

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

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Leviticus 21–22 is the fourth major section in the Book of Leviticus. We've already looked at 17–20, which dealt with a number of laws and had application for ordinary people. Leviticus 21 and 22 are a number of laws in the Old Testament period for priests. There were certain regulations put upon priests. We're going to look at those regulations and then make application to our lives.

One of the great truths of the Bible, a truth that was reaffirmed in the Reformation, is the priesthood of every believer. In the Old Testament the priesthood was limited to one select group. But in the New Testament we've all been made to serve as priests of God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, Revelation 1:6. A priest has access that an ordinary person did not have. We all now, as priests, may boldly approach God's throne. In the Old Testament a person became a priest not through choice but through birth. You were a priest if you were born to a priestly household.

In the New Testament we're all priests also by birth, through being born again into the family of God. A priest may actually have the office but not exercise the responsibilities or functions of the office. There were some Old Testament priests who never entered into the ministry of priesthood even though they were priests. It's possible that being now as priests in this present time we may not be entering into the functions of our office before God.

There are four worlds or spheres in which a priest is meant to function. The world of self: We have responsibility before God for our own life—the goals of our life, the dreams of our life, the

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

potentiality of our life, the characteristics of our life, the failures of our life, the needs of our life.

The world that is concerned with self.

Then all of us belong to family, either as a son or daughter, a husband, a wife, a parent. We have responsibilities in the world of family.

We have responsibilities in the world of community because the priest belongs to that world also.

The community of our immediate neighborhood or apartment complex. The community of our working relationships. The community of the body of Christ. We belong in that world as well.

Then there is the sphere or circle of relationship with God, where we come into God's courts and God's presence. Where God comes into our life and into our presence. We have an identity with Him.

Chapters 21–22 of Leviticus today take us through different spheres of relationship that a priest has.

I. The first area of the scripture today, Leviticus 21:1–15, is a section that is dealing with grief and marriage.

They have to do with the priest in relationship to his family. And especially two items. What happens when a family member dies and secondly the selection of a life partner for a priest.

A. In regard to grief, the regulation in verses 1–4 was that the ordinary priest could mourn only for the nearest of kin—his mother or father, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister, and it's assumed, although not stated, that he could mourn if his wife died. We know that Ezekiel would have had that privilege but the Lord specifically told him he could not mourn because of a prophetic lesson that was to be taught the people. Verses 5–6 tell us that the priests were not to imitate the funeral practices of the pagans by hairstyles or marking their bodies in the same way the pagans did when they had a funeral. Verses 10–12 tell us that the high priest even had a more

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

severe limitation in respect to practicing grief. He was not even to enter the room where a dead person was. Not even if it were a close relative. Not even if it were his wife. These by any standards are severe limitations on a priest in grief. Why were they given?

One reason is symbolically the priesthood was a part of the whole package that God was visually teaching His people. The camp of Israel was laid out in a way that had it gathered around the Tent of Meeting, the center of the camp which represented communion with God. Outside the camp was the place of the dead and the leper. The center of the camp represented life. The exterior of the camp represented death. Everything was either moving toward life or moving toward death. There were sharp limitations of the ability of a priest to practice grief because he of all people was meant to stand in the center and be a representative of life.

I think another valid reason, and one we can apply, for this limitation is that grief is one of the most, if not the most, powerful emotion we face as a human being. The priest therefore could grieve and grieve alone for his own family. But he could not grieve and take on mourning practices for those outside his family because he was not to be preoccupied with death. God had called him to live in the sphere of relationship not only to family and community but also in the sphere of relationship to himself. When he came in contact with the dead he lost his ceremonial cleanliness which then prohibited him from worshipping and leading people in worship and sacrifice at the center of the camp at the tabernacle. If he became preoccupied with death he would leave his sphere of relationship with God. It would then take him out of his relationship with community.

Often it is the case that now grief compels us and seems to pull us into a world of either self or family. One of the reasons why the high priest was never allowed to have contact with the dead, even members of close family was that it was the requirement of his office that he continually be

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

in the circle of God. He could never vacate that circle because he was the nation's representative before God and that circle was always to be filled with his presence.

It seems to me there's some marvelous psychological insight in this. One of the things that grief does in our life—whether it's grief because of death or whether it's grief because something we've wanted hasn't come to pass and we have lost it and we feel deep grief in our life or whether it is a severing of a relationship of some kind—whatever the form of grief is, one of the things that grief seeks to do is to pull us out of other spheres of relationship that God calls us to. We may be so overcome with our grief that we completely vacate the circle of relationship with God, because we're so shut in with our sorrow and we may be even angry with God that things have worked out the way they are. So we vacate the circle of relationship with God and get caught up in simply the circle of family. Or we may even go more introspective and move over into simply the circle of self.

