

4 Things That Happen When You Study Leviticus More Than 10 Years

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October 17, 2014 | [Jay Sklar](#)

More By Jay Sklar

[How to Be Unholy as You Pursue Holiness](#)

What happens when you study Leviticus for more than 10 years? I know the types of answers many people would provide:

- “You get to know your psychotherapist really well.”
- “People stop inviting you to dinner parties.”

Or perhaps the most common:

- “Is this a serious question? Who in the world would do this?”

I did. And it changed my life in ways far different from those just named. In my experience, at least four profound things happen when this book begins to seep into your soul.

1. You hunger for God's holiness more frequently.

I once taught a semester-long seminary class on Leviticus. (Yes, people actually did sign up.) One of the last assignments of the class was to follow as many of the laws of Leviticus as possible for an entire week. This is, of course, something many Jews do regularly even today, but for Gentile seminary students—most of whom had never thought twice about having bacon with their eggs—this was a daunting task.

During that week, the students had to keep a journal of their experience and turn it into me. There were understandable frustrations. One student noted, “[Leviticus 19:19](#) says not to wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. That wipes out my entire wardrobe with the exception of a pair of polyester track pants. This is going to be a long week.” Others made similar observations.

But by far, the most common theme of the journals went something like this: “Every day, I found myself focused on thinking about ritual purity and impurity. Partway through the week, I realized that I was thinking about these things *all day long* and *in every aspect of my life*, and that’s when it hit me: God cares a lot about our purity and holiness. Not just from a ritual perspective, but also from a moral perspective. *All day long* and *in every aspect of life*, the Lord wants me to pursue purity in my heart, in my life, in my actions. He wants me to reflect his holiness in all that I do. I have been treating holiness way too lightly! O Lord, help me to be holy!” That’s the kind of prayer you begin to pray when you soak in Leviticus.

2. You fear God more greatly.

[Leviticus 10](#) begins by telling the story of Nadab and Abihu. It's a story my Hebrew students translated last semester. And it affected them deeply.

Nadab and Abihu were priests. This meant they had special duties in terms of leading God's people in worship. My students resonated because many of them are preparing to be pastors and will also have special duties in leading God's people in worship. As the story begins, Nadab and Abihu bring an offering the Lord had not commanded (10:1). The larger context shows that they tried to barge into the Most Holy Place—the throne room of the Lord—without being invited. If barging into the throne room of an earthly king was a severe breach of royal protocol and a tremendous sign of disrespect (cf. [Esther 4:11](#)), barging into the throne room of the King of heaven was unbelievably blasphemous.

The Lord guards his honor by sending out fire to consume the blasphemous priests ([Lev. 10:2](#)) and then gives this warning: “Amost those who approach me, I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people, I will display my glory” ([Lev. 10:3](#)). In short, the Lord is telling the entire priestly family, “If you do not set me apart by your actions as the God worthy of reverence, I will use your death as an opportunity to remind all the people that I am indeed the God who is to be revered above all.”

There was a moment of holy silence in class that day as this truth began to grip our hearts. It was clearer to us than ever before that we must not trifle with the Lord. And it was clearer to us than ever before that he holds those who lead his people in worship to an especially high account (cf. [James 3:1](#)). We could not help but fear him more greatly.

3. You love Jesus more deeply.

I began studying Leviticus when my wife and I moved to England so I could do a PhD in Old Testament under an evangelical scholar named Gordon Wenham. For three and a half years I was focused on what the books of Exodus to Numbers teach about sin and impurity, and what they teach about God's solution to these things.

About two years into my studies, something new began to happen to me in church. Whenever we sang a song that mentioned sacrifice, or atonement, or the Lord ransoming us from our sin, I struggled to make it through without crying. None of these ideas was new to me; I had been going to church all my life. But Leviticus helped me to see with even greater clarity how far the Lord has gone—in his love for guilty sinners like me—to provide a way of forgiveness.

This became especially clear in a verse like [Leviticus 17:11](#). It explains that the Lord allowed the Israelites to ransom their guilty lives from his judgment by offering the lifeblood of a perfect animal in place of their own. Significantly, the Lord emphasizes his role in providing atonement by adding an extra "I" in the verse: "And *I myself* have given [the animal's lifeblood] to you on the altar to make atonement for your lives." God turns the idea of sacrifice upside down! It was not just what the Israelites gave to the Lord. It was first and foremost something he gave to them, in his grace, as a means of atoning for sin and achieving the forgiveness they so desperately desired.

And it gets even better with Jesus. In the Old Testament, the Israelites still had to bring and present an atoning sacrifice to ransom their lives. In the New Testament, the offended King—in his unspeakably great love—provides the atoning sacrifice on behalf of the ones who sinned

against him! Paul summarizes beautifully: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!” ([Rom 5:8](#); cf. [John 3:16](#)).

And so, all these years later, I repeat [Leviticus 17:11](#) every time I partake of communion—and I still find it hard to sing songs about sacrifice without tears of thankfulness for Jesus, the one who “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” ([Eph. 5:2](#)).

4. You love your neighbor more fully.

One of the best known facts about the Bible is that it tells us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” One of the least known facts is that this verse is first found in [Leviticus 19:18](#). And when seen in context, it’s about a whole lot more than being nice and mowing our neighbors’ lawn when they’re sick.

If we look at the entire verse, it becomes clear that loving our neighbor involves forgiving the wrongs of others as quickly as we forgive our own: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” To love our neighbors means to extend mercy and forgiveness to those who wrong us, and to do so because we follow the Lord, the one who so richly and freely extends his mercy and forgiveness to us ([Ps. 86:5](#); [Jer. 3:12](#); [Ez. 33:11](#); [1 John 1:9](#)).

That’s not all. If we look at the surrounding verses, loving our neighbor broadens to include embodying the Lord’s holy character in all of our daily interactions, from business practices ([Lev. 19:9-10, 35-36](#)) to

courts of law (vv. 15-16, 35a) to family matters (vv. 3a, 29) to proper treatment of the poor and disadvantaged (vv. 9-10, 13-14, 33-34) to social interactions in general (vv. 11-12, 17-18, 32). To put it differently: loving our neighbors is not less than telling them about the glorious gospel of Jesus (the primary way I thought of loving my neighbor as a young Christian); but it does include far much more. Pursuing reconciliation, extending mercy, seeking justice in business dealings and courts of law—all these things become opportunities to love our neighbors by showing them God’s mercy, justice, and love.

So while Leviticus emphasizes the importance of maintaining distinctions between the sacred and the non-sacred, the holy and the non-holy, it also emphasizes that everyday acts of kindness and love and mercy are incredibly sacred, incredibly holy, because they show forth the incredible kindness, love, and mercy of the One who is ultimately sacred and holy.

This is not how I grew up thinking about holiness. But it is how Leviticus thinks about it. It is how Jesus thinks about it ([Luke 10:29-37](#)). What would happen in our churches if we all began to think of holiness in these ways?

We need more Leviticus.

Further resources from Sklar on Leviticus include:

