

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 1

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of Leviticus 1–7 (The Sacrificial System)

Leviticus 1 opens the book's first major section (chapters 1–7), which details the five primary offerings: burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt. These chapters function together as the LORD's instruction to Israel on how a sinful people may approach a holy God through the sacrificial system. Leviticus as a whole stands at the center of the Pentateuch and at the center of Israel's covenantal existence — positioned between Sinai (Exodus) and the wilderness journey (Numbers), it answers the urgent question raised by God's descent into the tabernacle (Exodus 40): now that the holy God dwells among His people, how shall they come near? Leviticus 1 does not answer this question abstractly. It answers it with blood, fire, and a prescribed procedure that is at once costly, specific, and — for the offerer — entirely accepted.

This Text — Content

Leviticus 1 presents the LORD's instructions for the burnt offering (*'ōlāh*), the first and in many respects foundational offering in Israel's worship. The chapter divides by the animal offered: herd (vv. 3–9), flock (vv. 10–13), and birds (vv. 14–17). In each case, the structure is remarkably consistent: the worshiper selects a male without blemish, presents it at the entrance of the tent of meeting, lays a hand on it, slaughters it, and the priests arrange and burn it on the altar. The LORD receives it as “a pleasing aroma.” The tiered provision (bull → ram or goat → turtledove or pigeon) accommodates Israel's full economic range — no Israelite is excluded from access to this form of worship because of poverty. The hand-laying (*sāmak*) is particularly significant: it is an act of identification, the worshiper connecting himself to the animal before it is consumed.

This Text — Intent

God is doing something precise and urgent in Leviticus 1: He is showing a people who have been redeemed *how* to draw near to Him on His own terms. The burnt offering is described as producing “a pleasing aroma to the LORD” — a relational category, not merely a mechanical transaction. God intends for Israel to understand that (1) approach to God requires substitutionary sacrifice; (2) that sacrifice must be *specified by God*, not invented by the worshiper; (3) that God genuinely receives and is pleased by worship offered according to His word; and (4) that access to God is costly but real, and is graciously accommodated to the worshiper's means. The intent is not to burden Israel with obligation but to open a door — to show them that there *is* a way to come near, and this is it. The New Testament reader cannot read Leviticus 1 without seeing the shadow sharpening toward a single Lamb.

Subject Sentence: The LORD prescribes the burnt offering — the costly, accepted way to draw near.

Primary Claim: God is showing His people that approach to Him is possible, costly, divinely specified, and genuinely received — and that it comes only through the substitution of an unblemished sacrifice on their behalf.

Interpretive Evaluation

The meaning of hand-laying (v. 4) — transfer of sin or identification?

The act of pressing the hand (*sāmak*) on the animal's head in verse 4 is one of the most exegetically freighted gestures in the sacrificial system. Two main readings exist. The first, widely held in older scholarship and in some evangelical traditions, understands hand-laying primarily as *identification* — the worshiper is associating himself with the sacrifice, marking it as his own, so that what happens to the animal is reckoned as happening to him. The second reading, which some have taken from the Day of Atonement parallel in Leviticus 16 and from the substitutionary language of verse 4b (“it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him”), understands hand-laying as *transfer* — sin is transferred from the worshiper to the animal, which then bears the penalty.

The Reformed reading holds that both dimensions are present and inseparable, and that this is in fact *the same thing*: identification *produces* transfer; transfer *requires* identification. The burnt offering is explicitly said to “make atonement” for the worshiper (v. 4b). The gesture is not decorative or merely relational — it is substitutionary. The animal stands in for the worshiper; the whole burnt offering consumed by fire enacts what the sinner deserves. This reading is confirmed by the structural parallel with the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21, where the same verb (*sāmak*) governs the explicit transfer of Israel's sins to the goat. The Reformed verdict: hand-laying signifies substitutionary identification — the worshiper pressing his guilt onto the animal that will be consumed in his place.

