

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

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Our Scripture today is the 27th chapter of the Book of Leviticus. It's the last chapter of Leviticus. I feel like I'm leaving an old friend. I always have this feeling when I close a series. We've been in this since the first of the year. I hope Leviticus has lived for you. When I preached from Leviticus ten years ago as compared to this time it has been a whole new day. I haven't preached a single message the same. The Lord has spoken to me in new ways this time through. It's amazing how the Word of God keeps living and growing with you. It's a living book, a living Word. The Word of God always meets us wherever we're at in life. It speaks to us because the Holy Spirit is behind it.

As we look at Leviticus 27 today I'm going to read some selected verses to acquaint you with what is in this chapter. Then we'll look in more detail at the content. "The LORD said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "If anyone makes a special vow to dedicate persons to the LORD by giving equivalent values, set the value...[There are different values for different people if they make a vow to God.] If what he vowed is an animal that is acceptable as an offering to the LORD, such an animal given to the LORD becomes holy. He must not exchange it or substitute a good one for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one; if he should substitute one animal for another, both it and the substitute become holy...If a man dedicates his house as something holy to the LORD, the priest shall judge its quality as good or bad. Whatever value the priest then sets, so it will remain...If a man dedicates to the LORD part of his family land, its value is to be set according to the amount of seed required for it...If a man dedicates to the LORD a field he has bought, which is not part of his family land, the priest will determine its value up to

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

the Year of Jubilee...No one, however, may dedicate the firstborn of an animal, since the firstborn already belongs to the LORD; whether an ox or a sheep, it's the LORD's...But nothing that a man owns and devotes to the LORD—whether man or animal or family land—may be sold or redeemed; everything so devoted is most holy to the LORD. No person devoted to destruction may be ransomed; he must be put to death. A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD””” (NIV).

This chapter initially appears to us to be a very strange way to end the Book of Leviticus.

Logically it would appear that the ending of the book belongs with chapter 26. Especially when we compare with other covenants of the period of time when this book was written, other secular covenants traditionally; as we looked at last week, a covenant or a contract was closed with a series of blessings for having been faithful to the covenant and punishments if there was unfaithfulness to the covenant. Here we are opening chapter 27 and reading a chapter about vows and commitments to the Lord.

There have been some biblical commentators that have suggested that somehow chapter 27 became displaced. That it belonged to an earlier part of Leviticus and somehow got removed to this part. I have problems with that because my view of the Holy Spirit is that He doesn't accidentally throw Scripture together. I think there is an inner logic to chapter 27 being where it is. When you consider the fact that chapter 26 talks about the commitments God is making to us; God makes commitments to us and He is faithful to those commitments. Chapter 27 is the response. If God makes commitments to us now we as His people may also make commitments to Him. If we make commitments to Him we are to be good on those commitments even as the Lord in making commitments to us keeps His and is good on them.

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

Consideration of God's action on our behalf should prompt a consideration of our action toward God.

As we look at the Scripture we'll divide our discussion in two parts. First, trying to understand what the chapter was to the Israelite, to the person under the old covenant. Then trying to understand what it means to us now.

I. What did Leviticus 27 mean to an ancient Israelite?

A. Verses 1–8 talk about the commitment an Israelite may make of his own body, his own person to the Lord. He might at some point in his life say, "I give myself to the Lord. And He has free access to totally use me. I want to be available for His service. So I completely give myself to Him." The problem under the Old Testament covenant was that the only persons who could serve the Lord "full time" so to speak were the priests and the Levites, the people descended from Aaron. So if a member of another tribe said, "I give myself irrevocably to the service of the Lord," there was really no place for them to serve. The temple and the tabernacle were staffed by priests and Levites descended from Aaron; they belonged to the tribe of Levi.

So what did the person do who came from another tribe? If they dedicated themselves to the Lord, then what the Lord did was allow a financial transaction to take place whereby they might give themselves but simply pay a certain amount to the temple as a means of rendering their vow. Therefore the value was set on the person who made the vow.

When is the time when we make vows to the Lord? Probably most of us make vows when we're in trouble. These are foxhole commitments. This Scripture is allowing us to make those kind of commitments. There comes a time when God calls the commitment in. He's faithful, we get out of the jam, and the temptation is to say, "Lord, I was under duress when I made that

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

commitment. You surely don't expect me to keep it." Yes, the Lord expects us to keep those kind of commitments.

