

Grace Pastors' Fellowship

Preaching Leviticus

Presented by:
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The Book of Leviticus; where yearly Bible reading plans go to die! I have been asked to present a paper on “Preaching Leviticus.” I need to start by saying that I haven't actually preached through Leviticus. I have *taught* Leviticus with the aid of powerpoint, diagrams and graphs but I have not *preached* Leviticus.

I first found myself compelled to teach Leviticus in our Sunday evening studies when I came to the end of Exodus and realized that Exodus was actually a giant introduction to Leviticus. I couldn't stop. Exodus ends with a tension that must be resolved! Thankfully, I have found a way to end without continuing into Numbers! So, here I am like I am some sort of expert on Leviticus when the reality is, I stumbled into it and stumbled out of it.

Nevertheless, I will present this paper giving what I think is a way one could preach Leviticus. This is not to say this is *the only* way. I like to think of this paper as tracing the broad contours and themes of the book and offering some building blocks and suggestions one could use to open the book for our people. There are many places that it would be natural to run to Christ or tease out the fulfillment in greater detail but I will leave this to you. In some cases, I will hint at possible directions in the footnotes or parenthesis, but, for the most part, I will just focus on Leviticus.

This paper will be in two parts. 1. I will present some basic themes and concepts that I think are foundational to the book. 2. I will move through Leviticus looking at the book in light of these themes.

Part 1 “Themes & Concepts”

1. The Presence of God

Leviticus is really an answer for the dilemma that Israel finds themselves in at the end of the book of Exodus. Exodus 19:18 records “*Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.*” The presence of smoke, fire, lightning and elsewhere clouds ¹, signify the presence of God on the mountain. It is into this presence that Moses went for 40 days and 40 nights. (Exodus 24:15ff) ² In the course of giving His Law to Moses, God gives instructions for a “tent” where God,

¹ See Exodus 20:18; 24:17; 40:34-35

² Already we see a tripart division later reflected in the Tabernacle. (Ex 24) The congregation is to remain at the foot of the mountain, the elders are to remain at a distance. Only Moses is allowed into the presence of God. (Ex 24:2)

who came down on Mount Sinai, would dwell in the midst of His people! (Ex 25:8; 29:45-46) The experience of Sinai is to be perpetuated in the worship of this “tent”.³

But disaster strikes! Exodus 32 records the “golden calf” incident and God determines that He will not go with these “stiff-necked people” (Ex 33:3-6) because He is sure to destroy them on the way. This is a “disastrous word” (ESV) because the very essence of the covenant was that God would dwell in the midst of them. (Ex 29:4,46) This means there is no Tabernacle, no special status. This is not a setback, this is the end of the road!

It is here that Moses intercedes for Israel (Exodus 33) and God is gracious and agrees to dwell among His people. (I know we are passing over some good stuff). In the following chapters we must notice two things 1. Israel’s generosity in giving towards the tabernacle (Exodus 36:3ff); after the “disastrous word” they were elated at the prospect of God dwelling in their midst that they gladly gave to supply the materials for the Tabernacle. 2. Their obedience; this is stressed over and over in the repetition of the phrase “*as the Lord commanded.*”⁴

This is why it is so shocking when Exodus 40:34 records “*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*”

What are we to think of this? Moses, who went up into the cloud and spoke with God “face to face” is not permitted into the sanctuary? What about all their obedience? Is there no way into God’s presence?

A clue to the way forward has already been given within the structure of Exodus. Missing from the detailed obedience mentioned above is the ordination of the priests. While it was commanded in Exodus 29, the actual ordination of the priests is detailed for us in Leviticus 8.

The point is this: Leviticus answers the question “How can a holy God dwell in the midst of a sinful people?” The answer is “Not by their flawed obedience, but only through the mediation of a priest and the sacrifices.” This is also seen visually in the arrangement of the camp. (Numbers 1:53) The Levites form a buffer between God and the congregation. The presence of God is dangerous and can only be approached as God has prescribed. (Exodus 19:22-24) This is seen over and over in Leviticus. The presence of God presents a dangerous reality - They [we] are unclean and He is Holy, Holy, Holy!