The Lord is giving us this beautiful and gentle pattern in the Scriptures that reminds us that as priests we're called upon to have a whole series of relationships. And simultaneously in our life the Lord calls us to be present with self, to be present in family, to be present in community, and to be present in God. As we're present in all of those spheres of our life we can go on with the healing that needs to take place within us.

The priest lives in more than one world. The Lord wants us to not be caught in the position of having only one world. If you only have one world and you lose something in that one world then there is nothing left. So God calls us across a wide variety of spheres.

B. Not only is this particular passage talking about grief, it's talking about marriage. And in Christian marriage there is some patterns that flow out of the patterns here in Leviticus 21. There were rules for priests about who they could marry. There were even higher standards for

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

marriage of the high priest because their home was to be a model for family life in Israel. The New Testament takes the principle of marriage seriously and tells us that there are some prohibitions of marriage of a New Testament priest, you and me.

One of the prohibitions is marrying an unbeliever. We recognize that the New Testament tells us that if we have been converted and we are already married to an unbeliever that relationship is to continue because we are, as the believing partner, the sanctifying person in that relationship. We help the unbeliever come to know the Lord. But in terms of a single believer making a deliberate choice to marry an unbeliever, the Scriptures tell us in 2 Corinthians 6:14 that we are not to be mismatched with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? What harmony does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

The reason for that grows out of these four circles. In marriage God says two become one flesh. That one flesh is to be present together within the circle of family, within the circle of community, within the circle of self, and within the circle of God. But if only one of the persons in a marriage relationship is present in the circle of God then the wholeness of the two equals one is not here in God's circle. God simply asks in regard of the selection of a life partner that we take care to be equally mated.

Higher standards are also set for the high priest over the ordinary priest even as the New Testament makes distinction between those who hold the office of bishop or elder or spiritual leadership in the Christian church. There are certain standards that are put upon them that they are expected to adhere and if they don't keep these standards they are to lose their place of leadership.

One of them is that they are to be the husband of one wife. Another according to Titus 1:6 is that their children are not wild and disobedient. We need in this day of poor role models in family life

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

to take this seriously as the body of Christ that a certain standard is expected from leaders in the body of Christ.

The New Testament expected a person in a spiritual leadership position in the church (because they are models for the rest of the flock) to know that there are certain things that exempt them from a leadership privilege. That is if in their own life there is adultery and remarriage. That they then forever have forfeited their place to be a spiritual leader in the body of Christ, to have the office of preaching and teaching. It's a clear New Testament teaching.

I believe that God forgives. But I believe also that Scriptures set standards and role models. If the Christian community isn't careful what it is basically letting into existence is a kind of anti-law attitude. I have far more compassion, I guess, for the person who is really in the life of sin and knows the brokenness of that sin and has come to a place of repentance than I can have compassion for someone who has really known the Lord and preached from His Word and then deliberately have gone and done something. Men use sly techniques to ingratiate themselves back into the body of Christ by using the code word "forgiveness."

II. Second major area that this Scripture deals with is dealing with defects, Leviticus 21:16–24.

The circle of self. A priest in the Old Testament who had certain bodily defects was not allowed to have the responsibility of ministry, although he had the privilege of priests: He could take from the priests' table and food and salary but he couldn't function as priest because he had bodily defects. That seems cruel but the reason for it symbolically has to do with the placement in the center of camp where the priest ministers that everything in the center represented wholeness and the living quality of a wholesome God. Anything that was defective was being moved to the outside of the camp.

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

In a more real way as we take the New Testament teaching on defects we find that we can spiritualize these into something that is psychological and emotional. What will keep us from having a ministry as a priest ourselves is if we let certain spiritual defects remain in our life.

Here is what will keep you from ministry:

Spiritual blindness. Not seeing things clearly or not seeing things at all.

Lameness. Some believers are not able to walk, they are lame. They have allowed something to devastate them and have chosen to never get up and walk but always remember that hurt and injury which occurred to them.

Disfigurement. The idea is a mutilated face. No joy. No joy radiating on their countenance.

Deformed. Deformed has the idea with it of a limb that is too long. This could represent the spiritual quality of something that has been inherited from the past. There is, I think, such a thing as a generational flow. We tend to be in certain things like our parents or grandparents.

Sometimes bad influences cripple us and deform us, things we've had no responsibility for in the past, and we need somehow to have a break and come to the Lord to realize we're carrying it on, on, down to our children. We don't want to carry what we've got in the past. We ask the Lord to sever that and make things new.

Injured hands and feet would represent an impaired ability to do Christ's work. We're just not using our hands and feet for Him.

