

Be Holy for I AM Holy Series
The Holiest Day of the Year

Leviticus 16:1-34

Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus

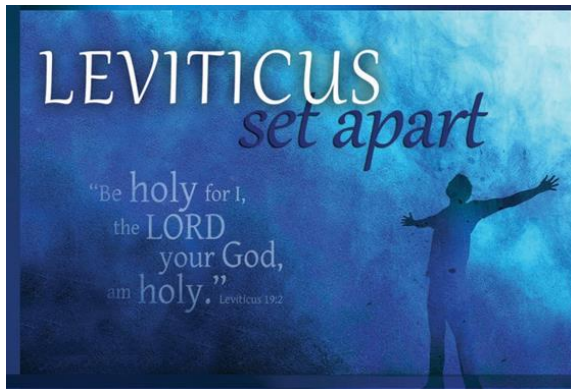
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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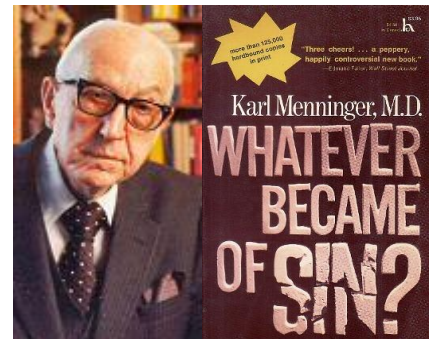
TEXTS: Leviticus 16:1-34

We continue in our fall series on the Book of Leviticus, and we come into very holy ground this morning. Leviticus 16 is the fulcrum of the entire book. We began this series focusing on what it



means to be set apart for God, to belong to Him, to be holy for the Lord our God is holy. Throughout this series, throughout our life experience, we are confronted with a challenge to *be holy for I am holy* by the reality of our unholiness, and our unholiness keeps us apart from God. We live in a society, in a world, that is out of touch with our unholiness, with our need for forgiveness, which is so central to our text. I want to set before you two images, two

writers of recent generations. The first is Dr. Karl Menninger. Karl Menninger was a famous psychiatrist and a very popular author. He published a book in the 70s called: *Whatever Became of Sin?* It was a lament, a diagnosis of our contemporary world. He writes in this book:

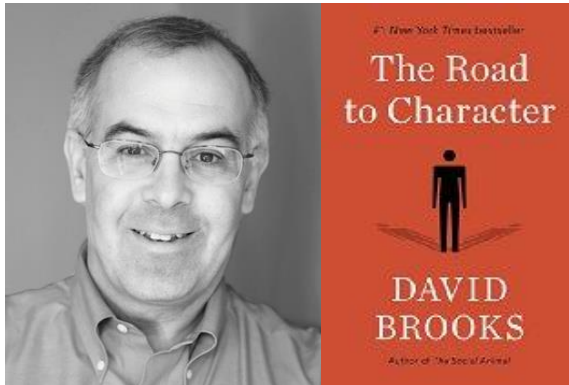


“In all of the laments and reproaches made by our seers and prophets, one misses any mention of 'sin,' a word which used to be a veritable watchword of prophets. It was a word once in everyone's mind but now rarely, if ever, heard. Does that mean no sin is involved in all our troubles---sin with an 'l' in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented of or atoned for?...

“The assumption that there is sin... implies both a possibility and an obligation for intervention. Presumably something is possible which can be reparative, corrective, ameliorative, and that something involves me and mercy.”

About Karl Menninger’s lament of a couple of decades ago, that we seem to have forgotten sin, I have good news this morning. The good news is that sin is really making a comeback. My evidence for this is from David Brooks. David Brooks is a *New York Times* columnist. He has

written a book recently called: *The Road to Character*. Brooks says we need to start talking about sin and righteousness again. He says that many people imagine that this cultural shift we



have experienced away from sin and righteousness began the 60s with the counter-culture, but when he investigated the books and culture of the late 1940s, he found that the shift happened then. There were tons of best-selling books and movies arguing that the notion of human sinfulness was hopelessly outdated and that we should embrace the idea that we are really wonderful. He says: “When you lose awareness of sin and start thinking that deep down

human beings are pretty wonderful, you lose the struggle of building character. You embrace a perception of yourself that is profoundly untrue.” Brooks continues to write: “We have encouraged generations to think highly of themselves. In 1950, the Gallup organization asked high school seniors: “Are you a very important person?” and back then, 12% said yes. Gallup asked the same question in 2005, and 80% said yes. Surveys conducted called the *narcissism test* asked seniors and university students questions like: ‘I like to be the center of attention because I’m so extraordinary,’ or ‘Someone should definitely write a biography about me,’ and the median narcissism score in our culture has gone up 30 percentage points in the last 20 years.”

