

Leviticus Bible Study #25

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 21:1-24

1 And the LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, **2** except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, **3** or his virgin sister (who is near to him because she has had no husband; for her he may make himself unclean). **4** He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people and so profane himself. **5** They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. **6** They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the LORD's food offerings, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy. **7** They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. **8** You shall sanctify him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for I, the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy. **9** And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.

10 “The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes. **11** He shall not go in to any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. **12** He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him: I am the LORD. **13** And he shall take a wife in her virginity. **14** A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people, **15** that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.”

16 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **17** “Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. **18** For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, **19** or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, **20** or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. **21** No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. **22** He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, **23** but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.” **24** So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

Introduction

The past ten chapters dealt mostly with the holiness code to be taught to the average Israelite. The people were to distinguish between clean and unclean among foods, materials, and even people. In addition to this, regulations were introduced to maintain the religious and sexual purity of Israel; any instance of necromancy or incest was to be met with swift execution. The sum and purpose of these laws is in the way that it binds the people to a standard of perfection. That which ought to be is established in law; that which ought not to be is prohibited; that which cannot be helped must be hidden until conditions improve. The promised land (and wherever the Israelites happened to be) must not only *look* like Paradise, it must also reach close to *being* Paradise – or the closest thing one could get to it in

the world. Leviticus is where the concept of *Shalom* shifts from state of being to legal impulse.

Yet the strict standards for the Israelite laity seem lax in comparison to the *extra* limitations and regulations placed on the priesthood. The priest has all the same commands applying to him as the average Israelite, but with stricter enforcement and more layers of purity. In addition to this, the tribe of Levi and all their women get caught up in the elevation of tribal standards. As the tribe of Levi was set apart after the golden calf incident,¹ they and the Aaronic dynasty of priests were to be treated as *holy*, that the people may look to them as the proper representatives of God on earth. If Israel's land was to be like Eden, the priesthood was to represent our Lord who walked among its trees. On the other hand, since the priests represented the people as they interacted with God, they were also called to a standard of holiness on the peoples' behalf.

Vs.1-6

1 And the LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, 2 except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, 3 or his virgin sister (who is near to him because she has had no husband; for her he may make himself unclean). 4 He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people and so profane himself. 5 They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. 6 They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the LORD's food offerings, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy.

While touching a dead body made someone unclean and becoming unclean was generally something to be avoided, the people were permitted to carry off and bury their dead. This is not so for the priests, who are only permitted to do this for close family members. If the priesthood speaks on behalf of the God who does not die, then they are only permitted to interact with death in specific ways. First there are the sacrifices, wherein they must handle animal bodies for butchering and offering on the altar; in that case, the priest interacts with death on behalf of the people to make expiation and special acts of devotion. In the other case, because the priests are still *human*, they must also take responsibility for the bodies of their family members.

The fourth verse elaborates on the self-conception of the priesthood. God instructs Moses that the priest is a “husband” or chief among the people. Because they were the teachers of the Law to the people, ran intercessory sacrifices and inspected the afflicted, the priests had a supervisory and guiding role for the Israelites to look up to. Thus, the layman must never see the priest becoming unclean, so that in seeing his maintenance of purity he follows a more positive example. This includes the way in which priests approach death, which includes a prohibition on the pagan style of performative mourning – cutting oneself, ripping hair out, or changing one's beard. In a world marked by death and chaos, the priest is to be a living example of *life* to the Israelite.

If there is a role model, then there is a goal for the people to strive for. By their strict living, the priests set an example for the people to *reach* to, that they may be clean, well behaved, and honorable. For this reason, we can surmise that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is assuredly *not* a condemnation of the priesthood or the Levites, but a presentation of how the Gospel offers something even greater.² That a priest or a Levite would pass by a man nearly dead was them fulfilling their duties according to the Law; even if they *wanted* to help, they cannot break these commands. But Christ speaks of the Samaritan as one who, in Gospel fashion, demonstrates Agape love in ways that the Law cannot help with. So while Christians must certainly set a positive example to our pagan neighbors as St. Paul says,³ and St. Peter says elders in the church must do so even more,⁴ these obligations rest on a foundation of

1 Exodus 32:25-29

2 Luke 10:25-37

3 1 Corinthians 8,

4 1 Peter 5:1-3

mercy as provided by the Atonement. Meanwhile, the strict purity standards of the Law could *hamper* acts of mercy if the afflicted found themselves on the wrong end of misfortune, and a priest was forbidden from helping.