Is the burnt offering primarily about propitiation or consecration?

Some interpreters — particularly in Wesleyan and liberal Protestant traditions — have emphasized the burnt offering as primarily an act of consecration or dedication to God, pointing to the total consumption of the animal as a symbol of complete self-offering. The “pleasing aroma” language, on this reading, points to God's delight in the worshiper's devotion rather than in the satisfaction of His justice.

This reading captures a genuine secondary element: the burnt offering *does* function as an act of consecration, which is why it frames Israel's major worship moments (Exod 29; Lev

8–9; Num 28–29). However, verse 4b is explicit: the purpose includes *atonement* (*kipper*). This is not primarily the language of devotion but of covering, satisfying, and dealing with sin. The two dimensions are not in conflict — total consecration and substitutionary atonement belong together in the *’ōlāh*. But the Reformed reading insists that the atonement dimension is primary and structural: the whole burnt offering is accepted *because* it makes atonement; the consecration dimension flows from that foundation, not the other way around. The Wesleyan emphasis on consecration is worth retaining as a secondary application but must not be allowed to displace the propitiatory structure the text establishes.

Does the tiered provision (vv. 3, 10, 14) signal anything theologically, or is it merely practical?

Some readings treat the tiered provision as purely pragmatic — God accommodating Israel’s economic diversity without theological weight. A closer reading, however, reveals that the gradations in costly-ness run from bull (maximum cost, maximum priestly involvement) to birds (minimum cost, adapted procedure), but the *acceptance* is identical across all three: each is called “a pleasing aroma to the LORD.” The theological weight here is significant: God does not calibrate His reception of the worshiper to the size of the gift. The poorest Israelite’s two pigeons are as fully received as the wealthiest Israelite’s bull. This is grace built into the structure of the law itself — a point worth emphasizing against readings (often in popular preaching) that treat the sacrificial system as a ladder of merit where greater sacrifice earns greater favor.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 22:1–14** — The binding of Isaac is the first canonical instance of substitutionary sacrifice accepted by God; the ram “in place of” Isaac (*taḥat*) names the dynamic that Leviticus 1 will institutionalize. The “pleasing aroma” of Genesis 8:21 similarly establishes that God genuinely receives sacrifice offered in faith.
- **Exodus 29:38–46** — The daily burnt offering (*tāmîd*) framing the tabernacle’s ongoing worship establishes the burnt offering as Israel’s fundamental mode of continuous access to God — not a one-time transaction but a sustained relational reality. God’s dwelling “among them” is structurally connected to the burnt offering.
- **Isaiah 53:4–12** — The Servant bears the iniquities of many, is crushed as an offering for guilt (*’āshām*), and his life is a sin offering — the sacrificial logic of Leviticus 1 (substitution, hand-transfer, death, acceptance) achieves its full verbal and theological expression here.
- **John 1:29** — “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” — John the Baptist’s identification of Jesus deploys the sacrificial vocabulary of Leviticus

directly; the burnt offering's requirement of an "unblemished male" is the typological ground for the sinless, substitutionary Christ.

- **Hebrews 10:1–14** — The author of Hebrews explicitly addresses the sacrificial system as "a shadow of the good things to come" and argues that the repeated character of the burnt and sin offerings (impossible to offer once for all) points to their inherent incompleteness, satisfied only by Christ's single, perfecting self-offering. The logic of Leviticus 1 is not abolished but fulfilled.

