

“Dealing with those Unintentional Sins”

Sermon by Reverend James Brassard

Scripture: Leviticus 4:27-30

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<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

Leviticus 4:27-30 “If anyone of the ordinary people among you sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done and incurs guilt, when the sin that you have committed is made known to you, you shall bring a female goat without blemish as your offering, for the sin that you have committed. You shall lay your hand on the head of the sin offering; and the sin offering shall be slaughtered at the place of the burnt offering. The priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and he shall pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar.”

Yes, the central text for this morning's sermon is from Leviticus. Yes, this is highly unusual. Be thankful that you just had to hear the last section of chapter four, which deals with the sacrificial offerings required by the priest, the congregation, and the political leadership after the commission of sins. The section we just read talks about the sin of the “common person.” You heard some of the gory details of the young female lamb that must be purchased and sacrificed at the temple during the liturgy of repentance. These are not sweet parables of Jesus.

Although Christians confess that the whole Bible is instructive in faith and Christian living, preachers tend to preach the “**abridged version.**” Leviticus appears only in the unabridged version . . .

Two months ago my two daughters were asked to escort our former neighbor, thirteen year old Jason, into the synagogue at his bar mitzvah. My daughters used to provide after school care for Jason and his younger sister when we lived next door to them in New Jersey. Jason is kind of a geeky kid. The chance to be escorted into this huge social and religious gathering by two college girls was certainly a highlight of his young life. Bar mitzvahs are lengthy worship services that are followed by lavish parties. They are important rites of passage for observant Jewish youth—signifying the completion of years of training in Hebrew language and religious law.

To demonstrate his knowledge of the Hebrew bible, the Torah, Jason had to read a passage out of Leviticus 12 in Hebrew and then offer a short “sermon.” He was assigned Leviticus 12; he obviously didn't choose it. My daughters were aghast as they followed along in the English text printed in the bulletin as Jason read the Hebrew. For those of you who don't know, Leviticus 12 is about the required purification rituals following childbirth, menstruation or the handling of a dead body. Most of Leviticus deals with ritual cleanliness.

Aware that Jason would have to sermonize on this text, Lydia whispered to her sister, who was suppressing a laugh, “*You have got to be kidding! What do you say about that?*”

With all the courage Jason could muster he began his remarks saying, “*it is important to understand and obey the law*” because “*the Law keeps us safe.*” Jason then illustrated this by giving what Shaina called an “*appropriately incomprehensible example.*” He sat down. The Rabbi rushed forward to save the moment. “*What Jason meant is that it is important to have wise leaders with strong character to interpret the Holy Scriptures for the community.*”

The first challenge in reading Leviticus is that it gives you **TMI**—“too much information” about the elaborate system of laws and sacrifices in a highly ritualized and structured worshiping community. There is not enough about the bigger picture: the world in which the early Israelites lived and how they attempted to relate to God. Leviticus is full of mind numbing detail—all **tree bark and no forest**.

My Old Testament seminary professor, whose specialty was Leviticus and Numbers, suggested that if the priests who wrote Leviticus were to submit their manuscripts for publication in one of the religious publishing houses today they would receive a rejection letter stating: *“Thank you for submitting your manuscript, Leviticus. We’re afraid your work, while meticulous and carefully thought out, is not a good fit for the markets we serve. You might want to consider self publishing.”*

Apart from proof texting on hot button issues, such as homosexuality from the second half of the book, the Christian tradition has treated Leviticus as space travelers would treat a lifeless planet—it’s plotted on the navigational charts, but you wouldn’t actually want to go there.

Preachers and even knowledgeable laypeople quickly pass Leviticus by and move to more fertile parts of the Bible. Yet it is still there, part of the Pentateuch, the core of the Holy Scriptures for Jews. Even the young like Jason have to discern its wisdom.

I have yet to meet an Old Testament scholar of note who didn’t always tell his seminary students that the OT stands on its own as the word of God. I have been taught to cringe when the OT is used only as a reference point to enhance the New Testament or worse yet, as an example of how much superior are teachings of Jesus Christ. The venerable OT scholar Walter Keiser goes even further, *“Leviticus, more than any other Old Testament book, claims to be a divine word for humanity.”*

OK, quit stalling, what does this section of God’s word have to say to us?

First the big picture and then more precise lessons. The world envisioned in Leviticus is an **orderly world**, created and shaped by God’s purposes. It is a **ritual world** in which creation itself is established, sustained and restored through liturgies of worship. It is a **relational world**, wherein God invited humanity to share in the maintenance, development and restoration of creation. It is a world that is pretty foreign to 21st century Americans.

Last Tuesday I was part of a bus trip to ‘Sight and Sound’ theater outside Lancaster to see a theatrical production of the Book of Ruth. The production gave you a good feeling for the inter-related nature of life in ancient Israel. The land, one’s reputation, one’s heirs, one’s faith were guarded carefully by tradition and religious observance.

This purposeful creation and careful design by God is subject to the ravages of SIN. When humans commit moral or ritual sins, pollution, like an invisible airborne, gooey miasma, adheres to the community. It is a kind of invisible **dirt**—invisible but very real. If the community becomes too polluted by this goo, God will abandon it, with the result that the whole community’s life is at risk. So the whole community, priests, community leaders and common people must work together to keep the sanctuary as pollution free as possible. The health of the community depends on how this responsibility for cleaning the community is shared. This is the big picture. Leviticus 4 takes up the problem of sin and its consequences.

