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Leviticus Overview (Part 1)



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview, Steve Gregg discusses the Book of Leviticus, which mainly deals with Jewish rituals and practices. The theme of holiness is central to Leviticus, and it contains many laws that pertain to morality and the punishment of wrongdoing. While some of the laws may seem severe by modern standards, they were meant for the Israelites during that time and not necessarily applicable in modern contexts. Ultimately, an understanding of both Leviticus and Jesus can provide a complete picture of the heart of God.

Transcript

For those of you who have been attending, you know we're going through the Bible month by month, a different book each month. And what's happening is I give an introduction and an overview of a book in these sessions. And then between this session and next month's session, you're supposed to read the book yourself.

And hopefully, having been through the introductory material and the overview, it will be something that will help you to make sense of the book in parts that might otherwise not make as much sense. And today we're going to have an introduction and overview of the book of Leviticus. And the endeavor to read through the whole Bible, many people find to be a challenge.

Because it's the largest book that most people will read through if they do read through it. Most people don't ever read through the Bible. And I've even known pastors who told me they've never read through the entire Old Testament.

Which is shameful. But the truth is, some people are Christians for decades or a lifetime and never actually read the whole Bible through. But I understand that partly because when I was young, I was about 10 years old, I suppose, I tried to read through the Bible.

And never get very far past the halfway point in Exodus. And start getting to all those laws and the tabernacle descriptions and so forth. And you get discouraged.

There are certain parts of the Bible that are more challenging than others to read

through. And Leviticus is among those books that some people find challenging for a number of reasons. One is that it's almost entirely comprised of archaic rituals that have nothing to do with us directly.

They're part of the Jewish religion that God established with Israel at Mount Sinai. A religion that no longer exists, not even in Orthodox Judaism. Because it's a religion centered around a physical temple with physical sacrifices of animals and such.

And neither Judaism nor Christianity practices those things. Now, Judaism would still do that today, if not for the fact that the temple had been destroyed in 70 AD. And the Jews have had no opportunity to rebuild it in the past 1900 and something years.

And therefore, we're reading in Leviticus about ritual religion that is not directly applicable to either Christianity or Judaism anymore. So why read about it? And this is something that, especially as you work your way through the first seven chapters of Leviticus, I'm sure that the modern reader begins to say, is this really worth it? Because the first seven chapters are set apart to give instructions about how to offer these five different types of sacrifices. And they're very detailed.

And a lot of it's repetitions. Because it'll give this particular sacrifice. Say, here's what you do if you offer a bull.

Here's what you do if you offer a lamb. Here's what you do if you offer a goat. Here's what you do if you offer something else.

And every animal it names, it goes through the same rituals in detail with very little difference. And you begin to say, after a chapter or two of this, how long is this going to go on? Well, I'll give you a spoiler alert. It goes on for seven chapters.

And then things change. Not necessarily greatly for the better, though. Because then you have several chapters of rituals about the garments of the priests and the consecration of the priests for office and so forth.

And nothing very exciting happens in Leviticus until about chapter 10 when two priests get incinerated by fire from the presence of the Lord. That's kind of an exciting chapter. But really, you get more than a third of the way through the book before there's any action.

In fact, in the entire book of Leviticus, there's only two events recorded. The rest is all laws and rituals. The two events are, as I mentioned in chapter 10, the death of Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron who offered strange fire before the Lord and got themselves killed for their trouble.

And then there's one other historical event in the book, which is in chapter 24, verses 10 through 16, where a man who's in a fight with an Israelite. The man himself has an

Israelite mother and an Egyptian father. But he gets in a fight with an Israelite, and he blasphemes Yahweh.

He blasphemes God. And so he is taken aside, and Moses inquires of the Lord what to do. And then the man is put to death for that.

And that's the only other event that takes place in the book of Leviticus, just the death of these two priests. And the, well, prior to the death of the priests, there's the consecration ritual, not full of a lot of action or activity. But the consecration of the priests and the death of Nadab and Abihu is kind of one thing.

And then you've got the death of the blasphemer. And that's the only stories in the book of Leviticus. The entire book takes place within the first year that Israel is at Mount Sinai.

Just as the latter part of Exodus was all laws and rituals for the most part. There's a few chapters interrupting it where God passes by and declares his name to Moses. And there's the breaking of the ten covenants, the golden calf incident.

But for the most part, apart from about three chapters in the latter half of Exodus, it's all about priests and tabernacle and rituals and things like that, not really stories, generally speaking. And that continues in Leviticus. And Leviticus is just sort of like a continuation of this last half of Exodus.

And at the end of Leviticus is the end of the first year of their camping at Mount Sinai. And so all of the book of Exodus occurs at the foot of Mount Sinai. The book of Leviticus, the Hebrew name for the book is very different than our English name.

