

IT'S ALL IMPORTANT

LEVITICUS 22:1-33

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BUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT.**

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It's All Important

Leviticus 22:1-33

The more I read and study through the book of Leviticus, the more I come to realize how far I am from living a holy life. As I studied through this morning's passage, it occurred to me that in our relationship with God, there is nothing that we should consider a little detail or an unimportant detail. I don't want you to misunderstand me and think that I want a return to Pharisaical or legalistic religion. In other words, just because people are very careful not to break any religious laws doesn't make them right with God nor does it express their love for God. Simply obeying rules is either another form of superstition, or it leads to self-righteousness that in turn carries us further from God. Jesus made it clear that He wanted love not self-righteousness.

However, as I look at my life, and as I look at the lives of average Western Christians, it seems to me that we have let the pendulum swing much too far in the other direction. In other words, as far to one side the legalists swung the pendulum, we today have swung the pendulum the same distance only in the other direction. We have turned our freedom into license. Most Christians in our society have thoroughly embraced the postmodern idea that things are only important in the proportion to which we assign importance to them. In other words, we pay great attention to detail when working on things that are important to us. And we tend to pay little attention to things that don't interest us or things that seem to be unpleasant to us.

Let me give you an example. I once had a congregation member who came into my office and told me that he just had a real blow-up at work. I asked him what happened and here was his story. He said, "I got my paycheck and noticed that it was \$200 less than I was supposed to get. I went right to the boss' office and lodged a bitter complaint."

"How did your boss respond?" I asked him. "The boss said, 'I know, but for the last two pay checks I overpaid you \$100 on each check.'"

"So how come you didn't notify your boss about the two previous mistakes?"

He looked at me with the most serious face I had ever seen and he said, "Pastor, I don't mind an occasional mistake, but when it gets to be a habit, I feel I have to call them on their shoddy work."

We laugh at this guy and can easily see how absurd his reasoning was. But as I examine my own life, and I'm pretty sure if you honestly examined your lives, I find that I am not diligent about all that God commands. I seem to focus on the things that I agree with and can easily accomplish. But I often neglect or get sloppy with things that don't seem so important to me. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **WE TEND TO FOCUS ON WHAT WE THINK IS IMPORTANT. BUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT.**

I. PRIESTS MUST BE HOLY (VS 1-16)

We Must Constantly Pursue Holiness In Our Everyday Lives.

When I see what's expected of the priests, I'm not so sure I could have been a priest with all the demands God put on them. And yet I have to continually remind myself that God has called all Christians to be priests and further, I am the pastor of this local church. In verses 1-16 God commands the priests to be holy. For us the message is that **WE MUST CONSTANTLY PURSUE HOLINESS IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES.** If you are a careful reader, the theme of this chapter comes through loud and clear. The phrases "I am the LORD," "I am holy," "I make them holy," and other similar phrases are peppered throughout this chapter. Again, the tendency for us moderns is to read this as if it doesn't apply to us. We somehow are able to compartmentalize this to applying to the profession clergy in the days of Old Testament Israel. However, let me just once again quote from the New Testament Apostle Peter as he addresses us:

"⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9 / NIV).

A. GOD IS HOLY AND EXPECTS US TO BE HOLY (1-3)

Verses 1-3 clearly state that God is holy and He expects us to be holy. This chapter starts out with God declaring His person and His Name to be holy. He ends this section in verses 31-33 with the same thought.

In verses 1-3, God directly addresses the priests through Moses. The phrase, "treat with respect" literally means that they are to separate themselves for or from the holy things offered by the Israelites. Other translations use be careful or treat with great care. Even though those are correct translations, I think they don't convey to us what the text is after. The priests were the group of men that handled the sacrifices people brought to God. They were set apart from the rest of the community in that they would have to be the go-betweens between God and the community. The Hebrew word used here is *nazar*.

Here is why I bring that up. In the Gospel of Matthew, we learned that after the Wise Men came to visit Jesus, God came to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt in order to escape Herod's massacre of the little children in Bethlehem.

When Herod died, God directed Joseph to return to Israel. But instead of going back to Bethlehem, God directed Joseph to take his family north. Listen to Matthew's description:

"²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:22-23 / NIV).

