

A VERY PERSONAL GOD

Leviticus 15

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We want to remember that this is the third major section in the Book of Leviticus. Chapters 11–15 contain laws that had to do with clean versus unclean, called laws of purification. Chapter 11, laws pertaining to food. Chapter 12, laws pertaining to uncleanness regarding childbirth. Chapter 13–14, laws related to skin diseases including leprosy. And chapter 15, laws related to bodily discharges. This chapter really has to do with four different phases of bodily discharges. I'm going to just read selected verses to give you a sampling of the chapter.

There are two discharges pertaining to men. One long-term and one short-term duration. Verses 1–3, “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “When any man has a bodily discharge, the discharge is unclean. Whether it continues flowing from his body or is blocked, it will make him unclean. This is how a discharge will bring uncleanness””” (NIV). There’s a whole set of laws about how anything the person touches will make someone else unclean if they touch it. At the end of the time of his uncleanness when the discharge clears up then he is to bring sacrifice.

A second way that these laws of discharge apply are in verse 18 of Leviticus 15, “When a man lies with a woman and there is an emission of semen, both must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening” (NIV).

The third classification comes in verse 19 and following, “When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening” (NIV).

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Then a fourth category is in verse 25, “When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period” (NIV).

Finally, verse 31 is kind of a summary verse, “You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them” (NIV).

I’ll never forget my experience with the Book of Leviticus ten years ago. I preached through the book of Leviticus in 1972. In the five or six months I preached through Leviticus and Numbers the church grew from around a hundred to three hundred people. It was remarkable to see the Spirit of God at work preaching through these chapters of the Old Testament. I really protested to the Lord when I began to feel the rising up of the Spirit within me to preach through the Book of Leviticus. I said, “It can’t be done unless it’s done allegorically and I can’t buy that.” It was like the Spirit said, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). You either believe that it’s profitable or it isn’t.” So I was willing to try. But there was one other objection I had. That was Leviticus 15. I didn’t have the foggiest idea how I would even read Leviticus 15 in public let alone preaching from it. Today I even fought with reading it. Part of that is my background that there are some things you just don’t talk about in public. You just don’t mention. Then the other thing is the Lord saying, “That’s part of My word. I want it to be read how my ancient people read it; they read it publicly. And how dare you to take upon yourself to be an editor of My word, and afraid to read what I caused to be written.” It was a dilemma. I felt the Lord say to me at that time ten years ago, “I’m not going to tell you how to preach Leviticus 15. Preach the first fourteen chapters. When you get to Leviticus 15 I’ll tell you

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what to do.” I felt that inwardly. It wasn’t an audible voice but I just felt it was the Lord talking to me so I was willing to try.

I’ll never forget the Monday morning. I had preached on Leviticus 14 the day before and I came to my office Monday morning the first thing, and I couldn’t wait to get into my Bible and hear what God was going to give me for that chapter. He gave me a title, which I use again today. “A Very Personal God.”

There are people who think God is very remote and He doesn’t know what’s going on. That He’s not concerned about the details of our life. If you’re ever tempted to think that way pull out Leviticus 15 and read it because God knows you right well. He knows your plumbing system. He knows everything there is to know about you. He is near and individual and personal.

When I said I preached through Leviticus ten years ago it doesn’t mean I’m preaching the same sermons. Every sermon is totally different. I think I’m learning more. The great thing about studying the Bible is as you keep studying it, it becomes more living and you keep seeing more. So what I want to do today is different than ten years ago. But I want to start out by simply saying God is very personal and we may return to that kind of theme.

There are four things that are going on in this passage. Four truths that God was meaning to teach His people.

