



Dr. James C. Howell
Leviticus 6:1-7
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You've got to love Leviticus. It goes on and on, chapter after chapter like this. And it gives somebody like me, who talks for a living, pause. I think a lot about words, the value of words, the importance of words, the inadequacy of words. Words. Sometimes in church it's just so many words, isn't it? I talk, you talk. It's so many ideas, it doesn't seem substantial. You turn to the Book of Leviticus and you realize that the Israelite religion... They had words when they came together. The priest said something. But for them, when it came down to finding hope, to reconciling with others, to reconciling with God, it always involved something that you do. Something that you could touch, something that you could smell, something tangible, something very, very real. I realize I could not have been a priest in Old Testament times. There's just a lot of blood involved, and you know, if you have a scrape and you're bleeding, I'm not really the person to call... Lisa's first C-section, I got more medical attention than she did. Don't do well with blood. But in Israel, there was a lot of blood, and, actually, all people then were accustomed to blood because they depended on livestock for their living. But we live this sanitized, cemented-over existence, don't we? In ancient Israel, they knew the value of blood, and what they believed, get this, what they believed is that the blood in an animal and the blood in you, it belongs to God, and that hidden in that blood is the very life and power of God, and if the blood is shed, you don't have God's life or power in you anymore. They believe that when blood was shed, the power of God, the mercy of God, was miraculously released and it had a healing power. Their faith was so tangible. They believe that if you were a shepherd and you had some sheep, get this, that those sheep didn't belong to you, they really belonged to God, and God in God's goodness lets you have those sheep for a time, and the way that you showed your gratitude to God for letting you have a flock of sheep is that... You would not take the runt of the litter that you didn't need, that was not doing very well to sacrifice. No, the one that you had to offer up at sacrifice was the best, the strongest, the stud, the Tyler Hansbrough of the lot. This is an idea... The reason that you did this, of course, is that you were showing your faith in God, that you didn't trust just in what you could see, but you trusted in the power of God for the future of your flock, and you showed your deep gratitude to God not by sacrificing the runt but by sacrificing the one that you really treasured, that is really valuable to you. The other thing that Leviticus makes provision for is when things go wrong between people. You've got to do something. It's got to be something tangible. It's got to matter to you. If my ox, according to Leviticus, gores your ox, you get to keep my ox. You have to make reparations for what goes wrong. I've wanted to translate this into modern terms. I can't quite get it. Let's say you're driving your car and you're texting as you're driving and you run into my car, I get to keep your car. Or you're running a company and you run it in a really dumb way and it causes me to have mortgage trouble and I lose my home, I get your house. You make reparation. But one of the things that we know about the making of reparation is that it's never enough. If you've really hurt somebody, if you really have a damaged relationship, you can't do enough to make up for it, can you? There's always some residue of guilt. You cannot fully make up for wrongs.

I had a couple in my office a number of years ago, and the man had done a terrible thing indeed to his wife, and he got found out, and after he got found out, he started trying to make it

up to her. He suddenly was sending her flower every day, he was buying her nice presents. He suddenly became the uber husband. He was cooking and cleaning, things he had never done before he got caught doing what he was doing, and he is just doing everything that he can to try to make it up for her, which was impressive in a way. But I had them in front of me, and he's protesting with her about this. He's saying, "I've done this and this and this to try to make up for it." And then he said, "What do you want, my blood?" And I said, "She ought to get your blood for that." The Old Testament knows that you need blood. That we make reparation, we do what we can to make up for something that is wrong, but Leviticus teaches us that at the end of the day, you can't do enough, that you need to shed blood. You need the power of God, you need the grace of God. When relationships are broken, we can't make it up ourselves, can we? Some blood has to be shed. That's why those people who understood livestock and blood so much were so impressed by the death of Jesus. Here was the best of the best. The best of the best of the best, the Holy, pure, perfect, beautiful son of God, and he was crucified, and His blood that poured out, they saw released in that the power, the mercy of God, and they believed that it healed them. They believed that it healed them, and it gave them hope. It's what we need.

Now, we say, Do something. Do something. Religion's got to be doing something, it's not just words. As soon as we say that, we realize that religion has a little bit of a bad name because religion through history has made people feel guilty about dumb stuff, and we've asked people to do dumb stuff or not to do dumb stuff and we're just an embarrassment to ourselves. You know, at times Christian leaders have said, No dancing, no dancing. It reminds me of the old joke, I know some of you have heard this from my lips. The guy comes in to the Methodist preacher and says, Can Methodists dance? And the answer is, Some can and some can't.

Cards. When I was growing up, religious people would say, You can't play cards. We see children playing Old Maid. I mean, how bad can it be, playing cards? Ash Wednesday is this week. A number of years ago I was speaking at a nursing home on Ash Wednesday and they had a worship service and the music stopped and it was time for me to stop, and so I stood up in the little pulpit and sometimes in the nursing home people speak out when they are not supposed to. And the woman in the front row did, and she actually thrust a finger at me, and she said, "I know it's Ash Wednesday." She said, "Don't you ask me to give up anything." She said, "My doctor's already made me give up everything that's any fun."