Now what is interesting is that there is no particular prophecy that can be identified with this event. But let me draw your attention to last sentence, "He will be called a Nazarene." In other words He would be a Nazar. I don't think Matthew was just saying the prophecy had to do with Jesus living in the city of Nazareth. I think he was identifying Jesus as *nazar*, a person set apart for handling the holy things offered to God.

Even though these priests may not have understood the point that they, and in particular the High Priest, became of type of what the Messiah would be, they understood the importance of their work. We will see as we continue that they could not live ordinary lives. They were set apart particularly to do God's work.

I hope as we focus on Israel that point is not lost on us. Over and over again the New Testament writers warn us not to get caught up in worldly things. As I examine my own life, I can see that I enjoy many of the comforts and enjoyments of this world. I know we justify it by saying that Jesus went to parties, drank, and enjoyed Himself, but again, I think we easily carry that much too far to justify our comfortable lifestyles. Let's never forget that Jesus was always focused on His mission. His whole life was directed to the cross: minute by minute, hour by hour day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year. He never lost sight of His purpose.

Again the New Testament witness is clear. We are to continue Christ's work of bringing the Kingdom of God to people here on earth. We are to be about the business of bringing the Gospel message to the lost. We are to be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and working for social justice. I know that if someone were to look at my day planner, my checkbook, and credit card statement, they would never come to the conclusion that I am focused on the mission I have been given by God. God expects us to be set apart for His work.

Before we leave these 3 verses let me draw your attention to verse 3. If one of the priests came near to the sacred offerings in a state of ceremonial uncleanness, God would cut him off from His presence. First of all, to be cut off from God's presence is the definition of hell. In his Psalm of repentance David pleads with God not to take His Holy Spirit away from him and not to cast him

out of His presence. We would do well to take our salvation seriously and to guard it as the most valuable possession we have.

Now I'm not sure if this verse refers to the work the priest does at the Tabernacle, i.e. offering up sacrifices, or if it refers to his eating of his designated portions. It probably refers to both but the next section describes eating the designated portion.

B. BEING COMMITTED TO AVOIDING EVIL (4-9)

Verses 4-9 warn us that our attitudes must be committed to avoiding evil. I'm sure you remember this, but let me just refresh our memories. On certain sacrifices, the fatty portions of the animal were burned up on the altar. These were offered up to God. The priest was given a portion to eat and to take home to share with his family. This is how the priests were provided for. God referred to this portion as the most holy portion. And the rest of the animal was taken home by the person bringing the sacrifice to share with his or her family and friends. In these verses, we are talking about this most holy portion the priests took home to eat with his family. Keep in mind this portion is still part of the official sacrifice. These verses describe conditions that were described earlier in chapters 11-15. If a priest was made unclean by touching something or someone unclean, by a bodily discharge or a semen emission, he could not eat any of this until he was once again made ceremonially unclean. In some cases, the priest simply had to wait until sundown, take a bath, wash his clothes, and he would be ceremonially clean again. He would then be able to eat of this food. In other cases of a chronic skin disease, he may be forced to be quarantined for a period of time or even banished from the camp until the disease cleared up.

Can you imagine how careful the priest had to be in order not to come in contact with someone or something unclean? Even if an unclean insect flew in his mouth, he would be unclean. When we were little we used to play this game while walking home from school. The game was, "If you step on a crack, you break your mother's back." The game went like this. As you walked along on the sidewalk, you had to be very careful to tiptoe over and around cracks in the sidewalk. If you touched one of the cracks, you lost. What we found out very quickly was that it was nearly impossible to walk like this and it didn't take long before everyone was eliminated and there was a winner.

It seems to me that life became that difficult for the priest even walking to work in the morning from his tent to the Tabernacle. I sense that not many of us, including me, take avoiding evil too seriously. Oh, I manage to avoid the big sins. But I'm not so careful or concerned with the little sins. But these verses seem to indicate the priests had to scrupulously and meticulously live to avoid evil of all kinds. If we took Jesus' prayer seriously to deliver us from all evil, most of us couldn't even get through our daily routines. I think we should be brought to tears and repentance when we read through Leviticus and compare it to how we live our everyday lives.

