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**Leviticus 19:1–17, NIV, abridged.**

**1** The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

**3** “If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. **4** He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. **5** Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **6** Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, **7** and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. **8** And Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; **9** but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

**10** “If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, **11** and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. **12** And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, **13** but the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer all of it and burn it on the altar; it is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

**14** “If his offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. **15** And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. **16** He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. **17** He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

## **Buzz's burnt offering.**

Wendy will, I am quite certain, attest to my extraordinary skills as a chef. Okay... That's not true. But I would like to tell you about an incident that happened long ago, when I was in college. I was working during the summer after my freshman year. It was a hospital lab, and I was essentially an illegal, unlicensed lab technologist. I ran electrolytes, lipids, liver enzymes, that sort of thing. I was also the person who came in at midnight to do blood alcohols that were ordered by police after people were pulled over or got into wrecks; since I didn't have a license, another technologist would come in at 7 A.M. and sign my alcohols. The hospital was near my college, Occidental, so I rented a room for the summer in a frat house. Aside from the place being infested with fleas, it wasn't too bad. One night I carefully crafted myself a homemade pizza by going to the grocery store and buying a frozen pizza. I carefully read the instructions on the back of the box; I preheated the oven, and then tossed the pizza in. Now, I have to tell you that nowhere on that box did it say to take the pizza out of the box before putting it in the oven. Clearly, I am not at all responsible for what happened.

Let's look at Leviticus. It is the third of the five books of the Bible that have traditionally been attributed to Moses, although very few scholars think that Moses wrote them. The other four books are: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and

Deuteronomy. Christians call these books by the Greek term Pentateuch, which translates to “*five scrolls*”. They also form the Jewish Torah. The material in these five books was written over a period of many hundreds of years, and the Pentateuch was put into its final form probably from between 538 and 334 B.C. Leviticus is dedicated to helping the people of Israel be holy in their daily lives. It lays out extremely demanding goals, that if met, offer purity. Leviticus is set at the base of Mount Sinai. In Leviticus, God speaks to Moses from the tent where the tabernacle, which holds the ten commandments, were stored at the end of Exodus. In the book, we are told that various men are consecrated as holy priests. Laws of purification are detailed; they tell us how to keep animals clean, and what women should do after childbirth. We are then told how to test for leprosy. After this we are given the Holiness Code, which tells the average person how to live a pure life. Although the book seems like a massive compilation of ridiculously detailed and ritualized rules, it was written for an ancient people who needed a way to live holy lives.

One of the things that people often note is that the book lays out precise rules for offering sacrifices to God. They seem totally irrelevant to us today. But let’s look at them. Here are the types of sacrifices and offerings detailed in Leviticus: 1. Burnt offerings were for atonement for sin. The whole animal was to

be sacrificed on the altar. 2. Grain offerings expressed a person's desire for God's blessing, as well as that person's dedication of their labor to God. 3. Fellowship or peace offerings were often given alongside burnt offerings. A fellowship offering would end with a meal, in which priests, the worshipper, and their family and friends ate together. 4. Purification offerings were sometimes called Sin offerings and were offered to compensate for unintentional sins and to obtain ceremonial cleanliness. 5. Guilt or reparation offerings were offered as a way to look beyond sin and focus on the long-term harm caused by sin. The person making the offering admits their guilt and pays restitution. There were requirements beyond these ritualistic offerings. Israelites were required to tithe and make donations during various holidays and for various ceremonies.

What's interesting is that while the Book of Leviticus gives us access to an incredible level of detail that we don't have from other neighboring peoples, offerings and sacrifices were common among Near Eastern cultures of this time. Texts from this period show us that people in Canaan, Phoenicia, Egypt, Moab, Syria, and Mesopotamia, and many other pagan nations and territories had similar practices. But while there are some significant similarities between the offerings and sacrifices of these peoples and those of the Israelites, there was a unique aspect to those of the Israelites. In pagan religions, these offerings and

sacrifices were, in a sense, bribes to get the gods to do things for people. But the Israelite God was perfect and had no specific needs. It is impossible to bribe God. Pagan faith was also magical in nature, as if the gods could be forced to do things against their will if certain things were done.

