Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Just a couple of days ago there was a story in the news about bigamy. And bigamy is when a person gets married to one person when they are still married to another person. And I am sure you can imagine that when you learn that your wife or husband is also married to someone else, it is devastating news. And it is devastating because God designed marriage as a relationship of **exclusive devotion**. All of the duties and privileges of marriage should be directed exclusively or only to your spouse; no one else is allowed to share in those duties and privileges.

Well, exclusive devotion is what this passage is about. It is **a call for the Lord’s people to worship Him with exclusive devotion**.

Now, it has been a while since we looked at chapter 16, so it might help us to begin with a bit of review. The major concern of Leviticus is? Holiness. The presence of God had come to live above the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place in the Temple. And because God is holy, the only way that He could live among His people was for them to be holy. And just the way that the Book of Leviticus is structured is already quite revealing. The second half of the book, which begins with chapter 18, is about the ***walk*** with God – we will see lots of rules and regulations about a holy lifestyle. But that is the second half of the book. The first half of the book is about the *way* to God. And the way to God is the way of sacrifices. You see, what God wanted His Old Testament people to understand is that they could not make themselves holy by doing this and not doing that; God made them holy by way of the blood of a substitute sacrifice. When they presented a sacrifice, God declared them forgiven, cleansed, atoned, holy, washed by the blood. So we read about all of the different types of sacrifices and chapter 16 – the annual Day of Atonement - was the pinnacle of all of the sacrifices. That was the day when the Lamb of God took away the sins of the people. And so, having been declared holy by God by way of sacrifice, they were to strive for a holy lifestyle; they were to try and live according to who they were. And that’s what the second half of Leviticus is about – the walk with God.

Now, what is tragic is that the people of Israel forgot the gospel lesson of Leviticus. When Jesus came to earth, the Jewish people of His time thought that holiness was all about keeping the rules. And what is worse is that they thought that they were able to keep the rules and earn God’s favour. But Jesus had come to be what the *first half* of Leviticus pointed forward to – the blood sacrifice; the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But because the people of His day did not understand the Gospel of Leviticus, they rejected Him.

And we can make the same mistake today. We can fall into the error of trying to earn God’s favour by our obedience. But God says, You cannot obey my law to the standard that I require. What you must do instead is to believe that my Son is the sacrifice that died in your place; that by His blood your sins are washed away and I have declared you holy. And then you strive for a holy lifestyle; you try and live according to who you are in Christ. So even the structure of Leviticus teaches us a powerful Gospel lesson!

So chapter 17 ends the first half of Leviticus; it completes the laws about sacrifices. And the reason why we are only looking at the first nine verses is that we looked at the rest of this chapter in connection with chapter 7. The rest of this chapter is a command not to eat blood and an explanation of the command. But that command was first given in chapter 7 so we considered what all that was about then. So our focus today is verses 1-9, which are **a call for the Lord’s people to worship Him with exclusive devotion**. And what we will do first is to say just a few words of explanation about the three parts of this passage, and then we will consider how all of this applies us today. So **Explanation** and then **Application**.