So what are we missing in the ‘BIG ME’ culture? Brooks ends the book with a call for humility and this statement: “We do not live for happiness; we live for holiness.” He says: “When we think of the counterculture, we sometimes think of the hippies, but actually, hippies ultimately represent the same individualistic striving we see whether from Apple computers or Ben & Jerry's ice cream.” The truth is that it is Scripture that gives us a real counterculture in an upside down world, where you and I are humbled before the Great I AM, and we get ourselves into proper scale. Well, sin is making a comeback, praise God! It is being reintroduced, even by a *The New York Times* columnist, into our moral vocabulary, and it is critical, because if we lack the category of sin, we cannot relate to Almighty God. We have no possibility of understanding this holiest day of the year in Leviticus 16. Keep your Bible open as we look at this most important fulcrum chapter in the Book of Leviticus.

Leviticus 16 is a description of the most sacred day of the year, the most sacred rite in ancient Israel. It is the rite of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In Leviticus 16, the rite of forgiveness is described in vivid detail. It is the place, the time, in which the sin of God's people is forgiven. We want to walk through this passage and apply it to our own existential lives this morning. Leviticus 16 begins as the Lord speaks to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, who had entered the Holy of Holies, or attempted to do so, by offering strange fire, an

unauthorized offering, and Aaron's sons perished. God's holiness is a consuming fire, and these sons die. In the wake of their death, the Lord speaks instructions to Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place. This is so difficult for us to imagine. We live in a 24-7, 365 continuous-access world. God is available whenever I want Him, whenever I need Him, forget that I forgot about Him 364½ days of the year. I need Him right now, so let's hear it, let's have it. But, the Lord says he cannot come whenever he chooses. He is not allowed. His sons died when they came in an unauthorized way. He is not to come whenever he chooses, or else he will die. In Leviticus 16:2, the Lord says to Moses:

"Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover."

God's theophanic glory resides in the sanctuary, visibly, but God then provides instructions for how Aaron is to come, how he is to enter the most holy place. We read in Leviticus 16:3:

"He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering."

There is that precious word. I want you to love the word *sin* by the end of the sermon. I really do. I want you love it, because God is going to solve it. In thinking this morning about our greatest need, some of us think: I just need this new job; I just need this new relationship; I just need this love to be reciprocated. Scripture would teach us this morning that our greatest need, every one of us, myself included, is for forgiveness of our sins, and we find out how that is given to us. Aaron brings a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. This will be offered later in gratitude. In Leviticus 16:4, we discover that Aaron is told:

"He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban."

He is to put on the linen garments of the common priest. Aaron comes in garments, not of glory, but garments of humility. We recall from last fall as we studied the book of Exodus, the garments of glory that the high priest was allowed to wear uniquely, Aaron does not wear on the Day of Atonement. The garments of glory and splendor were to reflect the glory of God in the sanctuary. As Aaron mediated God's presence to the people and displayed the re-created humanity in the midst of the sanctuary, on this day, the Day of Atonement, he divests himself of these garments of glory, and instead he comes in profound humility before the throne of God. He comes in linen garments with an offering for his own sin. In Leviticus 16:5, we read that he comes also with an offering for the sin of the community:



"From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram

for a burnt offering.”

The ram will be offered later, like his own ram, after the ceremony of the Day of Atonement. He comes with a sin offering for his own sin and two goats for the sin offering of the entire community. Let's watch closely what he does with these. In Leviticus 16:6, we read:

“Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.”

There it is again. We can't get away from it, and you shouldn't want to get away from it. You should want to identify your sinfulness, recognize it, and confess it, so that when you come into God's presence it can be forgiven. Aaron comes with an offering for his own sin. He comes in humility, and notice that this sin offering is offered to make atonement for himself and his entire household. I love that in the Bible, leadership requires an offering for their own sinfulness in addition to the sin of the community. Isn't that great? Don't you want to live in that kind of society where not only leaders are held to a higher moral standards, but they have extra provision to demonstrate first: “I offer this for my own sins before I offer them for yours.” I love that about the Kingdom of God. Aaron offers it for his own sin, the sin he recognizes that he has committed. The leader in God's kingdom is not above the people. He is not without defect. He is not infallible. He is a human being. He is sinful, just like the rest. There is no one without sin, and the high priest, this towering figure, this solitary man, comes first to offer for his own sin and his family and his household, which probably includes the entire priesthood. When he moves then into the sanctuary, we read in Leviticus 16:11:

“Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering.”