Look at verse 9. God says that not paying attention could cost the priest his life. Think of the dedication it would take for a priest to remain clean so he could perform his duties at the Tabernacle and eat his dinner. Remaining ceremonially clean meant thinking every moment and planning everything down to the nitty-gritty even about when and at what exact time he could have sex with his wife in order to not be unclean for more than an hour or two. It took intentional living to avoid evil and to remain pure. I hope that I can get to that point in my life where I live with that kind of intentionality.

C. BEING COMMITTED TO EMBRACING HOLINESS (10-16)

Verses 10-16 carry the lifestyle to a further level of being committed to embracing holiness. Anybody that belonged to the priest's immediate household was able to eat this sacred food. It was clear who belonged to the priest's family. His wife and children were allowed to eat this food. However, if one of his daughters got married to someone out of the priestly families, she could no longer eat of this food. She now belonged to her husband's household. If her husband

divorced her or if he died, and she didn't have any children, she was allowed to return to her father's house once again and legitimately eat of this food.

Again, slavery here is not like 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th century modern day slavery. Look very carefully here. If a priest happened to purchase a slave, the slave was considered part of his household and the slave was permitted to eat of this sacred food.

However, the priest would have to be careful to make sure that he didn't intentionally give food to workers, or friends. If an unqualified person ate some of this food, he would be required to pay for the entire sacrifice plus the customary 20% penalty.

How committed are we to pursuing holiness? Do we avoid going places where we may be tempted to disobey God? Do we avoid dating non-Christians? Do we consistently read, study, memorize, and apply the bible? Do we look for small group experiences and do we surround ourselves with people who will keep us accountable? God is serious about being holy. Let me just show you how clear God's reasoning is. In verse 2 God says that His Name is holy and that He alone is God. His Name is Jehovah. In verse 3 He says, "I am Jehovah." Again in verse 8 He says, "I am Jehovah." In verse 9 He says, "I am Jehovah, Who makes them holy." In verse 16 He ends this section with, "I am Jehovah, Who makes them holy." God made the priest holy and He made the portion of food they received holy. He expected them to be holy and live holy. God made us holy through the blood of Jesus Christ. He expects us to be holy and to live holy. That means living life intentionally. It means paying attention to the small details. **WE MUST CONSTANTLY PURSUE HOLINESS IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES.**

This section was written to the priests. I have said that we are all considered priests. Nevertheless, as I have said throughout our study of Leviticus, pastors and leaders must be living out their faith and service at a level that God puts higher expectations on.

II. THE COMMUNITY MUST BE HOLY (VS 17-30)

We Must Constantly Give God Our Best.

In verses 17-30, God instructs Moses that the community must be holy. The message to us is this. **WE MUST CONSTANTLY GIVE GOD OUR BEST.** When I go through this section, I don't want to make this sound like I'm a pastor preaching at you. I find myself in the same boat. I want to make it clear that I struggle with these applications as well. I think the question that presents itself in this section is, "Do we give God our best, or just what we happen to have left over?" Other ways the question presents itself to us could be, "Am I as careful in attending to church matters as I am at work or at home in doing my own personal business?" Or if we have children, "Do we convey to them that church is as important as school and extracurricular activities?"

A. GOD WANTS OUR BEST (17-25)

In verses 17-25 God clearly states that He wants our best. God placed incredible demands on priests so that they could always be in a state of readiness to offer up the community's sacrifices. Here he places incredible demands on the people of the community to bring their best for the priests to offer up in worship. I know that you are all careful bible students and you may be a little confused at the sacrifices described here. Usually, the Peace Offering wasn't totally burned up. The fatty portions were given to God and burned up. A portion was given to the priest eat, and the worshiper could take the rest home to eat with his or her friends and family.

However, in this section it will be offered up as a burnt offering. You remember that in a Burnt Offering, the entire animal was dedicated to God and burned up totally. The occasions for these offerings are when fulfilling a vow, or as a freewill offering. In other words, the worshiper is thanking God for enabling him or her to successfully complete the promise they made before God. Or, they could simply be overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude for all that God had done for

them. Look at verse 19 because this becomes important. Did you ever buy a present for someone, and when they opened it were very disappointed? Well, there is no need for that with God. God makes it very clear exactly what He wants. He wanted a particular animal. For this occasion He wanted a male goat, sheep, or cattle. It had to be perfect without any defects. There are a couple of things we need to discuss in this section. God gave us His best. He sent His One and Only Son Jesus to die for us. Could we say that we give God the best of our time, money, attention, and energy?

