

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 3

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of Leviticus 1–7 (The Offering Laws): Leviticus 3 sits within the first major legislative block of the book (chapters 1–7), which presents the five foundational offerings of Israel’s sacrificial system: the burnt offering (ch. 1), the grain offering (ch. 2), the peace offering (ch. 3), the sin offering (chs. 4–5), and the guilt offering (chs. 5–6). This unit as a whole establishes the architecture of Israel’s access to a holy God — each offering addressing a distinct dimension of the worshiper’s relationship with the LORD. Chapter 3 is genuinely intelligible as its own unit with its own specific claim about a particular type of sacrifice, but it gains its fullest meaning when understood as one movement within the larger liturgical grammar of chapters 1–7. The broader unit’s claim is that the LORD has graciously provided a structured, detailed, and complete means of drawing near to Himself — leaving nothing to human invention or improvisation.

This Text — Content: Leviticus 3 provides the prescriptive legislation for the peace offering (*zebah shelimim*), sometimes translated “fellowship offering.” The chapter covers three variants based on the animal offered: an animal from the herd (vv. 1–5), a lamb (vv. 6–11), and a goat (vv. 12–16). The structural pattern is consistent across all three: the worshiper presents the animal, lays his hand on it, slaughters it, and the priest sprinkles the blood on the altar. The internal fat portions, the kidneys, and the fatty lobe of the liver are then burned on the altar as the LORD’s designated portion. The chapter closes in verses 16b–17 with a perpetual statute: the fat and the blood belong to the LORD and are not to be eaten, a prohibition binding on all Israel throughout all their generations in all their dwelling places.

This Text — Intent: God’s intent through this chapter is not merely to legislate the mechanics of a sacrifice but to establish the theological reality that genuine peace between a holy God and sinful worshipers is made possible only on God’s own terms, through God’s own appointed means, with God’s own portion reserved to Him. The chapter presses worshipers — ancient and modern — to reckon with the weight of what it costs to have peace with God, to receive that peace with gratitude rather than presumption, and to understand that God’s holiness is never merely a backdrop to fellowship but is the very ground of it. The intent is to cultivate reverent, grateful, structurally-informed communion with the God who makes peace possible.

Subject Sentence: Peace with God is holy, costly, and entirely structured by divine appointment.

Primary Claim: God makes genuine fellowship with Himself possible — but only through the costly, blood-and-fire sacrifice He alone designs and accepts — calling His people to receive that peace with reverence, not presumption, and to recognize that true communion with a holy God is never on their own terms.

Interpretive Evaluation

The name and nature of the offering: The Hebrew *shelamim* (from *shalom*) has generated interpretive debate about the offering's primary referent. Some scholars (following Milgrom) read it as “gift of greeting” or “completion offering”; others read it as “peace offering” in the sense of restored relationship; still others emphasize its communal meal dimension — the offering that is partly eaten by the worshiper and family, unlike the wholly consumed burnt offering. The Reformed reading recognizes that *shalom* here is best understood as the full-orbed biblical concept: wholeness, wellbeing, right relationship, and peace — not merely emotional peace or relational friendliness. The offering enacts and celebrates the condition of the worshiper who stands before God in right relationship, made possible by the sacrificial system as a whole. The communal meal dimension (developed further in Deuteronomy and elaborated in Leviticus 7) is real, but chapter 3 itself focuses entirely on the presentation, slaughter, blood rite, and burning of fat portions — the altar-side mechanics, not the table. Reading chapter 3 primarily as a fellowship meal is to read ahead of the text. The Reformed reading holds content and sequence: this chapter establishes *how* peace is made before chapters 7 and later texts describe *how it is celebrated*.

