

Be Holy

SCOTT HOEZEE

Parents try to have a positive influence in shaping the behavior of their children. Along the way, all of us who raise children give advice that is often much easier said than done. Be nice, we say. Be kind to everyone, we say. Don't hit someone back, we advise. But of course, it is not always easy to be nice, to be kind, to resist hitting back. But of all the things along these lines that are easier said than done, how is this doozy 00:33 that we hear from God repeatedly in the book of Leviticus? Be holy; be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Now, that is not easy to do! Well, let's think about this today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program number two in a fairly short, four-part series on the third book of the Bible, Leviticus. We want to talk about holiness.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is probably *the* theme of the whole book of Leviticus. We hear it repeatedly expressed this way. Here are a few verses from Leviticus Chapter 11: ⁴⁴I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. ⁴⁵I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy because I am holy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is Leviticus 11. This will get repeated smack in the middle of the book in Chapter 19, again in Chapter 20: Be holy, for I am holy. A really good commentary on the book of Leviticus was written by Gordon Wenham, and he says this: *Be holy, for I am holy* is the motto, really, of the whole book; but to put it mildly, Dave, it is a tall order. We are supposed to be like God?! We should notice, too, Dave, this is not God saying: *Act* like me, right? This is not God saying: Well, you know, try to do some nice and holy things in imitation of me; things you might see me doing. No, this is God saying: Don't act like me, *be* me...

DAVE BAST

Yes!

SCOTT HOEZEE

The actions will follow, but you have to *be* holy.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, he grounds the command, be holy, in the reality of his own being: Because I am holy. He also introduces it repeatedly by saying: I am the Lord your God. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, and I did it for a purpose; not just so you could wander off into the desert, but so that you could belong to me...so that you could be like me. So, yes, it is a staggering kind of command when you think about it. It makes me think actually of Jesus' word from the Sermon on the Mount, where he says: You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect; and I want to say the same thing: What? How is that possible? How in the world are we ever going to be holy in this way?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And on our own...and we will think about this before this program is concluded...in the ultimate arc of the Bible, well, we know we cannot do this without grace...without extra help; but it is what God wanted Israel to do, and probably what he still wants us to do now for sure, as well, in Christ; but what is behind this? Well again, we remember the first program, Dave. The premise is that God is living with them. The thing about God's dwelling in the midst of Israel is that God's holiness was under constant threat by their *unholiness*. God's reputation was at stake; and a holy God couldn't hang out with an unholy people for long before his own reputation went into the gutter; and so, it is a precarious situation...this "be holy for I am holy"...God's living presence in Israel depended on this because God couldn't afford to be associated with bad people.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is another implication here for Israel that is really quite different from the way we tend to look at the world; but this was an absolute thing for them; this was a sort of all or nothing. Everything was involved in this command to be holy. They didn't have a distinction between the sacred and the secular the way we do. Somehow, part of modern life is to see things in this way as the sacred is this little area over here that we reserve for God and it has to do with church and whatnot...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But everything else is just out there in the world and we can kind of live in it and with it; but for Israel in the book of Leviticus, everything...everyday action...what they ate, what they wore, how they lived, brushing their teeth, you know, going to bed at night, getting up in the morning...it was all thought of in terms of holiness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And within that...so, there was really no sacred/secular divide, Dave. Everything was lived before the presence of God. So, this had something to do with everything, as you said. Even so, life is complicated, and so Israel did need to look at everything...and we mean everything...as either holy or common; and common things, furthermore, could be either clean or unclean. Common things that were clean could also become holy eventually, right, if you sanctified them to the Lord; but this is sort of the structure of the world that Leviticus wanted to impose on them. There is holiness at the pinnacle, and that is God perfectly, and then that is our goal; and underneath that are all these common things of life that are either clean or unclean...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the point of all that is, Dave, holiness was always under threat. There was always the possibility of holiness being polluted by something unclean; and there were a lot of ways by which you could make yourself unclean. You could eat the wrong kind of food; you could touch a dead body; sometimes our own bodily functions could make us unclean...or touching blood or drinking blood. So, the point is, holiness was always a little bit threatened.

