

## *“Holy Living”*

(Leviticus 1-27)

“I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God;  
therefore be holy, because I am holy.”

(Leviticus 11:45)

### **A Call to Holiness**

Moving across the country takes a lot of preparation. I should know, having done it twice in the past 5 years. Not only does it mean packing up all your belongings, but it also means forwarding your mail, renting a truck or trailer, and perhaps most importantly, making arrangements for where you will live when you reach your final destination.

God’s people have been freed from slavery in Egypt and God has entered into covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai, providing them the ten commandments wrapped in grace as sustenance for the journey ahead, like trail mix we take on a long hike.

But the people are not yet ready for the journey across the wilderness to the Promised Land. For one thing, they need to build the Tabernacle, God’s movable dwelling place that will assure them that God’s presence is with them for the whole journey. But even after the Tabernacle is built, the people still need to be instructed how to use it properly. They need to learn to incorporate worship into the regular pattern of their lives. Remember, God got the people out of Egypt, but there’s still a lot of Egypt to be gotten out of the people.

Thus we have the book of Leviticus, which describes God’s persistent call for the people to be **holy** because they are in covenant with a **holy** God. The entire book of Leviticus takes place at Mount Sinai, where God instructs Moses how to lead the people in holy living.

You see, the people are about to set out on their journey for the Promised Land, but they must be ready for what lies ahead. They must not fall into their old patterns of life from their days in Egypt, and they must not accept the patterns of life of the Canaanites who lived in the Promised Land at that time. Rather, before they journey onward, they must learn to be **holy**: God’s set apart people who will embrace God’s call to Abraham to bless the whole world. Blessed to be a blessing. They are to embrace God’s call to become a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

The book of Leviticus is a call to holy living. If you have any doubt about this, consider the number of times the word “holy” shows up throughout the book: 92 to be exact, which is the that most this word shows up in any book of the Bible, further highlighting its significance.

But holiness is not simply an expectation of the people. It is a response to God. Because God is holy, the people are to be holy. Because God is set apart from all other gods, the people are to be set apart from other peoples, not to isolate themselves, but to give them opportunity to reveal God’s Grace to the whole world.

Holiness is rooted in God’s grace. Last week, Rosie helped us see that the 10 Commandments were wrapped in Grace. The first word is not a command but rather a statement of grace: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). This same phrase, “I am the Lord your God” occurs 21 times in Leviticus, reminding us throughout that holiness is always rooted in grace.

Leviticus 11:45 is one verse that brings these two phrases together: “I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45).

So what does holiness look like? Well, as we look through Leviticus, we can recognize that holiness has something to do with proper observance of the different kinds of offerings. Furthermore, holiness has to do with cleanliness and purity with regard to food, infections, and sexual relations.

## **Raising the Bar**

But to truly understand God’s call to holiness, we must look at three key chapters in Leviticus. Leviticus 19, 23, and 25 “raise the bar” for what it means to live a holy life. These chapters help move our discussion of holiness from simply inward, individual beliefs, to outward, communal practices.

### **I. Holy Directions (Leviticus 19)**

Leviticus 19 begins with these words: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” After this initial challenge for the people to be holy, this chapter is full of many specific directions for how the people are to live holy lives. Then, at the end of the chapter, God says “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 20:36b-37). In essence, this entire chapter is bracketed by the words of Grace. Holy practice is rooted in the Grace of a holy God.

So what about the specific instructions? One commentator described the directions in Leviticus 19 according to two categories: *Holy living* and *honest living*. He says, “By holy living I mean our fidelity to God, and by honest living I mean our integrity toward other persons.”<sup>1</sup> As we read through God’s instructions to Worship and Obey the Lord and also to treat others with integrity, love, and justice, we can see that holiness is both vertical and horizontal: encompassing our relationship with God and with our neighbors.

On the horizontal axis, God’s words in this chapter teach us to outwardly care for others with radical actions of grace. Don’t reap to the very edges of your field. Don’t defraud your neighbor. Don’t oppress the alien residing among you.

## II. Holy Festivals (Leviticus 23)

Holy living is both vertical and horizontal. Next, when we turn to Leviticus 23, we read, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as **holy** convocations, my appointed festivals” (23:1-2).

This chapter describes the Sabbath as well as several festivals that the people were to celebrate in remembrance of God’s goodness to them. These are celebrations set aside for worship, days committed to meet with God, the Holy One of Israel.<sup>2</sup> The Sabbath is mentioned first because it was central to Israel’s worship, the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week set aside for worship and rest, a reminder of both creation and liberation. Sabbath reminds the people of creation because after six days of creating the world, God rested, establishing rest into the pattern of creation. The world was not created to work without end, but to rest and celebrate the goodness of God’s creation on a regular basis. Sabbath is also a reminder of liberation because God saved the people out of Egypt, out of unending slavery in which they worked each and every day of the week. In taking a day of worship and rest, the people declared God as liberator who freed them from the unending toil of slavery into a new life of freedom.