The fat prohibition and its theological weight: Verse 17's absolute prohibition — “you shall eat neither fat nor blood” — is sometimes treated as a merely hygienic or cultic regulation with no continuing theological freight for Christians. This reading, common in dispensational frameworks that sharply segregate Mosaic ceremonial law from any abiding principle, **qualifies but does not adequately account for** the text's own stated rationale. The text does not say “do not eat fat because it is unhealthy” — it says the fat belongs to the LORD. This is a *theological* claim about divine portion and divine prerogative, not a nutritional guideline. The Reformed reading acknowledges that the specific dietary prohibition does not bind New Covenant believers as a ceremonial regulation (Acts 10; Col. 2:16–17), but insists that the *theological claim underlying the prohibition* abides: God claims what is His; not everything is available to human appetite; holiness means boundaries, and some things are reserved for God. The abolition of the ceremonial form does not abolish the theological reality the form was carrying.

The laying on of hands: Some traditions (particularly those with sacramental concerns) have read the *samak* (“lay the hand on”) rite as a form of identification or even substitutionary transfer, seeing here a foreshadowing of Christ bearing the worshiper's sin. This reading is theologically rich and directionally correct in its typological instinct but must be **qualified** with care. In the peace offering, the worshiper is not in the posture of a

sinner requiring atonement (that is the sin offering's specific function); the *samak* here is better read as identification and presentation — the worshiper identifying the animal as his own gift, his own dedication. The typological connection to Christ remains real at the canonical level (the entire sacrificial system points forward), but the hand-laying in this specific context does not carry the full substitutionary freight it bears in the sin offering. Pressing the substitutionary reading onto the peace offering's *samak* flattens the differentiation the text deliberately preserves among the five offerings.

The Reformed reading — verdict: Leviticus 3 must be read as one part of a carefully differentiated liturgical system, not as a generic “sacrifice passage.” Its specific claim is about the peace offering's structure: God provides the means of fellowship, claims His own portion, and sets the terms. It points typologically to Christ not only in the blood and fire of the sacrifice but in the whole theological logic it enshrines — that peace with God costs blood, is accepted by God on God's terms, and results in genuine communion that God welcomes and designs. The New Testament fulfillment is not merely that “Jesus died for us” in a generalized sense but that Jesus is Himself the peace offering in whom God and humanity are reconciled (*Eph. 2:14* — “*He Himself is our peace*”), the one in whom the fat and the blood — the fullness of a life given — belong entirely to the Father's consuming acceptance.

Key Canonical Support

- **Leviticus 7:11–21** — Provides the complementary legislation for the peace offering, covering the communal meal dimension (thanksgiving, vow, freewill offerings) that chapter 3 prepares but does not yet develop; grounds chapter 3 in its full liturgical context.
 - **Ephesians 2:14–18** — “He Himself is our peace” (*autos gar estin hē eirēnē hēmōn*) — Christ is identified as the fulfillment of the peace-offering logic: the one through whom the dividing wall is abolished and access to the Father is secured, by blood, by sacrifice, by divine appointment.
 - **Colossians 1:19–20** — The Father's pleasure to reconcile all things through the blood of Christ's cross — the cosmic peace offering — directly fulfills the *shalom*-making intention embedded in the Levitical peace offering.
 - **Romans 5:1–2** — “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” — names the reality the peace offering signified: actual peace, actual standing, actual access, not merely cessation of hostility.
 - **Hebrews 10:1–14** — The repeated offerings were shadows of the one offering that perfects; the peace offering's repeated animal presentations find their termination in Christ's single, unrepeatable sacrifice that actually accomplishes the peace they could only signify.
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Aim: To lead readers to understand the peace offering's specific theological logic so they receive their peace with God — purchased by Christ — with the reverence and gratitude the offering itself demands, not with presumption or casualness.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Introduction of the peace offering (<i>zebah shelamim</i>); animal from the herd, male or female, without blemish, presented before the LORD	“Without blemish” (<i>tamim</i>) — the same standard as the burnt offering; defect in the gift is an insult to the Giver
2	Worshiper lays hand on the head of the offering and slaughters it at the entrance of the tent of meeting; priests (Aaron’s sons) sprinkle blood on the sides of the altar	<i>Samak</i> — pressing, not merely touching; identification and presentation; blood rite performed by priests, not the worshiper
3–4	The fat portions designated for the LORD: fat covering the entrails, fat on the entrails, two kidneys with their fat, and the fatty lobe of the liver	These are the richest, most vital internal portions — the LORD receives the best of the inner life of the animal
5	Aaron’s sons burn these portions on the altar on top of the burnt offering — a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD	The peace offering is layered <i>on</i> the burnt offering; sequencing matters — atonement grounds fellowship
6	Peace offering from the flock, male or female, without blemish	The offering is available across the economic range of Israel’s flock animals
7–8	If a lamb: worshiper presents it before the LORD, lays hand on its head, slaughters it before the tent of meeting; priests sprinkle blood on the sides of the altar	Identical structural pattern as vv. 1–2; the repetition across animal types signals universal application of the same logic
9–10	Fat tail (a delicacy in Near	The fat tail (<i>alyah</i>) is specific