I. The first is God acts to protect the health of His people.

That’s the focus of the first fifteen verses. In those first fifteen verses what is at issue is a discharge from a man. It’s very clear to see from the text that these discharges are sexual in nature. They have to do with anything that a man sits upon. In verses 6,9, and 10 it has to do with articles of bedding and clothing and saddles that the man would sit upon. The affected part is what he sat upon. What is really being described, all the modern commentators are agreed upon

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this, are the symptoms of gonorrhea. Gonorrhea is in fact the number one venereal disease in America today. It's been estimated upwards to fifteen million persons in our country are affected by venereal disease, gonorrhea being the leading venereal disease. The U.S. Health code requires that at least sixty diseases be reported to health officers. The most commonly reported disease by doctors is gonorrhea. The second most commonly reported is chicken pox. And the third most commonly reported is syphilis. In Orange County alone, of reported instances there are 361 persons out of every 100,000 who have some form of gonorrhea or syphilis. Over 7,100 cases reported last year of gonorrhea; 50 percent and more were coming from young people under 24 years of age. That's an epidemic. In fact someone has said that today venereal diseases or sexually transmitted diseases are not only epidemic, they are pandemic. If it were the case that there were fifteen million people in America that were reported to have small pox or even two million people there would be a panic in this country like you wouldn't believe. But there is a panic in this country in a quiet kind of epidemic. The Scriptures deal with that here in the first fifteen verses of this chapter in the Book of Leviticus.

God simply requires that a person who is so infected be unclean and not be touched. Of course He has in mind the preservation of people in terms of their health. And He also has in mind the preservation of babies. The reason why when babies are born that silver nitrate is put in their eyes is that because if babies are not so treated and their parents have gonorrhea, the baby is infected and will lose its eyesight within days and will permanently be blind for its life. The Old Testament didn't have the advantage so here was God acting to protect His people and to isolate the person who was infected.

They're not put outside the camp like a person with a transmittable skin disease. Rather they were restricted within the camp.

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II. The second thing that is happening in this chapter is God makes a difference between the morality of His people and the morality of the world.

That's verses 16–18. Scriptures that seem very strange to us. Verses 16–18 make it seem that there is something wrong with the expression of sexuality between man and wife. That it's something unclean. Yet when you look at these Scriptures in light of the cultural context of Israel you see at least three reasons why God gave these prohibitions.

A. The first reason is the backdrop of Canaanite religion. Almost all of Near Eastern religions of the time in which we're reading in the Old Testament, almost all the religions associate sexuality as part of religious worship; so that the place of worship is the place of sexual license and promiscuity. One worshipped God by having a sexual experience. God did not want His people to be like the Canaanites. He said to them, I'm driving the Canaanites out of the land because of their abomination. If you do the same thing I'll drive you out of the land. What God was doing in this particular regulation was insuring that no one would associate sexuality with the temple or the tabernacle by somehow introducing sexual forms of practice in religious worship. So that He required a waiting time after sexual experiences before even one could come to worship. He was making a distinction between His people and the people of the world who thought they encountered God in sexual experience.

B. The second reason why these regulations are given in verses 16–18 was to place prostitutes in society in a perpetual state of uncleanness and thereby depriving them of social respectability. Anyone who came in contact with them was unclean. They were unclean. Therefore the regulations helped undergird family life.

C. A third thing going on was that with married couples the uncleanness till evening allowed time for married individuals to contemplate the significance of their relationship to one another.

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One in the Old Testament by this regulation did more thinking about the sexual relationship after the sexual activity than before. God did not allow the sexual relationship to be just a matter of moments and then the significance is over; He required time for them to contemplate. He seeks to insure that each person is treated as a person and not as an object. A principle that still holds true.

III. A third major purpose that this chapter had is that God sought restraint in relationship between the sexes prior to marriage and consideration of the husband for the wife within marriage.

That's the focus of verses 19–24. We again recognize that our culture is very much different from the Old Testament culture. In the Old Testament culture married women did not have the degree of menstruation that would be common in our culture. Men and girls were married at a relatively young age and had an immediate pregnancy after marriage. Since large families were desired, they were pretty much having children all through their married relationship.

This regulation primarily affected teenage girls who were unmarried. The focus of it was that a young man would not know whether the girl he liked would be in a state of cleanness or uncleanness at any given time. If he were seeking to be sensitive to or not worship God in an unclean condition he would avoid physical contact. So it was a means of creating a barrier between the sexes until that barrier would be released through marriage.

Also for wives it meant that in a society where women worked hard that once every month a woman would have complete week off of all chores of cooking and everything else. She was in a condition of uncleanness and it as God's way of providing a vacation.

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IV. A fourth kind of thing that is going on in this passage in verses 25–30 is that God provided a time of rest for a woman who was ill and in a continually hemorrhaging condition.

