

KICK IT UP A NOTCH

LEVITICUS 21:1-24

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Kick it up a Notch

Leviticus 21:1-24

Let me just quickly review where we are in the book of Leviticus. Chapters 1-7 basically described the different types of sacrifices, the occasions on which they would be used, and regulations concerning the proper procedures. Chapters 8-10 described the ordination of the priests, and ended with God killing two priests on the spot for impropriety. Chapters 11-15 then went on to give the descriptions of clean and unclean as they applied to food, sacrifices, the body, the skin, and even to materials. Chapter 16 started the section we called the holiness code. It will carry us through the end of chapter 26. This section has to do with the rules for everyday living and the punishment for violating them. Chapters 16-20 pertained to ethical living for the community. The chapter we are studying this morning, chapter 21, kicks the ethical standards up a notch. This chapter deals with expectations of priests. Then chapters 22-26 will deal with the procedures for handling worship and special days. So we find ourselves this morning right in the middle of the holiness code.

I'm sure we have said this before, but the topic presents itself again here. God expected the priests to live according to a holiness standard that surpassed the expectations of the regular community members. And further, God expected even more of the High Priest. For us, we could say that board members and committee chairpersons should be living at a level of holiness above the congregation and the pastor should be living at a level above that.

Look, that's the way it should be, but that's not always the case. You all remember the church I used to pastor, the one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough that even the deacons had bad reputations in the community and in the church.

One day, one of our members stopped by the church and we sat down for coffee. I asked him how he was doing. He was pretty excited. His wife was having a baby, so they decided to sell their Vintage Mustang. He said, "It was amazing pastor. The ad was only in the paper one day. He told me a guy from the Presbyterian Church came over and agreed to buy it. The guy didn't have the cash on him. He assured me that he was good for the money. He said he was an elder at the church. So I figured he was good for the cash and I signed over the title. By the way pastor, what is an elder in the Presbyterian Church?"

I said, "A Presbyterian elder is the same thing as our deacons."

"Oh dear," the guy said with a really worried look on his face, "I guess I'll never see the money or my Mustang ever again."

All you need to do is pick up the Sunday Tribune and read about churches where the pastors or leaders are involved in some sort of a scandal. It happens way too often and these types of scandals, moral, and ethical lapses can destroy the faith of members and reinforce to unbelievers that there is no difference between believers and unbelievers. We can really stink up the reputation of Jesus if we are not careful.

There is no doubt that the Bible understands this concept. And further, the Bible always lays out higher standards of conduct for leaders. In fact that's the main idea of this morning's text.

MINISTERS AND OTHER CHURCH LEADERS WILL BE JUDGED BY A HIGHER STANDARD.

This is not just an Old Testament concept. Jesus said:

⁴⁸... people who are not aware that they are doing wrong will be punished only lightly. Much is required from those to whom much is given, and much more is required from those to whom much more is given" (Luke 12:48 / NLT).

James, the brother of Jesus said this:

¹"Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness" (James 3:1 / NLT).

The closer I get to the end of my career, the more I think about this. I start to go over sermons I have preached in the past, theology I have taught and defended, and wonder how many

mistakes I have made. I often wonder how much damage I have done. In one way, I'm glad that I'm rapidly approaching retirement. I'm not sure I want to make many more mistakes. I don't think I took this concept all that seriously when I was first ordained. I was certainly aware of the passages and the concepts, but when you're young and just starting out in your career, you think more of the possibilities and the excitement of ministry.

I'm sure that our board members are aware that when they agree to come on to the board, they will be judged more strictly by God than if they didn't take on this extra responsibility.

Because most of us have adopted the American egalitarian and democratic view of life, we often forget this: both as leaders and as congregation members.

Those who consider serving in church leadership positions should realize how much risk is involved. Not many people realize this, but if there were ever an incident in the church, pastors and leaders would be named along with the church in any lawsuit. And further, the pastor's personal assets and the leaders' personal assets become vulnerable as well. I am sure that congregation members and people who attend church do not realize how much leaders give up to serve, often with not even a "thank you" in return.