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Eastern fat-tailed sheep), fat covering the entrails, two kidneys with their fat, and fatty lobe of the liver — all to be removed and burned	to the lamb variant; the LORD's portion is expanded to include this prized portion
11	The priest burns these on the altar — a food offering to the LORD	"Food offering" (<i>lehem</i>) — not that God eats in a pagan sense, but the language of gift and reception; the Lord accepts the sacrifice as a presentation made to Him
12–13	If a goat: presented before the LORD, hand laid on its head, slaughtered before the tent of meeting; blood sprinkled on sides of the altar	The pattern completes with a third animal type, exhausting the major flock/herd categories available to worshipers
14–15	Same fat portions as the lamb: fat covering the entrails, two kidneys with fat, fatty lobe of the liver	The consistency across all three variants is itself a theological statement: the LORD's claim on the best inner portions is invariant
16	The priest burns these on the altar as a food offering — a pleasing aroma; all fat belongs to the LORD	The repetition of "all the fat is the LORD's" functions as the theological thesis statement of the entire chapter
16b–17	Perpetual statute throughout all generations in all dwelling places: eat no fat, eat no blood	The absolute and universal character of this prohibition signals that the theological claim (God's portion, God's prerogative) is not geographically or temporally limited to tabernacle/temple context

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Peace Offering from the Herd

Division	Verses	Label
2	6–11	The Peace Offering from the Flock: A Lamb
3	12–16a	The Peace Offering from the Flock: A Goat
4	16b–17	The Perpetual Statute: Fat and Blood Belong to the LORD

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Peace with God is holy, costly, and entirely structured by divine appointment.

Primary Claim: God makes genuine fellowship with Himself possible — but only through the costly, blood-and-fire sacrifice He alone designs and accepts — calling His people to receive that peace with reverence, not presumption, and to recognize that true communion with a holy God is never on their own terms.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive your peace with God as the staggering gift it is, not as a background assumption. (*Affections/Worship*) The peace offering was not a casual act. An animal died. Blood was shed and thrown against the altar. Fat was burned. The worshiper's hand was pressed onto the head of the animal before it was slaughtered. This was not a handshake agreement — this was a solemn, costly, embodied transaction. For those in Christ, the peace they have with God (Rom. 5:1) was purchased at the cost of the Son of God's blood and life. The danger for believers is to treat their peace with God as a theological background fact — true, confirmed, filed away — rather than as the daily, stunning reality that the One who should be their adversary is their Father and their welcome. Stand before God today with the weight of what your peace cost pressing on your heart.

