

Lessons from Leviticus
Bruce White / Carol Martin

In this study we are learning about the past history of Israel and God's desire to help them understand that He is the only God, their God, and they are His chosen people. We, at People of the Word, are fortunate to have some past history of our own in the form of rich teaching from lecturers of the past. The lesson we studied this week on the Book of Leviticus has a legacy lecture left to us from Bruce White, a former pastor of Eastside. I want to share his insightful thoughts to confirm why it's important that we study Leviticus.

Introduction

During His earthly ministry, Jesus once was approached by a teacher of the Law. This man listened to Jesus debating with the Pharisees and Herodians, and he was impressed by the insights that Jesus offered about the Jewish Law. So he stepped forward and asked Jesus a key question: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Jesus answered him his way: "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus' answer is important . . . but the exchange that follows is just as important. Mark's Gospel records what happens next: "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:32-34)

Think about what is happening here. Jesus had just summarized the entire Law with two concise statements: love God, and love your neighbor . . . and this teacher of the Law "gets it." This teacher understands that the Law does not exist for its own sake; the Law is a tool that points us to God. He understands that loving God and loving others is far more important than engaging in religious rituals.

In response, Jesus tells this man that he is close to the Kingdom of God. In other words, this Jewish teacher understands the very heart of God.

When we study the Book of Leviticus, we can get lost in the incredible details of all the laws that God gave to Israel. But Jesus helps us find the bottom line: Leviticus is about loving God and loving others. Every law, every guideline, every ritual in this book is designed to help God's people learn to love Him with all of their heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and to love their neighbors as they love themselves. In other words,

the Jewish Law did not exist for the purpose of getting people to follow rules... the Law existed to help people form healthy relationships - with God and with each other.

So I've entitled this talk "Loving God and Loving Others." And I want to address four points:

1. The Law
2. Laws that Help us Love God
3. Laws that Help us Love Others
4. The Blessings of Obedience to the Law

The Law

Before I get into the text, I want to briefly talk about the purpose of laws. When we think of laws and rules and regulations, we usually think in terms of restrictions and limitations. But the actual purpose of rules is to set us free.

Think about the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve to eat from any tree they wanted to . . . except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, God put a modest and healthy boundary around their behavior. Within that boundary, they were free - truly free - to enjoy themselves. They could eat, work, play, and relax in all kinds of interesting and enjoyable and creative ways. But instead of focusing on their freedom, they focused on one very small restriction. And the rest is history.

In the same way, when the Law tells us not to covet our neighbor's possessions, God is simply trying to create healthy boundaries for appropriate behavior in our relationships. He wants us to take our eyes off our neighbor's stuff, and simply use and enjoy our own stuff. As long as we use our possessions in ways that show our love for God and love for others, we are free to use our possessions as we see fit. Rules are freeing - not constricting - when we see them in the proper light.

Israel needed rules. When God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, there was not a single living Jew that understood freedom, because they had been slaves for generations. They had no idea how to govern themselves or how to live together in civic harmony. The Law was a gracious gift from a loving God to teach them how to live, by creating healthy boundaries around their sinful human natures. Through the gift of the Law, they could learn the best ways to love God and love each other.

And notice how the Law is given in Leviticus 11:1-2a: The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Say to the Israelites: . . .

All of the laws are introduced with this phrase: "The Lord said to Moses . . ." Our God is the living God who speaks to His people. We do not need to guess about His intentions, because He speaks to His people clearly and concisely through His designated

representatives. So the Law is a gift to God's people from the mouth of God Himself. And through this great gift, we learn how to love Him and love others.

Laws that Help us Love God

One of the first things we learn from the Law is that loving God requires us to strive for purity. God is holy, and therefore He wants His people to be in the process of becoming more holy in their daily lives. Ungodly people become slaves to their own desires and passions. God wants to set His people free so they can choose to pursue righteousness. So the Law helps God's people learn to recognize the difference between good and evil, clean and unclean, holy and unholy. As a starting point, in Leviticus 11, God gives the Israelites rules about clean and unclean foods.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Say to the Israelites: 'Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud. There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof: it is ceremonially unclean for you. The coney, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.'" (Leviticus 11:1-8)

This is just the beginning of a very detailed list. Some of the rules are given for practical reasons of health. For example, many of the unclean animals are scavengers; they eat dead animals, or live on garbage. Such animals easily can contract and pass on diseases, so it makes sense not to eat them. But God did not have such a specific health reason for each and every item on this list. He simply wanted His people to learn the principles of holiness. "Do not defile yourselves by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am the Lord your God: consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy." (Lev. 11:43,44)

In other words, holy living means choosing God's way of living rather than our own way of living. We do not have to understand God's choices. Holiness means we trust His choices and do what He asks, even when we may lack understanding. The holy Jew was to demonstrate his faithfulness in his choice of foods, by eating what God said to eat. But the food was not really the point. The faithful Jew was supposed to look beyond the foods and understand that he was building a relationship with the God of heaven and earth. By choosing to practice self-discipline, by choosing to eat only the clean foods specified by God, he was loving God with all of his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

One of the reasons that God created laws about clean and unclean foods was to make the point that holiness is not just confined to the religious activity of the Tabernacle.