Perhaps that's why the author of Hebrews commands church members:

¹⁷Obey your spiritual leaders and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they know they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this joyfully and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit" (Hebrews 13:17 / NLT).

Look, after spending so many years in the ministry; I know this is impossible to pull off in the United States. People are not humble or thankful enough to adopt these attitudes. In fact, people come to church the same way they approach life. People come with consumer attitudes and attitudes of entitlement.

I have really given up on that concept. However, I have not given up on demanding that pastors and leaders act with integrity no matter what the response of the congregation is. The fact is, pastors and leaders will be judged by a higher standard. I take that seriously in my life.

I. INCREDIBLE EXPECTATIONS (VS 1-9)

Church Leaders Represent God And Must Always Be Ready To Minister.

And that brings us to verses 1-9 where these incredible expectations are laid out. **CHURCH LEADERS REPRESENT GOD AND MUST ALWAYS BE READY TO MINISTER.** That's another thing I didn't understand at my ordination. I didn't realize that ministers are on duty 24 hours a day 7 days a week. As a youth pastor, I was called regularly at 2 or 3 in the morning with kids in crisis. When I'm at a party, I have to be very careful to never have more than one drink. Even at home on my day off; I can never drink more than one drink. If one of my congregation members gets in an accident and I have to go to the hospital, I have to be totally clear to drive to the hospital, and clear to minister.

I am always surprised to see that even when I'm on vacation, I end up ministering. I remember when my daughter and I were on vacation. It was just she and I in a taxi driving across Costa Rica in a cab. Maribeth and I were joking and enjoying the ride. About one hour into the trip, the taxi driver looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, "I'm having an affair and I don't know what to do or how to make it right." The cab ride was about 3 ½ hours. I ended up counseling this guy in my broken Spanish, praying with him, and directing him to a church in his area. Maribeth looked at me when we got out of the cab and said, "Aren't you ever off duty?"

A. MAINTAINING A STATE OF READINESS (1-4)

I guess I never thought about it, but I guess pastors are really never completely off duty. Think about how God drives this home in verses 1-4 where He commands the priests to maintain a state of readiness.

The one time in life you would think priests would be excused from their duties would be at the death of a loved one. We all know how painful it is to lose a loved one and we know the full range of emotions that overwhelm us. And yet look at these 4 verses. If an Israelite came in contact with a dead body, they would remain ceremonially unclean for 7 days. That means the priest would be unable to serve at the Tabernacle for 7 days. The only exception would be to tend to the bodies of his mother father, son daughter, brother, or unmarried sister. If you have read the text carefully or have been listening carefully, you will notice that he is not even allowed to come in contact with the body of his dead wife.

Doesn't that sound a little extreme on the part of God? What is God teaching here? Think about where they are at the time these commands were given. They were in the wilderness. At this time, because God had killed 2 priests, there were only 2 priests and 1 High Priest left to care for the spiritual needs of about 2 ½ million people. It was important to God that there be priests available to minister to the spiritual needs of His people.

We who are pastors and church leaders must make sure to keep ourselves morally, spiritually, ethically, and sexually pure. If there are ethical and spiritual problems going on in our lives that render us unable to effectively minister to the church, then we need to step down. We will talk more about this later. It really doesn't matter if we think this is fair or not. The point is that God has commanded that those who find themselves in leadership positions must keep themselves pure and morally upright for the purpose of being in a state of readiness to minister.

B. MAINTAINING GOD'S REPUTATION (5-6)

In addition to being ready to minister, verses 5-6 remind pastors and leaders that we are to maintain God's reputation by the way we comport ourselves. Some of the neighboring religions approached their gods by cutting themselves, and doing all sorts of other rituals. This is an aside comment. We have all seen these big showy demonstrations of Christianity. They are flashy, people are yelling and screaming and carrying on. The point God is making in these two verses is that the way we comport ourselves directly reflects on Him. I'm sure you all know about the big contest on the top of Mt. Carmel between Elijah the prophet of God against 450 prophets of the false god Baal. The contest would be this. The prophets of Baal would carve up a bull and place it on the altar. Elijah would do the same with his bull. Whichever sacrifice was burned up from heaven would prove to be the true God. Now listen to how the 450 false prophets approached their god:

²⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood."