The Hebrew word is why? I don't know which syllable the emphasis goes upon, but why? Why? Yikra is the Hebrew word that means and he called. Now, it's a strange name for a book, but that's the opening words of the book in the Hebrew Bible. And we've mentioned when we're going through Genesis and Exodus that in the Hebrew Bible, the books of the Pentateuch, the first five books, the Hebrew Bible names them after the first word in the book.

So Genesis is called in the beginning in the Hebrew and Exodus is called. Now, these are the names. And then Leviticus in the Hebrew is called and he called that is God called out of the tabernacle.

And that's how the book begins. Now, how did we get the name Leviticus? Well, when the 70 scholars in Alexandria translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in the third century B.C. They did not translate the names of the books.

They gave the books new names. So Genesis is a Greek word that means beginnings. Exodus is a Greek word that means going out or departure.

Leviticus is a Greek word that means pertaining to the Levites. Now, that's not a very good title. I'm not really sure why they chose that title for the book, because the book is not about the Levites.

In fact, the Levites are only mentioned one time in the book of Leviticus. And Leviticus 25, 33, you read of the Levites. But the book is largely about the priests.

Now, in the common thinking of many Christians, what's a different priest? Levites is all kind of the same, aren't they? But the Levites are a tribe. And they are the tribe that was set aside to attend to the tabernacle service. But one family of the Levites, the family of Aaron, who are a very small section of the Levitical tribe, became the priests.

And the book is really not pertaining to the Levites, but pertaining to the priests. It's mainly a manual for the priests. These seven chapters at the beginning that tell about all the details of the sacrifices.

That's what the priests had to know. The average Jew who brought an animal to sacrifice, he didn't have to know all that ritual. The priests had to know that ritual.

It's a manual of how you offer a lamb, how you offer a bull, and so forth, and which animals are suited for which sacrifices. There's five different kinds of sacrifices that are discussed there. And the priests, although the Levites are only mentioned once in the book of Leviticus, the priests are mentioned 200 times in the book of Leviticus.

So it's obviously a book about the priests, not about the Levites. Now, the book is written by, we assume, Moses. We know that at least it is comprised of things that Moses had spoken to him by God.

We assume that Moses wrote them down. Somebody did. But whether Moses or somebody else, whether Joshua or someone else wrote them down for him, the material is from God given through Moses.

And this is something that we're told like 17 times in the book. God said to Moses, God said to Moses, God said to Moses. 17 times.

And even Jesus confirmed that the things that are in Leviticus are things that were mosaic or commanded by Moses. When Jesus healed the leper in Matthew chapter 8, when he healed him in verse 4, he said, Now go and show yourself to the priests and offer the sacrifices that were commanded by Moses. Now there he's talking about Leviticus chapters 13 and 14.

Those two chapters are devoted to discussing leprosy and how one is diagnosed as a leper and how one is cleansed. If they are cleansed, there's no cure for leprosy given. But if a person finds themselves recovered from leprosy, then they have to go to the priest and get a clean bill of health.

Because the priest, in addition to being the officiator at religious rituals, was also the community health official. He was the one who would declare a person to have leprosy and therefore exclude them from all normal society. And then he'd be the one who has to give them the clean bill of health if the leprosy goes away.

Now you might say, how could leprosy go away? Isn't it incurable? Well, once in a while there's a miraculous cure. We read in the book of Numbers that God struck Miriam with leprosy and then Moses interceded and God healed her of the leprosy. We have Naaman the Syrian in the book of 2 Kings who had leprosy and he was healed supernaturally.

But that couldn't have happened very often. But we find when we read the chapters about leprosy that the diagnosis of leprosy was very inexact. If you had a patch of white skin that was beginning to flake on your arm or any part of your body, that had to be watched.

You'd have to come back and look at it again a week later and see if it had spread or not or if it had gone away. If it went away, it was okay. If it hadn't gone away, you'd be declared a leper.

Now, obviously, white patches of skin can be caused by more things than what we call leprosy. What we call leprosy is a specific diagnosis of something called Hansen's disease. Until recently, there was no cure for it.

They do have cures for leprosy now. But clearly, leprosy was simply an umbrella term for skin problems that they didn't know what they were. Some of them would be, in fact, what we call leprosy.

Of course, there were people who had that kind of leprosy. But there were people who had other kinds of skin problems that they'd call it leprosy only because they didn't know another word for it. Those kinds of skin problems sometimes would go away with time.

So, the leper, there had to be a law that not only excluded the leper from society, but one that reintroduced him to society once he was better, once he was no longer unclean. And so, Jesus, when he cleansed the lepers, he said, now go show yourself to the priests and offer the offering that Moses committed. So, Jesus confirmed that Moses is the author of these commands.

I say that partly because it's a very standard view among the more liberal type of scholars to say that Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch or of the Torah. Although the Jews always believed that Moses was the author of the Torah, and Christians always believed that he was the author of these five books, modern liberal scholarship raised doubts about this in the, actually in the 18th century, and especially in the 19th century. Doubts in the liberal schools began to arise and became established in the 20th century.