From the very beginning, God has always clearly stated what He wants from us and how He wants us to express our love for Him. I think it would be worth discussing the first recorded worship of this type:

"³In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:3-7 / NIV).

It's clear from this passage that Abel brought the best of the best of his flocks to offer up to God as an act of worship and love. On the other hand, it is pretty clear that Cain just gathered up what he thought was required and offered that up as a demonstration of his love and worship.

Both men demonstrated how much they loved God by what they brought and how they came to worship. Abel demonstrated great love; Cain demonstrated that he loved himself more than God.

We get the picture that Abel carefully looked over his flock and selected the very best for God. Cain didn't give much thought or attention. He clearly saved the best for himself.

When we think about how much money we will tithe and give to church, which example best describes our attitude: Cain or Abel?

When we think about serving in the church and decide how much time and energy we want to give, which example best describes our attitude: Cain or Abel?

When we come to church, how much thought and preparation to get here on time, wide-awake, and enthusiastic, which example best describes our attitude: Cain or Abel?

When we serve in a ministry how careful and complete do the job and which example best describes our effort: Cain or Abel?

Like it or not, the Bible is clear that the attitude in which we come to church demonstrates how much or little we love Him. The quality and dedication of our service in church demonstrates how much or how little we love God. The amount of money we give demonstrates how much or how little we love God.

If we were all honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that we love ourselves and many other things and people more than we love God. My guess is that most of us are more like Cain than Abel. We may be angry to hear that we don't give enough money or don't work enough at church, or don't take our service at church serious enough. After all what do God and the church want from us? After all, we are volunteering our time, we are giving what we can afford, and the church is lucky we are here.

God rejected Cain's offering and his worship. When Cain got mad, God told him to do what was right and he would be accepted. Look, I know we are all self-centered enough to understand this comparison. If your husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, parents or children demonstrated their love for you the same way you demonstrate your love and dedication for God, would you be happy? I'm guessing not.

When the defects that disqualified an animal for sacrifice are listed here, I'm drawn to the fact that they are similar to the physical conditions that disqualified priests from service in the last

chapter we studied last week in chapter 21. I said that I didn't really understand why God did not allow physically handicapped priests offer up sacrifices. I sounded a little discriminatory.

Perhaps again we run into a type of Messiah Who will come. Jesus becomes both the priest who offers up the sacrifice and He becomes the sacrifice. The priests had to inspect the animal before it was sacrificed. The priest had to declare the sacrifice without defect and acceptable to sacrifice. When Pilate pronounced Jesus not guilty by saying he found no fault in Jesus, he was functioning as a priest declaring Jesus to be perfect and acceptable to sacrifice. Perhaps the priests had to be perfect and without blemish in order to offer up perfect and unblemished animals.

Jesus was the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. Again we are reminded that God gave us the absolute best, His One and Only Son, Jesus. When we look at what we give back to God, how much would we be able to honestly say that we love Him?

B. GOD WANTS OBEDIENCE (26-28)

Verses 26-28 again demonstrate to us that God wants obedience. Again, I'm not sure about the reasoning behind these commands. The command is that these sacrificial animals cannot be taken away from their mothers for 7 days. The worshipers must not offer up a mother and its calf on the same day. The point is that even though the Israelites might not understand the why, they were still required to obey the commands.

I have Jewish friends who still eat kosher. God commanded that a calf not be boiled in its mother's milk. There is no apparent reason for this except that God commanded it. So my friends will not eat meat and dairy together. I know many of us make and change the clear commands of the bible because we want to feel better about ourselves and so we can continue to live the lifestyles we are accustomed to. I know that Christians always say that we live under the New Testament of grace. But there is nowhere in the New Testament that Jesus or the Apostles say that we don't need to give the very best of our time, money, attention, and energy to God. I have had Christians say to me, "I don't have to give a tenth of my money to church. Jesus didn't say that." I love to hear this because I love to come back with Jesus' answer to that. Listen carefully to Jesus' words:

⁴¹Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴²But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

⁴³Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44 / NIV).