1. So first of all, a brief **explanation** of the three parts of this passage.
   1. And the first part, from verses 1-4, is the requirement to worship the Lord **at the right place**.
      1. You boys and girls might remember from Genesis that people like Abraham and Jacob offered sacrifices at lots of different places. Well, the Lord was saying that that time was over; now all animal sacrifices were to be carried out exclusively at the official, recognized place of worship – the tabernacle.
         1. And we saw this also in our earlier Deuteronomy reading; the Lord said, “*Take care that you do not offer your … offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your … offerings*.”
      2. Now, if chapter 17 was all we had about sacrifices, and especially verses 3-4, it would seem that the only place that meat could be eaten was as part of a sacrifice at the Tabernacle. So just to be clear, the people of Israel **were allowed to kill and eat ox, or lamb, or goat at home and eat the meat for dinner**, so long as they drained out all the blood. We read this in our earlier Deuteronomy reading: “*You may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that He has given you*.” You will remember that the animals for sacrifice had to be “*without spot or blemish*.” And that would have left many animals that were blemished in one way or another, and not fit for sacrifice. And they were allowed to be eaten at home.
      3. So this requirement is just about theoxen, or lambs, or goats **that were offered as sacrifices**. And it is especially the peace offering that is in view in this section, as **verse 5** explains. And as we saw in chapter 3, the worshipper had to bring a live animal into the tabernacle courtyard, and then lay his hand on the head of the animal, and then kill it. And after some of the meat was offered to God on the altar, and some of it to the priests, then the worshipper could eat the rest of the meat at the tabernacle. And that is what this requirement is about – all this had to be done only at the tabernacle.
   2. So verses 1-4 are a requirement to worship the Lord **at the right place**. Verses 5-7 are the *reason* for this requirement. So in the second place let’s look at the requirement to worship **only the Lord**.
      1. Verse 7 says, “*So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore*.” And this seemingly bizarre warning had a general and a specific focus:
         1. The general focus was a warning **against all forms of idolatry**. What is the first commandment? “*You shall have no other gods before me*.” And the people of Israel were soon to enter Canaan where many gods were worshipped. That is why, as we also read in Deuteronomy, God commanded His people to “*destroy all the places where the Canaanites served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree*.” He said, “*Tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place*.” And goat worship may have been a prominent part of pagan worship at that time.
         2. But the specific focus of this command **probably has chapter 16 in view**. If you look back at verse 21 of chapter 16, Aaron was to choose a goat and lay his hands on it and confess the sins of the people and then send that goat out into the wilderness. And for a people surrounded by pagan worship, who not that long ago had made a golden calf, it is not too difficult to imagine what they might have done if they found that goat out in the wilderness. The person who finds it calls it a holy goat or God’s goat. And before you know it, people would bring food gifts to God’s goat, so that their crops would be good or they could have increased fertility, etc. But God says, Don’t even think about it! “*You shall have no other gods before me*.”
   3. So verses 5-7 are a requirement to worship **only the Lord**. The third part of this section, verses 8-9, are a requirement **that all who would worship** must worship only the Lord and only at the right place.
      1. Back in verse5, the focus was the peace offering. But there were four other types of offering, as we saw in the first seven chapters of Leviticus. And I am sure you can all remember sometime when your parents gave you an instruction, like don’t touch the chocolate biscuits! So when they were out you helped yourself to some gingernuts and some shortbread and some cake, because they only mentioned the *chocolate* biscuits. Well, God knows how our sinful minds work. So just in case the people of Israel thought that God’s words about the peace offering left them free to do the other offerings away from the tabernacle, the Lord said, ‘Uh huh! All forms of offering, whether they be “*burnt offering or sacrifice* (as it says in verse 8), must be offered to me at the tabernacle.’
      2. But notice also, from verse 8, that not just native Jewish people were in view but **also** **people of other nationalities who lived among the Jews**. That’s what is meant by “*strangers who sojourn among them.*” They were not required to present sacrifices to the Lord. But if they wanted to present sacrifices, they had to offer them *to the Lord* and *at the tabernacle*.
2. So, the Lord was to be worshipped **at the right place**, and **only the Lord** was to be worshipped, and **all who would worship** must worship *only* the Lord and only at the right place. So now we want to use the rest of our time to think about the So What? of all of this. How do these requirements point us to Jesus Christ? And what principles apply to us?
   1. Well, in terms of the right place for worship, this is why we read from **John 4** earlier in the service. For that was the exact question of the Samaritan woman, wasn’t it. Her people worshipped the Lord with sacrifices at the temple on Mt. Gerizim and the Jews worshiped the Lord with sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. So she said to Jesus, Who is right? Which is the right place for worship?
      1. Now, at that time, because of Leviticus 17 and Deuteronomy 12, the Jews were right. The temple in Jerusalem was the place designated by God for offering sacrifices. But Jesus also went on to say, “*The hour is coming when neither on [Mt Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father … the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*.”
      2. And what Jesus signaled with those words was that after His death and resurrection and the establishing of the New Testament church, worship would no longer be about animal sacrifice, but the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, and it would no longer be about the right place, as in one particular GPS co-ordinate, but about **the right *spirit***.
      3. And there is plenty we could say here but most basically, worship is now about Christians gathering together in the name of Jesus, anywhere, and their spirits connecting with the Father in heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s what spirit and truth worship is. It can be here at 63 St Georges Rd or in a cave in Iran or someone’s lounge in North Korea; so long as believers have gathered together in the name of Jesus, and they sincerely worship their Father in heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is ‘in spirit and truth worship’; it is worship at the right ‘place.’
      4. Now, I don’t want to belabour this point, but I would be remiss not to point out that this is in no way meant to undermine the importance of gathered worship on the Lord’s Day. There are many people who have taken the 2+2 of what we just said and come up with 5, meaning that they think that they don’t have to be at church on Sunday to worship God; they can do it just as well on Youtube or in the park down the road. Now, is there such a thing as private worship? Of course there is. And we should regularly worship the Lord when we are alone or with our families. But the Lord calls us to gather together for public worship on the Lord’s Day. **Hebrews 10:25** says, “[Let us] *not* [neglect] *to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*.” So the official, Lord’s Day worship of God is not restricted to one location in the world, but we are still to gather for public worship that is in spirit and truth.