But the biggest difference is this: over and over, the Old Testament makes it clear that none of these offerings, none of these sacrifices mean a thing if they are not accompanied by a true sense of repentance. The purposes of these rituals aren't to bribe or trick God. They teach people that you must approach God on God's terms. You must listen to what God wants from you and do those things. Beyond that, you are free to express your love for God and your trust in God by making offerings and sacrifices. That's the real reason to read Leviticus: to learn how the Israelites used highly proscribed ceremonial practices to help them express their faith in God. They found a way to intertwine their faith with their daily, seasonal, and long-term life patterns. In many ways, we should be envious of them. We come here each Sunday and we pray, sing, and listen to Buzz ramble on about how cool Scripture is, but then the other six and half days a week we are on our own. Yes, we have holidays, but only a few, and they have sadly been highly commercialized and turned into secular holidays by our nation in an almost desperate attempt to separate religion from the rest of our culture.

So, I do want to get back to that pizza. With the very inaccurate, ancient oven belonging to the flea infested frat house cranked up to the proper temperature, I skillfully placed the pizza, in its box, on the top rack. I centered it perfectly. Then I sat down at the beat-up, rickety dining table and waited for the requisite number of minutes to pass. I also reacted immediately, with athletic skill, when black smoke began billowing out of the kitchen. There were no smoke alarms back then, but I dutifully notified the other occupants of the house by very clearly shouting "Fire!" I then ventured into the kitchen in a state of total bravery to see what I could do. I of course had no idea what had gone wrong.

In Christianity, we do, of course, have one major sacrifice: Jesus Christ, who offered himself up for execution. One thing we tend not to think about is that he knew very well what was going to happen to him. He may have died a young man, but all during his short adult life, and perhaps during his childhood, he knew. Dying on a cross was gruesome. It was intended as a brutal, cruel form of execution so that people would become examples. The Roman Empire wanted people to know what would happen if you broke the law. People were hung on a cross with their knees bent at about 45 degrees. The only way to breathe was to use one's legs to lift oneself up. Death could be hurried by breaking the legs. Once the legs gave out on their own or were broken, the person would slowly

suffocate. And while hanging on the cross and trying to use your legs to hold yourself up, your shoulders would probably separate. Often, it would take days to die this way. Romans would sometimes crucify a group of people together, along a roadway, so that all could see them – over and over until their decayed bodies were finally taken down. Jesus knew that he would die in agony.

Theologically, we call Jesus' death "substitutionary atonement". Jesus was our substitute. He offered himself to atone for what we would all one day do. Theologians say that at the moment that Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – this was the moment when God accepted the death of Jesus as punishment for the sins of the faithful. It was of course symbolic. Jesus' death told us just how much our God loves us, and how much God wants us to live in joy and peace. We emulate the life of Jesus to make it clear to God and to ourselves that we appreciate such an empathetic creator.

Back to the pizza. The people living in the frat house that summer were a mixture of frat members and other students like me who lived in dorms during the academic year. My yelling did indeed cause a number of people to come flooding down the stairs. Courageously, I was the first one to enter the kitchen. Clearly, for some inexplicable reason, the smoke was coming out of the very oven

where I had placed the pizza. It was at that very moment that I realized the stupid mistake that the pizza manufacturers had made. Imagine, not telling folks to take the pizza out of the box before putting it in the oven. I should have filed a lawsuit for emotional distress. I got the oven door open. Using a rag, I pulled the flaming pizza box out of the oven and tossed it onto the Linoleum floor, forever marking it as the site of a holy sacrifice. Other young people opened windows and doors. When the smoke dissipated, we all stood around Buzz's burnt offering – a blackened pizza box. There was some laughter. I was just going to toss the thing out and find something else to eat. But one guy opened the thing. The pizza was in pretty good condition. I ended up putting it back in the oven, heating it up, and eating it.

We don't have much ritual in our lives. We do not make burnt offerings. But maybe we should. The Israelites were able to do things with their rituals. It rooted their faith, giving them constant, predictable markers that made it clear that God was with them. Rituals can reduce anxiety and increase confidence. They can help us sleep. A lot of athletes have little rituals that they go through before a performance or a competition. In the United States, we have a terrible balance between work and play. If we had some rituals, if we made burnt offers, maybe we would be able to get away from work and other worries periodically,

and purify ourselves. We'd be able to wipe our minds clear and focus only on God. Please pray with me.

*God, we ask you today to help us remember you. We live technology laden lives that constantly draw us away from you and toward email, texts, websites, and social media. We live complex lives, navigating a crushing medical system in order to care for ourselves and our loved ones as we confront chronic disease and aging bodies. We must find a way to earn enough money to buy very expensive food, housing, clothing, and transportation. Help us find a way to stop periodically and deliberately remember you. Our lives are infinitely more complex than those of the Israelites and yet we have lost almost all our offerings and sacrifices. May we never forget, not for a single day, the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. May we live with love for all in remembrance of him. Amen.*