

“I am Holy” Leviticus 9 + 10

This is the second in our series on Leviticus. And as I said last week, we’re doing things differently. I want to leave you wanting more of Leviticus, not less, and so rather than go through the book chapter by chapter, we’re going to be looking at some of the key themes of the book.

This week I read an interview with Leonardo DiCaprio, the Hollywood actor. And the interview began with a quote from the American author Erica Jong, who wrote that ‘fame simply means millions of people have the wrong idea of who you are.’ And it ended with the interviewer writing, ‘Leonardo DiCaprio: you might think you know him, but you almost certainly don’t.’

In other words, you think you know a famous person, you build this idea in your mind of what they’re like, but in reality, you don’t know them at all.

Well, if that is true of famous people, it is most certainly also true about God, isn’t it. Millions of people have their ideas of what he is like. But whilst it really doesn’t matter if what you think about a Hollywood actor is wrong, with God the stakes are far higher, aren’t they?

And that’s why Leviticus matters, because in it God tells us something of what he is really like.

God is Holy

Now if you wanted a strapline for Leviticus, it would have to be *holiness*. You see, the word *holy* and words derived from it get mentioned no less than 150 times, in the book. But *the* recurring phrase, *the* statement that God keeps on making about himself in this book is ‘I am holy’ (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8). ‘You want to know what I am like?’ the Lord says, well ‘I am holy.’

Now, if you had to fill the blank in for yourself and complete the statement, ‘I am...’ What would you say about yourself? You could say multiple things, couldn’t you? But the Lord’s response is, ‘I am holy.’ And everything in Leviticus is built around that statement.

Everything used in worship of him is holy, and his people must be holy, because he is holy. And through the events and the laws recorded in the book, God makes it clear that His holiness must never be trivialised or compromised. So whether it is through the worship life of the nation, or through the daily lives of the people, Leviticus brings home the message that God’s people are to put God’s holiness on public display.

And yet, despite the fact that this is the central theme of the book, there is no explicit explanation as to what his holiness is.

So what does it mean to be holy? And if I were to ask you that, I suspect that for some of us the idea of holiness can come with a whole load of unattractive baggage. So what does God mean when he says ‘I am holy’?

Well, the root of the word implies separation. To be holy is to be separate, to be distinct. Look at Leviticus 10:10, where the Lord says to the priests, 'You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.' So just as clean is the opposite of unclean, so holy is the opposite of common. There is everything else, the common, and then there is the holy. It's separate, in a class of its own.

So, when the Lord or the people make something, or someone holy, they do that by setting it apart to the Lord. But that is derivative or dependent holiness. The person, the animal, the object is not holy, in and of itself, it only becomes holy because someone sets it apart as holy, as distinct.

You see, in the entire universe, only God, and God alone, is holy by his very nature. His holiness doesn't depend on anyone else. By his very nature he is set apart, he is distinct. He simply *is* holy.

I mean think for a moment about how people imagine God to be. Maybe even how you imagine him to be. Often, what we want is for him to be a greater, better kind of us, don't we. We imagine that he will disapprove of the people we disapprove of, and like those we like. We want God and imagine God to approve of the stuff we want to do, and disapprove of the stuff we don't like others doing. So we create God in our own image.

But Leviticus tells us that God is *not* like us. It tells us he is holy: set apart. He is other than us and, frankly, we know nothing like him.

But what is it about him that makes him so holy? What is it about his nature that sets God apart from you and me and everyone else? Well, we're going to see just two things among many from Leviticus 9 and 10.

The context is that public worship in the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, is about to begin.

Reading 9:1-5, 22-10:3

So from what happens there, I want you to see that God is in a class of his own, he is holy in two things: his power, and his moral purity.

Holy in power

So, Aaron, the High Priest, has made atonement for himself and the people and blessed them, and then Moses tells us in v23, that 'the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people.' But if that was extraordinary what happened next must have been one of those events seared on Moses' mind: v24, 'And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering.'

And what do the people do? Moses tells us in v24, they 'fell on their faces.' Why? Why does anyone fall on their face before anyone else? You do it when you are in the presence of one infinitely more powerful than you. And time and again in the Bible, whether it is at the dedication of Solomon's temple, or Elijah's battle with

the prophets of Baal, or Isaiah's vision of God in the temple in Isaiah 6, the glory of God, and fire coming from his presence, is the manifestation of his power that leaves people face down. When it comes to his power he has no competitors. He is holy in his power.

But imagine someone who suddenly has the power to do anything he wants, and no-one can stop him. Would you welcome such a person or fear him? Imagine if your boss, or your neighbour, or your younger brother, suddenly had all conquering power, and no one could touch them. How would you feel? As Lord Acton said, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

So how should you feel about such a God of unmatched power? It all depends on his character, doesn't it? And if the first episode of fire tells us he is holy in power, the second tells us something just as important.

Holy in Moral Purity

And Nadab and Abihu are Aaron's eldest sons. And for whatever reason, chapter 10:1, they 'offered unauthorised fire before the Lord.' And the outcome was not pretty.