Purity is something that should be reflected in every area of our lives . . . even something as simple as the food we eat. The Bible tells us that we have been made in the image of God; that our bodies are temples of God's Spirit. So it makes sense for us to care for our bodies as gifts from God. Striving to live clean and holy and pure lives is one way to do just that.

Because of Jesus Christ, you and I are not required to order our lives according to these specific rules and regulations. If we eat pork, God does not consider us unclean. But the underlying principle still applies: is there a way we can show our love for God in our eating? Here's just one thought: in our culture today, over-eating is - literally - an epidemic. So while the Jews needed to focus on the kinds of food they ate, perhaps we need to focus on the quantity of food we eat. If we learn to practice self-discipline with food, it can be a wonderful way to demonstrate our love for God.

It is important to understand that laws about purity are not just for God's people, because these laws also can serve as a witness to our neighbors.

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:1-5)

The Egyptians and Canaanites made their own gods, in their own images. They made gods in the images of animals. And they used these man-made gods to get what they wanted and to indulge their own sinful tendencies. Israel was a testimony to the world that mankind was made in the image of God. And the Law, given by God, revealed that the best way to live was not through self-indulgence, but by living as the Creator intended.

This is an admonition that you and I must truly take to heart. Various polls conducted by Gallup and the Barna Group reveal that many people in America call themselves Christians, and regularly participate in church and worship and Bible study. Tragically, however, when the pollsters evaluate the lifestyles of these Christians...they discover that their values, morals, and ethics are virtually identical with those of non-Christians.

In other words: a huge portion of God's family has forgotten - or perhaps they never understood - the call to live holy and pure lives. God does not ask us to become geeks and goofballs, but in many areas of life He does want us to act in a manner that is distinctly different from our neighbors.

I know of a church that does something very interesting during their Elder selection process. They contact the Elder's employer and speak with a co-worker to get a character

reference, because they want to ensure that the prospective Elder has a good reputation in the marketplace. On one occasion, they made the phone call, and the conversation went something like this:

"Hello, Fred, I'm calling from First Church. Your co-worker, Sam, is being considered for a position of spiritual leadership on our church board. Since you work with him, I'm calling to get a reference based on what you've observed about Sam at the office."

Fred's reply? "Well, I'm really surprised. I did not even know that Sam was a religious person." Sam clearly was a committed member of his church...but evidently there was nothing about his lifestyle that made him different from his co-workers.

How would you measure up a situation like that? What would a co-worker or neighbor say about you and your faith? Here's another way to think about this issue..."If you were on trial for being a follower of Jesus Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

The Law reminds us that God invites us into a life of purity and holiness; a life that is distinct from our neighbors. And one of the most important areas where godly people must choose to live differently is in the area of our sexual behavior.

"No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord. Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her. Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father." (Leviticus 18:6-8)

As with the laws on clean and unclean foods, this is the beginning of a very long list. And virtually all of the sexual prohibitions are targeted to men, to teach men how to curb their sexual impulses. Godly men must learn not to be driven by their fleshly appetites. Our sexual drive must be surrendered to God and channeled into a healthy expression through marriage.

This was particularly important for Jewish men. God made a Covenant with Abraham that He would raise up a nation, and this obviously was done through procreation. So Jewish men were not to have sex with anyone, anytime they felt like it. They were to marry, and have children, and raise up families that would honor and serve God.

It's no accident that the sign of the Jewish Covenant is circumcision. Every time a Jewish man made love to his wife, he was reminded that his sexual behavior actually was an instrument of fulfilling God's will. The sign of the Covenant was a reminder that his sexual drive should be harnessed and expressed only in ways that would honor God.

Modern America has become a land of sexual license. Almost anything goes; virtually nothing is taboo. In a recent survey of Christian couples who were undergoing pre-marital counseling, more than half of them indicated that they had already engaged in sexual intercourse. For many Christians, pre-marital sex is just no big deal. That's so sad, because it is a big deal.

When we refuse to indulge ourselves, and instead pursue what God wants, we demonstrate that we love Him with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. We show the world that we love the Heavenly Father more than our earthly appetites.

Improper sexual behavior does not just affect us . . . it also can affect the community around us. And this leads us to the other aspect of the Great Commandment as given by Jesus: Laws that help us to love others.

Laws that Help us Love Others

Sexual behavior is not just a matter of personal purity. After God gives Moses a lengthy list of sexual sins, He wraps up with these words from Leviticus 18:29, "Everyone who does any of these detestable things - such persons must be cut off from their people." Those who engage in sexual immorality must be removed from the community to emphasize the destructive nature of their behavior. If a married man has sexual relations with someone other than his wife...if a parent has sexual relations with a child...these actions are a direct assault on the structure of the family. If we want to love other people with a godly love...then we will direct our sexual desires in the way God intends. A heterosexual relationship, within the confines of marriage, is the proper way to love our neighbor as ourselves, because then we are not coveting either our neighbor...or our neighbor's spouse.

