

Leviticus Sermon Series: Don't Forget God's Holiness

Live a Sweet Aroma Life to God Leviticus 1-3

[Slide 1] How did we forget God's holiness? I believe I have. I believe Hope Fellowship has. I believe the church in the United States has. Why do I say that?

Let me provide some evidence. Of the current top 20 Christian contemporary songs, none of them are about God's holiness. Of Amazon's top 100 selling Christian contemporary songs only two are about God's holiness, one is Chris Tomlin's song, "Holy is the Lord" and the second one fittingly is Addison Road's song, "What Do I Know of Holy." How is it that the songs Christians sing most often rarely mention God's holiness?

I checked Amazon's top 100 best-selling Christian books, none of them were about God's holiness. How is it that one of God's attributes that most defines who he is rarely is mentioned in our reading.

When people such as Isaiah or Peter experienced God's holy presence confessed their sin. Isaiah said, "Woe is me for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Peter said, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord." How many of us, in approaching God, are immediately convicted of our sin?

When non-Christians object to the existence of God their most common response is to say, "If God is such a loving God, then why does he allow evil or suffering to occur?" They never seem to say, "If God is such a holy God, why doesn't he immediately destroy us all?" Why do they only seem to think of God's love? What are they hearing from us about God? Are we so eager to sell God to them that we have hyped his soft attributes of love, compassion, kindness, and mercy while neglecting to mention his wrath, his holiness, his justice?

I think of KSBJ's motto: God listens. It certainly is true that God listens but what are we communicating to the world with that motto? Could we be communicating that God passively waits for us to ask for something and then he's quick to hear? Shouldn't we be the ones doing the listening, trying to discern what God is saying to us? I'm not trying to bash KSBJ. I'm just suggesting that we all, myself included, quickly gravitate toward the comforting attributes of God and we tend to ignore the ones that might make us uncomfortable, like God's holiness.

Christian Smith conducted the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He described the faith held by most American teenagers as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

According to him, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism consists of beliefs like these: 1. "A god exists who created the world and watches over human life." 2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other." 3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about one's self." 4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." 5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."

Nothing in there about God being a consuming fire who brings down judgment upon those who disobey him, nothing about God's wrath, nor about eternal condemnation in Hell. We need a fresh vision of God's holiness.

[Slide 2] Today, I'm beginning a sermon series through the book of Leviticus. Just now as I announced this new series the energy level in the room shot up, people leaned forward on the edge of their chairs, glazed eyes came alive, and faces broke apart in big smiles. Not. No, I expect if I asked you to rank the books in the Bible with your most favorite at the top, Leviticus would probably land near the bottom in most lists.

What is Leviticus about? It is about the holiness of God. It is about how the Israelites, a decidedly unholy people could live in the presence of a holy God. Leviticus also contains counsel for you and I on how to live in God's presence. With that in mind, maybe we better pray. Pray.

In order to see how Leviticus fits into the larger scheme of OT history we need only look at the last of Exodus and the first of Numbers. The last scene in Exodus describes God entering into the tabernacle, the tent-like structured that functioned as a portable temple. Look at Exodus 40:34-35 which I printed on your sermon outline. Read. Exodus ends with God in his tabernacle but not even Moses, his chosen representative is able to enter into God's presence.

Now flip over to Numbers chapter 1 verse 1 or look at that verse on your sermon outline. Read. In Numbers 1:1 Moses now stands in the presence of God in the tabernacle. What happened between Exodus 40 and Numbers 1 that enabled Moses to enter into the presence of God? Leviticus. God provided revelation explaining how his people could live in his presence despite their sin and uncleanness.

God is holy and cannot allow anything or anyone unholy in his presence. The word, "holy" means to be set apart. God is not like any of the rest of creation because he is perfectly righteous, perfectly just, without error or sin, pure and untainted. I like how the Bible Project defines holiness as God's pure and powerful presence. We are anything but holy. So how can an unholy people dwell in the presence of a holy God? Leviticus is God's initial answer to that question. The final answer will be the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

On three separate occasions in the book of Leviticus, God declares the purpose of his revelation. They are listed on your outline. Leviticus 11:44: "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy . . ." Leviticus 19:2: "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'" Leviticus 20:26: "Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine."

The book of Leviticus is arranged in a chiasmic structure to explain how the Israelites will be able to live in God's presence. They will do it by means of following rituals that God prescribes in chapters 1-7 and 23-27. They will ordain priests in chapters 8-10 who must meet certain standards listed in chapters 21-22, who will represent the people to God and God to the people. The people will obey purity laws God gives them in chapters 11-15 and in 18-20. Finally in the center of the book in the place of emphasis, the High Priest will once a year carry out the prescribed sacrifice on the Day of Atonement to make the people acceptable to God.

