

“Meeting God at the Altar” series (A study from Leviticus)

Week 6: The least of these

December 14, 2025

Introduction

- We have been exploring the bible book of Leviticus which is almost entirely about the early Israelite religious system and laws. This book demonstrates how a holy, powerful, creating God will go to great lengths to be in relationship with people he created and loves and it foreshadows what Jesus did 1500 years later, making a way for us, as sinful people, to have a deep relationship with our holy creator.
- Since the altar played a central role in this system of laws for the Israelite nation in how they were to know God and follow him, we have subtitled this series, **meeting God at the altar**. It was at the altar that the Israelites were invited to meet God and let him change their lives.
- And while we don't physically offer sacrifices the way that Israel was supposed to, the altar is **where we have an opportunity to surrender to God so that we might know him and be changed**. It is the act of coming to God to acknowledge who he is, who we are, and the implications for how we live today.
- What have seen so far is that God required the Israelites to meet him at the altar with:
- Their first and their best because it showed God's value and their dependence on him. This is all about surrendering their priorities.
- In confession and repentance because it is how God gave them freedom. This is about surrendering their sin.
- With thanksgiving, as gratitude changed how they interacted with God and with those around them. This was surrendering their relationships.
- In celebration, which helped them remember and reorient and rebalance lives that so easily got out of balance. This was about surrendering their time.
- Next week we wrap up the whole series by looking at the “law of choices” but today we are going to look at one more thing God asked the Israelite nation to bring to the altar, a thing that he still asks today, and quite frankly, is probably the single toughest thing to bring to the altar but one that has the potential to completely change our lives in a positive direction.
- God emphatically instructed the Israelites to use their resources to care for those with needs because he knew that for the Israelites (and really for almost all people) one of the greatest competitors for their hearts, their allegiance, their obedience, and something they need to surrender, is money.
- Billy Graham said: *“If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help straighten out almost every other area in his life.”*
- Yet most of us tune out when someone talks about how we should use our money. We have to some degree a skewed view in this area of life. We are a product of our experiences and upbringing and it doesn't help that we live in a time and place where the messaging on this topic is so at odds with God.
- When God gave Israel the law, he addressed the topic of money.

Main Sermon Text

- The Israelites had spent a century or two in slavery in Egypt. They were oppressed and taken advantage of. They were at the mercy of their overseers. Some probably prospered to a degree, but most had no say in their life, very little excess money, almost no stuff, with an inability to buy almost anything extra.
- Generations of people were used to being poor and oppressed. They had no freedom. They were foreigners and strangers and were treated as such.

- Then when God saved Israel from Egypt, he told them on their way out to ask the Egyptians to give them stuff.

Exodus 12:35 The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. 36 The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.

- They went from having nothing to leaving Egypt with more money and resources than they had ever had before. They left Egypt to go the Promised Land, a land of abundance. Where they were going to have opportunities to be wealthy and have more than they could use.
- God wanted to bless them BUT he knew that without a right orientation towards money, it would end up not being a blessing but a curse.
- Let's take a look at what he told them to do and then we will look at the why as it is instructive for how we live with our money today.

1. They were to bring their first to God.

- God put in their law that the first of all they made, right off the top, was to be given to God. *27:30 A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.*

- A tithe was simply a tenth. If they made \$10,000, \$1,000 was give to the tabernacle and priests. If they made \$100, they gave \$10 and if they made \$1,000,000, they gave \$100,000.
- You can debate whether this 10% number still applies, but God wanted them to give a significant portion of their income directly to God as the first order of business.
- Lest you get too hung up on it, note that when you go through the entire law, there were actually THREE tithes, two that they did annually and one every three years. So they were required to give closer to 30% of their income to God.

2. They were to bring their best to God.

- We talked a lot about this in our second week, so we won't spend much time here, but God not only asked for their first, but their best. He wanted them to offer the best of what they had, not keeping it for themselves, but giving it to God. Note that this is in addition to their tithe.

3. They were to bring regular offerings to bless God and others.

Leviticus 23:38 These offerings are in addition to those for the LORD's Sabbaths and in addition to your gifts and whatever you have vowed and all the freewill offerings you give to the LORD.

- Not only were they to bring the formal offerings to God, but anytime there was a special need, or when they wanted to express gratitude, or if they made a vow/promise they needed to keep, God instructed them to bring an offering.
- These were simply expressions of praise and thanksgiving to honor God.

4. They were to leverage their money to care for those who were needy.

- The people were to use their money and resources to care for those who had less. This involved both actively giving to help others or allowing those with less to have ways to make a living. For example:

Leviticus 19:9 When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

- For those that are familiar with the book of Ruth, this is what Ruth was doing when she met the man who eventually became her husband and was of the line that Jesus was born from.