³ Michael Morales traces out the theological themes of God’s presence from Eden and shows rather convincingly that this Tabernacle is “Eden restored” in some sense. See: Morales (P 95)

⁴ Exodus 38:22,39:1;39:5-6,21,26,29,31;40:16,21,23,25,27,29,32

2. The Holiness of God

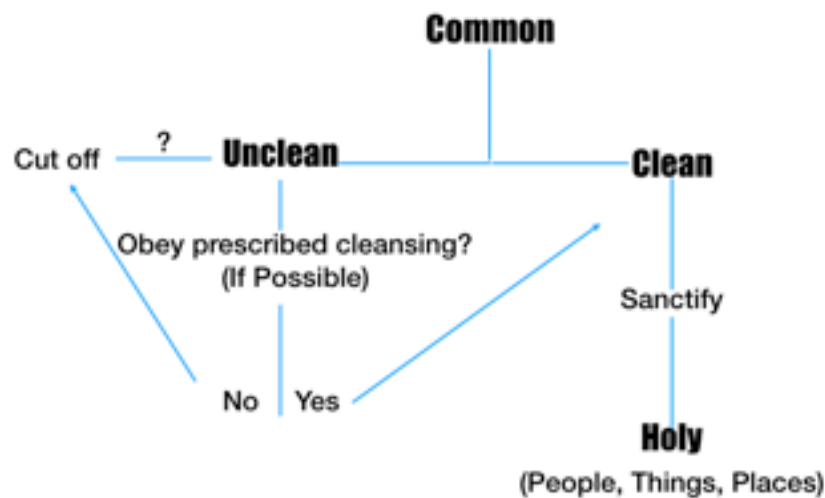
With God in their midst, Israel has a serious problem. God is Holy and they are not. This concept rests lightly on modern man and here lies one of the great benefits of preaching Leviticus.

However, we must understand how Leviticus thinks of “Holiness.” In Leviticus, holiness is “wholeness” or “normality.” This is why, for instance, mixed crops, mixed clothing and mixed mating are incompatible with Holiness. (Lev 19:19) God is the very source of life, wholeness and order, therefore no death, shadow of death, brokenness or disorder can enter into His presence. This is why God tells Aaron that none of his descendants who have a “defect” can offer sacrifices. (Lev 21:16-23) It is not that it is sinful to have a “clubbed foot” but the Holy Spirit was teaching that we are flawed people unworthy to be in God’s presence. To stand in the presence of God demands absolute perfection. Subsumed under this theme of Holiness is the elaborate Purity Laws.

A. Purity Laws- Clean/Unclean:

Leviticus 11-15 is focused on clean & unclean animals (Chap 11), cleansing after childbirth (Chap 12), skin and house defilements (Chap 13-14) and bodily discharges (Chap 15), followed by the Day of Atonement (Chap 16).

It is important to recognize that being “unclean” was not the same as being “sinful”. It could lead to sin if the proper boundaries were not respected while in the state of uncleanness, but it was not sinful for an Israelite to be “unclean.” It simply meant that that person must not come in contact with the Holy.⁵ From this diagram below, we can see the various stages that a person could be in.



⁵ How wonderful is it to see our Saviour touch the leper in Matt 8:1-5 or read of the woman with the issue of blood healed Matt 9:20ff!

One foreign concept that may need to be explained is that *things* can be said to need “atonement.” (Lev 16:16ff) That is, they are defiled by the uncleanness that Israel brought into God’s house. In this way, people, things and places could become defiled. (I.e. Lev 18:25)

It was absolutely vital that the “Holy” and the “Unclean” never come in contact with each other. To do so would be instant death to the worshipper. This whole system is predicated on the fact that the God who rested on Sinai (Exodus 19) has come to dwell in their midst. ““ ‘You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.’ ”” (Leviticus 15:31)

How many people today think it would be great to be in the presence of God with no thought of their sin! (cf: Isaiah 6:1-5)

B. The Logic of the Purity Laws:

It is possible to just accept Lev 11-15 on face value but there may be some benefit in digging in and trying to understand the logic of the purity laws.