Now, is that a gross over-reaction on the Lord's part? Two guys come with an incense offering and God blasts them. Isn't that an excellent example of what absolute power does? It destroys.

And the answer is 'no'; it is the exact opposite. You see, up until now, as the people prepared for this first worship service, Leviticus keeps repeating, 15 times in chapters 8 and 9, that they did everything 'as the Lord commanded.' But now, Nadab and Abihu come and they offer this unauthorised fire, which Moses says in v2, the Lord 'had not commanded them.'

You see, for whatever reason, these two men thought that they could decide what could and could not be done, that they could decide what was or was not acceptable. And if you think about it, current western culture is virtually built on this mindset, isn't it. No one should be able to tell me what I can or can't do. I must be free to express myself, to call the shots, and do life my way. And in reality what we're doing is we're siding with Nadab and Abihu – we want to be the lawmaker for our own lives.

But these two men discovered that they aren't God. They aren't the lawgiver. And whilst they may have been entirely sincere, they are a vivid example that when it comes to God you can be sincerely wrong. And these two sons of Aaron failed to treat God as holy, because they thought he was just like them, that his word and his commands, were no more binding than their own. That their word could trump his. And tragically, they discovered how wrong they were.

And so these guys stand as a warning to any of us who think that God's holiness and God's commands don't really matter.

Instead it is the Lord's commands, later on in chapter 19, that lifts the curtain on what it means for God to be holy. Because there he tells the people that they are to be holy as he is holy, and then sets out what that will look like in their lives. They will reflect his character by caring for the needy, being impartial in justice, being people of integrity in speech and upright in business; by loving their neighbours as themselves; by caring for the foreigner and by looking after creation. And if this is what God calls his people to be to reflect him, then how much more loving, righteous, truthful, faithful and just is he. He is holy in his moral perfection. So holy, that he will act against anyone who would trample that underfoot.

And there lies our problem, doesn't it. Because once you're confronted with the awesome holiness of God, you have nowhere to hide, because you realise you are anything but holy. And to bring his holiness, and our separation from him, home to the people of Israel, the Lord uses something fascinating in Leviticus, and that's the laws on what is clean and unclean.

Holy and Unclean Cannot Mix.

Now perhaps one of the biggest stumbling blocks in Leviticus for people like us are the rules on the ritual states of clean and unclean, because they just seem so alien, so weird to us. And yet through them the Lord was teaching them and us something profound, about himself, and about us.

In chapter 11 the Lord divides the animal world into 2 groups: clean animals which they could eat, and unclean animals which they could neither eat, nor their carcasses touch. Then chapter 12 talks about how a woman who gives birth is ritually unclean for 33 days if she gives birth to a boy and 66 days for a girl. Then chapter 13 deals with skin rashes, and how the priests were to determine whether someone with such a disease was clean or unclean, and if unclean they had to live outside the camp. Then chapter 14 details how such a person could be declared clean and be readmitted to the camp. Then it details how the priests were to act like building inspectors when there was mold in a house, and how the unclean plaster should be scraped off and taken to an unclean area outside the city. Then chapter 15 deals with how bodily discharges, whether that is a woman having her monthly period, or a married couple having sex, can make someone unclean and how that uncleanness could be spread to household utensils, and to others who come into contact with you, and how everything gets contaminated by uncleanness.

And you read those chapters and you think, 'what is going on there? What is the Lord teaching through that?'

Well, the first thing you need to see is that these are ritual states, not moral states. The fact that someone was unclean, say with a skin rash, was not the same as saying they were sinful. And there was nothing sinful about giving birth to a baby, or having sex with your wife. The bible says these things are blessings. So whilst sin was and is rooted in moral wrong-doing, uncleanness for the Israelites was not.

Instead, what you had was three ritual states: something was either unclean, clean, or holy. And those states determined what someone might do and where he could go.

I mean, imagine a modern day parallel which I've nicked off one commentator. If you've got the flu, you can't go and visit your friend who's in hospital, can you. No one thinks bad of you, provided you don't go, it's just that you're unwell. That's like you're unclean. But you can go and visit if you're healthy, and that's like you're clean. But just because you're healthy, 'clean', doesn't mean you are any better morally than the 'unclean' person, the one with the 'flu. But just because you're healthy doesn't mean you can go into the operating theatre, does it. To do that you need to be healthy and sterile (and that's like you're holy). And so when it comes to people in ancient Israel, there were these gradations of unclean, clean and holy. And it was only the high priest who was especially holy who could enter God's throne room, the Most Holy Place. Everyone else was excluded from his presence.

But the key to it all was that the unclean and the holy must never mix or the Lord's judgment would fall.

Now why? What's the Lord doing here with all these ritual rules? Well, you could look at these practically. Some of the food laws would have offered some protection from parasitic infections. Others would have served public health and hygiene. The uncleanness of mothers after child-birth or women during menstruation would have meant that others would have had to come and help do the house work and look after the kids, and the husband would have had to do the cooking, just when she needed it most. And the rules on uncleanness after sex would have put the brakes on any urge to copy the pagan nations and feature sex in their worship, or allow prostitution to flourish.