- There were rules in the law protecting day laborers, the giving of interest free loans and returning clothing taken as collateral. The widow, the orphan, and the poor were entitled to rejoice in the major communal feasts. There was a special third-year tithe of food crops for strangers, priests, widows, and orphans.
- Then there was the Year of Jubilee, talked about in Leviticus 25 which occurred every fifty years, when all property must be restored to the original landowner. This restored financial imbalances.
- So in the economy of God, he wanted them to TITHE + GIVE THEIR BEST + GIVE ADDITIONAL OFFERINGS + HELP SUPPORT, FEED, CLOTHE and HOUSE those who needed it.
- Two questions arise in my mind?
- 1) Why? Was this just because since the people did not pay taxes like we do, this was essentially how they ran social programs? Or was it more than this?
- 2) Since we are not under the law, how much of this applies to us today?
- God still cares about us and money, just as he did then. The reason God put all these things in the law was about the Israelite's heart attitude towards money.
- The truth is that **how we use our money is a direct reflection of how we see and relate to God.**
- Consider that if money is a reflection on how we see and relate to God, then if we want to grow, to change, to experience God more and to impact others, then how we use our money is an opportunity to become different people. What was God teaching the Israelites?

I. God has a heart (a passion) for the “least of these.”

- In the time of ancient Israel, there were particularly vulnerable parts of the population.
- Widows and orphans topped the list. Your ability to make money and live was dependent on having able bodied males in your family. When the husband died, the wife was extraordinarily disadvantaged. She had limited means for making money. Same with orphans. People made their way in the world by having their parents, particularly fathers, train them up in the family business. Children, and even more so for orphans, had no rights, no value, until they could contribute to society.
- The poor were another vulnerable part of the population. Unlike today, there were no government programs to help them. If you were poor, it was almost impossible not to stay poor. You scraped by. You tried to have enough to eat. It was a hand to mouth, day to day existence.
- The other big group was immigrants. The stranger. In a culture where family and blood ties were everything, the one who came from far away, who stuck out, who did not speak the language or look like the majority population, were given poor jobs, taken advantage of, discriminated against, and generally shunned.
- Jesus summarized the vulnerable by calling them “the least of these.” My friends, God has a specific passion, a tender heart, for these populations. We see this throughout the law as God told them not to mistreat these groups of people but take care of them.

Lev 19:33, 25:14,17,35,39,43

- God built his care of the vulnerable into the law he gave Israel. It was so baked into the law of Israel that in addition to the law, references to the poor, widows, and orphans occur about two hundred and fifty times in the Old Testament in their music, their poetry, their prophecy.
- God is an advocate for the weak and speaks out for the voiceless.

Exodus 22:21 Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. 22 Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. 23 If you do and they cry out to me, I will

certainly hear their cry. 24 My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

- That's a little intense! I wonder if we see the vulnerable people around us with the same intensity that God does?
- Who is the "least of these" in our culture? It is still the fatherless. The poor and homeless. The immigrant and stranger who is not like us. The definition changes within culture, but the passionate nature of God's heart to them does not.
- Question for reflection: Does my concern for others reflect God's concern for them?

II. All resources belong to God.

- God knew that the temptation for the Israelites was to take credit for their stuff and attribute it to their hard work, intelligence and business ability.
- If that happened, they would reserve the right to ultimately decide what to do and how to use it.
- God told the Israelites to bring their best and first and to use their resources to help those who could not help themselves because it wasn't theirs to begin with. When God told Israel about the Promised Land, he said:

25:23 The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.

- This is a remarkable statement. I am taking you from the land of Egypt that did not belong to you, where you were foreigners and strangers and owned nothing to a land with abundance that does not belong to you, where you will still be foreigners and strangers and still own nothing.
- What was the difference? The one in charge. The one who provided. What might change if we really believed that every financial decision we made was with God's money?
- Question for reflection: Do I truly believe everything I have is God's?
- But wanted them to know more than a lesson on ownership. He desired his people to know his character

III. God is a good and generous God.

- Israel's Egyptian masters were cruel and harsh. In contrast, God repeatedly told and showed them his loving and generous nature. Not only did he provide all their food and drink while they were in the desert, but he also gave them a new country of their own.

Leviticus 14:34 When you enter the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as your possession . . . (see also 20:24, 25:2)

- God says he "gave" the land to them. They did not earn it.
- How many of us feel like we "earned" our retirement, our promotions, our money. I worked for it. It is mine instead of realizing it is ALL a gift from God to you.
- Question for reflection: Do I believe God is good enough that I can trust him with everything?

IV. God's love and character are demonstrated through our generosity with his resources.

- Almost every reference in the law to money is about using it for God's purposes. Centuries after giving Israel these instructions, the prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, condemns the nation because they were acting religious but their religion was not touching their money.

Isaiah 58:6 Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your

food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

- This is not a socialist type of thing. God recognized that some will be poor and some will be rich. He only condemns rich people when they are primarily and firstly about their own comfort and stuff before God's agenda.
- God wanted them to use their money, which was all God's anyway, to help others. He wanted them to be radically generous.
- Question for reflection: Does how I use my money reflect God's full character? If someone looked at your financial records, would they see God first?