God is stressing that the need for forgiveness is precisely for our sinfulness. Aaron comes towards God's presence in Leviticus 16, and he comes with the blood of the bull that is offered for his own sin. He then moves inside the court into the holy place, and he comes now toward the Holy of Holies, the place of God's very real, indwelling presence. As he approaches the Holy of Holies, he comes in Leviticus 16:12:

“He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain.”

This veil, or curtain, separates the holy place from the Holy of Holies. He offers incense, and the incense cloud fills the Holy of Holies and covers the Ark of the Covenant and the lid, the atonement cover. The Ark of the Covenant conceals the tablets of the 10



Commandments, and this cloud of incense fills the holy place as Aaron prepares to enter. The Ark of the Covenant is made of acacia wood. This visible representation of God's throne is overlaid with pure gold both inside and out. It was a beautiful work of art. The lid of the Ark of the Covenant was made of fine gold, a beautiful work of craftsmanship. On the top of the Ark of the Covenant were the cherubim with their wings touching each other, and this was seen as the throne of the Lord God Almighty, the resting place of His feet, the place where heaven and earth actually touch. Aaron comes now, this once a year, into the place of God's presence. He enters with the blood of the bull, and with his finger he sprinkles it on the top of the atonement cover seven times. The Bible calls this place the Mercy Seat, the place of God's presence, and blood is placed here by the high priest of Israel. We are told Leviticus 16:16:

“In this way [Aaron] will make atonement for the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.”

Whatever they have been, here is the place of forgiveness. An ancient writer who saw this happen wrote about it in this beautiful way. He writes:

“God's world is great and holy. Among the holy lands in the world, it is the holy land of Israel; in the holy land of Israel, the holiest city is Jerusalem; in Jerusalem, the holiest place was the temple; and in the temple, the holiest spot was the Holy of Holies. There are 70 peoples in the world. Among these holy people is the people of Israel; the holiest of the people of Israel was the tribe of Levi; in the tribe of Levi, the holiest are the priests; among the priests, the holiest of all was the high priest. There are 365 days in the year. Among these days, the holidays are holy days; higher than these is the holiness of the Sabbath; among the Sabbath is the Day of Atonement, which is called the Sabbath of Sabbaths. There are 70 languages in the world. Among the holy languages is the language of Hebrew; holier than all else in this language is the Word of God; the holiest part of the Word of God is the 10 Commandments; and in the 10 Commandments, the holiest of all words is the name of God. Once a year, at one hour, these four supreme holinesses, holiness of place, of people, of time, and speech, come together on this Day of Atonement when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and utters the name of God.”

Ancient sources tell us the words that the high priest spoke when he came in. He entered into the Holy of Holies to offer this blood of atonement sacrifice on the Mercy Seat of God, and he said: “O God, I have committed iniquity, transgression, and sin before You. O God, forgive the iniquity and transgression and sin which I have committed and sinned against You.”

God is instructing His people on the place, time, person, and means by which our forgiveness of sins is secured. Aaron offers the blood of the bull for his own sins. He goes back out and he offers the sin offering for the people, and he comes back in and does the same for the people and makes confession of the sins of the entire community. Once this happens, Aaron comes out

from the Holy of Holies, and he makes atonement for the tent of meeting itself. He moves out to the outer court and makes atonement for the altar. And now, in Leviticus 16:20, we see the forgiveness of sins demonstrated in a parallel and complementary image. In Leviticus 16:20 we read:

“When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat.”

Remember that the people had brought two goats for their sin offering. One of them is offered, and atonement is made. The second goat is described as the scapegoat. In Leviticus 16:21, we read:

“[Aaron] is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head.”

This goat is called the scapegoat. In Hebrew, the goat is called *azazel*. Ancient readers of the Hebrew text translate this as: *the goat that is sent away*. William Tyndale's translation of the Bible in 1520 was the first to call this the (*e*)scape goat, and we call it now the *scapegoat*, from Tyndale. It is the goat that is sent away, that is banished. So, we see that sin is real. Yours is real; mine is real. Sin is not an idea; it's not an offense; it's not a mental category. It is something real; it is something dangerous; it is something that imperils you and me in the presence of a holy God. In the rites of the Day of Atonement, our sins are washed away with blood, and God shows us the reality that our sins are carried away. They are banished in this ritual of the scapegoat. The sins that you and I commit are confessed and placed on the goat, and the goat bears them, he carries them. Baruch Schwartz writes:

“All sin, deliberate or accidental, against man or God, once committed, is carried; it's borne either by the offender or by another. Sin can be unloaded by a process of repentance.”