Only the most conservative scholars still said that Moses was the author of these five

books. Others felt that these were the result of five, excuse me, four traditions orally passed down for centuries long after the time of Moses, and that Moses didn't write any of it. That's what liberal scholarship says even to this day, that Moses didn't write these books.

They were oral traditions. But Jesus said Moses commanded these things, so anyone who really believes in Jesus must believe that Moses wrote them. Jesus said to, in John chapter five to the Pharisees, do not think that I will accuse you before God.

It's Moses that will accuse you before God because he wrote of me. And he said, if you had listened to Moses, if you had believed Moses, you would believe me. But he said, if you do not believe his words, how can you believe my words? And that's a very good question.

If you don't believe Moses' words, how can you believe Jesus' words when Jesus believed Moses' words? Jesus said Moses commanded this. Either you believe Jesus or you don't about this. If you do, then you believe Moses is the author of these books.

And certainly, not only Jesus, but all the New Testament writers take for granted and sometimes mention that Moses is the writer of these books. So we accept, if we believe what Jesus said, we accept the Mosaic authorship of these books. Now, the laws that we find in Leviticus, some of them are also found and repeated from Exodus and repeated again in Deuteronomy.

Some of the laws are found in all three of these books. But in Leviticus in particular, we do find chapters that prescribe the death penalty for quite a few sins. Many of them are sexual sins, but not all.

Certainly, murder is a capital crime. Several kinds of sexual sins were capital crimes. Being a witch was a capital crime.

Kidnapping was a capital crime. As I understand, something like 30 or more crimes laid out in the laws, many of them in Leviticus, that God said, if someone does that, they got to die. Now, some of these things sound a little severe to us by our standards.

Because we would not think it a good idea to execute a rebellious child who curses his parents. Or even, for that matter, homosexuals or adulterers. We wouldn't want to put them to death.

Our sentiments are different. But we have to remember that when we're reading the Old Testament, we're not reading laws that were catering to 20th century or 21st century sentiments. God is under no obligation to think like modern man.

God thinks for himself. And God thinks rightly. Now, am I saying that we ought to put people to death who do those things? I think not.

That judicial action was something for the government to do. And only one government was given these laws. That was the government of ancient Israel.

No other government has ever given these laws. These are the laws that were to govern Israel. And Israel was a holy nation.

In fact, the word holiness and words derived from the word holiness are found 131 times in the book of Leviticus. It's a major theme. Twice in the book, God says, you should be holy, for I am holy.

Now, what does holy mean? You probably know if you're a Bible student. Holy means set apart for God. Set apart special.

Not common. Not ordinary. Something that is specially devoted to God.

And when we think of being holy, we might think of like, well, you don't smoke, and you don't chew, and you don't drink alcohol, and you don't go to movies, and stuff like that. You don't wear jewelry if you're in some traditions. And those things are considered to be what it means to be holy in some traditions of religion.

That's not what holiness is. Holiness isn't about how many things you find to abstain from that other people partake of. Holiness means that you belong to somebody uniquely.

You belong to God. You've been set apart by God for himself. Now, of course, that has ramifications in the way that you live.

Clearly, if you belong to God, you must live in a way that pleases God. But holiness in its primary meaning does not refer to the way you live. It is a status statement.

You are in a different status than everyone else if you are holy. You are set apart. And that's why in the Old Testament you read about holy cups and holy spoons and holy vessels.

Well, obviously, they don't behave any particular way. Their holiness is seen in their status, not in their behavior. Even the priests were holy to the Lord, though very few of them behaved that way.

The priesthood was very corrupt through much of Israel's history. It was the priesthood who condemned Jesus. Caiaphas and Annas and the priests, they're the ones who turned them over to Pilate.

Clearly, the priesthood was corrupt very much of the time, but they were holy. Now, how could you be holy and corrupt? Well, you could be holy but not act like you're holy. You could be set apart for God but not live like you're set apart for God.

And the priests were set apart for God. That doesn't tell you what they lived like. It tells you something about how they should have lived.

But how people should live and how they actually end up living are two different things. And holiness has to do with how one should be. Because they belong to God, they're not like others.

Now, in the New Testament, we Christians are set apart for God. We are said to be holy and commanded to be holy. In 1 Peter 1, Peter actually quotes from Leviticus on this point.

1 Peter 1, verse 14, I should say verse 15 and 16. He says, But as he who has called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, Be holy, for I am holy. Now, the quotation is from Leviticus 11, 44, 45 and Leviticus 19, 2. God said to Israel, Be holy, for I am holy.

It's interesting that Peter takes something that was said to Israel and says we should assume that applies to us. Now, that's interesting because it means we should just assume that we're Israel. What God told Israel to do, He didn't tell everyone to do.

He never told the Babylonians or the Assyrians or the Egyptians to be holy unto Him. They were not chosen to be holy unto Him. They were not set apart.