V. Generosity will grow our faith, not hinder it.

- In the law, God told Israel to take every 7th year off! It was called a Sabbath year.
Lev 25:4 But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.
- For an entire year, they were to suspend their business. Stop trying to make money. It forced them to have balance in their lives and more importantly, it made them trust God.
- He anticipated their argument. How are we going to live? Eat? Provide for our families? God said, "Trust me – I will make sure you have an abundance."
- Then he gave them what was called the year of Jubilee. It was supposed to be every 50 years where not only did they observe the Sabbath year (year 49) but the next year as well during which all property reverted to original owners and you did not work – it was basically two years of not providing for your family and giving away property.
- They could ONLY do this if they trusted God to take care of them. He knew that if they acted generously, they would have to trust God and it would grow their faith. And unfortunately, Israel ignored this entire part of the law for the next 500 years.
- When you give generously, it does multiple things. 1) It aligns what you care about with what God cares about. 2) It helps you be content with what you have and not always pursuing more. 3) It pushes you to trust God that he will truly provide for you. 4) It will allow you to see God's miracles in your life. 5) You will experience less anxiety and more peace.
- What is generosity? The one who responds to a need when they see the sad ad or notices them ringing the Salvation Army bell or hears an appeal, is NOT a generous person. That is a person like everyone else. Generous people are those who plan to give money away. They consider what God wants them to do with the money they have been given. And it is something we grow into with practice. God made a way for this to happen.
- What can I afford to give? This is making a plan. Choosing to give. The offerings of their first and best and required tithes is what they could afford to give. They just made it a part of their plans.
- This means putting aside money from my income to give. If I make wise decisions, I can regularly support God's work. This means picking a % of my income to give. Some of you have never done this. You don't think you can afford to. Others of you do this regularly. Great! But there is another question that will push you further.
- What can I sacrifice to give? This involves asking God what you should give up for yourself in order to be generous. The Sabbath year and extra offerings were a sacrifice. They gave up some potential income. They couldn't have what other people or nations had. They literally "sacrificed" to be generous.
- This is about not buying that new car and driving what you have for another three years to give money away. It's about taking a smaller vacation to give. It is not having that latte three times a week to help someone else. It involves giving up something good that you like for a

higher purpose. Some of you have been giving 10% of your income for so long it's a habit. You don't even think about it. It isn't even really a sacrifice any more. When was the last time you asked God what he is asking you to sacrifice to be more generous? Others of you do this. You live below your means. You do not buy all you could in order to give generously. But there is one more question.

- What will take faith to give? This is giving what you do not have. The year of Jubilee was what they had to have faith to give. If God did not live up to his promises to provide, they were in trouble.
- This is listening to God and committing to give what he hasn't even given you yet. It is saying, "God, I believe you want me to give this, and I don't see how I am going to have what I need unless you come through."
- Question for reflection: Is how I'm using my money growing my faith and intimacy with God?

Conclusion

- As one pastor said. God doesn't want to get your money. He wants to make sure your money doesn't get you.
- What God asked in the law he did in Jesus. He did not leverage his position as God to get all he deserved, but leveraged all his resources to bring salvation to humanity.
- Jesus himself was the mark of a radically generous God, who then told people that if they wanted to follow him, that same generosity should mark their life!
- Jesus came as one with a passion for the least of these. He hung with the lowest. He reflected the heart of God. For the Israelites and for us, God knew that how we use our money is a direct reflection of how we see and relate to God.
- We get tripped up when how we use our money does not reflect God's heart for others. We can't be generous when we believe what we have is ours to do what we want with instead of seeing all of it as God's. We struggle with money when we deep down don't trust God to provide for everything we need and so we must control our finances.
- The result is that we have a small view of God, a reduced experience of him, and a minimal impact on the people in our lives.
- Do you want more of a heart for God and his mission, to experience miracles and know all he has for you – put your money where he tells you!
- The C&MA began as a movement by people who had a passion to see people who did not know God be introduced to Jesus. They so believed that Jesus was the answer to all of life's problems that they would do whatever it took to ensure people heard about him.
- During the depression, when people had no money and missionaries were going to have to leave other countries because of lack of funds, there were meetings where people gave the watches, wedding rings and money they needed to live in order to see God's name be known.
- They knew it was all God's, that God cared about the least of these and that he was a good God who would provide. If not for them, this church may not exist today.
- Where are you at today? When God invites you to bring your money to the altar, know this is a repeated thing. You will NEVER do this one time for your life. Money is one of those things where this is a repeated exercise and where generosity grows with practice.
- Perhaps you need to start giving regularly. Pick a percent of your income and start.
- If you are a regular, significant giver of your money, ask God what's next? What might he be asking you to give that will require you to give up something else?
- Or perhaps there is something specifically that God wants you to give that will require a huge amount of faith to do. Regardless, your experience of God will utterly change when you bring your money to the altar.