

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON SIX: PRACTICES FOR HOLY LIVING

Opening prayer

Lord, may we be neither foolish nor prudish, neither uptight nor promiscuous, neither Biblically literalist nor Biblically illiterate. We thank you for inviting us into this community of grace and welcome. We have done nothing to deserve the invitation, but in gratitude we offer you our lives. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

Leviticus is an ancient “law” code. Some parts of it are horrible; but it replaces laws and practices even more horrible. Some parts of it are remarkably progressive, even by today’s standards. *Leviticus* is **not** a reliable moral guide for today. If people say, “the Bible says...,” remind them that only specific works within the Bible say things. *Leviticus* says some startling things.

Dabble in *Leviticus*.

Focus texts: Leviticus 11:1-8; Leviticus 19:26-37; Matthew 5:17-22;
Matthew 17:1-9; Romans 7:4-6; Galatians 5:2-6

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A few years ago TV personality, “Dr. Laura”, quoted *Leviticus* (the third book in the Pentateuch) to condemn homosexuality. An Episcopal priest from British Columbia lampooned her by addressing this tongue-in-cheek letter to her:

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Leviticus 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

Leviticus 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

Leviticus 20:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

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Christian fundamentalists insist that *Leviticus* must be taken literally today. But they do not take it literally themselves. They cherry pick a few select passages to bolster their personal prejudices – especially their prejudice against gay or lesbian people. “The Bible says...,” they intone, and then they quote *Leviticus* to “prove” that God hates homosexuality. The people who quote *Leviticus* to show that God condemns homosexuality seldom quote *Leviticus 19:34* which calls for treating illegal aliens the same as citizens.

The Hebrew portion of our Bible names thirty-six misdeeds that should be punished with death. These include using magic and striking a parent. (The *Koran* lists just two misdeeds meriting capital punishment: “spreading mischief” and murder.)

Beware of anyone who categorically claims that, “The Bible says...” because the Bible says nothing. *Leviticus* says things. *Genesis* says things. *Matthew* says

things. If someone claims, “The Bible is the Word of God,” remind them that ***Jesus is the Word of God***. We view everything – including the Bible - in the light of Jesus. Many passages in the Bible shrivel into ash when viewed in the light of Jesus.

Although *Leviticus* appears as a separate document in the Pentateuch, it is actually the continuation of a priestly tradition that extends from the second half of *Exodus* through the first ten chapters of *Numbers*. If we add up all of *Leviticus*, half of *Exodus*, much of *Numbers*, plus a summary in *Deuteronomy* it constitutes almost half of the Pentateuch!

In early rabbinic tradition *Leviticus* was known as “the Priests’ Manual.” It falls into six parts:

- Laws dealing with sacrifices
- The consecration of the priests so they can approach *YHWH*
- Laws distinguishing between “clean” and “unclean”
- The ceremony for the annual day of atonement
- Laws to govern Israel as a holy people
- A summary of religious vows.

At its best *Leviticus* prescribes how people should live their lives while a holy and terrifying God dwells in their midst; how to avoid things that anger *YHWH* and contaminate their health. They need good health because they have been set apart for divine service.

At the very least they should wash their hands. And watch their tongues. And corral their children. And honor the Sabbath. And separate themselves from unclean foods and unclean practices and unclean people. And . . . and . . . and . . .

Over the course of generations the rituals and practices and prohibitions proliferated. *Leviticus* reflects a desperate attempt by the Israelites to make themselves holy enough to provide hospitality for the Holiest One of all – *YHWH*, the God of all Creation.

At its worst *Leviticus* falls far short of the regal simplicity of the Ten Commandments and the gentle graciousness of Jesus’ beatitudes and parables.

Nevertheless *Leviticus* was progressive for its time.

If any who are dependent on you
become so impoverished that they sell



themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers.
{ *Leviticus 25:40a* }

Poor people sold themselves as slaves. *Leviticus* suggests a more enlightened way: better to be a hired laborer than to be a slave. For the time of *Leviticus* that was relatively enlightened.



They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free of your authority; they shall go back to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. { *Leviticus 25:40-42* }

Every 50 years came the Year of Jubilee. Debts were forgiven. Mortgages were cancelled! Everybody returned to ancestral lands and started over again. The rich gave up their gains and the poor had their debts forgiven. (“*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*” Jesus put that in the Lord’s prayer for a reason. It was meant to be taken literally. That part of the Lord’s Prayer comes from *Leviticus*.) This was a radical and repeated redistribution of wealth.

We gasp with horror at people selling their daughters into slavery. That is because we have never been so hungry we could see no alternative to selling one of our own children – in order to feed the rest. The Hebrew fathers did not want to sell their daughters! Neither do fathers in the Philippines, fathers in Laos and fathers in Thailand want to sell their daughters! But they do. There is a market for young Asian girls because there are American men who fly on special tours to Laos, the Philippines and Thailand to “enjoy” the sexual favors of young girls. In parts of our world today poverty is so grinding that fathers sell a child so their other children can eat.

Rather than mocking the outrageous prescriptions of *Leviticus*, we should let these ancient laws remind us that poverty, slavery, hunger, human trafficking, and economic injustice are still prevalent today. Much remains to be done about poverty, sex trafficking and malnutrition today. The people of the Pentateuch

were, after all, our ancestors. *Leviticus* is part of our Christian family tree. Give them credit: they were trying to do the right thing.