Israel was set apart, unlike all the nations. That's why when they, at a certain point in their history, said to Samuel, Give us a king to rule over us like all the nations. It displeased Samuel because God didn't want them to be like all the nations.

God wanted them to be a unique nation, set apart where He was their king. All other nations could have whatever kings they wanted, but God would be the king of Israel. They were different.

But Israel too often wanted to model themselves after other nations, just like Christians like to imitate the world sometimes. But the interesting thing is that nobody who was ever given this command in the Old Testament, except Israel, Be holy for I am holy. And Peter speaks to the Christians and speaks as if it's obvious.

What God said to Israel is for us. Didn't God say, Be holy for I am holy? Peter assumes that's applicable to the church. Though in the Old Testament it's not given to what we call the church.

It's given to Israel. But it's interesting that Peter takes Leviticus as being applicable to us in this respect. It's a holiness code we have in Leviticus.

The reason there's so much ritual, so much law in Leviticus is because it's defining what it looks like for Israel to be different than the other nations. God required Israel to do

things He never required anyone else to do. To be circumcised, to keep the Sabbath, to worship in the tabernacle, to do a number of other things, to keep a certain diet, to refrain from certain foods that other nations ate.

These differences in their lifestyle were intended to convey to them that God has called them to be different than other people, even in the mundane areas of life. Just as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 30 or 31, I forget if it's 30 or 31, but Paul said, Whatsoever you do, whether you eat or drink, Christians, do all to the glory of God. Now when he said, whether you eat or drink, do it for the glory of God, we might think, well, we sing songs to the glory of God.

We pray to the glory of God. We give tithes to the glory of God. We go to church to the glory of God.

He says, yeah, but you should do everything, even what you eat and drink. Every aspect of your life is to be devoted to the glory of God. And that's what God was showing Israel.

He says, everything, every meal you have has got to be governed by the definition of being separated as a people to God. And the clean and unclean foods are listed in chapter 11. And we may have something to say about that as we go along.

But the point here is that Leviticus is a book about how different Israel is supposed to be. And why should they be different? Because God is different. Be holy because I'm holy.

He said. Now, I mentioned that some of the laws in Leviticus do not harmonize with our sentiments. Sometimes they seem a little strict, especially the penalties.

And yet God wants his people to know I'm not like other gods. I'm not even like you. I'm like me and nothing else is like me.

And I think rightly, everyone else thinks wrongly. I mean, that's God's claim. God sees everything as it really is.

God knows the true value of a thing. God knows the true culpability of an act. God knows the true penalty that should come to certain kinds of actions.

And God never makes a mistake. He's different. He's unlike the other gods, which were largely concocted from human imagination.

He's unlike. He thinks differently than anyone else does. In Psalm 50, he rebukes the Israelites, saying, you thought that I was altogether such a one as you.

That was your huge miscalculation. God is not such a one as us. God is holy.

He is different. And you don't just treat him like you treat an ordinary human being, even if it's a ruler. You recognize God is invaluable.

God knows all. And he's the very description and definition of good and righteousness. There's no unrighteousness in him.

The Bible says he's holy and good. And therefore, what he says is right and good. So if God says, well, this this particular action really deserves the death penalty, that may be thousand miles removed from our thinking about that action.

I mean, think about certain sexual sins that are very much accepted as normative in our society right now. Whether it's whether it's a homosexual sin or whether it's adultery or whether it's just living together unmarried. These kinds of things were considered sinful as recently as 20, 30 years ago in our culture, our modern culture.

And yet our cultures move so far into thinking differently that we assume that we're becoming more enlightened. But in fact, we're becoming more benighted. The further our values move from the values that God expresses in his word, the further we are from reality.

And that should be scary when we realize that we're not alarmed by things anymore that would have alarmed us 30 years ago. Because 30 years ago, the reason we would have been alarmed is because our thinking was much more disciplined and governed by what the Bible said. Not on everything, but more than now.

In terms of society now, Christians, hopefully we're thinking more and more like the Bible. We should be. Christians are being transformed by the by the renewal of your minds.

If you're reading, meditating on, believing, obeying the Bible, then of course you're thinking more scripturally than before. But that's going to put you at greater odds with the culture at large because the culture is getting further and further as fast as they can and as far as they can from any instructions that the Bible gives or any authority that God would have in the life. Now, Israel lived at a time a little bit like Christians live now.

That is to say, they had, as we do, God's instructions. They had been separated from the rest of the world to be holy to God, to see his instructions as relevant and true and right. They lived in a world where no one else agreed.

The Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Edomites, the Moabites, none of them, the Philistines, none of them agreed with these things that God said. And we're living in a sense in that kind of a time now. As time goes on, the Western civilization in which we were raised and where our parents were raised, which at a certain time not so very distant in our past, was viewed by most as a Christian culture.