Old Testament religion, though, is about giving up things. What do you do with things? What do you not do with things? What do you embrace? Last Monday night, Rabbi Murray Ezring was with us and spoke in Jubilee Hall, and if you weren't here, you just missed a fantastic talk and you ought to listen to it online. It was funny, it was moving, it was informative, it was inspiring. And part of what he was showing us is that Judaism, it's a full-bodied religion. Judaism, and what bugged me about this by the way, is all the Christians in the room, their eyes were big like they never heard of this before. And I wanted to say, Brothers and sisters, Christianity is the same way. Judaism and Christianity care about what you do with your pots and pans and about your bodily functions and how your sexuality works, and your business practices, the stuff that you own, it's a full-bodied, everything religion, and your religion has to do with what do you do. Can it be touched? Is it tangible? Is it real or not? Now, I know to talk to you about doing something and giving something up in this culture is scary because we're in a culture where we've lost so much we feel like we'd better hang on to the little bit that we have

left. Sara McLachlan, one of my favorite singers, has a great lyric in one of her songs that says, “I fear I have nothing to give but so much to lose.” Hmm. I bet a lot of us feel that way these days. I fear that I have nothing to give, but so much to lose. But as God’s people, we feel we have nothing to give and so much to lose, we’re still called by God to do something to give, to make reparation, to offer sacrifice, and let me just suggest to you that maybe this will turn out to be a beautiful time for us to get creative about such things.

I’m rewinding in my mind a couple of years ago when I got on this rant in the pulpit against gift cards. You know, I did this, like, Oh, it’s the dumbest gift ever, a gift card, and I, of course, have received no gift cards since then, which is fine. And what I was saying about gift cards is that it’s just too cheap and it’s so easy, it’s just a card for somebody to go shop. Think about the person. Think about what they might want. What do you want to give them? And then I felt vindicated since then because all these companies are going bankrupt and people are holding gift cards or they lose them. It’s a bad idea, gift cards. And what I was saying at that time is that our normal mode of giving is, I want to give you a present. I’ve got some money in my pocket, so what I do is I take some of that money and I buy you something I think you want. This is our standard mode of giving in America, but I suggested that maybe there’s another way to go out there, that instead of me having some money and buying you something I think you want, maybe I give you something that is precious to me. I give you something that I really value because I want you to have it, and the beauty of the gift is that it’s something that’s precious to me, but I parted with it and gave it to you. We’ve been trying this within our family, and some of you I know have been trying it. I was at a party last night, and I saw a woman I told you about in a sermon a couple of years ago about this. I guess her family’s beginning to face some financial difficulties and she needed to look for a job. She’d been a stay-at-home mom, and in looking for job, one came up that looked pretty good, but to have this job she had to have a laptop computer. She didn’t have a laptop computer, didn’t have money to buy a laptop computer. Her daughter, 13 years old, had been given a laptop. Do you know how attached 13-year-olds are to a laptop computer? You can’t pry them off there to go to bed at night. She heard my sermon and she came to her mother and she said, I love this laptop, and I want you to have it. It will be your laptop. We give something. I wonder if it’s not a good time to get creative. The needs around us are immense, and we feel like we want to hang on. I feel like I have so little to give and so much to lose, but maybe it’s the time to get creative in our giving, to reach out to people who are hurting and are in need. It’s something that we do.

I want to close with this. This is the last thing in the sermon, and I wish I could tell you God told me to say this. I don’t know if God told me to say this, but it does strike me as a good idea. I’ll ramble in telling it. I was a couple of weeks ago in Alabama. I wasn’t here. Hope you noticed, maybe missed me a little. I went to Alabama and I preached and gave some talks. I think it was on Sunday night that I gave this talk. It was an OK talk, and then we had a great Q&A time together, and this amazing conversation unfolded where a woman, she was supposed to ask a question, but she just made a long comment, which was fine. Her comment was that religion shouldn’t just be a lot of talk, it ought to be something real, you do it, you do your faith, it’s real. And I was like, Yeah, yeah, amen, sister, good, preach it, it’s great. And then she said, “As long as you give a cup of water to the needy,” I guess she had heard this image somewhere that you give a cup of water to the needy. And I said, “Yeah, a cup of water, that’s great. Let’s give cups of water to the needy.” And then I added though, I said, “But there may be more to it