Aim: To show that God's provision of the burnt offering reveals the only ground on which sinners may draw near to God — costly substitution, divinely specified and genuinely received — and that Christ is the unblemished fulfillment toward which every *ʿōlāh* pointed.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD calls to Moses and speaks from the tent of meeting	The divine initiative: God speaks first; the whole system originates with Him, not Israel's religious instinct
2	The command to speak to Israel: when anyone brings an offering (<i>qorbān</i>) from the herd or flock	<i>Qorbān</i> = "that which is brought near" — the word encodes the act's purpose: drawing near to God
3	Herd offering: a male without blemish (<i>tāmîm</i>), presented at the entrance of the tent of meeting for acceptance (<i>lirtsōnō</i>) before the LORD	Male, unblemished, presented at the designated place — three requirements of specification
4	The worshiper lays his hand on the animal's head; it is accepted for him to make atonement (<i>kipper</i>)	Hand-laying = substitutionary identification; <i>kipper</i> = the central atonement word; acceptance is stated as the result
5	The worshiper slaughters the bull; Aaron's sons the priests bring the blood and throw it against the sides of	The worshiper kills; the priest handles the blood — two roles, not one; blood-handling is priestly work

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the altar	
6	The worshiper flays and cuts the burnt offering into pieces	The worshiper remains active — this is not a passive transaction
7	Aaron's sons put fire on the altar and arrange wood	The priestly fire preparation
8	The priests arrange the pieces, head, and fat on the wood of the altar fire	Priestly arrangement — everything in order, nothing omitted
9	Entrails and legs washed with water; the priests burn the whole on the altar — a pleasing aroma (<i>rêah nîḥôah</i>) to the LORD	“Pleasing aroma” — relational reception language; God is genuinely pleased; <i>whole</i> burnt offering = total consumption
10–13	Flock offering (sheep or goat): same essential procedure adapted — slaughter on the north side of the altar; priests handle blood and arrange pieces; pleasing aroma	North side specification for smaller animals; procedural continuity with the bull; same atonement function
14–17	Bird offering (turtledove or pigeon): priest wrings its neck, drains blood against the altar side, removes crop and feathers, tears by wings, burns on altar — a pleasing aroma	Adapted procedure for birds (priest does more work because the animal is smaller); same acceptance, same pleasing aroma — economic accommodation without diminished reception

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The LORD Speaks: The Offering as Divinely Initiated Act of Drawing Near
2	3–9	The Burnt Offering from the Herd: The Full Procedure with Atonement Named
3	10–13	The Burnt Offering from the

Division	Verses	Label
4	14–17	Flock: The Same Acceptance at Lesser Cost The Burnt Offering from the Birds: The Same Acceptance for the Poorest Worshiper

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD prescribes the burnt offering — the costly, accepted way to draw near.

Primary Claim: God is showing His people that approach to Him is possible, costly, divinely specified, and genuinely received — and that it comes only through the substitution of an unblemished sacrifice on their behalf.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) You cannot design your own approach to God — He has specified it.

Leviticus 1 opens with God speaking. Every element that follows — the animal’s sex, its condition, the place of presentation, the role of the priest, the handling of blood — is divinely prescribed, not humanly invented. Israel was surrounded by nations with elaborate, self-generated religious systems. The burnt offering says: *this* is the way, not the way you would have constructed. The New Testament reader must resist the modern equivalent of this error — the assumption that sincerity, good intention, or a personally meaningful spiritual practice constitutes an acceptable approach to God. The text confronts the reader: God has specified the way to come near. In Christ, that specification has been given its final, definitive, and exclusive form (John 14:6). The application is not a call to legalistic compliance but a call to abandon the project of self-designed religion and receive the approach God has provided.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) The “pleasing aroma” is not a metaphor for ritual performance — it is God’s genuine delight in His people’s faith-filled approach.

Three times in this chapter the phrase “pleasing aroma to the LORD” (*rêaḥ nîḥôaḥ*) appears, once for each category of offering. This is relational language. God is not a bureaucrat processing paperwork — He is a covenant Lord genuinely pleased when His people draw near in the way He has provided. For the worshiper who brings what he has — even two pigeons — and lays his hand on it and trusts the prescribed substitution, the text says: *God receives this. He is pleased.* The Christian reader should feel the weight of this when reading Hebrews 10 and Romans 8: God’s genuine delight in His people who come to Him through Christ is not diminished by their poverty of spiritual performance. He has specified

the sacrifice; He is pleased with those who come through it. This should produce wonder, not anxiety.