Because of a hemorrhaging condition, the process of death was really at work in her. Again, here's the imagery of the tabernacle being in the center of Israel's encampment. Any uncleanness was moving a person away from the center. Death moves you away from the center. As long as she had a hemorrhaging condition she was in a case of uncleanness because her condition of death was moving her away from the place of holiness. Therefore when the condition ended she would need to offer sacrifices to symbolize that the condition of death has ended and she can now come back into the nearer presence of God.

A preacher must always answer two questions if his sermon is going to relate. The first question is, "What *did* the text say," and the second question is, "What *does* the text say?"

What did the text say? Look at what God meant when He first gave the word to the people to whom He gave it. He tries to exegete it rightly. Use good hermeneutical principles. But if you only answer the question, "What did the Scripture say," what you end up with is a boring historical lecture. That's why so many sermons on the kings of Israel put us to sleep.

The second question is "What *does* the Scripture say? What's the *relevance* of the Scripture?"

Some people never bother to answer the first question. Because they don't they wind up with heresy. Whatever you feel like talking about you get up and talk about it, but you find a Scripture to support your point of view.

Somehow there has to be a balance. It's important what the Scripture *said* and it's important what the Scripture *says*. What we're trying to do on this series of Leviticus is go back through

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and look at whatever the regulation was and find in it the enduring eternal principle which we can apply to here and now.

We'll try to look for a moment at what the Scripture says to us. It's nice that we know what it meant but now we want to apply it to our lives.

V. These applications it seems to me are called for.

A. First the Lord calls His people to a standard of holiness different from the world. It's very clear in looking at this passage that God was asking His people to have a different kind of lifestyle than that of the world. He makes distinctions between the Israelites and the Canaanites. And He makes distinctions between us and the world.

B. The second application coming out of this for me is that the initiative for reporting an unclean condition lay with the affected person. The Lord didn't create a police state in Leviticus 15. He did not authorize people to go into people's tents and see what was going on. It was the person that was affected that was responsible for coming and saying, I'm in an unclean condition and I must do something about it.

Isn't that how God works with us spiritually? He doesn't send somebody our way. He leaves it up to us to be convicted by His Word and then to take steps that move us toward Him, to say, "I own up in my life there is a condition of uncleanness."

As I look at this Scripture I want to ask what in my life is happening that would move me away from God. Am I allowing things in my life that are moving me away from God and therefore defiling me? And in the process of defiling me, affecting my relationship with other people as well? The Old Testament teaches us consistently that whenever our relationship with God is not right it impacts our relationship with other people.

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C. A third thing that I think this text is saying is that a state of uncleanness moves you away from God but it also moves God toward you. That you can see from the New Testament. In the Old Testament, a state of uncleanness moves you away from God, but when you look at Jesus you find that the state of uncleanness moves Jesus towards you. At the same time you're moving away from Him, He's trying to move towards you.

There's an incident in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke that tells the story of the woman who had the hemorrhaging condition for twelve years. Mark says she had gone to many physicians and they hadn't been able to help her. She spent all she had. Luke said they'd done all they could. She got worse rather than better. She, by the terms of Leviticus 15, was unclean. Anything that she touched was unclean. And any person she touched was unclean. I think one of the neatest moments in all of the Gospels is picturing this woman as she decides she's going to move towards Jesus and He's moving past her and she's going to get to Him. I'm sure there were many proud Pharisees in the crowd that day that would never think of being defiled, wouldn't think of being unclean. And totally unknown to them was that woman pushing people aside, defiling scribe after scribe. And they never knew it. Finally she gets to Jesus; she prostrates herself, I think, and puts her hand on the edge of His garment, thinking, If I can just touch it I'll be made well. Jesus stopped her. Under ceremonial law she had just defiled Him and made it impossible for Him to worship in the temple for that day. She had made Him unclean. Jesus turned to her and said, "Your faith has made you well." No longer was Jesus defiled. In the New Testament the power of Jesus takes care of the cleanness and He defiles the uncleanness. The energy is flowing in the opposite way.

Jesus calls us out to be salt and light in the world, not just to gather in community. We can't be contaminated by the world. We're to infect the world with salt and light. Whenever we think

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we're moving away from God, God's moving toward us. That's why Jesus touched lepers, He touched the dead, and He touched the woman with the hemorrhaging condition because He reaches out and touches us in our uncleanness.