There's another group of laws that show us how to love our neighbor, and these are laws governing infectious skin diseases. Compared to modern-day standards, hygiene was very poor in biblical times. As a result, ancient peoples were subject to all sorts of skin disorders, generically referred to as leprosy. These conditions were often untreatable. Sometimes they would clear up on their own, but most often they led to a slow, lingering, and painful death. Because these diseases were highly infectious, they had the potential to wipe out large segments of the population. Therefore, the Law required individuals to separate themselves from the community.

In other words: to protect many people, God required the isolation of a few people.

(Before we continue with Bruce White's lecture from 2007, it's obvious that in 2020 the pandemic of COVID19 has struck world health and turned our lives upside down. We have been called to make sacrifices in every aspect of our daily living: self-quarantine at home, business failures, job loss or change to working from home, closures of recreational activities, schools closed, churches closed, travel limited, civil unrest, government dealing

with huge economic issues, as well as our collective grief at the number of lives that have been lost or impacted due to this dreadful virus.

In a time of uncertainty when we're in the midst of such a trial, it can be difficult to see the end as God sees it. He is still in control and working all things together for our good, because we love Him and trust Him. Let's return to Bruce's thoughts on loving one another.)

In these days of modern medicine, laws of isolation may seem harsh. Yet throughout most of human history, infectious diseases were largely treated by quarantining the sick people in the population. It was the only way to minimize the potential for a widespread epidemic.

God is using this part of the Law to teach His people that life is never just about us. God cares for each of us as individuals, but the community is more important than any one individual.

Sometimes we act as if God has made a personal Covenant with each of us, but obviously that is not the case. His Covenant was with Israel . . . now it is with the Church. I am able to participate in the blessings of the Covenant because I am a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Living with this understanding reminds me that I must always evaluate my own personal needs and wants and preferences and priorities against what is in the best interests of the community of faith as a whole.

In various ways, and at various times, we all must make sacrifices for the good of the community. For a leper in biblical times, that sacrifice meant a life of separation from the community. It was an act of incredible love; a sacrifice of self for the good of others.

This biblical understanding of sacrifice was repeated in 1665, in the village of Eyam, England, during the Great Plague. A parcel of cloth full of fleas was shipped to the village tailor. A few weeks later, the plague started to appear in the village and people began to die. The first instinct of the villagers who did not show any symptoms was to pack their belongings and flee. But what if they were already infected? They might unwittingly carry the plague to other villages, and therefore cause the death of many others.

The entire village met in the church to discuss the matter and pray. After listening to the advice of their pastor, they agreed to a voluntary quarantine of every man, woman and child. Everyone would stay in the village, whether they had symptoms or not. Those without symptoms realized that they might be consigning themselves to death. Yet they realized that by staying, they would inhibit the spread of the disease and perhaps save the lives of many others.

So signs were posted around the village to alert people to stay away. Neighboring communities donated food and supplies by leaving them at the edge of town. Infected

people were segregated within the village and generally cared for themselves, while those without symptoms lived in other parts of the village. The pastor and his wife visited everyone and anyone, tending to their needs. The pastor's wife eventually contracted the plague and died.

For 14 long months, the village of Eyam lived in quiet and horrible isolation, until finally the disease had run its course, taking the lives of some 260 people. Because of their strong Christian convictions, these simple villagers had shown immense personal courage and self-sacrifice. They prevented the spread of the plague, they helped bring about its demise in England, but many paid the ultimate price.

Their sacrifice is still remembered, because for nearly 350 years there has been an annual memorial service in the village church to commemorate the actions of those people. They demonstrated a deep devotion to godly principles, and a sacrificial love for others.

Love often is costly, but when we love God and love other people in the way our Father intends, there are blessings that we will receive in return.

The Blessings of Obedience to the Law

In Leviticus 26, God provides an incredible list of the blessings that Israel will receive when they live in faithfulness to the Law. They will have abundant crops, fruitful families, and victory over their enemies. They will be able to live at peace in the land that God has given them. And best of all, God Himself will dwell among them.

I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high. (Leviticus 26:12,13)

What could be better than to have the God of heaven and earth living in your midst? He did that for the Jews by making His presence known in the Tabernacle, which was at the very center of their community life.

And God still does that today by placing His Spirit within each of us when we repent of our sins and invite Jesus Christ to become our Lord and Savior. God does not guarantee physical blessings for us, instead He promises spiritual blessings. When His Spirit makes His home within our hearts, then we can experience victory over our enemies of sin and temptation.

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (1 John 5:3-5)

Just as God asked the Jews to show their love and faithfulness to the Law, He asks us to show our love by obedience. He does not demand this from us . . . it simply is a choice we make every day. Our obedience is evident when we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and when we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And when we do that - whenever we demonstrate love for God and love for others - I believe in that moment Jesus says to each of us: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."