3. (Will/Behavior) Examine whether your worship is defined by what God has commanded or by what feels acceptable to you.

The worshiper in Leviticus 1 could not omit the hand-laying because he found it uncomfortable. He could not substitute a blemished animal because a perfect one was too costly. He could not present his offering in his own field rather than at the tent of meeting because the journey was inconvenient. The specification mattered — the whole acceptance of the offering rested on compliance with what God had prescribed. The application for the contemporary worshiper is concrete: Is your engagement with God's means of grace (Scripture, prayer, the gathered church, the Lord's Supper) shaped by what God has instituted, or by what feels spiritually natural to you? The burnt offering's total specification calls the worshiper to submit the *form* of worship to God's word, not only its emotional content.

4. (Mind/Belief) The hand-laying is the whole gospel in a gesture — your guilt transferred to the one who stands in your place.

The worshiper in verse 4 does not merely observe the sacrifice. He presses his hand on the animal's head with weight (*sāmak* implies firm pressure), and in that gesture, the text says, atonement is made. What he deserved — to be consumed by the holiness of God — is transferred to the animal. The animal dies; he is accepted. This is not a metaphor for moral improvement or spiritual discipline. It is substitution. The entire burnt offering procedure is designed to make this visible and felt: *another* is dying in this person's place; *another* is bearing what this person earned. The New Testament reader who grasps this will not read "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21) as a doctrinal abstraction but as the hand-laying of Leviticus 1 brought to its final and permanent reality.

5. (Affections/Worship) The tiered provision is not condescension — it is the grace of a God who will not let poverty bar anyone from drawing near.

God does not accept two pigeons grudgingly from the poor worshiper who cannot afford a bull. He accepts them as "a pleasing aroma" — the identical language used for the bull. The poorest member of Israel's assembly had access to the same accepted approach to God as the wealthiest. This is grace built into law. The application should move the reader to gratitude and away from spiritual performance-anxiety: the question before God is not whether you have brought enough, but whether you have brought what He has specified through the means He has provided. In Christ, the specified sacrifice has been offered once for all, and it is offered on behalf of every sinner who comes — regardless of what they bring.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Leviticus 1 establishes the foundational theological grammar of the Old Testament sacrificial system: God is holy, sinners cannot approach Him on their own terms, substitutionary sacrifice is the divinely appointed means of access, and God genuinely receives those who come through the way He has provided. The chapter teaches that atonement (*kipper*) is not a human religious achievement but a divinely ordained transaction — God specifying both the need and the provision. The “pleasing aroma” language establishes that God’s reception of the worshiper is relational and genuine, not merely transactional. The tiered provision teaches that God’s grace is not calibrated to the worshiper’s economic status. Taken together, Leviticus 1 defines what it means to “draw near” (*qārab*) to God: it is possible, it is costly, it is specified, and when done rightly, it is genuinely accepted — not because the animal is sufficient, but because God has ordained it as the means of access for now, and because it points forward to the One whose sacrifice will be permanently sufficient.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 1 is the institutional ground of the Reformed doctrine of substitutionary atonement. The hand-laying, the unblemished requirement, the priestly blood-handling, the total consumption, and the explicit *kipper* language together establish a sacrificial structure that is inherently substitutionary and divinely originated — not a human religious instinct but a God-prescribed response to the problem of human sinfulness before a holy God. Reformed theology’s insistence that atonement is God’s provision before it is the sinner’s achievement is written into the very grammar of Leviticus 1: God speaks first (v. 1), God specifies the animal, God receives the offering. The worshiper responds within a framework he did not create. This pattern — divine initiative, divine specification, divine acceptance — is the backbone of Reformed soteriology, and Leviticus 1 is among its oldest textual expressions. Furthermore, the Reformed redemptive-historical reading (Clowney, Ferguson) sees every *’ōlāh* as a promissory note — a repeated enacted declaration that a final, sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice is coming. The inadequacy of the system (Heb 10:4) is not an embarrassment to the text but a built-in pointer: these offerings cannot finally suffice, which is precisely why they must be repeated, and precisely why Christ’s offering, which fully satisfies, renders them obsolete. Leviticus 1 does not merely illustrate Reformed theology — it establishes its Old Testament sacrificial foundation.