If you look at your outline you will see Leviticus laid out in a chiasm or chiasmic structure. Chiasm comes from the Greek letter, chi, which looks like a capital X. If you divide an X straight down the middle and take the left side of it you have the shape of half an X or what looks like the greater than symbol in math. You have pairs of similar topics which point to a center piece which is the place of emphasis, the Day of Atonement.

Now one last piece of overview we need to briefly cover before we can get into chapters 1-3. How do we apply OT Law? The simple answer is that most of the time we do not obey OT Law. The only OT laws we are to obey are the ones repeated in the New Testament or which

necessarily reflect God's unchanging character and will. For example, God is truth, therefore every law that prohibits lying, false testimony, false weights, slander, etc, is always going to directly apply, because all those behaviors violate God's character and will forever be ungodly regardless of culture or time. God's permanent will for mankind is marriage between a male and a female according to Genesis 2:22. That will be forever true and thus all laws forbidding sex outside of marriage will also directly apply to us.

How then do we Christians profitably apply a book of OT Law like Leviticus? God has told us in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that all Scripture is profitable for one of four things: for teaching, for reproof, for correction, or for training in righteousness. Every law and example in Leviticus is going to fulfill at least one of those four functions, even if the law does not directly apply to us.

[Slide 3] I'm going to summarize Leviticus chapters 1-3 for you in chart form, and add some additional information that is not there. I'll give you some verse references that you can quickly glance at as we go along. Leviticus 1 is about the whole burnt offering. Each of the offerings covered in chapters 1-3 describes a personal, voluntary offering. These offerings were also made for the whole nation as public offerings, but that legislation appears in Numbers 28-29. In Leviticus 1-3 we are talking about private, voluntary offerings. Look at verses 2-3. Read. Notice the law does not say the individual has to offer the whole burnt offering at any specified time or with any specified regularity. It says when a man brings the offering and it's a burnt offering, he was to offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting or the tabernacle.

It was called a whole burnt offering because the whole animal was burned. Either a male bull or sheep or goat or turtle dove or pigeon was killed, gutted, cleaned and chopped in pieces by the worshipper. The priest then spilled the animal's blood on the side of the altar and put its pieces on the altar to burn. The animal had to be a male without defect; however, if you were poor you could offer the pigeon or turtle dove instead of one of the larger animals.

It was called an offering by fire, a soothing aroma to the Lord in verse 10. The expression soothing aroma means that the sacrifice pleased God. If you think about it, it would have smelled like barbecue until it got too burned.

What made this offering unique and what gave it its name was the fact that the whole animal was offered up to God. The key idea the whole burnt offering illustrated was that a holy God is pleased by undivided loyalty. The worshipper held nothing back from God, everything was offered up to God.

That's how we apply the whole burnt offering to our lives. A holy God demands your undivided loyalty, your whole self. The New Testament repeats this principle in a number of different ways. For example, in Matthew 22:37 Jesus says that you are to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You are to love God with all that you are. Romans 12:1 evokes the imagery of the whole burnt offering when Paul writes that we are to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship. In James 1:5-8 James says that we are to ask for wisdom without doubting for one cannot expect to receive anything from God if they are doubleminded, if they are one moment trying to love the world and at the next moment trying to love God.

Does God have your undivided loyalty? Does he have your loyalty before family, before children, before career, before entertainment, before money? Does he have all of you, or do you withhold some things from him? Do you entertain hidden sins or habits that you won't give up? Do you listen to others more than you do him? Have you given more of your love and affection to someone else? Are you giving your time, energy and abilities to serve God or are you sitting back and letting other Christians do all the work? Our holy God deserves and demands

unswerving loyalty and devotion, anything less is sin, is impurity. Who here can stand and say, “I have given everything to you God, and not withheld anything?” Who here stands with a completely devoted heart and totally clean lips? If not, we need forgiveness for we have fallen short. We have offered half a sacrifice rather than the whole animal. God deserves it all and is pleased when we offer our whole self as a living sacrifice.

[Slide 4] The offering in Leviticus chapter 2 is the grain offering. It consisted of fine flour, mixed with frankincense and oil, made into salted, unleavened cakes. The cakes were placed on the altar and burned, once again producing a soothing aroma to God. Verse 13 in chapter 2 tells us that the salt in the grain offering represented the salt of the covenant. Salt does not burn, illustrating the permanent nature of God’s covenant with Israel. In Israel’s time nations often ratified covenants by eating salt together. The vassal nation represented by its leader would eat a meal containing salt with the overlord as an expression of covenant loyalty to him. The vassal nation would provide some kind of tribute to the overlord as an expression of gratitude for the overlord making covenant with the weaker nation.

When the grain offering was made by an individual, as it is here, the Israelite offered a tribute to God in form of the grain offering in thanksgiving for being allowed to be in covenant with God. In appreciation the Israelite offered a gift to God that would please him, that would be a sweet aroma to God. God specified through his revelation what kind of grain offering would please him. It could have no honey or leaven and it had to be fine flour mixed with oil and frankincense. As a side note, the whole cake was not burned, only a portion. The rest was given to the priests for their personal consumption. So the tribute was not given just to God but also to God’s servants.