* 1. And the mention of **worship in Jesus’ name** is our second application point. Earlier in the sermon I referred to the words that John the Baptist said when He first saw the Lord Jesus; he said, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*.” The sacrifices of Leviticus point us, again and again, to Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins. **Hebrews 10:12** says, “*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God … For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified*.” And this is why the Apostle Peter said of Jesus in **Acts 4:12**, “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*.” And in **John 14:6**, Jesus said, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.”So all of the ‘onlys’ of Leviticus 17 point forward to Jesus as the only way of salvation.
     1. Lots of people like to think that all of the world religions really worship the same God under a different name. And Christian or Jew or Moslem or Buddhist or Hindu, it doesn’t really matter, they are all just different pathways to God. But the Bible, whether it be in Leviticus or Hebrews or anywhere else says different – repentance and faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. Jesus demands *exclusive* devotion. To set up other mediators is, in effect, to set up another god.
  2. And that brings us to our last point of application, which has to do with the **exclusive** aspect of all we have learned today. For we too must worship *only* the Lord.
     1. Now, I trust that none of you secretly offer sacrifices to goat demons! And I trust that none of you have a statue of a cow on the mantelpiece that you pray to or a sacred river that you worship, etc. Anything like that is the foolish error that Romans 1 describes as worshipping “*the creature rather than the Creator*.”
     2. So if we do not do this, does that mean that we are free of idolatry? Does that mean that our worship of the Lord is exclusive devotion?Well,a quick read of the New Testament makes it pretty clear that we too must be on guard against idolatry:
        1. **1 John 5:21**, “Little children, keep yourselves from *idols*.” **1 Corinthians 10:14**, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from *idolatry*.”
        2. So what sorts of idolatry are we prone to? Well, **Colossians 3:5** says, “*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*.”And similarly, **Ephesians 5:5** says, “*For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God*.” And both of these passages connect covetousness with idolatry. When we make possession of things what consumes our thoughts and our time and energy, we lose sight of the treasures of heaven. And Jesus said, “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*.” And He also said, “*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*.”
        3. So while it is good to work hard, and to provide for yourself and your family, and to have something to share with those in need, all things that the Bible commends, it is possible for these things to become an excuse or a cover for our covetousness. So I have to ask you today: Could it be that you are far too busy trying to lay up treasures on earth? Could it be that you are trying to serve God and money?
        4. If so, then praise God for this intervention! Go to Him in confession and ask Him to help you lay up treasures in heaven, and not to serve money.

A constant refrain of the Old Testament is how quickly the Lord’s people forgot that they owed Him their exclusive devotion. Well, while they had sacrifices that pointed forward to Christ, we have Christ Himself! It is by His blood that all our sins have been taken away and we have been declared holy. So let us strive to live according to who we are in Christ. Let our worship, both here on Sunday and out there from Monday to Saturday, be the worship of exclusive devotion. Amen.