It has been noted that all of the things that make unclean have some connection to death or loss of life. ⁶ The loss of semen or blood are the loss of the “forces of life” (Lev 15), to go near a dead body makes one unclean (Lev 21:11), to have a defiling skin disease is to have the shadow of death upon you. (Lev 14) These things not only defiled the Israelites and made them unfit for the presence of God, it defiled YHWY’s house and necessitated a yearly purge.

A personal example may be helpful. As a boy, I had a friend we will call Tom. Tom’s father got a deal on a piece of property and built a house on a concrete pad. Shortly after, he discovered that a family of skunks had moved in under the concrete pad. I remember sleeping over and waking up thinking there was a gas leak! Poor Tom, we always knew when he got to school. Everywhere he went, we smelled skunk. Tom could not go down a hall without leaving a trace. When Tom arrived, you knew it. Tom “defiled” our school!

This is the idea of ritual defilement which was common in the ANE, but it was always the underworld (demons) that had brought the defilement ⁷.

However, Lev 11-15 taught Israel that *they* defiled YHWY’s house. They could not blame the demons or the goat gods like the surrounding nations did. They knew that it was *themselves* that needed purification. This is why this section is placed right before

⁶ Milgrom, J. (1988). Rationale for Cultic Law: The Case of Impurity. *Semeia*, 45. (p103)

⁷ Hallo, W. W., & Younger, K. L. (1997–). *The context of Scripture*. (p. 171) Leiden; New York: Brill.

the Day of Atonement. (Lev 16) On the day of Atonement it was not only the sins of the people being atoned for, but YHWY's house was being purified as we will see. (See Lev 16:16-20.) Like Tom "defiled" our school, Israel defiled YHWY's house by spreading the stench of death.

The purity laws of Lev 11-15 contain some content that may be awkward in covering in detail.⁸ However, taking the big picture approach and using it as an introduction to the Day of Atonement can be a fruitful approach.

In these seemingly obscure laws God was teaching our need for purification. We are sinful people who cannot stand in the presence of a Holy God. A sacrifice is needed. Purification must be accomplished.

C. The Logic of the Food Laws:

In Leviticus 11, God details what are clean and unclean foods for His people. Many have tried to discern some logic to these laws. Suggestions range from them being based on Canaanite practices to health-based reasons. An oft-cited book "Purity and Danger" by Mary Douglas offers some insight into the matter. In this book commenting on the Levitical purity laws she points out a common denominator: "*Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong.*"⁹ This would fit well with the rest of the book of Leviticus and it seems to be what is behind the food laws.

The animal kingdom is divided up into 3 realms, Land, (Lev 11:2) Water (Lev 11:9) and Air (Lev 11:13). Each have a particular mode of transportation suited to it's classification. Animals that move in an orderly fashion according to it's class are "clean". Animals that do not are considered "unclean". Conformity to it's class seems to be the concern. Again we see a concern for order and wholeness.

The animal world mirrors the world in which Israel found herself. Just as Israel was chosen out of the nations and the rest are "unclean", only some animals were chosen for Israel's diet, the rest are "unclean". Just as an even fewer were chosen to approach God as priests, even a fewer animals were offered to God in sacrifice. Just as there was clean and unclean in the realm of man, there was the same among the animal kingdom.

However we discern the logic behind these food laws, these laws visually demonstrated Israel's uniqueness from the nations. (See Acts 10ff.) Through these laws, Israel conformed to the class in which they belonged - a holy people! Again we see a concern for order and normality.

⁸ If you want a guide for this type of exposition, see Allen P Ross.

⁹ Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (p 54). London: Routledge.

It is debatable how much of this is suitable for a sermon, but it may be helpful in seeing how to get from Leviticus 11 to 1 Peter 1:13ff. While these laws are not binding under the New Covenant, we still should conform to the class to which we belong- a Holy people!

In the second section of this paper I will offer a few apologetic reasons for dealing with the food laws in some measure of detail.

These building blocks: 1. The presence of God in the Tabernacle. 2. The Holiness of God and what this means in Leviticus. 3. And the Purity Laws form a backbone to the book which, I think, if we can fix in our people's minds may help open up the book to them.

Part 2 “Preaching Leviticus”

One question that must be answered as we approach this section is, how fast do you want to go through the book? Too fast and people may not settle into the book with you. Too slow and they miss the whole thing!

