

The Most Important Thing in the World

We will stand and sing hymn 325," announced the worship leader, " 'Take Time to Be Holy.' We will sing verses one and four."

If I had been sitting with the congregation instead of on the platform, I might have laughed out loud. Imagine a Christian congregation singing "Take Time to Be Holy" *and not even taking time to sing the entire song!* If we can't take the time (less than four minutes) to sing a song about holiness, we're not likely to take time to devote ourselves to "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Happiness, not holiness, is the chief pursuit of most people today, including many professed Christians. They want Jesus to solve their problems and carry their burdens, but they don't want Him to control their lives and change their character. It doesn't disturb them that eight times in the Bible, God said to His people, "Be holy, for I am holy,"¹ *and He means it.*

"He that sees the beauty of holiness, or true moral good," wrote Jonathan Edwards, "sees the greatest and most important thing in the world."

Have you ever thought of personal holiness—likeness to Jesus Christ—as *the most important thing in the world?*

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In God's kingdom, holiness isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Yes, God wants His children to be happy, but true happiness begins with holiness. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). "If I had my choice of all the blessings I can conceive of," said Charles Spurgeon, "I would choose perfect conformity to the Lord Jesus, or, in one word, holiness." Would you make the same choice?

Leviticus tells new Testament Christians how to appreciate holiness and appropriate it into their everyday lives. The word *holy* is used 91 times in Leviticus, and words connected with *cleansing* are used 71 times. References to *uncleanness* number 128. There's no question what this book is all about.

"But wasn't the Book of Leviticus written for the priests and Levites in ancient Israel?" you may ask; and the answer is, "Yes." But the lessons in Leviticus aren't limited to the Jews in ancient Israel. The spiritual principles in this book apply to Christians in the church today. The key verses of Leviticus — "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45) — are applied to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 1:15-16; and the Book of Leviticus itself is quoted or referred to over 100 times in the New Testament. Since *all Scripture* was given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16), then *all Scripture* is profitable for God's people to use in developing godly lives. Jesus said that we should live by *every* word that God has given us (Matt. 4:4), and that includes Leviticus.

The Book of Leviticus explains five basic themes that relate to the life of holiness: a holy God; a holy priesthood; a holy people; a holy land; and a holy Savior.

1. A holy God

What is "holiness"? Contrary to what you may hear today in some sermons and popular religious songs, the emphasis in

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the Bible is on the *holiness of God* and not on the love of God. "Love is central in God," wrote American theologian Augustus H. Strong, "but holiness is central in love."² God's love is a *holy* love, for the Bible states that "God is light" (1 John 1:5) as well as "God is love" (4:8, 16). Love without holiness would be a monstrous thing that could destroy God's perfect law, while holiness without love would leave no hope for the lost sinner. Both are perfectly balanced in the divine nature and works of God.

God's holiness isn't simply the absence of defilement, a negative thing. The holiness of God is positive and active. It's God's perfect nature at work in accomplishing God's perfect will.

The Hebrew word for "holy" that Moses used in Leviticus means "that which is set apart and marked off, that which is different." The Sabbath was holy because God set it apart for His people (Ex. 16:23). The priests were holy because they were set apart to minister to the Lord (Lev. 21:7-8). Their garments were holy and could not be duplicated for common use (Ex. 28:2). The tithe that the people brought was holy (Lev. 27:30). Anything that God said was holy had to be treated differently from the common things of life in the Hebrew camp. In fact, the camp of Israel was holy, because the Lord dwelt there with His people (Deut. 23:14).

Our English word "holy" comes from the Old English word *halig* which means "to be whole, to be healthy." What health is to the body, holiness is to the inner person. The related word "sanctify" comes from the Latin *sanctus* which means "consecrated, sacred, blameless." We use the word "sanctification" to describe the process of growing to become more like Christ, and "holy" to describe the result of that process.³

How does God reveal His holiness? The religion of the nations in Canaan was notoriously immoral and involved worshipping idols and consorting with temple prostitutes, both

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male and female. (The mythological deities of Greece and Rome weren't much better.) For this reason, God commanded His people to stay away from their altars and shrines and to refuse to learn their ways (Ex. 23:20-33; Deut. 7:1-11). In many ways, God made it clear to His people that He was a *holy* God.