Leviticus is an ancient code of behavior that evolved more than 3000 years ago. It contains what is known as the *Levitical Holiness Code*: rules for cleanliness and hygiene, foods that can be eaten and foods that are forbidden, taboos and expectations, concerns about nudity, rules for the treatment of animals and neighbors and children and old people, rules for honoring the Sabbath, prayers for certain times of day, prayers for certain moments in life, a schedule for ritual festivals to remind people of *YHWH*'s presence, how to bake bread for the sanctuary, a guide for sexual practices, when to offer certain sacrifices and much much more.

When our mothers told us to wash our hands before eating it reflected our knowledge about germs. *Leviticus* stresses washing our hands before eating, but for a different reason. Washing before meals was a ritual act, cleansing oneself to receive a gift from the Holy One. It was like saying grace.

To understand *Leviticus* it is important to get "inside" the mind and experience of a small tribe of nomads, living in a vast desert. They were trying to be different from all the tribes and villagers around them, in service to a God who was unseen by the other tribes and villagers. The Levitical Holiness Code outlined radical behaviors that set the Hebrews apart from others so dramatically it drew attention to the holiness of *YHWH* – the sheer utter fearful perfect holiness of this God who lived beyond all gods.

Like the Amish in Pennsylvania, the Holiness Code set the Jews apart from their neighbors in a very conspicuous way. It was radical stuff 3000 years ago.

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

{ *Leviticus 24:27-20* }

This was a major step forward in civilized behavior! The tribal law of the desert required tribal retribution. If you knock out my tooth (thereby insulting my 'honor'), tribal law required that I go and get my brothers and my cousins and my uncles and we will **all** come beat you to a pulp, break your legs and rape your wife. Injury to an individual led to retribution by tribe against tribe. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" – **no more than that** – was moral progress, much better than beating up a whole family or tribe for the transgression of a single individual.

Jesus was familiar with *Leviticus*. He espoused a better way.

*We must shine the Light of
Jesus on Leviticus."*

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."
{ *Matthew 5:38-42* }

We must shine the light of Jesus on *Leviticus*. The Levitical Holiness Code took an ancient tribal people to a higher ethical plane than the older tribal codes. Jesus asks us to rise to a higher plane yet and it is hard to claim that we have reached the plane of Jesus' ethics.

The Jews marked the passage of time by celebrating various festivals. Each of the festivals drew their attention to *YHWH*. We could set ourselves apart by adjusting the rhythm of our lives to the seasons of Advent, Christ-Mass, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Creation. Instead we allow the clock to rule our lives, and the months on our calendars are named for Roman gods (Janus, Mars...).

Too many Christian sermons contrast Christianity as a religion of grace with Judaism as a religion of the "Law." But rabbis insist that the Law is God's gift. It brings joy and grace. People do get hung up on the literalism of the Law, both Jews and Christians. Some of us probably come from the "Bible Belt," where we

were taught to be ashamed of our bodies, where dancing and card playing were strictly forbidden.

When I was a boy my father and I would toss a baseball around on Sunday afternoons. It was one of the few things we did together, father and son. But when my father's elderly cousin Gladys visited, we left the baseball in the closet. There were no games on Sunday when cousin Gladys visited.

Cultural norms have changed dramatically over our lifetimes. We live in a culture that is saturated in self-satisfaction, self-development, self-expression, personal freedom and individuality. When dictionaries added a new word for 2014 the word was "selfie" – a photo one takes of one's self, holding the telephone/camera at arm's length and aiming it at one's self. *Leviticus* would not approve. *Leviticus* aimed to focus people's attention on *YHWH* and on the Covenant.

Ultimately *Leviticus* is about community. It is about becoming a people "set apart" from society's norms. The mega-story starts with Abraham and Sarah, continues when Joseph rescues his family from famine, continues when Moses leads the Israelites through desert wilderness carrying the Ark of the Covenant. The story becomes "daily" in a nation dedicated to holy living.

Jesus could see that the Law had become an end in itself. The rituals were empty instead of liberating. The Pharisees had become self-righteous. The "rules" for holy living became a barrier to hospitality. The early Church struggled to correct this tendency. Baptism was the only "membership" ritual in the early Church and the Lord's Supper was the only consistent practice.

You who want to be justified by the law
have cut yourselves off from Christ; you
have fallen away from grace. For
through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly
wait for the hope of righteousness. For
in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor
uncircum-cision counts for anything;
the only thing that counts is faith
working through love. { *Galatians 5:4-6*
}

“The only thing that counts is faith working through love.” By the grace of God we are invited into the community of Baptism. By the grace of God we are invited to the Table that Christ sets with the bread of life and the cup of salvation (from *salve* – which is Latin for “healing”). We don’t have to be holy to sit at Christ’s Table. We don’t earn our way into the community of God’s people. We are invited. Come as you are! *The only thing that counts is faith working through love.*

In gratitude , we might consider a new and revised book of *Leviticus*, designed for the 21st century, designed for Federated Church, designed to make us a “priestly people.” It might include guidelines for practicing simplicity and for practicing forgiveness, celebrations for honoring the earth and its trees and seas, disciplines for discovering the joys of generosity, for leaving a modest carbon footprint, for welcoming aliens and refugees, and for bequeathing a fertile, welcoming, gracious future for our grandchildren.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

What does holiness mean?

What does Federated Church need to do to become counter-cultural?

Should we take the Lord’s Prayer literally: *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*?

What does Jesus mean when he says “I have come to fulfill the Law”?

How can we counteract the culture of the “selfie” without becoming self-righteous ourselves?

Begin a list of practices for holy living in the 21st century in El Dorado County.

What should be included in a “new” *Leviticus*?