For this paper I will divide the preaching section into 5 sections. Each section could provide multiple sermons or as few as one.

1. **The Sacrifices.** (Chap 1-7)

In these chapters God details the sacrifices (Lev 1-6:7) and how the priests are to do their job. (Lev 6:8- chap 7) It is important to stress that, in one sense, the Israelites are not giving sacrifices to God but God has provided these sacrifices to them. Leviticus 17:11 *“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.”* This is how God will dwell in their midst, through these sacrifices and the ministry of the priests. This is the answer to the problem of Exodus 40:34ff.

The Burnt Offering: (Lev 1) This was the most common sacrifice being offered morning and evening by the priests, but also by individual worshippers as the occasion required. This sacrifice was intensely personal. The worshipper would place their hands on the head of the animal, confessing their sin, signifying transfer of guilt or substitution.

Leviticus 1:4 says “*You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.*”

The worshipper would be tasked with the actual slaughter of the animal (Vs 5) while the priest caught the blood.

If the sacrifice was birds, then the priests would wring off the head and drain the blood (Lev 1:14ff), but the messiest work was for the worshipper. This was not a passive experience. It was a vivid reminder of the cost of their sin. The Israelite would know: this animal was dying on my behalf because of my sin.

It may be helpful to explore the effect of this “Burnt Offering” throughout scripture. ¹⁰ I believe you will see that this offering propitiated the wrath of God. Although man was unchanged in his sinfulness, God’s attitude toward man changed because of this burnt offering. A possible theological point to stress is “penal substitution” which, in my view, is seen clearly in this sacrifice. A transfer of guilt is made to a substitute whose death satisfies the wrath of God and makes fellowship with a Holy God possible. (Cf: Hebrews 10:11-14; Mark 10:45; Eph 5:2).

The Grain Offering: (Lev 2) This sacrifice was normally presented after the “Burnt offering.” In addition to providing for the priests (Lev 2:3), it was a rededication of sorts. Only the finest flour was to be used, this was the worshipper offering himself to God afresh. Sin spoils our relationship with God. This sacrifice reminds us that we must constantly be rededicating our lives to the Lord.

It may be fruitful to investigate how this offering is echoed in Paul’s admonition in Romans 12:1, “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*” In the New Covenant we no longer offer the finest flour to God, but in light of the sacrifice of Christ, we offer ourselves.

The Fellowship/Peace Offering: (Lev 3) This sacrifice was offered as an expression of thankfulness (Lev 7:12) or a vow or freewill offering (Lev 7:16). It is different in that it is a festive meal that was eaten by the worshipper in or near the sanctuary. Not much is made of this meal in Leviticus but it may indicate that the experience of Exodus 24 where the elders of Israel saw God and ate in His presence (Exodus 24:11) is now possible for every Israelite who comes to God through these sacrifices. A possible area to explore is the fellowship and peace we have with God through Jesus Christ even as we sit at the Lord’s Supper.

The Purification/Sin Offering: (Lev 4) Many translations call this a “sin offering” but a closer look will justify calling this a “purification offering.”

In Part 1 we saw how Israel learned that they defiled God’s house with their uncleanness & sin; sin not only angers God but it defiles. Like Tom “defiled” my school

¹⁰ See Genesis 8:21, Numbers 15:24, 2 Sam 24:25,

with the smell of skunk, sin defiled God's dwellingplace in their midst. This is what is in focus in Lev 4 with this sacrifice.

The chapter deals with unnamed sins committed by various people all demanding various levels of purification depending upon their position in Israel. A regular member of the community (Lev 4:27ff) would have to bring a female goat and only the outside altar would need to be purified. However, an "anointed priest" (Lev 4:3ff) who sinned would bring that defilement right up to the curtain of the Most Holy Place!¹¹ He would have to bring a costly bull! (Vs 3) The cost of the sacrifice and the place of the sprinkling point to various levels of defilement.

The point of this sacrifice is that it demonstrated that sin not only incurs the wrath of God (dealt with by the burnt offering) but it defiles and creates a need for purification through this sacrifice and sprinkling of blood.