One of the things that happens to us when we do wrong or when we fail God is it's terribly hard to get up and go to church and feel like a terrible hypocrite for being here. Or it's hard to pray to God or read the Bible or whatever. But that's the precise time God is moving toward us. When we feel like moving away from Him, He's moving toward us.

D. I think a fourth thing out of this passage is that temptation to sin often involves taking a short cut to a desired goal instead of trusting and obeying God.

Leviticus 15 has a lot to do with sexual relationships. I find so often is the case people fall into sexual sin because they're attempting to take a short cut to what God allows as a legitimate experience within marriage. But the person will take a short cut and will wonder why their life is so devastated. It seems to me that most all temptation involves taking a short cut to something that God allows. But by taking the short cut it becomes wrong to us.

Let me give a biblical example: Jesus in the temptations. The first temptation was simply this: "Turn these stones into bread." Bread is legitimate. It's ok to eat. It's ok to be strengthened. But turning the stones into bread was to call upon Jesus to take a short cut. The long way around was to trust in the Father, to trust that God the Father knew His need and would provide for Him. The shortcut was for Jesus to short-circuit His humanity through a divine act and turn the stones into bread. It was to act presumptuously. It was to say, "Father, You're not coming through and I can't wait for You any more because if I wait for You any more I'll die." It's a short cut. But He resisted that temptation because He refused to take a short cut. To steal is a short cut to something financial instead of working for it, instead of investing for it. Instead of taking the

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time to get the product one simply takes the short cut and gets it and he becomes wrong in the process.

In terms of sexual experience, adultery and fornication are simply saying, "I cannot trust God to meet these needs in my life. I cannot trust God to work out my relationships so I'll take matters in my own hands. I'll do it." What the temptation really amounts to is taking a short cut to get to something which God may have all along wanted us to have but we take matters into our own hands and take a short cut.

It's a temptation for Christian ministry; you look at the number of hurting Christian ministries. You hear financial appeals all the time. The temptation is enormous to use short cuts to get money, to start promising people gimmicks. To start recognizing people for what they give. To start manipulating people. To start twisting their arms. To do anything in order to get the bucks to keep the ministry going. God could care less about keeping the ministry going. He is more concerned with keeping His name exalted. When somehow ministry becomes bigger than His name we're in bad trouble.

The temptation to use a short cut. Cheating is a form of a short cut. It's stealing something in order that you can pass the test rather than going through the legitimate work of learning the material and passing the course.

The Lord calls us away from short cuts to a dependence and a trust in Him. To rely on Him and see Him at work in our lives.

Leviticus is a marvelous scripture. It says that God is very personally aware and concerned about our lives and that He can speak to us and that His Word, all parts of it, is profitable for our correction, our instruction, our training in righteousness.

Closing Prayer

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Our Father, You've taught us to call You "Father"; we need to trust in You. We take stock momentarily to inventory our life. Any area where we are attempting to solve something without depending upon You. Or where we got tired of waiting for You to come through. Or where we've gotten upset with you because You haven't done it our way. We become angry. We bring that to You now. We ask that You will teach us anew to trust in You. Trust in You with all of our heart, to lean not to our own understanding, to acknowledge You in all our ways, knowing that You will direct our path. Help us to truly be Your people, a holy people, a people set aside for You. Lord, as there are persons here this morning who have felt in their own life that they have moved away from you, we've brought to them today Your word that tells each of us that You never move away from us and that You are always moving towards us—the Good Shepherd in search of sheep who are lost or hurt. Move toward us, Lord, in these moments and make Yourself present and known to us. Help us in the issues of today to distinguish between being Christian from being a non-Christian. Help us to be able to take stands on issues without being pharisaical or hypocritical. Help us to make commitments that don't sound holier than thou. Help us to make righteous commitments that are based upon the fact that we are servants with a towel in hand ready to wash people's feet. Keep us tough and keep us tender. Move upon us, Lord, with Your own spirit of justice and mercy. Move in us as we come in these moments of prayer and consecration. We know that You are here. We pray that all the needs that You want to minister to today—physical or spiritual or mental—You will be here to meet every need of each person who comes and responds. We ask in the name of our Lord. Amen.