Similar to the weekly Sabbath observance, the festivals described in this chapter were extended reminders of the goodness of God, opportunities to gather as community and remember the story of how God saved them.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, R. Kent Hughes (2009-10-14). *Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 3177-3179). Good News Publishers. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, R. Kent Hughes (2009-10-14). *Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Location 3636). Good News Publishers. Kindle Edition.

In the first month of the year, the people were to celebrate Passover followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a yearly reminder of the formational story of God's deliverance in the Exodus. Seven weeks after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the people were to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, which was a celebration of grain harvest symbolizing God's gracious provisions for the people from the land. Then in the seventh month of the year, the people were to celebrate the feast of trumpets, the fast of atonement, and the feast of booths. Trumpets signaled the beginning of the most important month of the year. A day of fasting followed, signifying the people's repentance of their sins. Finally, a weeklong fall festival, the feast of booths, would help the people remember God's provisions for them in their long journey across the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Being a holy people means setting aside special time each week and each year to worship God and celebrate God's goodness and gracious provision. These special times were to remind the people who they were and whose they were.

### III. Holy Jubilee! (Leviticus 25)

Finally, Leviticus chapter 25 describes the climax of what it means to be a holy people. This chapter is dominated by a description of the Year of Jubilee. You see, each 7<sup>th</sup> year, the land is to take a Sabbath, an opportunity for the land to rest and rejuvenate. Then after 7 Sabbath years, on the Day of Atonement, which is in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, the trumpet was to be sounded throughout the land! (blow trumpet). This trumpet signaled a Year of Jubilee! In this year, slaves were set free and people returned to their land. This was to be a great leveling out the playing field. Those who had come upon hard times and had to sell their land or even themselves would celebrate their freedom in renewal of their fortunes.

You see, the land is God's. God gives the people the Promised Land, the people rent it from God. And in God's economy, people are to live holy lives in which they practice care and justice for the land and with their neighbors. People aren't meant to continually grow in wealth or stature, but rather Jubilee gives us a vision of a community that works together in harmony for the benefit of everyone.

Every 50 years, the people were to remember and celebrate the Exodus in a special way, acknowledging that "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1), and that everything they have is a gift from God.

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Thus we see in these chapters that Holy Living is about much more than inward, individual moral choices. Holiness is about right relationships with God and other people, it is about remembering God's goodness through worship, and it is about celebrating God's economy of freedom! Holiness is about living set-apart lives for the purpose of blessing all other peoples in the world!

### **To be Blessed or not to be Blessed... (Leviticus 26)**

The Israelites have a long journey ahead of them, but they cannot set out from Mount Sinai until they understand how they are to live once they get there. As a response to God's grace, they are to live radical lives of holiness because God is holy.

And when we turn to Leviticus chapter 26, we read some amazing promises about how God will care for the people if they are obedient to God's instructions. But we also read some pretty terrible consequences if the people choose not to obey God. After all, God always gives people freedom to choose, and here the people have a choice, to be blessed, or not to be blessed, that is the question.

If they obey God's instructions for holy living described in this book, God would bless the people with good rain, with peace in the land, with population increase, and with God's enduring presence among his people. In other words, God would provide for their every need: food, safety, fertility, and intimate relationship. This last blessing is perhaps the most powerful: God says: "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." This reminds us of the Garden of Eden, when God walked among the people and was in intimate relationship with them. Embracing the covenant means embracing God's good intentions for creation.

The section of blessings ends with a familiar refrain: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect." I got you out of Egypt and I'm getting Egypt out of you too.

Sounds pretty good. Sounds like it's worth following God's instructions, doesn't it?

But just in case the people can't handle God's instructions, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to the severe consequences that will happen if they refuse to obey God's directions. The curses get worse and worse as the people continue rejecting God, until they deserve to be annihilated. But even if and when the people reject God, God's last word is one of Grace. God says that the people will confess their sins and that God will once again remember his covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. And when God remembers, there is always hope for the future.

## **Embracing Holiness (1 Peter 1:13-16)**

Even though people have refused to embrace God's ways of holiness across the generations, we have new opportunity today to respond to God's call. Now, I'm not saying that we need to start practicing all the different kinds of offerings described in Leviticus. But, what I am saying is that we can receive God's call to be a holy people today, set apart from the destructive patterns of our world so that we can be a blessing to others.

If we want to truly understand what it means to be a Holy People, we must look to Jesus, who taught and embodied the ways of holiness, who proclaimed a new Year of Jubilee.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus said in Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (blow trumpet)

Leviticus raised the bar on holiness, and Jesus raised the bar even further. As God's people today, we must take seriously Leviticus' call to holiness, and we must learn to practice holiness by following Jesus.

Turning to 1 Peter 1:13-16, we read,

"Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Therefore, may we receive God's call to be a holy people today. May we follow Jesus in the freedom dance of Jubilee! And may we always remember God's delivering grace so that we can be people who share God's grace with the whole world. In the name of our Holy God, Amen.