So the Israelite who made that commitment would come and there were different values set upon him. If he were a man between the ages of 20–60 his payment for his vow, vowing himself to the Lord, was 50 shekels. A shekel, if you were an average laboring man and you worked for a whole month the pay at the end of the month would be one shekel. A woman's payment between the ages of 20–60 was 30 shekels. 20 shekels for a boy, 5–20 years old, 10 shekels for a girl. 5 shekels for a boy 1 month to 5 years—"Lord, I'm going to give this child to You." You could do that. 5 shekels for a boy, 3 shekels for a girl. 15 shekels for a man 60 years and over, 10 shekels for a woman.

If you made a vow and you actually didn't have those kind of dollars you could come to the priest and get a sliding scale. Saying, "I don't have the money but I still want to give myself to the Lord." The priest would ask your assets and then figure out a sliding fee arrangement. Just like today's counseling practice. Sliding fee—you pay whatever is fair.

There are two things that come out of this that are kind of interesting. First of all the pay rate for women hasn't changed over the years. In defense of the Old Testament it might be noted we're talking about pay for an agricultural society where a brawny man is probably worth more working in the fields than a gal. But I think it's fair in the New Testament era certainly to say that in Christ there is neither male nor female and women ought to get the same wages as men. I think if they're doing a comparable job everybody ought to get paid alike.

The Lord allowed people in the Old Testament to commit their lives, then to kind of pay a ransom, a redemption to fulfill their vow.

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

B. Second thing which they could commit was an animal to the Lord. If you had a change of mind and were caught slipping in a substitute there was a penalty. If you were caught you not only had to give the one you vowed but the substitute. So you were out all the way around. You could vow an animal, a clean animal, an animal used in sacrifice, or an unclean animal. If you wanted to buy back an animal you vowed you could buy back an unclean animal for 120 percent of its value. You had to pay a 20 percent add-on charge for buying it back once you dedicated it to the Lord.

C. Third, people wanted to commit their house to the Lord. It's always been a characteristic of God's people, when they fall in love with God they want to give things to the Lord's work. That's true of the old covenant and it's true of the new covenant. A person might want to give their house, verses 14–15. It was probably city property rather than farm property because farm property would be covered by the laws of the Year of Jubilee. If they later changed their minds and wanted the house back they could get it back—for 120 percent of its value.

D. They could give land, family land, land that was theirs for generations. The value of the land was set by the amount of seed that could be sown on the land and the amount of years remaining till jubilee. The family could redeem the land before the Year of Jubilee. But if they didn't redeem it by the Year of Jubilee—every fifty years—then that land permanently passed into the Lord's hands. And it belonged to the priests from then on and to the Lord, not to the people who gave it.

If, however, they gave a piece of land that they were only leasing—in effect gave the lease—then at the end of the fifty years, in the Year of Jubilee, the land didn't go to the priest. It went back to the original owner in keeping with the law of jubilee.

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

E. The dedication of firstborn is covered in verses 26–27. People couldn't use a firstborn as payment of a vow. They couldn't say, "Lord, when my firstborn is born, I'm going to give it to You." The reason why they couldn't do that for a vow is that every firstborn belonged to God. If it belonged to God it couldn't be given to God again. Something else had to be given. All firstborn belonged to the Lord.

In verse 28 there is an irrevocability of commitment. Once something is permanently given to the Lord it cannot be sold or redeemed; it irrevocably belongs to the Lord. It's holy to the Lord.

E. Then that strange verse, verse 29: "No person devoted to destruction may be ransomed. He must be put to death" (NIV). This is in reference to the times when Israel was in war where maybe a nation, because of its abomination, is to be totally destroyed by Israel. Even maybe the property. Or the property is not the spoils. It belongs exclusively to the Lord. Achan tried to keep a garment. He touched something that was irrevocably dedicated to the Lord. It was holy. It didn't belong to him and he was judged for that.

F. Then there was finally the commitment of tithe, verses 30–34. The tithe is not "Lord, if You treat me good I'm going to start tithing to You." The tithe was mandated under the Old Testament law. But this is there in event that a farmer was maybe running low on seed and he said, "I can't make it through this year and tithe. I'm going to have to use this for myself." The Lord said, "Go ahead and use it for yourself but the add-on charge is a 20 percent fine for using the Lord's tithe."

