

## Gleanings from Leviticus, Number One

Reading through the Bible's book of Leviticus might be regarded by most people as less than exciting. The reader finds mostly material on the mechanics of the sacrificial system and law codes that seem jumbled, like a deck of cards shuffled, with rules for sexual morality interspersed with ritual laws and rules for relating faithfully to other people. Some of the prohibitions make little or no sense to us today because we can't figure out what is at stake.

Reading a chapter of Leviticus, I may come upon a short section (sometimes only a verse or two) that speaks profoundly to being faithful to God in our attitudes toward other people and treatment of them. That short section may, however, be followed abruptly by a rule that seems to have nothing to do with me or my life, such as spiritual contamination by contact with a dead animal. Then I come upon a regulation about use of the land for agriculture that offers a view wonderfully different from that of possession and consumption. Then, just as suddenly, I am back in the world of accidental contamination to be atoned for by the sacrifice of some designated animal or its substitute (for the poor who cannot afford to sacrifice a sheep or goat). In short, it's confusing and seems jumbled to the modern mind. Why doesn't Leviticus, I think, arrange its regulations by categories? To my way of thinking, it seems to be always jumping around in disorganized fashion.

One of the practices for which Leviticus sets requirements is gleaning, an ancient way of providing for the poor in an agricultural society, but we'll return to it later. Meanwhile, I'm borrowing the word to indicate a very unsystematic way of sifting through Leviticus in search of food for thought. My plan is to post these gleanings for us to think about and, maybe, talk about.

Here's the first. After five chapters of mostly regulations for making sacrifices, Leviticus offers this in chapter 6, verses 1-7:

1. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:
2. When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the LORD by deceiving a neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbor,
3. or have found something lost and lied about it--if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby--
4. when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found,
5. or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt.
6. And you shall bring to the priest, as your guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering.
7. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the LORD, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and incur guilt thereby.

Reading these seven verses, I hear anew that my life with God is not all about me. Leviticus stands before me this person called my neighbor. My relationship with God has a third party, my neighbor. Who is that person? This question will continue to be raised throughout the Bible until our understanding of it is radicalized by Jesus.

At this point in the early pages of Leviticus, I learn that my neighbor is someone I can deceive if I chose, but if I do, God will take it as a sin. God is patient. If I cheat my neighbor unconsciously or even accidentally, God will wait, but the time of reckoning must come. Even if no one knows what I have done and I have fooled myself into being unaware of the deception, God will wait for the truth to dawn in my mind. For that day, Leviticus provides a way to atone, to set things right with my neighbor and with God, for I have offended both.

I notice that in the view of Leviticus, justifying a situation means correcting it, not explaining it away. Forgiveness is tied to righting the relationship with my neighbor.

We live in a time when taking responsibility has come to mean standing tough and defying anyone to do anything about it. Accountability has become a buzz word for blame. Telling the truth has become confused with merely being believed by most of the people or even just by one's own supporters who also benefit from the lie.

True, Leviticus sees guilt in an almost physical way that was common to the ancient Near East but is strange to us. The Hebrew language speaks of words as though they were things, almost physical things with a concreteness and reality we struggle to understand. A curse was almost a weapon, and so to curse someone was viewed as an assault that could do real damage to the person. Likewise, a lie is almost a thing. We seem unlikely ever to take the spoken word as seriously as the ancient Israelites did, but maybe we could stand to take it a little more seriously than we do in this time of spin, credibility, and moral bravado without substance. They attributed almost physical substance to their words; we might do well to ask what kind of substance, if any, our society teaches us to attribute to words today.

Here in Leviticus, silence has substance, too. When is silence a lie?

Most of all, though, we are introduced to the neighbor whose presence is crucial to our relationship with God. Leviticus will have much more to say about our neighbor, and we may be in for some surprises.