

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Case Laws, Leviticus

Session 13, 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, let's talk about Leviticus. For a lot of people, it's that one book in the Bible they just skip, you know? It feels ancient, really strange, and maybe even a little irrelevant to our lives today. But what if I told you there's a secret key, a single idea that makes the whole thing click? Well, that's what we're going to uncover.

I mean, let's just put it out there. When you think of Leviticus, what comes to mind? Probably a huge list of really weird rules, right? Why can't you eat pork? What's this thing about not mixing fabrics? And why on earth is so much of it about skin diseases and bodily functions? It's a totally fair question, and it's the exact puzzle we're going to solve. So, before we get to the solution, we've got to really understand the problem.

Let's take a quick look at exactly why this ancient book can feel so, well, so baffling to us today. Just look at some of these. You've got rules against eating everyday foods like pork, rules that say a woman is unclean after doing something as natural as having a baby, even rules about what kind of physical condition a priest has to be in.

To our modern ears, it just sounds completely arbitrary. And you know what? Without the right key, it is. So, what is this magic key? It's one single powerful concept that gives the logic to everything else in the book, and that idea is holiness.

The second you really get what Leviticus means by holy, the whole system just starts to make a surprising amount of sense. Now, here's the absolutely crucial point. When we hear holiness, we usually think of moral purity, like being a really good person.

But that's not the primary meaning here. The Hebrew word *kadosh*, its root idea is to be totally other. It's about being separate, distinct, completely unique.

God is holy because he is in a category all by himself. There's nothing else like him. This verse from Isaiah just nails it, doesn't it? It's a rhetorical question, and the answer is obvious.

No one. There is nothing in the entire universe you can compare God to. He is utterly unique, totally other.

That is the heart of his holiness. But, and this is a huge but, you might think separate means distant or unapproachable. Not at all.

In fact, this is where it gets really mind-blowing. This totally other, high and lofty God chooses to live not with the powerful and the perfect, but with the broken and the humble. It's this amazing paradox right at the center of the whole book.

Okay, so if God is holy, totally separate, and he wants to live among people, how does that even work? Well, Leviticus lays out a kind of map for reality. It organizes the entire world into three distinct zones, or states of being. Let's break them down.

So everything and everyone exists in one of these three states. Clean is the default. It's the normal, everyday state for the average Israelite.

Holy is a step up. Things and people who are specially set apart for God's presence, like the priests or the tabernacle itself. And then there's unclean, which is a state of ritual impurity.

Now it's super important to know this doesn't mean sinful. It just means you're in a state that's not compatible with holiness in that moment. And here's the cool part.

You weren't stuck in one state forever. The book lays out really clear rituals for moving between these zones. If you were unclean and wanted to get back to the normal state of clean, you'd go through a cleansing ritual, usually with water or a sacrifice.

And to go from clean to holy, well, you had to be sanctified or made special, often with anointing oil. So why all the fuss? Think of it this way. Your approach matters, right? You wouldn't just stroll into the Oval Office and slap the president on the back the way you would with your best friend.

The status of the person changes the protocol for how you approach them. Leviticus is just applying that same logic to God. If God is totally other, then getting close to him requires a certain care, a certain respect, a specific protocol.

So now that we have this framework, this map of holy, clean, and unclean, we can finally go back to those weird rules and see how they fit. They're not random at all. They are part of this system.

So why were some things considered unclean? Well, scholars have a few main theories. For some rules, it was about being culturally distinct, making sure Israel didn't just blend in with its pagan neighbors. Others clearly had hygienic benefits, like rules about waste disposal that would have been amazing for public health.

But the big one, the idea that seems to explain the trickiest laws, is this concept of wholeness or normalcy. Things that fit neatly into their created categories were clean. And you can see this logic perfectly in the kosher food laws.

It's brilliant. For a land animal to be normal or clean, it had to have two things: a split hoof, and it had to chew the cud. A cow is clean.

But a pig has the split hoof, but it doesn't chew the cud. It blurs the categories, so it's unclean. Same with sea creatures.

The norm was fins and scales. So a lobster, which crawls on the seafloor, is an anomaly. It's unclean.

See? It's a system of order. And listen, you have to understand, these were not just friendly suggestions. Crossing that boundary into God's holy space in the wrong way, violating that protocol of approach, was seen as incredibly dangerous.

The sheer power of God's holiness could be destructive if it wasn't treated with the ultimate respect. And the text gives us some pretty stark warnings about this. You've got the story of Nadab and Abihu, two priests who offered what's called an unauthorized fire in the tabernacle, and they were instantly consumed by fire from God.

Or how about Uzzah? He just instinctively reached out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant when it looked like it might fall, just trying to help. But he touched the holiest object uninvited, and he was struck dead on the spot. And then there's King Uzziah.

He got arrogant and tried to perform a duty that was only for the priests. His punishment? He was immediately struck with leprosy. The message could not be clearer.

You do not treat the holy lightly. So after all of this, the rules, the zones, the consequences, what's the big takeaway? What is Leviticus really trying to tell us? Well, it's actually something incredibly profound. Here it is.

The ultimate point of Leviticus is to completely erase that line we love to draw between the sacred parts of our lives, like church or prayer, and the so-called secular parts, like our job, our meals, our family life. By giving rules for every single aspect of existence, the book is teaching that all of life is lived in the presence of a holy God. And because of that, all of life is sacred.

And that really leaves us with a final, pretty challenging question. Let's forget the specific ancient rules for a second and just think about the principle. What would it actually look like for us today to live as if nothing was truly secular? What if every single act, from how we work, to what we eat, to how we treat people, was seen as a sacred activity done in the very presence of the Holy One? That's the radical, world-changing vision of Leviticus.