That's the Old Testament law. The tithe was not a freewill offering. It was a mandated offering. It was requirement of flocks or of grain.

We want to pull that Scripture down into the present.

II. We know what the terms of the Old Covenant were. Let's see what it says to us today.

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

This has something to tell us about the kinds of commitments we can make to the Lord.

A. The first thing this has to say to us is that the making of commitments is an acceptable Christian practice. It's all right to make commitments. It's all right to make vows. In Acts 18:18 Paul is at the end of his second missionary journey. He wants to get to Jerusalem so he makes a vow to the Lord, which evidently when he gets to Jerusalem he will have completed the vow. God would have gotten him there safely. What he does to signify that he's under a vow is just before he sails from Corinth he shaves off his hair. The hair that was shaved would be somehow presented to the altar and that would be the fulfillment of a vow. Paul says, "Lord You be with me and I'm going to perform this action."

In Acts 21:23, four men are under a vow; they've taken a Nazirite vow to undergo an abstention from some legitimate things for a period of time. Then when they complete the vow they're released from it.

I think what he is telling us is as believers it's ok to make vows. It's not wrong at all. But we ought to be very careful when we make a vow or when we make a commitment. We ought to be very careful to keep that commitment. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 says, "Whenever you make a vow to God do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin." Jesus says in Matthew 5:37, "Let your yes be yes and your no, no." Translated is, "If you say you're going to do it, do it." If you say you're going to be somewhere, be there. If you say you're going to make a commitment to be a part of something, keep the commitment.

I think one of the weaknesses of Christianity in southern California is oftentimes the surface level of commitment. We make statements easily and then we don't live with the commitments

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

that we make. That can be very disappointing. It can be disappointing to God. It can be very disappointing to other people.

This goes for making commitments in the body, in the church as well. You make a commitment to teach a Sunday School class, to sing in the choir, do something, whatever the commitment is. Don't make commitments lightly. And on the other hand don't avoid making commitments. It's a lot of trouble making commitments but one of the things about commitments is we grow spiritually. People that don't make commitments are people who kind of just float on the surface of the water. They never sink their roots in. They never take on spiritual vitality and growth. If you say you're going to do something, do it. And if you can't do it go to the person that you made the commitment to and say would you please release me from my commitment.

B. The second implication. Giving of our finances to support the Lord's work is an important part of commitment. It's part of a regular, ongoing, practical commitment. Here in this covenant of Leviticus 27 we see people not only were taught to regularly give their tithes or 10 percent of their income to the Lord's work but they had opportunity to give more and respond out of love to God.

We make commitments to buy or rent a house, to buy or lease a car, to purchase appliances. We ought not get real mystical about the Lord's work and somehow we presume that it's wrong to make a commitment to the Lord's work.

C. Third, commitments help us achieve God's best for our lives. They really do. Unfortunately some believers live with the "Whatever will be, will be" attitude. They never plan. They never have goals. Never set objectives, never dream dreams. One of the things that Leviticus 27 is telling us is it's ok to set objectives. God approves of that. That can be validated in the New Testament as well. Often we fail to make commitments because of laziness or we're so afraid

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

we'll fail so we don't take risks when we ought to be, or we may just lack discipline so we don't make a commitment because we know it's going to require discipline from us.

I believe God puts dreams in our hearts. I believe the Holy Spirit is at work in that dreaming process. Many times we look at something God's showing us and we say, "I can do this," and we douse water on that little flicker of flame of the Holy Spirit. We douse water because maybe it involves some kind of commitment. It's going to require some major investment of our time. Sacrifice. Discipline. Sure it will, but any dream that's worthwhile is going to incur that. The great thing about commitment is it forces us to discipline and it forces us to live life on a volitional level rather than on an emotional level. If you always are making decisions on the basis of how you feel and you live that way it's going to be the pits. But the importance of a commitment is that commitment hangs in there when the feeling level is way down. The will takes in and takes hold. Marriage is a gift of God, more preferable than people living together. Marriage involves commitment. The good times and the bad times. There's tremendous growth that happens in our life as we are responsible to keep commitments.

D. The fourth thing that really flows out of Leviticus 27 by way of application is all of life should be committed to the Lord. The new covenant is so much superior to the old covenant. In the old covenant the person could commit part of himself. In some cases his totality. But in the New Testament really we're to live in such a way as to regard everything we have and everything we are as being given to the Lord. Not just part of something. Not just part of our time, but the Lord has everything we are and hold.