A hunch back. I've seen a few spiritual hunchbacks in my time. I've probably been there a few times myself. We become so problem oriented and we don't have faith that God can lift the problems. We settle in that condition of always having problems and never having possibilities.

Dwarf. Stunted growth. Never growing as a believer.

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

Festering sores. Still reacting to past hurts in our life that we haven't gotten over because we haven't forgiven them.

Damaged testicles. The wrongful sex life. That could be representative. What the Lord wants us to do is come out of the world of ourselves. Our defects that lock us into that self-world. When we have become aware of our defects, our low self-esteem and the like, we can shut ourselves in and we'll never have good family relationship or good community relationship or good relationship with God because we're all locked up with self. Don't get locked up with your defects, imprisoning you in the world of yourself.

III. The third thing in this Scripture has to do with priests and sacred offerings: the handling and eating of offerings, Leviticus 22:1–16.

This focused then on the sphere of their relationship with God. The priest had the privilege of eating the meat that was brought in the peace offerings and sin offerings. But in order to partake of this offering, to eat it for themselves, they had to be in a position of cleanness. And the food for their offering could only go to their immediate family.

The New Testament also has application about our relationship with God in respect to coming to sacred moments such as communion. 1 Corinthians 11 tells us that as priests when we come to communion we ought to take moments to examine our relationship with God. To look within and see what is happening in that relationship, and if there are things that are built up in that relationship, to bring it to the Lord and come out of our condition of spiritual and emotional uncleanness into a position of wholeness with Him.

IV. Then a fourth area in these two chapters is unacceptable sacrifices, 22:17–33.

The priest in his relationship to the community. He was kind of the inspector general. He looked at people as they brought their offering and he was suppose to spot the lame, the maimed, and the

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

blind animals that people would try to sneak in and offer as sacrifice. Sneaking in something second rate to God. The priest was supposed to call that out so that the people had a standard by which to relate to God that only the best was to be given to God. The priest was sort of a quality control person to insure that the best was given to God. It is directly related and directly proportionate to our love. Whom we love we do generous things for. Whom God loves He does generous things for. That's why He sent us His Son. True giving must flow out of a heart of love. In the New Testament priests are not called to be quality control experts. We're not called to stand at the door of the church and inspect people's tithes and offering envelopes as they enter. We're called as New Testament priests to do a very strange thing. As New Testament priests the Lord actually tells us in Luke 14 that we are to go out in the streets and the alleys and find the lame, the maimed and the blind and compel them to come in and partake of the Messianic feast. God wants to bring together, to Himself all of those who have been injured and separated and hurt physically and spiritually and emotionally by life and bring them to His table and provide a wonderful feast for them. He calls us therefore to responsibility to those we live in community with. To be in that community as a man or as a woman of God who radiates the love and care and concern of God for others.

As you look at your life and the spheres of relationship are you in all four worlds? Are you in a right world of self, a right world of family, a right world of community, a right world of relationship with God? Or is it possible that something has happened to have pulled you out of one or more of those worlds so that you're not functioning as a priest ought to function. God wants you to be in position of wholeness and completeness to fulfill your calling as a priest.

Closing Prayer

OUR PRIESTLY CALLING

Leviticus 21–22

Our Father, we thank You again for the Scripture which is life. We pray that as we look at the various dimensions of our life we might be fully present in each. Some in this room may have within recent months or years even of their life drawn away from the circle of family, neglected responsibilities as a spouse or parent or even as a child, to pull into the world of self. Self-goals and self-fulfillment. You're calling us, Lord, today, out of that small circle of association with what we want to look anew with cleansed eyes at our wife or husband or children or parent and consider afresh what our responsibility and relationship is to them. Others, Lord, because of some deep cross of life that has happened to them may have for a time vacated that circle of relationship with You and withdrawn into the circle of relationship with self or family. And the circle of relationship with You stands empty. Today You're calling us back into that sphere of relatedness to You. Back into vital fellowship with You because You know we can never be whole unless we are fully present with You. It is in You that we live and move and have our being. It is not in our wife or husband that we live and move and have our being. It is not in our children as deeply as we care for them and are concerned for them. Our whole life is not meant to be lived in them. But it is in You that we live and move and have our being. You go on living. And You always want us to know that of everything of life You will be present with us if we will acknowledge Your presence and invite Your presence. That our real world and our real identity is not wrapped up in the things we have or the relationships we enjoy but our real identity is in You, for from You we come and to You we return. Help those here in this room today Lord that in some way have vacated that circle of relatedness to You, to in this moment obtain Your grace which You freely offer and to come fully present back into that relationship with You. May Your presence be very living and may You saturate our heart with these words and our thoughts as we come to Your table today. We ask in Your name. Amen.