The Day of Atonement is ineffective without repentance and confession. The high priest must confess our sins on the scapegoat, and then we read in Leviticus 16:22:

“The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.”

The Lord says in His Word that He has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. Our sins are washed away by the sacrifice of blood, and they are carried away as they are transferred to another. The Lord tells us in Leviticus 16:29-31:

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you—because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.

Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance.”

The image is of denying ourselves, which is so offensive to us. I feel it. Do you feel it? This is more vocabulary than we need: self-denial. You won't recognize Jesus' summons to discipleship without it. If you continue to live in the 'BIG ME' society of our contemporary moment, denial will mean nothing to you, and yet the Word of God says we must deny ourselves. Ancient interpreters understood denial to be a posture of repentance and confession, to be fasting, and abstaining from marital relations for a season, in preparation of genuine humility and repentance. We come to God repentant, asking for forgiveness, and the Lord God Almighty makes provision for your forgiveness and mine. He makes it through the sacrifice of blood atonement where sin is washed away. He makes it possible and visually communicates this as our sins are confessed and laid upon another and carried away, gone forever. Sin and guilt shut us down, and the road to life is not in self-improvement. It is not in wishful thinking. It is not in denying it. The road to life is repentance and confession. This is the gate of life. Yom Kippur was celebrated just a few days ago by the Jewish community. As we prepare this morning for a celebration of communion, this work of our Lord Jesus that fulfills, in an ultimate and eternal way, the Day of Atonement ritual that is held in trust here, I want to lead us together in a litany of confession. It is a litany of confession that is actually adapted from the Yom Kippur liturgy. This portion of the Yom Kippur liturgy is recited 10 times over the week of the highest holy days. It probes our sinfulness and need for forgiveness.

As I read this, I want you to confess your sin before the Lord. I mean every phrase of this liturgy myself. I would ask you to put your hands out, close your eyes, and as we hear these words, I want you to place your sins in your hands in preparation for using these hands in a few minutes to partake of the sacrifice of Christ. O Lord. . .

For the sin which we have committed before You under duress or willingly.

And for the sin which we have committed before You by hard-heartedness.

For the sin which we have committed before You inadvertently.

And for the sin which we have committed before You with an utterance of the lips.

For the sin which we have committed before You with immorality.

And for the sin which we have committed before You openly or secretly.

For the sin which we have committed before You with knowledge and with deceit.

And for the sin which we have committed before You through speech.

For the sin which we have committed before You by deceiving a fellowman.

And for the sin which we have committed before You by improper thoughts.

For the sin which we have committed before You by a gathering of lewdness.

And for the sin which we have committed before You by verbal [insincere] confession.

For the sin which we have committed before You by disrespect for parents and teachers.

*And for the sin which we have committed before You intentionally or unintentionally.
For the sin which we have committed before You by impurity of speech.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by foolish talk.
For the sin which we have committed before You with the evil inclination.
And for the sin which we have committed before You knowingly or unknowingly.
For all these, God of pardon, pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.*

*For the sin which we have committed before You by false denial and lying.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by a bribe-taking or a bribe-giving hand.
For the sin which we have committed before You by scoffing.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by evil talk [about another].
For the sin which we have committed before You in business dealings.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by eating and drinking.
For the sin which we have committed before You by [taking or giving] interest and by usury.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by a haughty demeanor.
For the sin which we have committed before You by the prattle of our lips.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by a glance of the eye.
For the sin which we have committed before You with proud looks.
And for the sin which we have committed before You with impudence.
For all these, God of pardon, pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.*

*For the sin which we have committed before You by casting off the yoke [of Heaven].
And for the sin which we have committed before You in passing judgment.
For the sin which we have committed before You by scheming against a fellowman.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by a begrudging eye.
For the sin which we have committed before You by frivolity.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by obduracy.
For the sin which we have committed before You by running to do evil.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by tale-bearing.
For the sin which we have committed before You by swearing in vain.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by causeless hatred.
For the sin which we have committed before You by embezzlement.
And for the sin which we have committed before You by a confused heart.
For all these, God of pardon, pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.*

Lord Jesus, we all stand here equally weighed down by our sinfulness, and Lord, we come to the communion table needing it today. We need, Lord, the sin offering of Christ, for not what my

hands have done can save my guilty soul; not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole. Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God; not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load. Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin. Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within. Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord to Thee, can rid me of this dark unrest and set my spirit free.

Lord Jesus, we come to this fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. Lord Jesus, this is the place that You have made provision for what we need the most. We lay our hands on You, and we are sorry that Your death was required for everything we hold in our hands. We set our sins on You, Lamb of God, and thank You that You wash us clean and that You carry our sins away. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Amen.