DAVE BAST

Yes; of course, part of the command to be holy is preceded by the word *consecrate* yourself; and actually, we can kind of hear the same root...if we think of a synonym for holy: sacred...consecrate...it is the same word at its root; and so, part of being holy means you are sort of set apart; you are different; you are distinct; you belong to God. In fact, that is the basic understanding of holiness: Something that God has taken to himself or set apart for himself...for his exclusive possession...like the people of Israel. That is what made them holy, but then they had to kind of live into that; and as you say, a lot of stuff out there could threaten

that—that status. So, they had to be very careful in terms of their day-to-day life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if you are listening to all of this, and if it sounds to you as though this focus on holiness was a constant, daily, hour by hour reality, then you are getting it right. That is exactly what it was supposed to be for Israel. As you said earlier, Dave, cooking, sewing, raising your children...blowing your nose...how you planted your crops, how you harvested your crops, being married, conducting business...all of it had something to do with God...all of it was either holy or it wasn't; and when you really broke the rules, holiness was under threat; and as we said, ultimately that could threaten the very presence of God among his people.

DAVE BAST

Right; this may be a little bit general...what we have said so far. We will look at the specifics and some of the more obviously puzzling verses of Leviticus...dive into the specifics of holiness and clean and unclean...we will do that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program in a four-part series on the book of Leviticus, thinking, Dave, in this program about the holiness code, as it is sometimes called...all the laws and rules pertaining to how Israel could try to be holy as God is holy, which as we said, is the motto of the book; and the very presence of God in Israel depended on this. No holiness, no presence of God, that was the deal.

DAVE BAST

Right; it got very, very complicated; and again, this is part of the struggle, I think, we have with trying to read through Leviticus or grasp it all or understand it, because some of the laws seem to us to make perfect sense...I mean: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. You cannot do better than that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is the highest moral maxim of human history, and it is in the holiness code of Leviticus; and as we will see in the last program of this series, the way to treat strangers, the fairness principle comes through in Leviticus; but other things just strike us as being odd even to the point of bizarre. We are not going to be able explain everything, but let's listen to a representative passage, where God addresses this. So, we read in Leviticus Chapter 11 at the end of the chapter: ⁴⁶These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves about in the water, and every creature that moves along the ground. ⁴⁷You must distinguish between the clean and the unclean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, the food laws are one of the best known parts of Leviticus, probably, and is one thing that was directly repealed in the New Testament, which is maybe one of the reasons even Christians today are little more aware of what it means to eat kosher, as it is called; but if you drill down into this stuff, Dave, it is kind of interesting. This whole holiness code seems to have something to do with completeness—with wholeness—with something or another of the integrity with which God made the creation. A lot of what Leviticus concerns itself with is avoiding what in Hebrew is called *tebel* which means mixture or confusion; and again, some of this seems odd to us, but here is kind of how that went: Things that seem mixed up, even in the animal world, were things that were considered unclean. So, the Israelites could eat any bird that flew, but a bird that only walked, like an ostrich, they couldn't eat. Birds are supposed to fly; that bird doesn't fly,