But whilst all those are true, the Lord was doing something much more profound. You see these laws look back to what the Lord said to Aaron after the death of his two sons, after God had displayed himself holy in his power and his moral purity. Leviticus 10:10, 'You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.' Then in chapter 11, in the midst of all the stuff about unclean foods, the Lord says, 'You shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them. For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy... For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy. This is the law... to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean.' (11:43-47). And then in chapter 20, having told them that they must not live like the other nations, the Lord says, 'You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, ... You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.' (20:25-26).

So can you see what the Lord is doing? He's teaching them three things. Firstly, that every time they separate between clean and unclean food, every meal time, was to become a reminder of God's grace, that in his grace God had chosen them

and separated them from the nations. And it's because that is what these food laws taught, that when we get to the New testament, they're abolished, and abolished in the context of the Gentiles coming into the church, because now, in Christ, that dividing wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, of clean and unclean, has been destroyed, and now there is just one people of God, made clean in him.

But secondly, the laws taught them that just as clean was different from unclean, so they were to live different from the nations around. God had called them to be different, and they were to live as different.

But the third thing it taught them was the most profound of all. You see to live like this would have meant you were constantly having to sort things into categories, of unclean, clean and holy. It would be like you're constantly at the décheterie, always sorting: this goes in this category, this goes in this category. Constantly triaging. Uncleaness and cleanness and holiness would be constantly in your face. This honours God, this doesn't. I can't do this, because God is holy. I can't go there, because God is holy. I can't touch that, because God is holy. I can eat this, because my God is holy.

Now, can you see what these laws would do? Every meal, every day, every month; everything in your every day telling you: God is holy, God is holy, God is holy. But uncleaness is all around you, and yet you're called to be different.

And can you see how quickly this would become like a burden on your back, as it brought home to you just how separate from God you are, and how vulnerable your state before God is, and how the smallest thing can set you back? Can you begin to understand why the apostle Paul described asking new Gentile Christians to follow these laws as 'placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear' (Acts 15:10). Can you see how you'd long that God could make you clean, and more than that, make you holy, so that this fear of his holiness that you live under, and this separation from him, could be lifted?

The Holy One Who Lifts the Burden

This week I read an article by a second-year university student who woke up to realise that her frequent one night stands with men who would sleep with her, use her and then dump her, was trashing her life. And in her own words she described how she felt like a soiled, and then discarded, tissue. In Leviticus' words, she felt unclean.

And yet we all know the uncleaness she's talking about, don't we? Sure, your story may not be the same as hers, but you know that sense of unworthiness, of uncleaness, of having been left slimed by some sin you have sunk into. And we long to be washed clean. We long for what the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah to be true for us, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (Is 1:18). And we long for this separation between a holy God and an unclean and unholy us to be healed.

Well, enter Jesus, the one whom the apostle John said came to dwell among us, came to pitch his tent among us, whose glory we have seen. Not the glory of the cloud of fire but the glory of God's grace. The one before whom the demons called out, 'I know who you are, the holy one of God'. The one who Paul wrote has become for us the holiness of God. The one whose glory John tells us Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord high and lifted up and the angels crying out holy, holy, holy. The one whom the writer of Hebrews calls 'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1:3).

But what does Jesus do when he comes? Does he push the unclean away? No! The unclean woman who has been bleeding for years reaches out to him with faith and is healed and cleansed. Lepers come to him and with a word he cleanses them, 'Be clean.' Prostitutes, unclean women, who would have felt like soiled and discarded rags, he eats with and calls them to leave their life of sin and start over. Time and time again he bridged the gap between a holy God and an unclean people.

And then he taught us where the real uncleanness lies. The Pharisees, the experts on clean and unclean, criticised his disciples for not washing their hands before eating, and in response he said real uncleanness is not outside you, it's inside. You see the root problem of religion is that it tells you that the problem is outside you, and the answer is inside you, that you can fix the problem. But Jesus tells you, 'no, the problem is inside you, this uncleanness. And the answer is outside you, and it's me who can make you clean.'

You see, whereas Nadab and Abihu thought they could be their own lawmakers, and we so often think the same, Christ came and perfectly fulfilled God's law. And whilst fire came from the Lord's presence and consumed them, the voice of God came upon Jesus and said, 'this is my Son with whom I am well pleased.' And when we repent of our sins and put our trust in him and what he has done for us, and not in ourselves, then we are declared holy in him, because he is holy. And his Holy Spirit comes and lives inside us and starts transforming us into his image – the image of holiness.

And when you know that you are accepted by God because of Jesus, when you know the gap has been bridged, when you know that Jesus says to you 'be clean' and you are clean because of him, your response will be like the people of Israel's when the Lord accepted their sacrifice. They shouted for joy and bowed low in awe. Because deep joy and awe are always the response to God's grace and God's holiness.