Our lives are more cosmopolitan these days. Most of us are not born in, and do not live and die in the same community—sharing the land with the same neighbors who practice the same religion.

So we tend to look at Israelites and sacrificial rituals as mere superstition and we also tend to make fun of sin. Mark Twain liked to tell a story about how he once stole a watermelon from a cart when the owner wasn't looking. He carried the watermelon to a secret spot, sat down, was just about to take a bite---then he realized he shouldn't have done it. So he got up, took the watermelon back---replaced it on the cart...and took a ripe one!

One glaring weakness of American Christianity is its individualism. We used to sing, "Jesus is just all right by me." If we look at sin, we only look at getting personal forgiveness from God. We are taught to think: if I am right with Jesus---then I am off the hook. The public consequences of my bigotry, my arrogance and pride, my non-involvement in the overall well-being of my community is not an issue. I am washed in the blood and I am right with God...end of the story!

This incomplete understanding of sin probably has its roots in "**American Exceptionalism.**" America was founded on the belief that we were the light to the world. When you see your nation as a guiding light, it is very easy to believe that you never really do anything wrong as a people. When you are pursuing lofty ideals the questionable means to that noble end are not seriously questioned.

Sin, personal and communal, are taken much more seriously in Leviticus. Here is the clincher! The **vast majority of sins are accidental and unintentional.** Think about the enormous number of sins we commit---they are just a drop in the bucket compared with the unintentional ones we commit.

Wait a minute---there is something here. When I look back it seems that most of my problems have not come from direct disobedience to God, not from a willful determination to do something wrong, but from my own arrogance in believing I am self sufficient.

- That I can live life on my own.
- That my personality is so wonderful that I don't hurt other people's feelings
- That I can resist temptation on my own.
- That my self-righteousness is not harmful.

I am sometimes shocked when I find out later that I said or did something that caused others a great deal of harm. Yes, accidental and unintentional sin is a big problem!

But unintentional sin is seldom recognized and rarely repented. There are exceptions. Just last week I was flagged and held accountable for an unintentional and accidental sin. I received a photo ticket in the mail---a nice picture of my car exceeding the 25 MPH speed limit in rush hour traffic coming home from visiting a church member at Washington Hospital Center. I had no choice but to repent and pay my \$50 fine.

Let's face it, an essential part of the health of a family, a church community, or a close business relationship is that when you discover you are guilty---you confess it. If you don't, a dangerous pollution enters the community, poisoning it and threatening its very survival.

Remember the story of Zaccheus, the corrupt but legally law abiding tax collector, that was too short to see Jesus so he climbed up into the sycamore tree to see him pass by. When he ate with Jesus he confessed his sin and offered to make restitution. "Half of what I have received I will give to the poor and all those I have defrauded I will pay back double."

How much more healing would have taken place if **Ken Lay had offered an apology** and some restitution for his sins. Instead he spent \$200,000 of his ill-gotten gains on his wife's last birthday celebration.

In the “**The Tipping Point,**” Malcolm Gladwell offers a theory on social changes. Gladwell demonstrates how context shapes character much more than we generally are willing to acknowledge. Kids heading off to college will soon find out. What was not permissible at home is generally accepted behavior on campus and without the carefully controlled parental environment the overall moral fabric of social life deteriorates. I won't go into detail because I don't want to horrify you parents. Social context shapes character and influences behavior. Religion is not just a personal matter.

Unintentional sins are those things we do that we don't recognize as sinful, or those things we fail to do that we should have done. These are the common persistent everyday sins that threaten the life of a community. The Bible's core assumption is that when, “**one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers; when one part flourishes, all rejoice together.**”) I Corinthians 12

My son Jonah is working out in California. His department is losing business due to one of their manufacturer's poor manufacturing quality. They have since corrected the problems but the damage is done. Top customers have lost faith in company and taken their business elsewhere. This has alarmed upper management and they asked Jonah to repair the breach by apologizing for the problems and by offering to do whatever is necessary to get the business back. Jonah called me and said, “Dad, I can't do it. I can't apologize for something I didn't cause. I don't even apologize for things I am responsible for.” “Tell me about it!” I responded. “But you have a choice. You can acknowledge that your company's lax quality control has cost your customers a lot of money. Someone needs to accept responsibility and try to make things right. If you are not willing to apologize for the company's “sin”- you might be out of a job.”

Success in life is about restoring damaged relationships. Occasionally we have to assume the stance of Dennis the Menace in one memorable cartoon. Dennis kneeling by his bed, hand folded, gazing up at heaven . . . his imploring look, “I'm here to turn myself in.”

Ever met someone with a knack for fixing broken things? Where does it come from? Certainly from experience and learning---but does it also come from *really listening*?

That's the way it was for one machinery repairman who worked in a large factory.

He left the lunchroom ten minutes early every day to stand in the middle of the room, close his eyes, and listen to the machinery. His ear caught every subtle sound the mechanism produced. He listened to every click, every vibration, or change in pitch. He became familiar with every sound the machines made, and could identify the first sign of a developing problem before it became apparent.

Occasionally, someone will get blindsided with divorce papers, a valued employee will just get up and quit after ten years, saying “they can't take it anymore”----and you never had a clue it was coming!

When it does, one of the problems that surfaces is **inattentiveness.**

Are you listening to the people around you?

Are you attentive to the unintentional and accidental sins that produce discord?

Yep—you can even find wisdom in the minutia of the book of Leviticus.