***The Value of Leviticus for Followers of Jesus***

Very early on the church decided that only a few of the specific laws of Leviticus and the Old Testament generally would be binding on Christians (see the fascinating process of this decision in **Acts 15:1-35**). Nevertheless, Leviticus contains important perspectives and teachings that remain relevant for disciples today. Here are a few:

1. ***Leviticus teaches us that worship is* for God**. While this might seem obvious many Christians and churches are vulnerable to arranging worship for other priorities. The perspective in the third book of the Bible, that worship is ***for God***, can be transforming for us western, individualism, consumer-culture, post-modern democracy types. You’ve got to love the Book of Leviticus. It’s so completely non-western. Leviticus could care less if God’s people have their needs met by worship. The decorum, the procedures, the personnel, the clothing, the materials, the fact that the whole worship center is an elaborate mobile shrine; worship is micro-managed, time-consuming, expensive, and thoroughly inconvenient. How refreshing! How cleansing for people in a culture who consider individuals to be the centers of their own universe! Worship is not about us! Leviticus shows us a God who is not motivated by practicality or relevance; who is not anxious to provide worshipers with a meaningful experience. In Leviticus the centerpiece of worship is ***offerings***, that is, not what people come to ***get*** but what they come to ***give***.Leviticus gives us the gift of a wonderful challenge: The best spiritual thing we can do for ourselves is ***getting beyond ourselves***.
2. ***Leviticus interweaves*** ***the importance of worship with*** ***the importance of ethics***. These are the two pillars of Israel’s faith. Interspersed with laws about repairing the relationship with God through offerings, we have laws that concentrate on person-to-person relationships. For example, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (**Lev 19:18**) and “You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants [in the year of Jubilee]” (**Lev 25:10**). Leviticus upholds both “vertical” (with God) and “horizontal” (with others) relationships. God is concerned about the composition of incense offered on the altar ***and*** God is concerned about a just economic system. Both the prophets and Jesus subordinate the importance of the sacrificial system to the practice of justice (see his two quotes of **Hosea 6:6** in **Matt 9:13, 12:7**). Jesus also maintains the balance of the Book of Leviticus between love of God and love of neighbor (see his explication of the two great commandments as well as his sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, **Luke 4:16-30**).

We live in a society where many Christians consider faith to be a private matter; religion is a separate part of life not thoroughly integrated with all other aspects of life. Church is a discrete activity that we ***go to***, like many other activities, rather than something we ***are*** 24/7. This is a symptom of the fragmentation of life that we experience in our world.

Leviticus teaches us the same perspective that Jesus had, namely, that the life of faith is an integrated whole; that relationship with God and relationship with others are inseparable. Consider, for example, **Leviticus 5:1** (and verses 5-13): Whoever has knowledge about a crime and doesn’t speak up about it, that is, doesn’t bring their perspective to the authorities so that the crime can be addressed, that neglect is a ***sin***; it is an offense ***against God***. It is an offense ***against God*** when people become so private that they won’t participate in making their neighborhoods safer. Now in such a case when a person doesn’t speak up and offends God, the ***sin*** can be forgiven; the person simply brings the necessary offering and the priest makes atonement. Once again, worship and ethics are a seamless garment.

God wants his people to be active participants in healthy community, people who create and maintain a just social system. And to fail to take that responsibility is not merely bad citizenship but a ***sin against God***.

Like Jesus, Leviticus is critical of any expression of faith in which love of God becomes divorced from love of neighbor.