Leviticus places this defilement in the place of worship but in the New Covenant it is the worshipper that needs to be purified from the defiling nature of sin. While sacrifice is no longer needed, (Hebrews 10:19-22) confession is still required. (1 John 1:9)

Another area to explore is the responsibility of leaders and the effects their sins have on the church. This chapter seems to indicate that sins by the leaders of God's people bring greater damage. Sadly, we can all think of examples where this has proven true. Leadership among God's people brings grave responsibility. (cf: James 3:1) This is displayed in great detail in the matter of Nadab and Abihu. (Lev 10)

Reparation/Guilt Offering: (Lev 5:14-6:7)

The last (blood) sacrifice presents a commercial picture of sin. The Burnt Offering satisfies the wrath of God. The Purification Offering removed the defilement. The "Reparation Offering" demonstrates the cost of sin. One thing that should be noted is that this offering stressed a payment of the "proper value." (Lev 5:15,18; 6:6) Another thing that should be stressed is the value would be according to a "sanctuary shekel" (Vs 15). An Israelite could not use his or her own measurements to determine when a matter was made right. God would set the value and price. (Exodus 30:13)

The setting is that of a person inadvertently sinning against the Lord in regard to the Lord's Holy things. (Lev 5:15) This could be a withholding of a tithe or even, inadvertently, taking a holy thing. Not only was a sacrifice to be made, but a 1/5th penalty was to be added. The point is that sin incurs debt and demands satisfaction.¹²

¹¹ Even this sacred space would need purification on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:16)

¹² Isaiah 53:10 says that Christ's death was a "offering" the same word used in this sacrifice (Lev 5:18ff). Christ's death provided satisfaction, a price was paid.

This extended to wrongs done against people. (Lev 6:1-7) It is very interesting that if this guilt involved taking from another person that God demanded this to be made right first. Restitution preceded sacrifice. (cf:Matt 5:23-24) One could not worship God properly if not right with his brother. The idea was that sin against God and man had to be made right. A price needed to be paid.

Summing up:

This is one of the richest sections in the book. Whether one covers it with one sermon on “Sin & it’s Effects” or slowly moves through each sacrifice highlighting the various nuances of sin and God’s provision in Christ will depend on your situation.

I think that we can agree that the idea of “sin” rests lightly on God’s people today. This section can be of great value highlighting sin’s destructive effects and Christ’s magnificent work.¹³

2. The Ordination & Ministry of the Priests (Chap 8-10)

This section could be covered in one sermon. The ordination of the priests (chap 8) and the beginning of their ministry (chap 9) all lead to the disaster of Nadab & Abihu. (chap 10)

What should be noted is the repetition of the phrase “*as the Lord commanded Moses.*”

¹⁴

This is Israel approaching God as He has directed: through sacrifice and by the ministry of the priests. This obedience is met with (Leviticus 9:23–24) “*Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.*”

This is a joyous occasion. In some ways it relieves the tension from Exodus 40:34-35 where Moses could not enter the tent. God has provided a way into His presence.

Through the sacrifices and the ministry of the priest, He dwells with His people! The people shout for joy!

However, this joy is short lived. Lev 10 records that Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, offer “unauthorized fire” before the Lord. Fire instantly roars from the presence of the Lord and consumes them! Two charred smoking corpses lie in the Most Holy Place!

The parallels must be noted here. The same fire that consumed the sacrifice on the altar (9:24) also consumed Nadab and Abihu (10:2). To come into the presence of God apart from the right sacrifice is deadly!!! Fire [judgement] must fall either on a sacrifice or the sinner! (Romans 3:25-26)

¹³ Chap 1 “Sin brings the wrath of God” Chap 2 “Sin makes us ineffective. Chap 3 Sin ruins fellowship with God. Chap 4 “Sin defiles” Chap 5-6 “Sin incurs a debt” Each one is answered by Christ!

¹⁴ Lev 8:9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 31; 9:7, 11.