Although people who were real Christians knew that America wasn't literally Christian, but it was influenced by Christianity to the degree that most Christian values were still considered right in our culture. And that being so, we were raised with a certain

relationship to our culture that was more or less comfortable. If you were a servant of God back in the 50s and 60s, as I was, then you did not find yourself too greatly at odds with the culture.

You did in many respects. I remember in the second grade, I had differences with my second grade teacher about evolution. Already, you know, in, what would that be, 1960 maybe, there was already that move in the educational system away from what the Bible taught.

It caught me by surprise. I thought everyone knew the Bible, and I was surprised that my teacher would teach something that wasn't agreeable with the Bible. But the fact is, we expect the schools now to teach things not agreeable with the Bible because the culture has moved so far that we now recognize that we are the oddballs.

We are the strange ones. We are the peculiar people in a world that simply does not sympathize with the values that even the world used to sympathize with, and certainly that Christians must. And if we're going to be holy as God is holy, that means as the culture changes, we must not change in that same direction.

In fact, the call of God is going to be, in very many respects, morally in the opposite direction because we're not as holy as we should be. We should be becoming more and more like God, thinking more and more like the way he does, and as the culture goes further away, we're going to find that chasm greater and greater between us and them. And, of course, that kind of chasm almost always leads to persecution because usually on our side of the chasm is not the majority, not the people who are running the country, not the people who are running the institutions.

Not the ones who are making the laws. And therefore, as that chasm grows wider, then we find that the people in our own nation will look at us the way the heathen looked at Israel. And Israel was usually persecuted by the heathen because they were different.

Now, Israel sometimes had the problem of thinking they were so righteous and so much better than Gentiles that it kind of, no doubt, aggravated the hostility between them. And Christians should not have any sense of self-righteousness. In fact, we should be very much aware of how far short we fall of the holiness that we're called to be.

Yet, we should be holy despite the fact, or maybe even more so because of the fact, that the world is drifting further from God. There needs to be an unwavering witness for what's true. And if it's not in us, where's it going to be? So being holy.

Now, Peter, when he quoted Leviticus there, he said, be holy in all manner of conduct. As I said, holiness does not primarily refer to your conduct. It refers to your status.

You've been set aside for God, just like the priesthood in Israel had been set aside for God, or the whole nation of Israel was set aside for God. They didn't always act like it,

but they still were God's people even when they didn't act like it. And the church is, we've got to realize that God has set us aside for something.

We're not supposed to be imitating the world. We're not supposed to be like the world. We're a different people.

And therefore, our status should dictate behavior. So Peter says, you've been called to be holy, so be holy in your conduct. Act like it.

And that's really what Leviticus is telling Israel to do. You are holy, act like it. Don't model yourself after the heathen.

Model yourself after my commands. My word. And so more and more, the culture is not going to be sympathetic towards some of the standards that God raised.

And especially when you find, I mean, imagine the average non-believer here in the 21st century reading Leviticus and reading that certain people, adulterers, should be stoned to death. Or witches, or homosexuals, or children who curse their parents, or many other kinds of things should be stoned to death. Now, I was saying earlier, I don't think we should advocate that kind of behavior.

That is stoning. We shouldn't be advocating that kind of thing. Because we are not the government.

The government of Israel was like the government of any nation. They were there to enforce the laws with penalties. And God was telling them in Leviticus what the penalties are for what crimes.

Now, what that does tell us is that that kind of behavior in God's sight is worthy of death. That doesn't mean that Christians should be executing anybody. The Christians are not called to do that.

We're not called to go out and round up the criminals and make sure they get the proper punishment. That's the government's job, and we are not the government. Christians are a separate people who have different ways and different calling.

It's not ours to go out and enforce the laws of God upon the unbeliever. But it is ours to live according to the laws of God. To live according to the standards that we know God embraces.

And that is our responsibility. Paul talks about a great number of things in Romans chapter 1, which he summarized them at the end of chapter 1, saying in the last verse of Romans 1, verse 32, he says, that knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death. They not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them.

Now, Paul listed a whole bunch of bad behavior. He said, we know the righteous judgment of God, that these things are worthy of death. How do we know that? Well, because God said so.

We know from God's law what kind of penalties these things deserve. That doesn't mean we're interested in enforcing those penalties. That's not for us.

That's God's to do. We're not here to enforce the laws, but we know what they deserve, and that should give us some idea of how bad certain things are that our culture no longer thinks of as bad. And Paul says, even though those who do these things are worthy of death, these people do them and approve of others who do them.

Now, you see, in our society, when we had views that were in the culture more agreeable with Christian morality, although they were never completely agreeable with Leviticus, of course, and nor should they have been because, frankly, our government should never be enforcing laws that were only for Israel, like executing people who break the Sabbath or executing people who blaspheme God. That was something not permitted in Israel because Israel was set apart for God, and that kind of behavior was simply not going to be tolerated in God's people. America is not God's people.

England is not God's people. Germany and France are not God's people. The church are God's people, and therefore, we do not impose the special laws upon the nations who are not Christian that we as Christians are informed that we should observe.