Main Takeaway

God will not be approached on your terms — but He has provided the terms on which you *can* be received. In Leviticus 1, that provision is a spotless animal dying in the worshiper’s

place, its blood handled by a priest, its whole body consumed in fire, accepted by God as a pleasing aroma. In Christ, that provision is complete and permanent: the unblemished sacrifice has been offered, the high priest has presented the blood, and the Father has declared Himself well-pleased. Stop trying to come to God carrying your own credentials. The hand has already been laid; the substitution has already been made. Come through the sacrifice God has specified, and you will be received.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Leviticus 1 as merely historical description rather than theologically prescriptive.** A common failure is to teach this chapter as background information for understanding the New Testament rather than as God's active word that makes a claim on readers in its own right. The theological grammar established here — divine initiative, substitution, specified access, genuine acceptance — is not superseded in Christ but *fulfilled*; it remains authoritative for understanding what Christ accomplished. Preachers who race past the Old Testament text toward the New Testament application rob the congregation of the depth that makes the New Testament claim so weighty.
- **Skipping the hand-laying and its substitutionary freight.** Verse 4 is the interpretive center of the chapter. Preachers who dwell on the procedural details of verses 5–9 while passing quickly over the hand-laying and the *kipper* language lose the theological engine that drives the whole passage. The atonement language in verse 4b is not incidental — it is the stated purpose of the entire procedure.
- **Moralizing the text toward “complete consecration” and away from substitution.** The temptation, especially in contexts influenced by Wesleyan holiness or devotional Christianity, is to preach the burnt offering primarily as a model for total self-surrender — “give God your whole self, hold nothing back.” This captures a genuine secondary truth but inverts the text's primary structure. The offering makes atonement before it models consecration. Preaching consecration first produces moralism; preaching atonement first produces gospel, from which consecration naturally flows.
- **Ignoring the tiered provision and its theological weight.** The three tiers (bull, flock, bird) are sometimes treated as a curiosity of ancient economics. In fact, they carry a significant theological claim: God's acceptance is not proportional to the cost of what is offered. The poorest worshiper receives the identical reception (“a pleasing aroma”) as the wealthiest. Failing to preach this perpetuates the implicit performance-anxiety that drives much contemporary Christian experience — the sense that those with more to offer are more received by God.
- **Failing to connect the typology without collapsing the text into an illustration.** Leviticus 1 points forward to Christ — this is non-negotiable in Christian exposition.

But a common homiletical failure is to use Leviticus 1 as nothing more than an illustration of Hebrews 10, with the text itself evacuated of meaning. The Reformed redemptive-historical approach insists that the text makes its own claim in its own moment — it was God’s real provision for real Israelite sinners — and *also* points forward. Both the type and its fulfillment carry weight; the former should not be dissolved into the latter.

- **Presenting the sacrificial system as burdensome obligation rather than gracious provision.** Leviticus 1 opens with God calling Moses and providing a way for “any of you” — the inclusivity of *’ādām* in verse 2 is deliberate. The burnt offering is not primarily a burden imposed on Israel; it is a door opened. God is showing a redeemed people that they *can* draw near — that there *is* a way — and that He will genuinely receive them when they come. Preaching that frames Leviticus 1 primarily around the cost and burden of the system, rather than the grace of the provision, misses the pastoral intent embedded in the chapter’s own structure.