Vs.7-9

7 They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. **8** You shall sanctify him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for I, the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy. **9** And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.

The priest could not marry unless he was marrying a virgin. While the world is “messy” in terms of relationships, the priesthood is to represent the gold standard in marriage. Adam and Eve were together as husband and wife with no previous partners and no romantic competition, and so the priests representing that ideal must conform to it. They do this both as a role model to the people *and* in their intercessory role. As Israel was supposed to present the Edenic ideal to the world, God interacts with men under the Old Covenant with the demand of seeing His priests conform to its vision for the sexes. In Eden, there was no fornication nor adultery nor divorce nor prostitution, and so these ought not be present in Israel *at all*, but especially not among the priests.

Because the priestly dynasty is a *family*, the daughters of the priests have a role in this as well. The inherent connections and bonds within the family means that one member's sin is the responsibility of the whole. Thus a woman in Aaron's family may not engage in fornication, adultery, prostitution, etc. While these sins are prohibited from *everyone*, they are not enforceable en masse; lovers may engage in secret trysts, prostitution may be discreet, and there is no way for the chiefs of the people to be fully aware of such activities. But for the priesthood, which is called to a stricter lifestyle, both sons and daughters were monitored much more closely – lest the son be found to marry a forbidden woman and the daughter engage in sexual sin, either of which dishonoring the family. As much as death is to be shunned by the priests in most cases, so too is sexual impurity.

Vs.10-15

10 “The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes. **11** He shall not go in to any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. **12** He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him: I am the LORD. **13** And he shall take a wife in her virginity. **14** A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people, **15** that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.”

The high priest is under all the same extra regulations as the normal priests, but even more so. As he is the one who goes into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, he represents the highest standard *of* the highest standard. While the concession is made for a priest to handle the dead body of his close relatives, this is forbidden from the high priest, who may not be unclean for any reason whatsoever or even appear to be in mourning. The twelfth verse appears to clarify that in the event of a family member dying, the high priest is to remain in the sanctuary of God until the bodies have been buried. For all intents and purposes, death is something that almost doesn't exist in the high priest's life: it is outside of his field of vision.

The marital requirements are the same for the high priest, but with higher stakes. Just as death is to be off of the high priest's proverbial radar, so too is sexual impurity. If he were to take a non-virgin woman as his bride, the offspring would be considered profane on account of the previous history of indiscretions. Later on in Deuteronomy the people are permitted to marry divorced women (albeit as a

concession to the hardness of men's hearts, as divorce is something which ought not happen in the first place);⁵ since it was not a sin per se for an Israelite man to marry a divorced woman or a prostitute, the point is not the union itself. The offense created by a priest – and especially for the high priest – marrying a woman who had past partners or a history of sexual sin was the imposition of the *curse* on sacred ground. Sexual sins and changes to relationships were never intended for humanity in Eden; since the sanctuary, especially the Most Holy Place, was the most sacred ground on earth, to bring in such violations of the principle of *Shalom* is an affront to God. As a theoretical punishment, the high priest who does such a thing forfeits his place as priest, with him and all of his offspring being laity (“profaned”).

Vs.16-24

16 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **17** “Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. **18** For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, **19** or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, **20** or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. **21** No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. **22** He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, **23** but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.” **24** So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

These verses, wherein the deformed or injured or diseased may not serve priestly functions, is actually a merciful *concession* rather than a rote prohibition. The Law specifies that no one among Israelite laity may enter into the assembly of the Lord if they have these defects: if a man is unclean by virtue of a skin disease, or if he is physically mutilated,⁶ he is excluded. Yet as the priestly dynasty is set apart for service unto the Lord, for a priest to be cast out would depart from God's promises regarding Aaron's family. Thus, the deformed member of the priestly family may still contribute by laboring for his family as though he were a standard Levite: he may not offer sacrifices or enter into the inner Tabernacle area, but nonetheless still receives the priestly portion of the sacrifices as a man sanctified unto service. This “safety net” law may appear to be a double standard, since the deformed among the laity may not even approach the Tabernacle, but it is one of the few privileges granted to Aaron's family, as they have no land to inherit and far fewer freedoms than the common man.

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 19:3-9

⁶ Deuteronomy 23:1, Leviticus chapters 13 through 15, etc.