

Leviticus Bible Study #6

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 5:1-13

1 “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity; **2** or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt; **3** or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt; **4** or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; **5** when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, **6** he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

7 “But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. **8** He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the sin offering. He shall wring its head from its neck but shall not sever it completely, **9** and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering. **10** Then he shall offer the second for a burnt offering according to the rule. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

11 “But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering. **12** And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall take a handful of it as its memorial portion and burn this on the altar, on the LORD's food offerings; it is a sin offering. **13** Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be forgiven. And the remainder shall be for the priest, as in the grain offering.”

Introduction

At first glance, these verses sound as though they are a kind of civic law. An offense has been committed, thereby violating sacred space, and the prescription is to make a sin offering which satisfies the Divine Law on the matter. No one, not even the priest, is exempt from these requirements and anyone caught refusing to obey them would necessarily be executed.¹ The list, and the required sacrifices, appear to be punitive in nature. Yet there is an issue with this notion which requires us to see it in a different light, namely that of *enforcement*. How was it that someone was to be “caught” having touched an unclean thing or having stayed quiet when they could have testified? Israel had no surveillance system, especially not in their wilderness sojourn, and the people were often too busy to “tattle” on others. In most cases, the only one who could accurately decide on the occasion to make a remedial sin offering was the offender himself. Speaking to Moses, God determines that the matter of unintentional sins must for all intents and purposes operate on the honor system.

¹ Hebrews 10:28

Whether or not a sin offering was made for unintended offenses relied entirely on the offender realizing his guilt and making amends to God. But this does not mean that these offerings are *voluntary*. Though these offerings are movements of piety in the individual, it is a *mandated* piety which God solemnly commands. The man who made a rash oath ought to have had the sort of conscience that directed him to an awareness of that sin. The believer who touched something unclean ought to be careful not to touch them in the first place. In this sense, the commands not only inspire private piety, but also bring a heightened awareness to God's standards in the minds of the faithful.

Vs.1-6

1 “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity; **2** or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt; **3** or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt; **4** or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; **5** when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, **6** he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

The list of offenses is not exhaustive. In the previous chapter, *any* unintentional sin brought into attention is shown to be cause for a sin offering. But if the people were to understand the proper use of the offerings, then they needed to have a number of examples for their understanding. Thus with this passage that there is a *catechetical* use for Leviticus, and it is “top down” catechesis. God taught Moses these commands, and in turn he writes them for instructing Aaron and his sons and the Levites; from there, the Levites are tasked with ensuring the people understand them and apply them. Leviticus itself was *never* meant to remain cloistered within the priesthood as an internal document, but through this “trickle down” method helped establish the knowledge of the people. While it is not a direct command, it is clear that this system contributes to the general way the Church performs discipleship to this day, using a seminary and vicarage system to teach ministers who then teach the laity.

We may think of the offenses listed as “food for thought,” matters on which the average Israelite may meditate and learn deeper principles. A man who does not testify in court when he could contribute is held guilty and must make an offering; thus Moses teaches that obstructing or delaying justice is sinful. Doing so violates sacred space by disrupting the way things *ought to be*, or the Mosaic legal principle of “shalom,” requiring getting back to it in reflection of the principle of “shalam,” as discussed with the peace offerings.²

The Israelites are also catechized regarding the cleanliness standards and oaths in this way. The command is absolute, meaning a man was required to make a sacrifice for becoming unclean, even if he bathed before he learned of his offense. The laity, upon hearing this, are then prompted to *meditate* on why that must be, and thus they learn of the nature of the uncleanness; the Psalms later explicitly teach this practice.³ If a man was to become unknowingly unclean, then his day to day activity causes other things to become unclean too, thus disrupting the sacred space of the congregation; he still bears responsibility to make amends. Oaths include the obligation to take responsibility for the result of their terms, so a man making a rash oath may find himself unwittingly causing damage to his neighbors in

² In summary, “shalom” in the Mosaic Law is not merely peace, but a state in which things are right and functioning as they ought to. Shalom is the principle of *returning* to that state of being via making amends, paying reparations, or performing sacrifices. Thus, with peace offerings – or *shelamim* – the people declare that Shalom has been observed and Shalom is the current state of things.

³ Psalm 1:1-2. Psalm 119 in its entirety.

the same way that the unclean man does. Every command of this sort teaches the ancient Israelites not only how things ought to be, but how they can get back to that state, a sort of instruction on the practice of shalom.

Vs.7-13

7 “But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. **8** He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the sin offering. He shall wring its head from its neck but shall not sever it completely, **9** and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering. **10** Then he shall offer the second for a burnt offering according to the rule. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

11 “But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering. **12** And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall take a handful of it as its memorial portion and burn this on the altar, on the LORD's food offerings; it is a sin offering. **13** Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be forgiven. And the remainder shall be for the priest, as in the grain offering.”

As all men are held accountable to the Law, all social classes are given the opportunity to make sin offerings through a mediating priest. Everyone is under the general mandate toward private and public piety. Note then the responsibility placed upon the Levites in this Law. Again, God catechized Moses and Moses catechized the priests and Levites, who were charged with catechizing the people. Since the sacrifices are available to all social classes from prince to pauper, the Levites could not deny instruction to anyone. The Israelite had a right to know God's Law and be educated in it for the sake of obedience; these commands are written to accomplish just that in accordance with later command.⁴

A lamb is shown as the preferred sacrifice, but two doves or pigeons will suffice as well. One for sprinkling of blood, the other being for a burnt offering. This is likely out of practical consideration, given the smaller volume of blood in a single dove and the risk of damaging its body and losing a piece of the bird while it is being drained out. The priests were not expected to sift through blood and ashes to find a piece of the spinal cord or head if it accidentally became fully severed. Even if they did, such would go against the principle of sacrificing a bird for a *whole* burnt offering.

We must note also that the atonement offered here is one which foreshadows the imputed righteousness of Christ to believers and our justification by faith. The act of killing an animal does not undo a man's silence when he could testify, and nor does it actually remove uncleanness from the assembly. But the man who realizes his sin has righteousness imputed to him, *counted* as being his when the animal is sacrificed. He is treated as though he had not made anyone unclean or stayed silent when he could have given testimony or given a rash vow. The slate is wiped clean *for the man who benefits from the sacrifice*, even though the effects of his indiscretion may still occur. On his part, he was to trust that his offense had truly been undone by the atoning sacrifice, and thus he was in good standing with God again. The parallel is clear, that Christians today trust that through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for all their sins their relationship with God is made whole again through the imputation of our Savior's righteousness.

4 Leviticus 10:10-11