²⁶So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal all morning, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced wildly around the altar they had made.

²⁷About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or he is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or he is asleep and needs to be wakened!"

²⁸So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. ²⁹They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no reply, no voice, no answer" (I Kings 18:25-29 / NLT).

There was no answer so it was Elijah's turn. To make things even more difficult, he soaked the sacrifice with water and covered the whole sacrificial area with water. Now listen to how Elijah approaches his God:

³⁶At the customary time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. ³⁷O LORD, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself."

³⁸Immediately the fire of the LORD flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the ditch!" (I Kings 18:36-38 / NLT).

Elijah's approach to God was quiet and dignified. As ministers, we should not get all caught up in worldly things. We must consistently remind ourselves that we are God's representatives and we either bring glory to God or we disgrace His Name. And ministers should be living at least two cuts above the normal run of the day Christian.

I know that I have not really done well with this. There are times in my life that I have been so self-righteous and offensive, that unbelievers would never be interested in becoming Christians if the God Who I represented was anything like me. On the other hand, I had so much become one of the guys that you probably couldn't tell me apart from unbelievers. I know that it is a difficult balancing act. I am constantly struggling with the proper balance. But I do know that God expects leaders to be a cut above the rest.

C. MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY (7-9)

In verses 7-9, ministers must be careful about maintaining their credibility. Here the priests are forbidden to marry prostitutes or divorcees. I know that prostitute is a legitimate translation, but I think it sends the wrong message. The King James Version says the priest is not to marry a whore. The word in Hebrew is *zanah*. It refers to any kind of fornication. It can also mean adultery, temple prostitution. What it means is that the person referred to is sexually promiscuous.

The word defiled literally means to be polluted. In other words, if a priest were to marry a promiscuous woman, the priesthood would be constantly threatened with pollution. Let me explain. In Hebrew culture, even though it was a patriarchal system, it was the mother who was the determining factor in the Jewishness of the child. Keep in mind there were no DNA tests. One could guarantee that the mother was Jewish because the baby would come from her body. However, there would be no certain way to tell who the father was. Since the child would be born to a priest who was a Levite, and in particular from Aaron's line, it would be imperative that the woman was a woman of good character. Otherwise the priesthood could become polluted and the entire nation of Israel could be wiped out if a child grew up to be a priest who was not a legitimate descendant of Aaron. Not only would the boy be polluted, but the entire Tabernacle area would become polluted as well. If he became the High Priest, the pollution would reach even to the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies. God would wipe Israel off the face of the earth.

The same thing would apply to a divorced woman. The word describing divorce here is a pretty rough and brutal word. It is *garish*. Its primary meanings are expelled, thrown out, banished, or put away. Here is the problem with marrying a divorced woman. To be sure, many women were divorced by their husbands because their husbands were sinful and no good. However, there were also women who were divorced because they were no good. Again, God wanted the priests to take no chances in polluting the priesthood. We know from history, that ultimately the priests became defiled and polluted morally and ethically.

Look at verse 9. All of us who have been in the pastorate for any number of years realize that our families live in a glass house. Everything they do and say is very public. There really is no privacy for a pastor's family. If a priest's daughter was caught having sex or being promiscuous in any way, she was executed and burned. God was very serious about keeping the priesthood above reproach.

I know that my colleagues think that my view on this is extreme. However, in my opinion, if a pastor is caught in sexually immorality, stealing money, or acquiring an addiction, he or she should be removed from the ministry permanently. To be sure, they can be forgiven, and participate in church, but they should never function as a pastor again. I think if we were real about the whole thing, it would be extremely difficult to restore credibility. I admit that I am in a very small minority on this subject. However, this much is clear. **CHURCH LEADERS REPRESENT GOD AND MUST ALWAYS BE READY TO MINISTER.**

Let me just draw your attention to verse 8 before we leave this section. The people were to regard the priests as holy. Paul makes the same point in his letter to Timothy:

¹⁷"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (I Timothy 5:17 / NIV). Again, there is no way this will happen in American churches because people feel they are experts in everything and have no real concept of submission, humility, and thankfulness.