2. Relinquish the assumption that you come to God on your own terms. (*Mind/Belief*) Every element of Leviticus 3 is prescribed. The animal, the presentation, the slaughter, the blood rite, the fat portions, the prohibition — nothing is left to the worshiper's preference. This is not liturgical bureaucracy; it is theological reality: God is not approached on human initiative or human design. The temptation in every generation is to construct a preferred version of God — more accessible, less demanding, more accommodating to human appetite — and approach that version. But the text will not allow it. God receives the offerings He appoints. The same principle runs through the entire canon: we come to God through Christ, by faith, according to the Spirit's intercession — not through whatever form of spirituality happens to feel authentic. Audit your approach to God: is it shaped by what the Scriptures say about how God receives worship, or by what feels natural and comfortable to you?

3. Recognize that God’s holiness is not an obstacle to fellowship but the very ground of it. (Mind/Belief) Modern evangelicalism often frames God’s holiness as the problem that grace has to solve so that fellowship can begin. Leviticus 3 refuses this framing. The peace offering does not happen *despite* God’s holiness but *through* it — the detailed prescriptions, the unblemished animal, the blood on the altar, the fat reserved for the LORD — these are the expression of a holy God providing holy access for unholy people. The fellowship is real *because* the holiness is honored, not in spite of it. In Christ, this reaches its completion: God’s holiness is not overcome or set aside in the atonement; it is *satisfied* — which is why the peace that results is not a truce but a genuine, unbreakable shalom. Do not regard God’s holiness as something to navigate around in your approach to Him. It is the very thing that makes your approach solid.

4. Examine what you are reserving from God’s claim on your life. (Will/Behavior) “All the fat is the LORD’s” (v. 16). The fat in the ancient Near Eastern world was the richest, finest, most prized portion — the best of the best. The LORD’s claim on the fat portions is a claim on the prime of the animal, the center of its vitality. Transposed to the New Covenant, the question is not whether to offer a sacrifice — Christ has offered the one sacrifice — but whether the worshiper’s life is being presented to God in a manner consistent with the theology the peace offering embodies. Romans 12:1 calls believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices. The fat-prohibition logic is: what is most valued, most prized, most vital belongs to God. Where are you withholding the fat — the best of your time, your financial resources, your ambition, your attention — from the LORD’s claim? Name it specifically and release it.

5. Worship with the whole body, not just the mind. (Affections/Worship) The peace offering was an irreducibly embodied act: the worshiper brought an animal, pressed his hand onto its head, watched it die, and participated in a ritual that engaged sight, sound, smell, and touch. Biblical worship is never merely cognitive assent or interior sentiment. The repeated, careful, physical structure of Leviticus 3 is itself a form of instruction: the body is involved in approaching God. For those accustomed to purely intellectual or emotionally-driven worship, this passage calls for recovery of the full-bodied, reverent, structured engagement with God that the New Testament describes in terms of gathering, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and corporate worship. Come to God with your body engaged, not as a soul that happens to occupy a body. The peace offering was not a thought experiment — and neither is your worship.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Leviticus 3 teaches that peace with God — genuine relational wholeness between the holy Creator and sinful creatures — is possible only through divinely appointed, costly, blood-and-fire sacrifice. The chapter reveals something essential about God’s character: He is a God who both *demand*s and *provides* the means of fellowship, a combination that prevents both presumption (He demands; not everything

is permissible) and despair (He provides; access is genuinely available). The invariant prohibition on eating fat and blood — “perpetual throughout your generations” — signals that God’s claim on what is most vital and most life-bearing is not a temporary ceremonial arrangement but reflects something permanently true about who He is: the LORD who will not cede His prerogatives, who receives only the worship He appoints, and who is not improved or supplemented by human addition. The threefold repetition of the offering across herd and flock animals teaches that God’s terms for fellowship do not vary with the worshiper’s economic status or animal selection — the same holy logic governs every approach.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 3 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of *sola gratia* in worship: God provides the means of access, defines the terms of approach, and accepts only what He Himself has appointed — leaving no room for human merit, human creativity, or human supplementation of the sacrificial system. The peace offering’s sequencing — burned *on top of* the burnt offering (v. 5) — encodes a crucial Reformed insight: fellowship with God is only possible *on the ground of atonement*. Peace is not a free-floating relational category; it rests on the prior satisfaction of God’s justice. The entire chapter points forward to Christ as the one true peace offering in whom God’s holiness and humanity’s need are simultaneously and permanently resolved (Eph. 2:14–18; Col. 1:20). Reformed covenant theology reads the peace offering as a covenant fellowship meal in miniature — the God who has entered into covenant with Israel provides the means by which covenant members draw near and celebrate the relationship He has established. The “pleasing aroma” language (vv. 5, 11, 16) carries through to Paul’s description of Christ’s sacrifice in Ephesians 5:2 and of believers’ sacrificial lives in Philippians 4:18 — the New Covenant fulfillment of the fragrant offering is Christological at its center and doxological in its application.