And so we don't penalize, but we should live under the light of these laws. We know, like Paul said, that people who do such things are worthy of death. That doesn't mean we want to kill them or that we even advocate killing them.

It just means that we recognize these are very heinous things, and that tells us that we want to avoid them. We don't want to tolerate them in the religious community, in the church, and that's why Paul advocated church discipline of people who were living incestuously, for example, who were in the church. Excommunication, kicking them out of the church was really the discipline, not capital punishment because the church doesn't wield the sword.

The church doesn't kill the criminals. But we are supposed to keep the church's behavior properly adjusted, and that's something that the church is negligent in to this day. The point being, though, that we read Leviticus to recognize how God really feels about these things.

And if we read that a certain behavior had a certain criminal penalty attached to it, and we say, whoa, that is way too excessive, that is way disproportionate, the degree to which it seems excessive and disproportionate to us is the degree to which our minds have drifted from reality because God knows what the just penalty is, and there's

nothing that God would never compromise His justice. God cannot compromise His justice. So if He says those who do this, do this to them, that's a just penalty.

And once you know the just penalty, then you know something about the magnitude of the crime. Rather than me saying I think it's disproportionate for a rebellious son to be put to death, I have to say I guess to the degree that that seems disproportionate to me, I'm a little too lackadaisical, a little too permissive in my own sentiments about rebellious children. And while, again, I would never advocate enforcing the capital penalties on people who do these things, nonetheless, my own thinking about these behaviors has got to be informed by the awareness of what God said, these things really do deserve.

And if they deserve them, and if those penalties are never carried out in this life, and most of them will never be, then we have to assume that in the day of judgment, those who face a perfectly just God will receive perfectly just punishment, even if it never was executed on them in this life. That God sees these things as worthy of death, and there are those who the Bible says will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death, and that would be, no doubt, the time when these penalties are executed. Paul says we don't judge those who are outside the church, God judges those.

We should be judging those inside the church. First Corinthians 5, he says, it's our business to keep the church pure. It's not our business to civilize the pagans.

It's not our business to make the pagans behave like Christians. It's our duty to make the pagans become Christians, but that has got to be done with their approval. That can't be done at the point of a sword.

That can't be done by making laws that forbid them to sin. We need to win them to Christ the same way we were won to Christ, and when they are won to Christ, then we need to teach them how to live as Christians and be holy, and that's exactly what God was doing in Leviticus with Israel. They had been brought out of Egypt.

They had agreed voluntarily to be God's people, and Mount Sinai said, Will you do this? They said, We will do it. It's like a marriage vow. They both, Israel and God, agreed to this covenant.

Now, okay, now that you're one of God's people, here's how God wants his people to behave, and so we get the righteous law code given to us here, and by the way, in the New Testament, Paul does tell us in Romans 7, 12, that the law, he means the Jewish law, is holy and just and good. Sometimes people think that Paul was against the Jewish law. He was not against the Jewish law.

He did believe that we're not under the law. That is to say, the Jewish law is not the code that we enforce in the church. We don't put to death people in the church when they commit adultery.

Israel had to do that. We don't. We're not under the law, but that doesn't mean that God likes adultery more than he did before or that the things he hated in the Old Testament he somehow has become fond of or tolerant about.

It's just that we don't live under that law. We will be judged, though, by our submission to the will of God, and we know something about the will of God from what those laws tell us about him. And those laws are holy and just and good, Paul said in Romans 7, 12.

So Paul thought it was a good law. It was a good law for the people who were under it. We're not under that law.

We're under a better law, perhaps, at least as good, and that is we're under the law of Christ. We have to obey Christ. The Jews, they had to obey Moses.

We have to obey Christ. And Christ, of course, had many of the same standards that Moses did, only he emphasized that they go deeper than Moses revealed. Moses said you should not commit adultery.

She said, yeah, you should not commit adultery, but you should not also look at a woman to lust after her because that's committing adultery in your heart. Moses said you should not murder, and she said, yeah, you should not murder if that's for sure, but you should not even be angry at your brother without a cause. In other words, your heart has got to reflect the righteousness of the law, not only your behavior, your heart and your behavior.

So we have really quite a standard given to us by Christ. It's not less stringent but more so than the law that God gave to Moses. Yet the law of Moses, as far as it went, was a good law, a righteous law.

Now, since we're not under the law, what good is it for us as Christians to concern ourselves with the book of Leviticus? Well, the book of Leviticus has a lot of reasons for us to pay attention to it. One is, as I have been saying, it reveals the character of God. When you find that God says, I don't want you to do this, I feel very strongly about it, you know how strongly? I want you to be put to death if you do that.

That's how strongly I feel about it. You find out what really, where his heart is about certain things. The law of God is the revelation of his character.