you cannot eat it. They could any fish that would swim through the sea with fins and scales, but guess what? A lobster walks through the sea. Sea creatures are supposed to swim. A lobster walks, you cannot eat it. These are examples of *tebel*—of confusion—and if those seem sort of trivial, they ultimately add up to something bigger, to shoot for shalom...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some sense of wholeness and completeness in the world God made.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so this mixture principle, or maybe we should call it the anti-mixture principle, extended beyond things involving food and clean and unclean animals. So, you get this kind of set of commands from Leviticus 19:19: Keep my decrees (says the Lord). Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Again, it just seems odd to us, right? Really? A farmer cannot plant one side of his field with corn and the other side with soybeans? He has to make it all one or all the other? You cannot wear a suit made out of a mixture of different materials...cotton and linen or wool and cotton? It just seems so odd to us, but if you remember the principle of *tebel* or completeness or no mixing up, then you see how it could apply to clean and unclean.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it mounts up to bigger things. So, ostriches and lobsters as an example of confusion seems odd, but it is sort of like baby steps. God is teaching them to think along these lines so they can think about this in terms of other things. It is also in Leviticus confusion for a man to sleep with his own wife's sister, or with your mother-in-law. These things, too, are confusion. And then there are other principles that this builds up to which nurtures this sense of completeness and shalom.

So, consider these verses from Leviticus, where God says:

19:14 Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord. 15 Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. 16 Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord. 32 Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord. 35 Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights...I am the Lord.

So, here, Dave, are examples of some things that are cruel, like cursing a deaf person who cannot hear you, or purposely tripping a blind person who cannot see it; but also things that are dishonest and things that are disrespectful to older members of society. All of these things are things to avoid, not just because they are *tebel* and confusion, but because they rip at shalom...they tear the fabric of life apart.

DAVE BAST

Right; and notice how often God comes back again and again and again with the refrain: I am the Lord. This is intensely personal to God. His people and their behavior reflects back on him and his character. We said that earlier. A holy God simply cannot stand to be with unholy people, and in the next program we will talk about how that is dealt with by means of sacrifice, because without that, forget it, there is no relationship. It just won't work; and so, over and over God calls for his people to reflect in their life and in their behavior the wholeness or the completeness that belongs to God's very own character—his person. He is not mixed up in any way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, right.

DAVE BAST

Or mixed with any evil. He is pure God, and pure holiness, and that is what we need to strive for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that thing you just noted, Dave, that again and again and again, like a refrain: I am the Lord, I am the Lord, I am the Lord; it is not just telling us who is doing the talking here, although that is important. What God is saying is that this is personal for God. You insult a deaf person who cannot hear you, you purposely trip a blind guy, God takes that very personally. This goes against the divine character itself. Think of that, huh? You are offending God when you do those cruel things. When you use...when you fuss with your scale in the market so that a pound of sugar weighs out a pound and a half and you can overcharge your customer, God takes that very personally. Don't do that, he said; I am the Lord; I am watching; but not just that, I take this personally. That makes this about as serious as serious can be, Dave.

DAVE BAST

Right; but as we asked again and again in our earlier program, and we will ask in subsequent programs, what does this have to do with us? As followers of Jesus, do we have the same demand placed upon us? That is what we want to talk about as we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are closing out the second of four programs on Leviticus and the holiness code; and you know, sometimes when we look at all those complicated laws in Leviticus, Dave, talking about garments of two types of cloth and you cannot eat lobster and whatnot, we might be tempted to say: Whoo, thank goodness none of that applies to us. That would be really, really complicated. And yet, the motto of Leviticus: Be holy, for I am holy...it's in the New Testament, Dave. In fact, it comes up very, very early in the very first letter of the Apostle Peter.

DAVE BAST

Right; listen to this: ^{1:13}Therefore, (Peter writes) with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written, "Be holy, because I am holy."

And guess where that is written.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Leviticus 11, 19, 20. So, if anybody had the idea that Leviticus is long ago and far away and has nothing to do with us as Christians now, sorry; Peter just quoted it in his very first letter. So, the core concern of Leviticus...of being holy so that you can maintain the presence of God in your life...that is as relevant for baptized Christians today as it was for Israel; and indeed, the presence of God in Israel was first in that tabernacle...the portable tent in the desert...but then once they settled in Jerusalem and in Israel, it was in the Temple...but as we said in our *Groundwork* series: What does it mean to be the Church? We looked at key biblical images for the Church, the Temple is still a key image, and in fact, it is radicalized now because, well...let's listen to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:

¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

So, this has been actually...in the New Testament here, Dave...we could say it has been radicalized. There is not just one temple where God dwells, we are each of us a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, each of us a temple, and that means...well, as Peter put it, you still gotta be holy as God is holy, same as God told Israel in Leviticus.