A fascinating commentary on Leviticus 27 is the last few verses of Zechariah 14. This prophet looks to the age of the Messiah, to the Messianic day. He says something like this. "On that day HOLY TO THE LORD [HOLY TO THE LORD was like a brand, that when it was spiritually placed on

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

something it meant that's given to the Lord and restricted to the Lord's usage] will be inscribed on the bells of the horses. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them." Zechariah is saying there's going to come a day when even the bells on the horses and the cooking pans in the kitchen are going to have "HOLY TO THE LORD" written on them. They're going to be for the Lord's use. Zechariah looks forward to the time when the pots and pans in our kitchen and the horses, which do the world's work and take men into the fields and even into battle will have their ordinary bells labeled "HOLY TO THE LORD." Because they too will belong to the Lord's service. That is such a fitting Scripture when we think of Romans 12:1–2 where Paul tell us to present, commit, our bodies as living sacrifice holy [and wholly] to the Lord which is your reasonable sacrifice.

We are holy people. Set apart for God's use. That's the idea of holy—set apart, separate for God's use.

We live in holy houses and holy apartments, not just ours, but set aside for the activity of God living in us, living in our individual lives, living in our family lives. Our homes or apartments are hospitality places for those outside of Christ and those inside. We drive a holy car. The car is not ours. It has bells on the bumper which say "HOLY TO THE LORD." Think of that next time when you're violating the speed limit. If married we're united to a holy spouse. If parents we have holy kids. The kids are being sanctified through, set apart for the activity of God because they're seeing something in our lives. We wear holy clothes. Clothes that mark us as God's people. Not in some weird sense. And I think the selection of them even ought to involve God. What would God be pleased in what I wear? What does He want the size of my wardrobe to be? What does He want the cost of my wardrobe to be? That's part of God's involvement in our daily lives. We

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

have holy appliances. Holy furniture. A holy checking and savings account. It belongs to the Lord. When we look at our check register does it indicate that it belongs to the lord? We have holy jobs, places where God has put us to labor.

I admire the people who sought to live by the terms of the Old Testament law. There's something to be said about the tremendous depth of commitment that was possible under the law. But there's something more to be said seeing how we have a better sacrifice and a better system, something even more to be said about the kind of commitment that's possible for us in the here and now. When we evaluate our lives we ought to be asking the question, "Lord, is everything I have really Yours? Is there anything about me that I've restricted exclusively for my own use? Does it all belong to You? Does my time belong to You? Does what I have belong to You? Does my heart belong to You?" The greatest joy in life is to realize that indeed everything has been given to God and we only take it back sort of as a leaseholder. We use it as a trustee for God and for His glory.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we think about this word "commitment", this beautiful word that involves discipline of our lives. We think about simple commitments. Commitments such as faithfulness to Your word. Faithfulness to being in moments of worship such as this. Not neglecting the assembling of ourselves together as is the habit of some. Commitment of finances. Commitment of schedule. Lord, we just take this moment to review the commitments of life. What commitments do we have and are we glorifying the Lord in those commitments. If we put on the screen of our mind our calendar for this coming week and our appointments or our duties, our chores, how does that schedule reflect commitment to Christ? Is the time taken in pursuit of my own goals and interests? Or is there time that has been blocked out to pursue those concerns and interests that

COMMITMENT

Leviticus 27

are most on Christ's heart for my life? Do my goals and Christ's goals line up as one? When I view my checkbook and I see the deposits as and I see the checks, does that reflect my commitment to You? When I review my relationships to people in my family, am I committed to them or am I only using them? Do I really care? Is my time really invested where it ought to be with them? Are there dreams in our lives that we kind of let go of, get buried? In a service like this where Your Spirit is very much at work, is the creative Spirit of God blowing the bellows on our smoldering dreams, saying, "Wake up. Live. I'll put my Spirit within You and You'll live"? Fan our dreams. Where it takes commitment to bring those dreams to pass let's not be afraid of the cost. Very great athletes pay a price in commitment but the reward is the victor's trophy. Nothing good ever happens in our life without a combination of Your grace and our own commitment. Bring commitment to our hearts. We ask these things in Your name. Amen.