There are many curiosities in this passage. What was the “unauthorized fire”? Were they drunk? Why is Moses satisfied with Aaron’s explanation for allowing the whole goat offering to be burnt up? Isn’t this also a deviation from God’s command? (Vs 16-20) ¹⁵

An interesting problem often overlooked is the fact that two charred smoking bodies are smouldering in the Most Holy Place! Talk about uncleanness! A problem of utmost importance seen in that Moses got them out of there as quickly as possible!

Summing up:

There are many themes to focus in on in this section. 1. The need for a perfect priest & sacrifice in light of Nadab & Abihu’s failure. 2. God’s dedication to uphold His honour (10:3). 3. God’s holiness and justice in bringing judgement (Nadab & Abihu) and showing mercy (Aaron).

In these chapters we are reminded that God is not our buddy or the “big guy upstairs.” He is the Holy One and to enter into His presence apart from His Son, Jesus Christ, will bring His wrath down upon us. (cf:Lev 17:11/Rom 3:25)

3. The Purity Laws (Lev 11-15)

God taking up residence in the midst of His people presents some unique challenges. Namely, that Israel is unclean and contaminates God’s dwelling place. Here I will refer you back to “Part 1, Themes & Concepts” for a suggested rationale behind these chapters.

Let me offer 2 possible reasons to preach these chapters:

1. Many of these laws form the background for N.T. events. Purification after childbirth (Lev 12) is what brings Joseph, Mary & Jesus to the temple. (Luke 2:22ff)
Regulations about skin diseases (Lev 13-14) are what is behind Matt 8:1-4 where Jesus heals a leper and sends him to see a priest. Regulations regarding discharges (Lev 15) is what makes the healing of the women with the issue of blood so amazing. (Matt 9:20ff)
A vital area to explore is how Jesus is not defiled by coming in contact with these defiling conditions. In fact, just the opposite occurs. They become clean! What kind of amazing authority and power is this that can say to a leper “Be clean” and the leper is clean! (Matt 8:1-4)
While some of these chapters may be obscure to some, they offer a wonderful opportunity to highlight the glory of Christ.

¹⁵ It appears to me that Aaron was so fearful of eating the goat that he could not bring himself to eat it. This suggests that God is more gracious to people who make mistakes out of fear rather than reckless disobedience like Nadab & Abihu.

2. Another reason to spend some time in these chapters, possibly with the food laws, is for apologetic reasons. In the last few years several books have been written¹⁶ by authors who have seized on some of these laws and tried to live them out (while publishing a book about it, of course!). They conclude that Christianity is a sham and that Christians basically just pick and choose what laws we want to obey. Really? Is this true? I have seen through the years how young people are particularly susceptible to these types of mischaracterizations. It is important that we deal with these laws in context and show the fulfillment in Christ.

Summing Up:

The 4 chapters are important because they set up the Day of Atonement (Chap 16). Why is atonement & purification needed? Because uncleanness is pressing in on YHWY's house. Even with all the sacrifices, it is certain that someone will mess up. If God is to dwell in the midst of these people, then something must be done. The "Day of Atonement" is the answer.

It can be invaluable for our people to see how these laws ultimately point forward to Christ who alone can cleanse us from our uncleanness and present us spotless before His presence with great joy. (Jude 24-25)

4. The Day of Atonement (Chap 16)

The fact that God's house is surrounded by unclean people (chap 11-15) necessitates a yearly purge. In the "Purification offering" (Lev 4), there were various levels of purification. A regular member of the congregation's sin would defile the outer altar (Lev 4:30), but if an anointed priest sinned, that defilement would be carried right up to the inner curtain (Lev 4:6). There were various levels of defilement and purification required based on the position the person occupied.

On the Day of Atonement the people of Israel would know that their defilement had reached into the "Most Holy Place!" (Lev 16:16ff) Just as Tom "defiled" our school with skunk, Israel had defiled God's house even in the Most Holy place!

Aside from explaining the day, there are several things that you may want to stress in this passage. 1. There is the need for the High Priest to offer a bull (Vs 11ff) for himself even before he represents the people. Aaron and those who followed him as High Priests were sinners themselves. 2. There is the concept of uncleanness that is so central to Leviticus being cleansed by blood (Vs 16ff), an often overlooked part of the ceremony where the Most Holy Place needed atonement because of the impurity

¹⁶"The Year of Living Biblically" by A.J. Jacobs or "A year of Biblical Womanhood" by Rachel Held Evans.

