

God Legislates?  
Leviticus 18:1–5; 20:22–26  
Sunday, October 3, 2021

Did you know that in Atlanta, Georgia, it is *against the law* to tie a giraffe to a telephone or light pole? (You probably shouldn't try to do that *anywhere*, but in Atlanta there was specifically a *law* about it.) In North Dakota, it is against the law to lie down and fall asleep with your shoes on. In Washington State, it is against the law to sleep in an outhouse without the owner's permission (I don't know *why* you would want to do that, but you *shouldn't*). In Kentucky it is against the law to carry an ice cream cone in your pocket (it has something to do with horse theft). In Poland it is against the law to wear a t-shirt with Winnie the Pooh on it (because Winnie the Pooh does not wear *pants*, and so it was deemed to be potentially harmful to children). In Arizona it is against the law for a donkey to sleep in a bathtub. In Vermont it is against the law for women to wear fake teeth without their husband's approval (they must actually get written permission from their husband). Back to Georgia, where it is technically against the law to eat fried chicken with a fork (a woman was actually arrested for it in 2009). In the state of California, if you have a frog, and that frog dies in a frog jumping contest, it is against the law to eat it. And in Alabama, it is against the law to wear a fake moustache that causes laughter in church (you can wear a fake moustache, and you can wear it to church, but nobody can *laugh* at it).

All of these are actual laws that, at one point in time, were passed, and in some cases are still on the books, even if they are mostly overlooked and ignored today. But there was a time when it was decided that there was a *need* for these specific laws, and they *made sense* to people.

It's kind of like some of the laws that we see in the book of Leviticus. Anyone here like shrimp? Lobster? Crab? According to Leviticus, it is against the law to eat *any* of those. Chapter 11

verse 9 says that you can only eat sea creatures that have fins or scales, so no shellfish. Anyone here wearing clothes made from a blend of materials, like polyester and cotton or linen and wool (a lot of pants today have a blend of cotton and spandex to give them some stretchiness)? According to Leviticus 19:19, it is against the law to wear a garment made of two different materials. It is also against the law to plant two kinds of seeds in your field, so if you have a garden at home with tomatoes *and* peppers growing in it, you're in trouble. It is against the law to let your animals breed with a different kind. I'm not sure if that applies to anyone who has a golden doodle or other mixed breed dog. Anyone here have bacon or some kind of pork for breakfast? Chapter 11, verse 7.

According to Leviticus 13, "If anyone loses the hair from his head, he is bald but he is clean. If he loses the hair from his forehead and temples, he has baldness of the forehead, but he is clean. But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased spot, it is a leprous disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. The priest shall examine him; if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles a leprous disease in the skin of the body, he is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head." Do me a favor, if you find a reddish-white diseased spot on your bald head, don't come show it to me. Go see a doctor.

These are all actual laws from the book of Leviticus. And this doesn't even begin to scratch the surface; there are 27 chapters of these. A lot of the Levitical laws I can't even read aloud here without offending your sensibilities or causing children to ask questions later; laws about bodily discharges and sexual activity. And then if you *do* violate any of these laws, there are even *more* laws about what you have to do to be considered clean again so that you can rejoin society and participate in religious rituals. We laugh about these today and mostly ignore them, but there

was a time when it was decided that there was a *need* for these specific laws; they addressed specific issues and *made sense* to people.

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Two weeks ago, we looked at the book of Genesis and talked about how God *creates*. Last week we looked at the book of Exodus and talked about how God *liberates*. This week we are looking at the book of Leviticus, not a book that we typically spend a lot of time with. And in getting a sense of what this book is about – the big picture – it would be really easy to talk about how God *legislates*. This is a book filled with laws that the people of Israel have to follow in order to participate in social and religious life. But this isn't just about *legislating*. God is not just enacting laws for the sake of enacting laws. There is something *deeper* going on here. Something that starts to make sense when we explore *when* this book was written and *why* it was written. I always say, "It's important to understand *what* the Bible says. But it is equally important to understand *why* the Bible says it."

We've talked about how Genesis and Exodus are thought by most biblical scholars to have been written between the years 700–500 BC, when the people of Israel had been invaded and conquered by Assyria and Babylon and forced to live in exile. So *during* that time of exile. Leviticus is actually thought to have been written *later* in that time period, being developed over the course of centuries before reaching its final form somewhere between 539–333 BC at the *end* of exile or the *post-exilic* period.

So the people of Israel have gone through this traumatic experience of exile, which many of them viewed as God's *punishment* upon them for not being faithful to God. And now at the *end* of that experience, they are reflecting on it and saying, "How can we prevent this from happening again?" And the obvious answer is, "By being faithful to God." Well, how do we do

*that?* There are a *lot* of ways, and Leviticus represents one *perspective*; one way of answering that question.

