

**Our Best to God
Leviticus 2:1-10
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Out in South Dakota, there are two Christian groups that sacrifice cows. One is called Steer and the other is named Holy Cows. Both organizations work similarly. They recruit donors who care about Christian mission work to buy a cow or a calf. If a cow is purchased, then every calf from that cow is raised by ranchers in South Dakota at their own expense. If a donor buys a calf, then that calf is raised at the ranchers' expense. When the calves are ready for slaughter, the animals are sold at auction and the proceeds are "steered" or sent to support mission projects around the world. The ranchers say that adding a few head of cattle to their herds creates a relatively minor expense to them and gives them a way to support the spread of the gospel. Although they lose money on each head of cattle in the program, the benefit they receive from giving the best they have to offer to the cause of Christ outweighs the cost.

One of the ranchers in the Holy Cow program is a friend of mine named David Gnirk. David donates the proceeds of the cattle he raises in this program to support Camp Judson, a youth camp in South Dakota. David told me that for years he had trouble seeing the connection between the work he did best, raising cattle, and his passion for missions. The Holy Cow program gave him a way to connect those two significant aspects of his life.

For most of us, a program like Holy Cow or Steer makes sense. What would be less comprehensible to us, however would be if those ranchers chose the best of their livestock each week, butchered it and burnt the entire beast on a bonfire in their pasture. Depending upon the size and type of cattle, that behavior would be the same as sending \$500 to \$1000 up in smoke.

Yet it was the latter behavior that Moses said God wanted the people of Israel to implement. The Hebrew Scriptures teach us that Moses was summoned by God on four occasions. The first was when God called Moses from the burning bush. Moses' second direct encounter came on Mt. Sinai when the Lord gave him the 10 Commandments. Not long after the third meeting, God called Moses back to Mt. Sinai where the Almighty gave Moses specific directions on how to build a tabernacle, or a holy tent, in which the people could gather to worship the Holy One.

After Moses built the tabernacle, God called out to him once more. Leviticus records the nature of the conversation in the first chapter of the book. The writer says, "The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting (that's the tabernacle.) Here is what God instructed Moses to do: "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them; 'When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock. If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish.'"

We know the third book in the Bible as Leviticus because that is the name given to the book by the compilers of the Septuagint, the most popular Greek translation of the Old Testament. Leviticus refers to the fact that the book holds a lot of instruction for the Levites or the priests of Israel. That particular name is a somewhat unfortunate choice, however. For one thing, the word Levite is only mentioned in one or two verses in the entire book. More importantly, the name gives readers today the impression that the substance of the book pertains to a religious class that does not operate in the Christian church, therefore causing us to conclude that the book has no relevancy for us today.

The truth is that although there is a lot of instruction for the priestly cast in this work of Scripture, the majority of direction offered is for the full people of Israel. The Hebrew people never referred to this book as Leviticus. In the

Torah it is referred to by a Hebrew word that means "and God called." Look again at whom God called. The Divine voice told Moses to speak to the people and say, "any of you." In other words, the call recorded in this ancient book is for everyone.

So, should I go to butcher's school? Should we set up some sort of altar and grill in the front yard so the staff can roast donated bulls to the Lord? Does God want each of you to put a few head of cattle in your back yard or, if you live in an apartment complex or dorm, tether a heifer or two in the common space around your building?

No, I don't think so, but I do believe there is a principle taught in these instructions that is authoritative for our lives with God today. Much of the specific instructions of Leviticus are for practices that are no longer useful to our lives. Some instructional material in the book pertained only to the people of that day, much of it was replaced by the work of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I think we commit a grievous error when we ignore the principles of Leviticus simply because many of the processes described here are no longer desired by God. After all, the true name of the book is "and God called." Doesn't that sound like a summons we ought to answer?

The principle we are to follow is indicated several times throughout the first three chapters of Leviticus. Chapters one through three provide explicit instructions on the voluntary offerings God desired from those who loved their Creator. Later in the book, the required sin offerings are described, but in the opening chapters God outlines the procedure to follow when bringing voluntary gifts, gifts of love to our Maker.

Through Moses, God told the people, "if you want to bring a bull to honor me, bring one without a blemish." Most of the households in Israel could not have afforded to own a bull much less burn it as a sacrifice to God. Knowing that, the Lord said, "if you don't have a bull, bring a sheep or a goat and if that is beyond your means, bring a turtledove or pigeon. Whatever you bring, however," the Lord said, "it must be the best you have. Don't go dragging some lame, sick, half dead old mule up here and act like you love me. If you're going to offer your gratitude, express it with the best you have to offer.

Notice that these sacrificial animals were not to be shared with the priesthood. They did not provide food for the priests or the poor or the elderly. Whatever the people brought was to be entirely dedicated to God and burned up in smoke.

The people in that time believed that the smoke went up to God and pleased the Giver of all good gifts. The offering was an extravagant display of unfettered love. If you find yourself thinking, "wouldn't God have been better pleased if the meat was used to feed the poor?" I must warn you that you're thinking like Judas. Remember in the Gospels when a woman breaks a jar of costly perfume and pours the contents upon Jesus' feet? John tells us that when Judas saw this extravagant display toward Christ, he said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money give to the poor?" Jesus scolded him for his attitude and commended the woman for her wasteful love. The same principle is behind God's call for the sacrifice of the best animals in the herd or flock.