Main Takeaway

The peace you have with God is real, it is costly, and it was purchased entirely on God’s terms — not yours. Christ is your peace offering: He shed the blood, the Father accepted the sacrifice, and the fellowship that results is unbreakable. But this peace is not a background fact to be filed away — it is the most staggering thing true about you, and it demands that you come to God with the reverence of someone who knows exactly what it cost.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as purely antiquarian legislation with no living claim.** The most common failure with Leviticus texts is to spend the entire exposition explaining what the ancient Israelites did and why, with no movement toward what this passage is claiming of the contemporary reader. The chapter is not a museum exhibit. It is the word of God — living and active — making a claim about what fellowship with a holy God requires and costs. The preacher must move through the legislation to the theology it encodes, and from the theology to the Primary Claim, without getting marooned in ancient description.
- **Skipping the costliness and going straight to the fellowship.** The peace offering results in genuine communion and celebration (Leviticus 7 fills this out), and it is tempting to preach to that end — peace, fellowship, welcome. But chapter 3 itself stays entirely at the altar side: the slaughter, the blood, the burning fat. Preaching the fellowship without preaching what produces it creates cheap-grace worship. The chapter insists on the cost before the communion.
- **Confusing the peace offering with the sin offering.** These are deliberately differentiated offerings addressing different relational postures before God. The sin offering addresses guilt and requires atonement; the peace offering assumes a worshiper who is already in covenant standing and is drawing near in gratitude, vow-fulfillment, or freewill devotion. Preaching the peace offering as though it is a guilt-management mechanism misreads the offering's category. The Reformed preacher should note this distinction carefully — not because the peace offering has no connection to atonement (it is burned on top of the burnt offering), but because its specific claim concerns *fellowship* and *shalom*, not *expiation*.
- **Over-pressing the typological reading at the expense of the passage's own claim.** The typological connection to Christ is real and necessary — the preacher must not leave the congregation in Leviticus without showing them the fulfillment. But if the exposition spends 90% of its time in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 1 and only nods at Leviticus 3, the passage itself has not been preached. The text has its own claim, its own structure, its own theological weight. The typological movement should arrive as a revelation, not a rescue operation from a boring text.
- **Flattening the fat-and-blood prohibition into mere dietary law.** Verse 17 is often noted briefly and passed over as a Mosaic dietary regulation superseded by Acts 10. This misses the theological load the prohibition is carrying: the fat belongs to the LORD — the best, most vital portions of the offering are His, not the worshiper's. The preacher who skips this skips the chapter's climactic statement about divine prerogative and human restraint. The specific dietary form may be superseded for New Covenant believers, but the theological claim is not: God claims what is most vital, most prized, most life-bearing. That claim presses directly into the application about what the worshiper reserves from God's claim on their own life.

- **Neglecting the structural insight that the peace offering is burned on top of the burnt offering.** Verse 5 is easy to pass over, but it encodes the entire Reformed ordo in miniature: atonement before fellowship, propitiation before peace. The peace offering doesn't stand alone — it rests on the prior burnt offering. The preacher who misses this misses the chapter's own internal statement about the sequence of grace. Preach the sequencing.