What key idea does this offering illustrate? A relationship with a holy God requires mutual giving in the covenant relationship. The covenant participant is expected to give to God, not in order to earn the covenant, but out of gratitude that God made the covenant with him. Covenant is a two-way street. We receive much from being in covenant with God, but it is highly disrespectful to God to only be takers and not also givers. God does not exist to bless us and make our life better. We enter covenant with God with an expectation that we will offer to him what pleases him. Covenant with God is a mutual relationship that entails giving by both parties. A holy God requires a mutually beneficial relationship.

Hebrews 13:15-16 provides an example of our NT covenant obligation. Let me read that. Read. We don’t bring grain offering sacrifices now, but notice the sacrifices that do please God: a sacrifice of praise where we thank God, do good works, and share what we have with God and with others. These are the sacrifices that please God.

How would you describe your relationship with God? Is it a mutual relationship? Do you spend equal time offering to serve him as you do asking for favors from him? Do you balance praise and thanksgiving with petition? Do you spend as much time doing good works for God’s glory as you do asking God to do good works for you? Do you share as much your stuff with others as you want God to share his good stuff with you? If you are sensitive to God’s holiness you will be cautious not to be out of balance, when you want much more from God than you are willing to give to him.

Of course, we cannot outgive God and our relationship with him will never reach parity. We receive far more from him than he receives from us, but our heart’s desire should be to become more of a giver in our relationship with God. Even something as simple as attending a worship service should become more about coming to give to God rather than what I can get from the service. Your main motivation for attending worship should be because that pleases God and

God's holiness requires you to give back to him in gratitude for him entering into covenant with you.

[Slide 5] The third offering in Leviticus chapter 3 is the peace offering. The peace offering was a bull, lamb or goat, male or female without defect. The worshipper killed and gutted the animal. The priest sprinkled the blood of the animal on the side of the altar. The worshipper took the fat on the animal's entrails, the kidney and the liver and gave those to the priest who then placed them on the altar and burned them. That was God's portion. This chapter does not explain it, but Leviticus 7:12 ff explains that the worshipper was to give the right thigh to the priest, then take the rest of the meat home, cook it, and eat it with his family and friends. The sacrifice illustrated God and his worshipper eating together, God feasting on the kidney and liver, the worshipper and family eating the meat.

In Leviticus 7 we learn that the peace offering was made after confessing a sin, or after fulfilling a vow, or after receiving some blessing from God. The common thread in all three of these aspects of the peace offering is that I am celebrating my condition of being at peace with God. I confessed my sin and now I celebrate my restored relationship with God. Or I paid my vow to God and now I am no longer in his debt. Or God has blessed, me proving that I am at peace with him. The idea of reconciliation is present in all three. We are not in conflict because I confessed my sin. We are in harmony because I paid my vow. We are at peace with one another, proved by the blessing I received from God.

Since I am at peace with God, it is entirely appropriate and even necessary that I celebrate. It is so important that I be at peace with a holy God that I should be agony when I am not, and dancing and singing when I am. Celebrating my peace with God emphasizes how important God is in my life. The key idea is that we celebrate with a holy God our reconciliation. God celebrates with us. He eats with us and joins us in our celebration.

The clearest analogy to the peace offering in the NT is the Lord's Table. At the Lord's Table we celebrate our reconciliation with God through the death of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Table is an act of eating. What symbolically are we eating? Jesus said we are eating his body which was broken for us. Just as the Israelite family ate the flesh of a bull or lamb or goat to celebrate their reconciliation so we symbolically eat the flesh of our Divine peace offering in order to celebrate our reconciliation with God.

Why did Jesus eat with his disciples? After all, he did not need to celebrate any reconciliation because he was fully at peace already with the Father. Jesus ate from the bread and drank from the cup not to celebrate his receiving reconciliation. He ate and drank with his disciples to represent God celebrating with his followers their reconciliation to him.

The early church got the idea of celebration because they actually had a meal together as part of the Lord's Table celebration. In Corinthians 11: 33-34 Paul criticized the Corinthians because they weren't waiting for everyone to arrive before they dove into the feast. Whether we should have a meal or not along with the Lord's Table is not the main point. The main point is that we should celebrate our reconciliation with God. Once we understand how holy God is and how sinful we are, we should explode with joy at the news that we are reconciled to God.

I'll make this claim. If you are not regularly celebrating your salvation, it's probably because you've forgotten about the holiness of God and what it means to face his wrath and judgment with no hope. I know I stand guilty of forgetting about the holiness of God. So, whether you need to be here every week to hear this sermon series or not, your pastor certainly needs to be here.

Don't forget God's holiness. [Close in prayer]