Following the instructions for bringing animal offerings, Moses spelled out the procedure for bringing gifts of grain to God. The people were told they could bring uncooked grain (which one commentator called grits) or cakes of unleavened bread baked in an oven or flipped on a griddle like a pancake or fried in a pan like cornbread. The form of bread didn't matter to God, what mattered was that the grain was to be of the choicest flour. No rejects here. No inedible grain spoiled or covered with mold or mixed with chaff. Nothing but the best, God said, if you're going to express your appreciation to me. In addition, God said that the grain, in whatever form, was to be coated with oil and fragrancd with frankincense. These added requirements made the common bread more costly. Oil had to be squeezed and grinded, the production of it was labor intensive and made it a luxury. Frankincense was a spice that came either from Arabia or Somalia. Either way the use of the expensive spice would have been about like coating ones flour with Chanel #5.

Lastly God gave the people directions for bringing an offering of well being. The steps involved in that offering were very similar to those included in the burnt offering except that in the Shalom offering, only a small portion of the livestock was to be burnt (the blood, the fat, the organs), the rest was to be roasted or boiled and shared in a common celebratory meal with the priests and the people. Again the common principle in the instructions for the offering of well being was that the animals sacrificed were to be the best of the herd and flock.

Why would God call the people to participate in such rituals? Preachers have tried to apply the first chapter of Leviticus to Christian giving by saying God wants us to bring the best of our wealth to the church. Actually, the only way to literally mimic what our spiritual ancestors did, however, would be for us to gather our offerings on Sunday morning, place them on a little Hibachi grill on the communion table, light the money on fire and sing To God Be the Glory as the smoke rises to heaven.

I'd rather not see us do that. Nevertheless there is a teaching here that needs to be followed. Our ancient spiritual ancestors understood that God created the world as a very good place. Sadly, however, human interaction, sin and corruption constantly polluted and degraded the beauty of the earth and the sanctity of our relationships with God and one another. Therefore, they rightly understood God to say, that we need to participate in a certain rhythm of worship that would help us stay tuned into God and God's desires for this world.

One part of that sacred rhythm is to habitually bring our best to God. What or whom gets your best? Your best efforts, your best attention, your best energy, your best passion? When, for instance, do you try to look your best? When you go on a job interview, a date, a dinner to meet your fiance's parents, your grandmother's birthday party? What makes you try to look your best? A desire to please, a hope to honor, an effort to impress? Why don't we bring our best to God?

Like in Leviticus, God doesn't care whether our best is a three-piece suit or clean jeans and an unstained t-shirt, but God does say, when you come before me, treat me like an honored, valued, esteemed part of your life. Give me at least the kind of respect you give your boss, your grandma, your dream date.

Of course how we dress is a small part of our best. When we serve in the church, do we bring our best? In this church, I find that most do. Our Bible teachers put a lot of time each week in preparing their lessons and do a brilliant job of presenting their material. Our choir gives us their best every week. Our deacons, nursery workers, ushers and other lay volunteers provide us with their best efforts every Sunday. Sometimes though, I hear folks say, "well church work is volunteer. My job is paid" as if that provides a justification for halfhearted work. The offerings described in Leviticus were also voluntary, but they were still to be the best the worshiper had to offer. If we take a place on a committee or as a teacher, deacon, trustee, choir member or any other voluntary position in the church, we ought to bring our best. What does it say about the place God holds in our lives if we give our greatest passion to a dozen different endeavors and give our halfhearted leftover thought and energy to God?

Now you may thinking, "but one of the characteristics I love about God is that the Lord loves me as I am. I don't have to put on airs or try to impress God." What you say is true. We can come just as we are before God. Pretending to be something we are not actually damages our relationship with God. Giving and bringing our best to God, however, is not about impressing God or pretending in the Lord's presence. It is about saying this is the best talent, energy, attention, effort, gift I have and I dedicate it to you voluntarily, freely, lovingly, gratefully.

Let me hurry to say that we can give our best to God at places outside the church. Loving our spouses, parents, siblings and children with the best we have is also a way of honoring God. Giving our best to our vocations can also be a way of showing God reverence. Being good students, neighbors, citizens and honest businesspeople are also ways of giving our best to God.

The danger occurs, however, when we give our best to some person, place or thing for our own selfish ambitions and desires and throw God some cheap, trinket from our leftover time and energy. Whatever gets our best, will become the center of our lives, the object of our dreams, the driving force in our daily patterns. Our careers, recreational pursuits, friendships, hobbies, wealth and possessions are not meant to edge God to the periphery of life. When they absorb our best, God is relegated to an inferior status in our lives. With God out of the center, our lives wobble and contort and diminish and our families, health, church and community pay the price. So it is out of pure love for our well being and for the well being of this world that God tells us to regularly bring our best in acts of worship and service so that we might be continually reminded of Who is worthy of all honor and praise and devotion.

In 1666, an anonymous spiritual pilgrim traveled to a monastery in Paris to interview a cook about his deep relationship with God. Although his daily duties consisted of baking bread, serving his brothers and cleaning the kitchen after each meal, Brother Lawrence developed such a wondrous relationship with God, people came from great distances to find out the secret of his uncommon peace and faith. Brother Lawrence told the pilgrim that he had found a life of "perfect liberty, continual joy and unspeakable pleasure." This life came to him when, as he put it, he resolved to start each day with a simple prayer. "O God since thou art with me, receive all my works, and possess all my affections." Then Brother Lawrence began his day, doing every deed from baking the daily bread to washing the dirty dishes as acts of gratitude to God. At the end of the day, he asked the Lord to show him where he had not done his best, then asked for mercy and started again the next morning to give his best efforts in every part of his day to please the Lord.

A life of perfect liberty, continual joy and unspeakable pleasure." That's what God wants for each of us and that is what awaits us when we decide to give our best to God.