II. INCREDIBLE DEMANDS (VS 10-15)

God Places Great Demands On the Lives of Ministers and Church Leaders.

As I studied through the requirements of priests, I started to wonder how they could live up to such high standards. And then I came to verses 10-15 and came across these incredible demands placed on the High Priest. The message for us is pretty clear. **GOD PLACES GREAT DEMANDS ON THE LIVES OF MINISTERS AND CHURCH LEADERS.** I said earlier that people and congregations are never going to submit to church leadership in the United States. I know that many people will argue, but think about it this way. People will "submit" as long as they agree with what is being done or taught. Isn't that right? Well that's not submission. C.S. Lewis used to say, "My dog never obeys me. It's just that his will agrees with my will from time to time." I don't say this because I'm looking for anyone to submit to me or I'm not looking to change attitudes in the United States. That ship has sailed. My message is to leaders. It really doesn't matter who submits, who listens, or who follows. What matters is that pastors and leaders understand their duties and responsibilities before God.

A. LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP (10a)

It would be easier not to become a leader. It clearly is much easier to just attend church. Those who feel called to take leadership positions must realize that there are levels of leadership illustrated by the first half of verse 10. The normal priest had to make personal sacrifices but in this section God is going to apply higher standards to the High Priest. The principle is that the higher the position, the more God expects and the harsher He will judge. Think about this. Moses did everything God asked of him and God clearly loved him. And yet because Moses hit the rock twice instead of once, God forbade Moses from entering the Promised Land.

B. LEVELS OF DEDICATION (10b-12)

Think about the different levels of dedication described in the second half of verse 10 thru verse 12. There seemed to be almost unreasonable rules for normal priest to obey in regards to grieving the loss of his relatives. The High Priest is not allowed to attend to any dead bodies, not even close relatives. In fact, while the family is grieving and burying the dead family member, the High Priest is not even allowed to leave the Tabernacle area. There was no choice in the matter. If you were a male, born into the tribe of Levi, to the family of Aaron, you were a priest. God also chose the High Priest. There was no choice in the matter. I have had the privilege of

working with many ministers and lay leaders over the years. The stand up guys and gals gave up a lot and sacrificed a great deal to serve God. That's the way it is.

C. LEVELS OF VISIBILITY (13-15)

In verses 13 through 15 we can see there are different levels of visibility. Again, concerning marriage, the requirements for the High Priest were even higher. He couldn't even marry a widow. And further, look at verse 14. The virgin had to be from the same tribe. In other words, it seems that if you were in line to be the High Priest, you would have to marry a virgin from the tribe of Levi. I know by the time Jesus came on the historical scene, these commands were all twisted around. The offices of priest, High Priest, scribes and Pharisees had become political power positions without any of the sacrifices that are laid out here. If a pastor or leader is looking for power or prestige, then he or she should not become a pastor or a leader because God's expectations and judgment are much more severe. I don't claim to understand why God set up these rules but I do know this. **GOD PLACES GREAT DEMANDS ON THE LIVES OF MINISTERS AND CHURCH LEADERS.**

III. INCREDIBLE EXPOSURE (VS 16-24)

Ministers And Church Leaders Give Up A Great Deal Of Privacy.

At this point in the text, I am at an even greater loss to explain the why of these commands. But verses 16-24 definitely point to the incredible exposure the priests faced in both God's eyes and in the eyes of the people. Even though I don't fully understand this section this truth is certain. **MINISTERS AND CHURCH LEADERS GIVE UP A GREAT DEAL OF PRIVACY.**

A. ALWAYS IN THE PUBLIC EYE (16-17)

Verses 16-17 remind us that the priests were always in the public eye. As I read through these two verses, I thought I understood what was going on. The text says that any priest who had a defect could not offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Naturally I was thinking about moral defects. In other words, it makes perfect sense to me that people that have serious moral defects should not be in the ministry. And further, they should certainly not be in a visible position of leadership. However, when we go on to the next couple of verses it becomes very confusing to us.