See Jacob's TED talk on "My Year of Living Biblically"
https://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically?language=en#t-509439

creeping in on God's house. 3. There is the beautiful picture of the scapegoat ¹⁷ carrying the sins of the people off into the wilderness after the other goat has died as a substitute ¹⁸ (Vs 20ff). 4. It is interesting to note that only the High Priest could be in the tent during this time (Vs 17). There is one mediator both in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (1 Tim 2:5). 5. The word "atonement" itself and what it means is a rich study. 6. You may want to stress that this day was a day to "deny yourself" ¹⁹ (I.e. Repentance) (Vs 30). This was not a day when the High Priest did all the work. Israel was to mourn their sin on this day.

The Day of Atonement is a rich, rich topic from which we can highlight and contrast the work of our Saviour.

Summing up:

The thing that stands out the most to me about the "Day of Atonement" is that after all the sacrifices, the High Priest bathes ²⁰ and puts on his regular garments and goes out to offer the evening sacrifice! (Vs 23-25) The man who led the goat into the wilderness must bathe or he will bring impurity back into the camp! (Vs 26ff) The hide, flesh and intestines of the bull and goat need to be burnt outside the camp but the lucky man who has this job must also bathe or he too will bring impurity back into the camp! (Vs 28ff) Can this go on forever?

Paul in Romans 3:23 says God presented Christ as a ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion), the same word is used in Lev 16:2-15 (LXX) to describe the "atonement cover" (NIV) or "mercy seat" (ESV). The point is, just as God set the mercy seat/atonement cover as the place where He would deal with Israel's sins, now, in the New Covenant, God has set forth Christ as the person from whom we can secure *real* and *final* atonement.

It is here that we can rejoice in Jesus Christ of whom the author of Hebrews writes "*Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*" (Hebrews 7:27) How beautiful are these words "once for all!" The Day of Atonement, while no doubt moving, must have been deeply disappointing.

¹⁷ Be aware that the ESV and the NLT (unhelpfully in my view) translate this as "Azazel." For a discussion on this see Wenham (p 233)

¹⁸ A possible area to explore is how the goat which is killed propitiated God's wrath and the goat that is sent away expiates their sins. Two sides to the same sacrifice.

¹⁹ Possibly reflected in the simple garments the High priest wore this day. (See Lev 16:4 and compare to Exodus 39:27-29)

²⁰ This is the only place where a High Priest is to bathe after a sacrifice. It suggests that the High Priest by entering into the Most Holy Place carried out some level of holiness that could not be brought out of the Tabernacle. This would explain the bathing and the leaving the garments in the Tabernacle. God is Holy beyond our imagination! Flee to Christ!

When it was all done, the priest still had to go offer the Burnt Offering. Thank God for His provision in Jesus Christ!

5. Rest in God's Presence. (Lev 17-27)

After we leave the Day of Atonement we find ourselves somewhat at a loss. Up to this point, the steady movement of the text was to find the resolution that we see in the sacrifices and ultimately in the Day of Atonement. How will God dwell in the midst of these people? The answer is through the constant sacrifices and ministry of the High Priest.

But as we survey chapters 17-27 we are met with a bewildering array of commands (Chap 17-20), rules for priests (Chap 21-22), feasts (Chap 23-25), covenant stipulations and warnings (Chap 26-27). Where do we go from here?

One common method is to stress Holiness. Israel was saved out of Egypt to be a Holy people. God expresses this Himself *"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'."* (Leviticus 19:2).

A careful reader of Leviticus will note the repetition of the phrase *"I am the Lord your God"* often stated after a command as the reason why Israel should obey. For instance God says *"Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God."* (Leviticus 19:10)

This phrase *"I am the Lord your God"* goes back to Exodus 6:6-7 when God said to Israel, yet in bondage *"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.'"*

This phrase then functioned as a reminder of their deliverance from bondage and as the reason they should obey God. They were saved out of Egypt to be a Holy people!