Now, it's not as perfect and complete a revelation of his character as Jesus is. Remember, Moses, in Exodus, said to God, show me your glory. And God says, no one can see my face and live, but I'll put you in this crevice of this rock, I will pass by.

After I've gone by, I'll let you look out and you can see my back parts or the afterglow of my passing by. This is all very figurative, but the idea is you get to see sort of a scaled down revelation of my glory, a scaled down revelation of who I am. And Paul talks about

this phenomenon in 2 Corinthians 3, and he says that Moses' face, when he saw this glory, which was indeed scaled down somewhat because he didn't see God's face.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul says it made Moses' face shine. And of course, it mentions that also in Exodus. And he says, but that glow, which was the glow associated with the Old Covenant, was a fading one.

But Christ, in the face of Christ, we see the full glory of God, and that's not a fading glory. Now, what Paul is saying is that the glory of God revealed to Moses and through Moses in the Old Testament was good insofar as it went, but it wasn't the full picture. No one saw the face of God there.

But we did see the face of God in Jesus. In fact, a few verses later in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 6, Paul says, God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So Moses said to God, show me your glory.

God said, no one can see my face, and I'll show you something a little less than that. But Paul said, God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. In Jesus, we have the full frontal view of God's character.

We have the full revelation of God's character. The law gave only a partial revelation of it. But insofar as the law gave it, it was not inaccurate.

It just was not comprehensive. Many people thought, well, Jesus, what we see in Jesus is in conflict with what we see in Moses. You know, Moses had people go and kill the Canaanites.

Moses had people put people to death for sins that we wouldn't do that. And yet Jesus, he never killed anybody. He never ordered anyone to be put to death.

So the vision of God we get from Jesus is superior and even contradictory to the vision of God in the Old Testament. However, people who say that aren't thinking very clearly. Jesus never gave instructions to nations as a whole or to their governors or their leaders.

Leviticus, when it says put such people to death, put such people to death, it's talking about how the judges and the magistrates, the rulers, enforce the law and enforce the penalties of the law. Jesus never addressed a ruler or a governor and telling them how to enforce law or not to. Jesus spoke to his disciples.

When Jesus said, you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, which of course comes from the law, he says, but I say to you, do not resist the evil man, but if man strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. Jesus was not taking away the law, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. That was the law that the judges were to enforce.

If you struck money in the face and I lost my eye and I took you to court about it, the judge was supposed to dictate what the sentence should be for your crime of assault. And the crime was, I lost my eye, you lose your eye. That's what the judge was supposed to enforce.

But Jesus says, but you, the victim, don't have to take him to court. You can just turn the other cheek. The point here is Jesus is giving his disciples instructions about how to live, how to relate to their enemies.

He's not telling magistrates to close down the courts, close the jails, end all criminal prosecutions because suddenly you're supposed to not resist the evil man and just turn the other cheek. What kind of government would that be if there were no courts of law and no punishments for criminals? Jesus is not addressing that. Jesus is not contradicting Leviticus or other parts of the law that tell the magistrates how to enforce the criminal code.

Jesus didn't give instructions to anybody who held a position in government that would be in a position to enforce criminal codes. He's talking to fishermen and peasants and people about how to live with those people that are not friendly to them and who exploit them and so forth. He is not taking away from anything the Old Testament said about criminal justice systems.

Now, Jesus might have modified the criminal justice system for all we know, but we'll never know because he never addressed it. And for people to say that Jesus contradicts Moses, no, when Jesus said, You have heard an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say, he's not saying an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is no longer a good code any more than when he said, You have heard that it was said you should not commit adultery or you should not commit murder. He's not saying, But I say, Do commit murder.

Do commit adultery. He's not saying that. He is not arguing that the law was wrong.

He's saying there's such a thing as going beyond what the law requires. The law forbids you to commit adultery. I say, Don't even think about it.

The law says, Don't murder. I say, Don't even think about it. Don't even want it.

The law says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I say, Don't even go to court. If you do go to court, then the judges have to use some standard, and there's no suggestion in Jesus that an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, is not a good standard.

He just says, You, as the plaintiff, can let it go. Just let it go. Jesus said, If a man wants to sue you and take away your coat, give him your cloak also.

Don't fight him. Stay out of the courts. Jesus is not reorganizing the courts or the criminal

justice system or redefining penalties for crimes.

He's telling his disciples, Don't even bother with the courts. Just absorb the injury and go your way. That's loving your neighbor.

But what is it for a judge to love his neighbor? Suppose a man who's a serial killer is brought before a judge. He's been arrested. A penalty has to be assigned.

And the judge says, You know, I'm feeling very loving today, so I'm just going to let you go. Is that very loving? The man's going to go out and kill a bunch of other victims. Now, obviously, criminals have to be prosecuted.

Anyone who's in the position to govern and to enforce the criminal justice code is not loving if they let perpetrators go free. That's not justice, and that isn't love. It's extremely unmerciful to the victims, both past and future.