than just giving a cup of water. It may not only be that God wants us to give, because the fact is, there are a lot of atheists who give to the needy. There are people who don't think twice about God who give to the needy. Maybe our real life with God is beyond that. Maybe it involves being holy." And she was a little slow in the uptake. She said, "I like holiness. You give a cup of water to the needy." And I said, "No, no. I'm talking about like your inner thoughts and your heart and your mind and your habits, these Jewish kinds of things. What do you do with everything in your circle, are we holier or not?" She said, "Give me an example of what you're talking about." I couldn't think of one right off the bat, but I found myself saying, "Well, you know a couple of weeks ago I was preaching at Myers Park, and in my sermon I said this thing. I said to my brothers and sisters at Myers Park, We drink too much." And when I said this to the group in Alabama, I could tell from their faces that they also drink too much. And I explained, I said, "You know how it is. You go to a party and there's got to be alcohol. If you don't have alcohol... It's more fun and everybody's kind of cool and they've got new wines. And you have a bad day at work and you come down and knock down a cocktail, that's what you need, or you need the wine to get to sleep. And whatever. Life's just huge, huge for us. The role of alcohol." I explained all this, and she said, "What did they say?" I said, "They really didn't say much." I said, "But later, I did hear a lot of stories about the carnage that alcohol has wrecked in so many homes, and people saying, I really do drink too much." And then she said something that just caught me totally off guard. She said, "How are you going to follow up with that?" And I said, "What do you mean, follow up? I already did it. I did it. It was in a sermon." She said, "It seems like you've got to follow up on that." And I wondered, How would I follow up on that, and that's when the idea came to me in front of the people in Alabama, and here's what it is: Lent is coming. And often during Lent, we ask you to give up something. You know, I've given up chocolate for Lent. That's really hard for me. I've given up TV for Lent. I think I'm going to do that this year because you know, Duke basketball's going badly, there's nothing else on. I'll give up TV. We give up something for Lent, and I got this idea in front of the people in Alabama. I said, "I think I'm going to ask my people to give up alcohol for Lent." And I actually tried this on a guy this week. I said, "I'm going to tell the people Sunday, I'm going to ask them to give up alcohol for Lent." He said, "I couldn't do that." And I said, "Maybe that's a clue." Maybe that's a clue if you think I couldn't give up alcohol for 40 days, and that's when the perfect storm formed in my mind because, you see, there's another thing going on that's interesting, which is the economic times are tough, and you know this, and it's tough for companies and it's tough for your family and it's tough for the church. We've got some economic issues and we're making some cuts, and every one of them is painful and nobody fully understands all... It's just hard, hard in the economy. But one of the things that we're trying to work really hard on as we're making cuts and dealing with the money situation of the church is to try to sustain our high level of giving to people that are in need. And the reason for this is that people in need aren't suddenly richer. The people in need actually now are poorer, and the agencies that we work with are now poorer and there are more people who are poorer, and so we're trying to work on this. And the one piece of the budget that's kept me awake at night is this fund we have called Jubilee Plus. You did really good to rally to pledge to Jubilee Plus, but we're about \$100,000 short from where we were a year ago in a year that we really need to be doing more for the needy. Now all this time I'm talking in front of the people at Alabama. I'm not telling them all this, but I'm in my mind thinking about this, and I'm doing math, and I'm thinking no alcohol for 40 days, and we need money and how much money... I get this idea, What do you spend? It's not just don't drink, but what's the money that you would spend on

drinking, and do we put it in, get this, the Spirit Fund? I'm diggin' this idea. What happens is, You go out for a business dinner, and the waitress come and says, "Would you like a drink?" And normally you'd say, "A gin and tonic." "What kind of Gin?" "Tanqueray." "Fine." Eight bucks. Eight bucks. That's why we only get one, eight bucks. And what you do is you say, "I'll have a water with lime or whatever." And you'd put eight bucks in your little Spirit Fund jar. You go to the grocery store and you're in the wine section and you're about to buy a bottle of wine. Depending on your taste, it may be six bucks, it may be 26 bucks. Who knows. And you go, you just walk on through and go get your bread and milk and you put the \$6 or the 26 bucks in the little Spirit jar. Or you're about to have a party and you're gonna fill a cooler with beer, but you don't. And people come in your house and they say, "Where's the beer?" And you say, "Sorry, we're doing this Spirit thing. I don't know. Howell brought it up." And you take that money you'd spend on four six-packs of beer and you put it in your little Spirit Fund. I've done some math in my head. If many of us did this, we would more than make up that \$100,000 and I think we'd learn a lot about ourselves and our dependence on God. I don't know if that's what's God's telling us to do, but it really fits what the Scriptures are about. It really fits something that's real and is a problem in our lives, and it also happens to match something that's going on out in the world that is an enormous need. It's something you do, and it's something you refrain from doing, and it's something that you do. Spirit Fund.

It's kind of heavy. I hope you follow with me. I'll just leave you with a little bit of humor. The 8:30 a.m. Scripture reader afterward said there's divine sanction for what I just suggested, and it was actually right there in the Book of Leviticus. It's talking about what you do if you damage someone by robbery or oppression, and it says, "You shall restore what was damaged in full," and then it says, "And shall add a fifth to it."