the tent from where He calls people to be free from the bondage of sin and to pursue a life of holiness. That's a pretty serious calling. I hope that our study through the book of Leviticus can help us get back on track. It will be hard because we are so tainted by society and by our own lust. But here is the situation we face in the churches in the United States. **SOMEHOW WE HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT LIVING IN GRACE MEANS THAT LIVING IN HOLINESS IS OPTIONAL.**

I really like the way Warren Wiersbe phrases things. He has a practical way of looking at complicated theology. Listen to how he describes the state of our churches today.

"We will stand and sing hymn 325," announced the worship leader, 'Take Time to Be Holy.' We will sing verses one and four.'

If I had been sitting with the congregation instead of on the platform, I might have laughed out loud. Imagine a Christian congregation singing 'Take Time to Be Holy' and not even taking time to sing the entire song! If we can't take the time (less than four minutes) to sing a song about holiness, we're not likely to take time to devote ourselves to 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God' (2 Cor. 7:1).

Happiness, not holiness, is the chief pursuit of most people today, including many professed Christians. They want Jesus to solve their problems and carry their burdens, but they don't want Him to control their lives and change their character. It doesn't disturb them that eight times in the Bible, God said to His people, 'Be holy, for I am holy,' and He means it."

Our study through the book of Leviticus will give us an opportunity to do some real serious self-examination. If we were honestly to evaluate our lives, would we find ourselves pursuing holiness or happiness? Following up on what Warren Wiersbe said, when God says Be holy for I am holy, that's not a suggestion. It's a command.