B. MAINTAINING THE HIGHEST STANDARDS (18-21)

Verses 18-21 seem to be talking about maintaining the highest standards for worship. When I read through this, and I'm sure most of you, as you hear this read, want to react like the commentator Frank Gorman Jr. "From a contemporary perspective, many of the priestly rulings, and this one is certainly included, are insensitive at best, and reprehensible at worst. It is difficult to reconcile such rulings with an affirmation of the value and integrity of all persons."

These verses now go on to define what kinds of defects God is talking about. No priest who is blind, lame, disfigured, or deformed can offer up sacrifices at the Tabernacle. No person with crippled foot or hand could offer up sacrifices. No hunchback or dwarf could be a sacrificing priest. Add to that any priest who had eye problems, open sores, or damaged testicles could be a priest who offered up sacrifices on the behalf of the people. We react and want to say that God is not fair as if we are more enlightened or even more gracious than God. Look, I'm going to take a guess at the reasoning for this, but it doesn't matter if I'm right or not. God does not need me to defend Him and He certainly doesn't need our approval. These are the regulations He gave, and these are the regulations the priests had to follow.

Perhaps one reason God kept these priests out of the sacrificial ministry was because there was a lot of physical work in offering up the sacrifices. He didn't want any sacrifices dropped or misplaced on the fire in any way. Clearly open sores even disqualified normal people from coming to worship at the Tabernacle. So priests would have to be in physically tiptop shape to handle these heavy sacrifices all day long.

Secondly, appearances were important as well. People often gain understanding visually as well as intellectually. God wanted them to know that He demanded perfection and holiness.

As I said before, I don't really claim to know why God disqualified these priests from offering up sacrifices. I just know He did. And they were not invited to question God's commands. They were simply required to obey them.

The lesson for us is that we are so indoctrinated with political correctness, that often times we equate things as good and holy that are in direct contradiction to the Word of God and exactly opposite of God's character, nature, and will as revealed in the Bible. And the sad state of affairs in the church is that people have all sorts of ideas and theology that they are willing to die for, but in the end could not show you in the Bible why they believe it. I think that is pretty common in the Western churches today. People argue about theology, but don't have a clue why they believe it or where it is in the Bible.

C. GRACE IN ENFORCEMENT (22-24)

But this passage does end well and teach us something. Verses 22-24 remind us that there is always grace in the enforcement of God's commands. These priests are still considered part of the priestly community. They are allowed to eat the food that was part of the worship service just like the other priests. And although they could not participate in the sacrificial part of the service, there was other work they could do. Pastors and church leaders are always in the public eye. We give up our personal privacy and because we serve the church as an institution, we must oftentimes give up our personal desires. It is a fact that just as the High Priest and all the other priests found themselves under constant scrutiny by God, by each other, and by the people, **MINISTERS AND CHURCH LEADERS GIVE UP A GREAT DEAL OF PRIVACY.**

IV. EPILOGUE

As I have studied through this passage, it has caused me to review my years in the ministry. Some things I look back and recognize that I did pretty well, some things I did were adequate, and there were many things that I'm sure I failed at and will be judged by God for. **MINISTERS AND OTHER CHURCH LEADERS WILL BE JUDGED BY A HIGHER STANDARD.**

The church in Corinth was facing a leadership crisis. Listen to what Paul says about how leaders will be judged:

"9We work together as partners who belong to God. You are God's field, God's building—not ours. 10 Because of God's special favor to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. 11For no one can lay any other foundation than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. 12Now anyone who builds on that foundation may use gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. 13But there is going to come a time of testing at the judgment day to see what kind of work each builder has done. Everyone's work will be put through the fire to see whether or not it keeps its value. 14If the work survives the fire, that builder will receive a reward. 15But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builders themselves will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames. ...

18 Stop fooling yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you will have to become a fool so you can become wise by God's standards. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, "God catches those who think they are wise in their own cleverness." 20 And again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, but they are worthless" (I Corinthians 3:9-20 / NLT).

Pastors, board members, committee chairpersons, and teachers should be very careful to take these concepts seriously because one day we will need to give an account of how we built on the foundation of Christ here at Devon Church.