The primary focus of the book of Leviticus is *ritual purity*. What does it mean to be *clean* and *unclean*? Who is able to participate in the social and religious life of the community? If we are *clean*, how can we become *unclean*, and if we are *unclean*, how can we be made *clean*? At its core is this question of *who is acceptable to God* and *how can we change our standing to become acceptable to God*? So we get these laws about, “If you have sinned, here is how you make the appropriate sacrifice or offering to *atone* for your sin.” All these laws about grain offerings and burnt offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings, rituals that would have been performed in the context of religious life.

And then you get all these laws about *not mixing things* that seem so strange to us today. Do not mix anything with its blood. Don’t plant two different kinds of seeds together in the same field. Don’t wear a garment made of two different kinds of fabric. Don’t breed two different kinds of animals. Why is *that* so important? Well, they just had this experience of exile that was brought about by their involvement with foreign nations. And *during* that experience of living in foreign lands, some of the people of Israel adopted the cultural and religious practices of the nations where they lived. They were forced to go live in Babylon, and they started becoming *like* the Babylonians. So this is a way of saying, “*You* are not *them*. You are not *supposed* to be like them. You are not supposed to *mix* with them. You belong to *God*, and you are supposed to be *different* from them. You are supposed to stay *pure*. So *don’t mix things* that are supposed to be *separate*.”

We hear this sentiment expressed in the reading that Nancy read, “I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow *their* statutes...You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because *they* did all these things, I abhorred them. But...I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean and the unclean...You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.” It’s this notion that the way they avoid this happening again is by staying *separate*. By being *pure* and *holy*, set apart by God. That word *holy* is the Hebrew word *quadosh*, and it literally means *set apart* for a special purpose.

So it’s not *primarily* about how you can be made right with your neighbor (although there is definitely some of that in there), but the primary concern of Leviticus is about how you can be made right with *God*. “How can we keep God happy?” And that same question is still at work in so many people today. “What do I have to do to keep God happy, so that God will *bless* me and not *punish* me?” While the specific *laws* of Leviticus don’t always make much sense to us today, the deeper, underlying question of Leviticus is something that a lot of us are very familiar with.

The challenge that the people of Israel found – and that *we* run into when *we* live under this mindset – is that it is *never ending*. You make the appropriate sacrifice to please God, but then you just have to do it again the *next* year. Or maybe something happens in between – you could *accidentally* violate some of these laws without even *meaning* to – and you have to make *another* sacrifice. There is always one more sacrifice. It is never enough. You always have to *do more*

and *work harder* to please God. That's what happens when we live with the mindset that God *legislates*. You have to do more and more and more to make yourself holy.

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But like we said earlier, the primary focus of Leviticus is *not* that God *legislates*. That's the *surface* of what's going on here, but it's not the *core*. At the heart of Leviticus is that God *consecrates*. To *consecrate* is to *set apart* and *make something holy*. That's the purpose of these laws in Leviticus – to set apart a people and make them pure and holy. And the way that God does that for *us* is by entering into this system of endless sacrifice and *becoming* the sacrifice for our sin in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament book of Hebrews says that “Jesus appeared at the culmination of the ages to remove sin once and for all by the sacrifice of *himself*...The same sacrifices offered year after year cannot make perfect those who approach...These sacrifices are just a *reminder* of sin, year after year (it never fully goes away), for it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...It is by *God's will* that we have been *sanctified* (made holy and righteous) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. Priests stand day after day, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can *never take away sins*. But Jesus Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

In his death on a cross, Christ became the ultimate sacrifice – the sacrifice of *God's own self*. Jesus, who was *without* sin, bears the sin of the world on the cross, and while he's doing so, he says, “Father, *forgive* them.” And his last words on the cross were, “It is finished.” This whole system of sin and sacrifice and atonement that goes on year after year, over and over, forever, *it*

*is finished. God has made the sacrifice for our sin. In Jesus' body broken and blood shed, we are forgiven once and for all, forever.*

So we don't *need* to make *sacrifices* anymore. That's why we do not have an *altar*, we have a *table*. An altar is where you go to make sacrifices to appease God and atone for your sin. That is *done*. The ultimate sacrifice has been *made*. A *table* is where you share a *meal* with *family* and *friends*. And Jesus invites us to come to this table and share in this meal in which we are reminded of the sacrifice of his body and blood that was made for the forgiveness of *all* our sin.

You see, it's not that we have to *do* more and more to keep God happy and make ourselves holy. It is *God* who consecrates *us*. *God* sanctifies us and makes us holy through Jesus Christ. The only *law* that we are called to live by is Christ's command to love God and love our neighbor. And through this meal, at this table, God nurtures and strengthens us to *do* that, that *we* might be broken and poured out for the world, as Christ was for us.