So Jesus, when he talks about mercy and love your neighbor and don't resist the event, he's not talking to judges and law enforcement people. Judges and law enforcement people still have to protect the public, and that still means taking criminals out of circulation. But Jesus didn't talk about that.

It wasn't on his list of things to talk about because he didn't have an audience that that would apply to. He wasn't talking to the judges. So those who think that Jesus contradicts Leviticus in this, they don't understand either Leviticus or Jesus, probably neither.

They're certainly misunderstanding one of the two and very possibly both. In my experience, most Christians misunderstand both Jesus and Leviticus because most Christians seem to misunderstand most of the Bible. And that's a tragic thing because it's not necessary.

If they would study and think and harmonize things in Scripture and think things through, they would know that they're making a mistake in that assessment. We do have a revelation of the character of God in the law, in Leviticus, and we learn the heart of God. It's just that we get a better picture, a more full picture, of the heart of God in Jesus.

But the one in the Old Testament is not wrong. It's simply not as complete. It doesn't go as far.

And we do have there, as I said, the inspired civil law code. And by civil law, I mean, again, what criminal justice system would enforce. And if we think, well, but I think those penalties are excessive.

Well, God didn't think they were excessive, and I think he's more in touch than we are with what behavior really deserves. If you look at Deuteronomy, where God, a little later than Leviticus, is talking about the same laws that are given in Leviticus, he warns Israel

in Deuteronomy 4, verses 5 through 8, he says, Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding, in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes.

And they will say, Surely this is a great nation and a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments, as are all this law which I set before you this day? So he's saying, the laws that God has given you are wisdom, they are justice, they are your wisdom as a nation. The other nations don't have these just laws, because they don't have God to tell them what's right and wrong.

Don't let these things slip away, he says, because you'd be giving up your special insight into reality and into justice. God has given you these things, enlightened pagans will look on and say, Boy, these Israelites, they really have got a special privilege. A God who tells them what's right and wrong, gives them these great laws.

Now, of course, we read these laws today in the 21st century, and very few people think, Oh, these are great laws. Most of them think these are crazy laws. These are barbarian laws.

But that's only because we're judging them by a sliding standard, which is sliding very rapidly currently in our culture. At a time when the Bible was still more or less accepted as the word of God in Western civilization, frankly, these things did seem a little more severe than what Western civilization was supposed to enforce. For example, we're not supposed to kill people for breaking the Sabbath.

Israel was different. They were holy. They had different standards.

But still, the laws that God gave Israel were not considered to be crazy at a time when culture was more amenable to what the scripture says. And there has never been a time in my understanding of American history where the American culture has been as far removed as it is today from sympathies with God's way of thinking. And, again, that places a far greater responsibility on us to remain loyal to what God says so that somebody will, so that the witness for righteousness and truth is not lost completely in a culture.

There's also a law in Leviticus that is mentioned kind of in passing. It doesn't receive great emphasis in Leviticus, but it stands out to us like a gem shining in a dark place. It is Leviticus 19, 18, where God said, You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge.

Now, that sounds like Jesus, doesn't it? So, you see, Jesus didn't disagree with the law.

He told people not to take vengeance, not to bear grudge. That sounds like Jesus talking about turning the other cheek.

Of course, here he's talking to common citizens. And he says, You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Now, that line, You shall love your neighbor as yourself, is kind of tucked away in there in a longer sentence, surrounded by other sentences that are different than it. And it just kind of goes by if you read the chapter through. If you've never read the New Testament, that line will not stand out as it does for us today.

Everyone in Western civilization, Christian or non-Christian, knows You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. When I have conversations with atheists, and I say, You know, if you don't believe there's a God, how can you determine what's right or wrong? They say, Well, you just naturally know you should treat others the way you should treat yourself. As if that's instinctive in people, as if that's natural, as if that's what evolution has taught the species.

No, what evolution teaches the species is survival of the fittest, not treat your neighbor as you love yourself. Do lions treat impalas as they treat themselves? Hardly. It's, you know, nature is bloody in tooth and claw, you know.

There is no such standard in the animal world, nor naturally in the human world, except among some of the more religious or philosophical types. There are philosophers in other religions, besides Judaism and Christianity, that have said similar things. In fact, the highest moral thinkers in all societies have said something very much like it.

But the thing is, it's not what people instinctively think. We do because we live in a society that's shot through with Christian influence for the past many centuries. We think everybody knows this.

We think that's the obvious. What makes that seem so to us? It's because when Jesus was asked, what is the great commandment? He said, well, there's two I got to give you. One comes from Deuteronomy 6. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And there's another one like it, still up there at the top of the most important commandments. It's you shall love your neighbors as you love yourself. It takes that one line at the end of that one verse in Leviticus.

It says that is one of the greatest two commandments. He said, on these two together, the whole law and the prophets hang. And not only does Jesus say that, Paul says it, James says it.

It's interesting that this command is repeated or cited eight times in the New Testament.