DAVE BAST

And you know, we have noted that Leviticus is all about learning how to live with God in the midst of your camp, in the presence of God; and for us as Christians, the stakes are raised even higher because, as you say, Scott, God just doesn't live in the middle out there or nearby or in our neighborhood; he lives within. His Spirit inhabits our bodies as a temple. You know, I really think that this puts the issue squarely before us. We mentioned how Leviticus talks a lot about food and animals and clean and unclean...and it talks a lot about sex. You touched on that, Scott, which also has to do with mixing and not mixing; and I think that puts it so clearly for us, because there is nothing like sex that will confront us with the issue of: Do I own my own body or does it belong to the Lord? Is it a temple or is it something else? I just read recently a line from a modern skeptic and cynic who said: Your body is not a temple, it is an amusement park; enjoy the ride. That puts the issue as clearly as it could possibly put it. What is my view? Do I belong to God like I say I do, or don't I?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, we know that we have become that temple by grace alone, through Jesus' perfect sacrifice, which we will think about in the next program when we look at the sacrificial system in Leviticus and how it applies in the Church today. We get this status by grace alone. We didn't deserve it. Jesus did it all for us. That is the great thing about Jesus' ministry, too, by the way, Dave. In the Old Testament, the concern was always being contaminated. If you touched something unclean, you become unclean. Jesus reversed that. Jesus had so much holiness in him that when he touched an unclean leper, or anything unclean...a dead body...he didn't become unclean, they became clean. They even became holy. So, the contagion of holiness in Jesus is stronger than the contagion of sin and uncleanness, and we have been touched by that grace; but, that only means that now we have to act like it. You know, I read earlier that verse from 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul says: Do you not know that you are temples of the Holy Spirit? That is kind of a refrain in that chapter, and in some ways, a refrain throughout all of Paul's writings in particular. Hey, you have to remember who you are. You have been made holy by the grace of God. You have been made a temple of the Holy Spirit by the grace of God. Remember who you are, and now act like it.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You don't just get a free pass to do whatever you want; because you have been saved by grace, you have also been transformed by grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in a way, it is harder for us than it was for Israel because they had some pretty clear-cut laws and rules: don't touch this, don't eat that, don't do the other; and for us, it is internalized. You know, Paul also says that in Christ we are free, and our freedom is absolute. We are free from the law. It is not a matter of rules of don't do this and that, but then he adds: Don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh, but to serve one another in love...that is from Galatians 5...and that is a much harder demand, in a sense, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is; it is a matter of discernment, right? We are seeking wisdom. I think that is what the New Testament... We are mature in Christ, and we are trying to become more mature, growing up into Christ, who is our head...another image from the New Testament; but that requires constant discernment; and we said earlier in this program, Dave, that if you read Leviticus and you get the idea that the Israelites were supposed to think about holiness morning, noon, and night, that is right; and guess what? We sort of do, too. We have to always

be discerning: Is this the right Christ-like thing to do? Is this kind? Does this grow the fruit of the Spirit in me? Because the fruit of the Spirit are how we show the holiness. We did a whole series on the fruit of the Spirit. That is because that is where the holiness inside us shows up on the outside of us, and it is something we think about...well, it *should* be...all the time.

DAVE BAST

Yes; all the time. So, it is by grace, as you said, Scott. It is not our doing. It is not that we earn our holiness or that we earn God's presence by this, that or the other thing. He has come to us; he has called us to belong to himself; he has forgiven and pardoned us; he has given us his Spirit; now we need to live that way, thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. Please join us again next time when we examine the sacrificial system described in Leviticus and discuss how it helps us understand our need for Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, and ideas for future programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/be-holy>

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