Jesus' point is this. 10% doesn't belong to God, 100% of what we have belongs to God. How in love with God are we?

C. GOD WANTS THE BEST FOR US (29-30)

We always think God is selfish because He wants so much from us. But verses 29-30 remind us that God wants the best for us. When offering thanks to God by bringing the sacrifice to the Tabernacle, the worshiper only offered the fatty portions to God, some to the priest, but the rest of the animal was given back to the worshiper to take home and eat with his or her family and friends. And to top it all off, at the time these commands were given, God was also supplying the Hebrews with manna from heaven. God provides. And I can promise this. We can never out-love God. I don't want anyone to think this is some sort of magical formula or health or wealth promise like these television preachers because that teaching is an attempt to manipulate God into blessing us. But I do promise that we will never be able to out-love God. So please, as we

think about how we spend our time, energy, and money, let's remember **WE MUST CONSTANTLY GIVE GOD OUR BEST.**

III. GOD IS HOLY (VS 31-33)

God Has Given Us His Best, Continues To Give Us His Best, And Will Always Give Us His Best.

In this last section, verses 31-33 clearly recap the reason for all these regulations is that God is holy. I hope by now we have come to see that **GOD HAS GIVEN US HIS BEST, CONTINUES TO GIVE US HIS BEST, AND WILL ALWAYS GIVE US HIS BEST.**

At the beginning of the sermon I said these verses match verses 1-3. They kind of summarize all that we have said. But we need to keep in mind that it all starts with God and ends with God. Life is not about how successful or happy we are. Life is all about the truth that God is holy and that His expectation is that we pursue holiness as well.

A. OBEDIENCE DEMONSTRATES OUR LOVE (31)

Verse 31 restates what we said previously that obedience demonstrates our love for God. Just like the examples of Cain and Abel, we will be able to measure how much we love God simply by looking at our day planners, credit card statements, and checkbooks.

B. LIFE IS ALL ABOUT GOD (32)

And that brings us to verse 32 where we are reminded yet again that life is all about God. Unlike everything we have been taught from our youth, the pursuit of happiness is not a God-given right. On the other hand, the pursuit of holiness is a God-given command by a holy God.

C. GOD DEMONSTRATES HIS LOVE (33)

Why should we so passionately demonstrate our love for God? Because as verse 33 states, God demonstrates His love for us. What a reminder for the Hebrews when they received these commands. Just one year earlier, they were in Egypt. They were slaves. They had no future, only misery. And in one night, God set them free, made them rich, and gathered them together around Himself, making them His chosen people and His chosen nation. For Christians how could we ever forget this truth?

"⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 / NIV).

We would do well to preach this Gospel to ourselves every day and every night. How could we not passionately be in love with the God who has given us all of His best? **GOD HAS GIVEN US HIS BEST, CONTINUES TO GIVE US HIS BEST, AND WILL ALWAYS GIVE US HIS BEST.**

IV. EPILOGUE

I have been learning so much as I have studied through the book of Leviticus. I have gained a new perspective of God's expectations of us. I think I have become more keenly aware that God wants me to be holy. He wants me to live intentionally aware of His presence. He wants my love. I demonstrate this by obeying Him and giving Him the best of my time, energy, attention, and money. I want to start to pay attention to even the minor details of my life. **WE TEND TO FOCUS ON WHAT WE THINK IS IMPORTANT. BUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT.**

I don't know who wrote this but I like this story:

"While on a trip to Switzerland, an American businessman was watching a Swiss clockmaker carving the case of an ornate cuckoo clock. As the businessman watched the clockmaker carve out the case, he was astounded at his slow rate of progress. The businessman finally said, 'My good man, you'll never make much money that way.'

'Sir,' the clockmaker replied, 'I'm not making money, I'm making cuckoo clocks.'"

I want to start adopting that attitude towards my living for God. I want people to look at me and say, "You'll never get rich that way, you'll never get popular that way, and you'll never climb the social and business ladder that way." I want to respond, "I'm not trying to be rich, popular, or successful. I'm trying to be holy." Is that your goal also? If it is, let's try to get there together.