But Holiness is not an end in itself. I want to suggest that Israel was to be Holy *so as to rest in God's presence*. When we place Leviticus in the Biblical storyline we see a progression from the Eden lost (Genesis 3) to Eden regained (Revelation 22), the ultimate rest in God's presence. Within Leviticus this rest is pictured in the festivals (Lev 23) and the Sabbath (Lev 25) and contingent upon the covenant stipulations (Chap 26).

Here we come to a thorny problem. How much of the Mosaic Law is binding on believers today? Going through Leviticus has convinced me that it is just not possible to divide the Law up into a neat tripartite scheme. It is my belief that it stands as a whole and was given to Israel at a particular time in redemptive history. Within the broad storyline of the Bible mentioned above, it has been superseded by Christ and the New Covenant.

The fact is, the rest that is pictured in Leviticus 17-27 was not achieved by Israel but is accomplished by Christ! (Hebrews 3) Just as we cannot look at the “Day of Atonement” or the “Ordination of the Priests” without seeing Christ, we cannot look at this rest Israel longed for and not see it fulfilled in Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of the entire book of Leviticus (indeed the whole Old Covenant).

This is not to say these chapters are useless. We, in the New Covenant, have an even greater salvation than deliverance from Egypt. We have been delivered from sin’s bondage by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the goal remains the same: (1 Peter 1:15–16) *“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.’”* The N.T. is full of examples of the holiness we are to have as God’s people but, even better, we see our Lord walking among us as the perfect example of holiness.

Any preaching of Leviticus today must aim for holiness but also must take into account the progression of redemptive history from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ. (See: Hebrews 7-8.) It would be a mistake to think that Leviticus alone could teach holiness to our people.

Only through experiencing the atonement that Christ brings and the power of the Spirit can we make any headway in holiness.

In light of this, I cannot see preaching holiness from this section without constantly dipping into Paul’s rich teaching on the Cross, Regeneration, Justification, Sanctification, the role of the Spirit and many others. The Old Covenant truly pales in comparison to the New Covenant. (2 Cor 3:7-11)

Paul says it best in Rom 8:1-4 *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”*

So the question remains: How could one preach this last section, which I submit to you has a theme of “Resting in God’s Presence” in light of the New Covenant? One option is to stop after the Day of Atonement and go to Hebrews to trace out the fulfillment. However this might give the impression that these remaining chapters are insignificant.

Another option is to trace out broad themes and look at them in light of the New Covenant: “The Danger of Idolatry” (Lev 17), “Sexual Sins” (Lev 18 & 20), “Loving God & our Neighbour (Lev 19 ²¹), “The Rest that God Gives” (Lev 23-25).

Another option is to address the broad theological themes of the Bible from Eden to the New Jerusalem showing where these chapters fit into God’s story.

Summing up:

This last section is, in my view, the most challenging to preach. If and when you preach through this section, I am sure you will agree that Christ as the sanctifier of His people must be at the forefront. When I taught through Leviticus, I summed it up in one session on Leviticus 19 focussing on Holiness & Rest and then went to Hebrews.

Conclusion:

Teaching Leviticus and now preparing this paper has been a blessed experience to me personally. Several things stand out to me:

1. The Holiness of God: We often say God is Holy, but when you begin to wrestle with the regulations and stipulations that He laid down for Israel you begin to get a sense of how foreign God’s holiness is to your own mind. Here is one of the great benefits of Leviticus for today. God is Holier than any of us have ever imagined. *“Praise the Lord, my soul. Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.”* (Psalm 104:1)
2. The incredible privilege we have as New Covenant believers to *“....approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* (Hebrews 4:16) Translation: Walk into the “Most Holy Place” whenever you need help. Your Father sits on a throne of grace! (cf:Lev 10)
Astonishing! We have privileges that no Israelite could ever dream of having! To call God “Father”, to have the Spirit, to know that Christ’s single sacrifice is sufficient is enough to make us praise God all our days.
3. The Magnificence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: All of our salvation is wrapped up in the reality that Jesus is both our perfect sacrifice and perfect High

²¹ Notice how the Decalogue is intertwined with this passage. This is part of what leads me to believe it is impossible to separate the Decalogue from the covenant God made with Israel.

Priest. *“Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.”* (Hebrews 7:26–28)

“to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”
(Jude 25)

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