1. ***The Book of Leviticus makes known the procedures for the priests to all the people*** (**Lev 1:1-2a**). Although much of the activity described by Leviticus is to be carried out by the clergy alone, Leviticus is not written as a priest’s manual only; it is no in-group Scripture. ***All*** the people know ***all*** of God’s instructions. This resonates with the Anabaptist understanding of faith where all disciples read and seek to understand the Scriptures and participate fully in the life of the community.
2. ***The Book of Leviticus takes holiness seriously***. We keep in mind that the root meaning of holiness is “specialized’ or “set apart.” Leviticus encourages us to consider, “What does it mean for followers of Jesus to live lives that are distinct and specialized for mission and set apart unto God? What does a holy use of our time, talents, and energy look like on a day to day basis?”
3. ***The Book of Leviticus takes sin and forgiveness seriously***. **Leviticus 16** describes the procedure of the once-a-year Day of Atonement. This is a nation-wide day of dealing with sin. From the perspective of Leviticus, no amount of human diligence can ever account for all sin, that is, all disruption in the human relationship with God. There will always be sins that people don’t repair, resist repairing or aren’t even aware that they committed. But those are still offenses against God and can affect not only individuals but the community as a whole. What can be done? The Day of Atonement is the answer. On that one day a year the unaccounted-for and even on-purpose sins of everyone in the nation are symbolically placed on the head of a goat, the “scapegoat.” That goat is then set loose in a remote place and carries away the sins of the people into the wilderness. **Leviticus 16:34** summarizes: “This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for ***all*** their sins.” Leviticus, then, has an understanding of sin that is similar to that of Jesus and Paul, namely, that sin is part of the human condition; it is more than just each offense or even the sum of offenses. And God responds to the comprehensive nature of sin in a way that is equally comprehensive. Because of God’s grace, the LORD provides forgiveness not only for individual offenses but for the totality of sin.
4. ***Leviticus deals with sin tangibly.*** The church did not need to continue the sacrificial system of the Old Testament because Jesus Christ is the all-sufficient atoning sacrifice. However, the sacrificial system as described in Leviticus contains an enduring element of emotional wisdom, namely, that concrete actions in worship help people experience forgiveness more fully. Leviticus encourages us to use tangible actions in worship to help followers of Jesus experience his forgiveness more fully. Examples include communion, anointing, footwashing, writing down sins on paper and pinning them to a cross or running them through a shredder. What creative ideas can you imagine for making the experience of forgiveness more tangible?

1. ***Leviticus envisions a people who strive in every aspect of their lives to be pleasing to God***. So Leviticus addresses things like personal hygiene, diet, and appropriate sexual boundaries. Paul talks about honoring our bodies as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (**1 Cor 3:16; 6:19**). Leviticus is already moving in that direction. The third book of the Bible encourages us to consider questions like, “What might be an approach to eating which is pleasing to the Lord? What are some appropriate boundaries to sexual behavior for followers of Jesus? How do we work at sustainable farming practices in our day (see e.g. the land observing a Sabbath year in **Lev 25:1-7**)?” **Luke-Acts** also commends faith as a holistic lifestyle; in particular, disciples are people who have a transformed relationship with possessions. As Anabaptists we resonate with the perspective of Leviticus, that life is an integrated whole. This is an important antidote to the often fragmented and compartmentalized view of life that is prevalent in post-modern society.
2. ***Leviticus reveals a God who is ready to forgive***. Several words for sin appear in the first six chapters of Leviticus. However, the phrase “You shall be forgiven,” is equally prominent. Because God is holy, God can be offended. Yet ultimately God is pre-disposed to forgive us. Life with God is not a debit-credit system (see e.g. **Psalm 86:5**). In his book *The Divine Conspiracy* theologian Dallas Willard cautions churches who construct life around “sin management” because God is far too eager to forgive to allow sin to so control our lives. In **Leviticus 26**, for example, God already foresees repeated disobedience on the part of Israel. And yet if they confess their iniquity, God says I will not spurn them or abhor them but I will remember my covenant.

1. ***Leviticus is used by Jesus in his teaching on the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-34//Matt 22:34-40//Luke 10:25-28)***. Jesus uses an open and expansive understanding of “neighbor” which he exhibits in his story of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**). In this teaching Jesus is building on an expansive understanding of neighbor already begun in **Leviticus 19** (see **Lev 19:18, 34**). Jesus is not introducing a new teaching but rather taking an existing commandment to the utmost limit. According to Scot McKnight in his book *The Jesus Creed* loving God and loving neighbor is the core of Jesus’ teaching which he develops from **Leviticus 19** and **Deuteronomy 6**.