To begin with, He gave them *a holy law* that contained both promises and penalties, of which the Ten Commandments are the essence (Ex. 20:1-17). God's statutes and ordinances governed the daily life of the people and told them what was right and wrong, what was clean and unclean, and what the penalties were for those who deliberately disobeyed.

At Sinai, God revealed His *holy presence*. "And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off" (20:18; see 19:14-25). He also revealed His holy power and presence when He judged the gods of Egypt (12:12), when He opened the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army (14:13-15:21), and when He did miraculous works for Israel in the wilderness.

God is "glorious in holiness" (15:11), and His glory dwelt in the holy of holies in both the tabernacle (40:34-38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10). The presence of the cloud of glory and the pillar of fire reminded Israel that Jehovah was a holy God and "a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). In fact, the very structure of the tabernacle declared the holiness of God: the fence around the tent, the brazen altar where the blood was shed, the laver where the priests washed their hands and feet, and the veil that kept everybody but the high priest out of the holy of holies.

The whole sacrificial system declared to Israel that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4, NKJV). God hates sin, but because He loves sinners and wants to forgive them, He provides a sub-

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stitute to die in the sinner's place. All of this is a picture of the promised Savior who laid down His life for the sins of the world.

You could never call any of the heathen deities "holy." But "Holy One of Israel" is one of the repeated names of Jehovah in Scripture. It's used thirty times in Isaiah alone.

In declaration and demonstration, Jehovah made it clear to the people of Israel that He is a holy God, righteous in all His works and just in all His judgments.

2. A holy priesthood

The Jewish priesthood belonged only to the tribe of Levi. Levi, the founder of the tribe, was the third son of Jacob and Leah (Gen. 29:34; 35:23) and the father of Gershom, Kohath, and Merari (46:11). Since Kohath's son Amram was the father of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam (Num. 26:58-59), Aaron, Moses, and Miriam belonged to the tribe of Levi.

Aaron was the first high priest and his male descendants became priests, with the firstborn son in each generation inheriting the high priesthood. (Every priest was a Levite, but not every Levite was a priest.) The rest of the men in the tribe of Levi (the "Levites") were assigned to serve as assistants to the priests. The Levites were the substitutes for the firstborn males in Israel, all of whom had to be dedicated to the Lord (Ex. 13:1-16; Num. 3:12-13, 44-51). To facilitate their ministry, David eventually divided the thousands of Levites into twenty-four "courses" (1 Chron. 23:6).

The name "Leviticus" comes from "Levi" and means "pertaining to the Levites." Actually, the Levites are mentioned in only one verse in this book (Lev. 25:32); the regulations in Leviticus pertain primarily to the priests. Of course, as assistants to the priests, the Levites would have to know what the Lord wanted done in the ministry of His house.

God insisted that the priests be holy men, set apart for His

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service alone. Not only must they come from the tribe of Levi, but also they must not have any physical defects or many women whom God disapproved (chaps. 21-22). They were set apart in an elaborate ceremony that involved their being bathed in water and marked by oil and blood (chap. 8). The high priest was anointed with special oil. The priests wore special garments, and special laws that didn't apply to the common people governed their lives. In every way, the priests demonstrated the fact that they were set apart and therefore holy to the Lord.

The Levites were in charge of the sanctuary, and during the wilderness years of Israel's wanderings they carried the tent and its furnishings from place to place (Num. 1:47-54). They were also responsible to guard God's sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), to teach the people the Law (Deut. 33:8-11; Neh. 8:7-9), and to lead the worshipers in praising God (1 Chron. 28:28-32).

Only a holy priesthood could approach God's altar and be acceptable to serve God. If the priests weren't dressed properly (Ex. 28:39-43), if they didn't wash properly (30:20-21), or if they tried to serve while unclean (Lev. 22:9), they were in danger of death. If the Levites were careless with the tabernacle furnishings, they too might die (Num. 4:15, 20). The high priest wore a golden plate at the front of his turban on which was the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36); and he dared not do anything that would violate that inscription. He could be serving in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and still be in danger of death (Lev. 16:3).

Every true believer in Jesus Christ is a priest of God, with the privilege of offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5, 9). In the Old Testament, God's people *had* a priesthood; but in the New Testament, God's people *are* a priesthood (Rev. 1:6). Through faith in Christ, we've been washed (1 Cor. 6:9-11), clothed in His righteousness

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(2 Cor. 5:21), anointed by the Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27) and given access into His presence (Heb. 10:19-20).

3. A holy people

God's purpose for Israel was that the nation be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6, NKJV). Everything in the life of the Old Testament Jew was either "holy" (set apart for God's exclusive use) or "common," and the "common" things were either "clean" (the people could use them) or "unclean" (it was forbidden to use them). The Jews had to be careful to avoid what was unclean; otherwise, they would find themselves "cut off from the people" until they had gone through the proper ceremony to be made clean again.

The laws governing marriage, birth, diets, personal cleanliness, the quarantine of diseased persons, and the burial of the dead, while they certainly involved hygienic benefits to the nation, were all reminders that God's people couldn't live any way they pleased. Because they were God's chosen people, the Jews had to learn to put a difference "between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean" (Lev. 10:10). They must not live like the godless nations around them.

When you read Leviticus 11-17, you will see how the Jewish people were distinguished by their diet, their treatment of newborn babies (and the mothers) and of dead bodies, and their handling of people with diseases and sores. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (chap. 16), the nation was reminded that Jehovah was a holy God and that the shed blood was the only way of cleansing the people.

God's church is supposed to be "a holy nation" in this present evil world, to "declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9, NIV). The Greek word translated "declare" means "to tell out, to advertise." The holy nation of Israel in Canaan, with its holy priesthood, revealed to the pagan nations around

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them the glories and excellencies of Jehovah, the true and living God. The church in today's world has the same privilege and responsibility. When Israel started to live like the pagans, they robbed God of His glory; and the Lord had to chasten them.

4. A holy land

The people belonged to the Lord, because He had redeemed them from Egypt to be His very own; and the land belonged to the Lord, and He gave it to Israel with the stipulation that they do nothing to defile it. A holy God wants His holy people to live in a holy land.

In Leviticus 18-27, the word "land" is used sixty-eight times. In these chapters, Moses named the sins that defile the land and invite divine judgment: immorality (chap. 18); idolatry (chap. 19); capital crimes (chap. 20); blasphemy (chap. 23); and refusing to give the land its rest (chap. 25). Unfortunately, the Jewish people committed all these sins and more; and God had to chasten them by allowing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive (2 Chron. 36:14-21).

The nations of the world today don't have the same covenant relationship to God that Israel has, but they are still responsible to obey His moral law and use His gifts wisely (Amos 1-2). I can't speak about other nations, but I believe my own beloved land is guilty of abusing God's gifts and refusing to obey God's laws, and is therefore ripe for judgment. The very sins that God condemns—murder, deceit, immorality, violence, greed, and blasphemy—are the very things that entertain the masses, whether it's on television or in movies or books. Take the violence and vice out of entertainment and many people won't pay to see it.

God even gave His people an annual calendar to follow to help them appreciate His gifts and use them for His glory

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(chaps. 23, 25). Until after the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews were primarily an agricultural people; and the calendar of feasts was tied directly to the annual harvests. The Sabbatical Years and the Year of Jubilee not only helped conserve the land, they also helped regulate the economy of the nation. The ungodly nations could just look at the land of Israel and see that Jehovah was blessing His people and caring for them!

5. A holy Savior

To study the Bible and not see Jesus Christ is to miss the major theme of the book (Luke 24:47). The law was "a shadow of good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). Especially in the levitical sacrifices and the priestly ministry do we see the person and work of Jesus Christ vividly portrayed.

No amount of good works or religious efforts can make a sinner holy. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse us from our sins (1 John 1:7), and only the risen glorified Savior can intercede for us at the throne of God as our Advocate (2:1) and high priest (Heb. 8:1; Rom. 8:34). What the Old Testament Jews saw only in shadows, believers today see in the bright light of Jesus Christ.

Just as the nation of Israel had to beware of that which was unclean and defiling, so must believers today "cleanse [themselves] from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). God wants us to be a "holy priesthood" and a "holy nation" so that we will advertise His virtues and glorify His name (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

On Sunday morning, January 24, 1861, Charles Haddon Spurgeon closed his sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle with these words:

An unholy Church! It is of no use to the world, and of no esteem among men. Oh, it is an abomination, hell's

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laughter, heaven's abhorrence. And the larger the Church, the more influential, the worst nuisance does it become, when it becomes dead and unholy. The worst evils which have ever come upon the world, have been brought upon her by an unholy Church.

Eight times in His Word, the Lord says, "Be holy, for I am holy!" Are we listening?