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Dedication and Devotion

Leviticus 27:1-34

Intro: Ch27 is the last of the 3-chapter final section of Leviticus. This final section is arranged in a very specific, very deliberate manner. Ch25 addresses laws concerning redemption; ch26 presents the blessings and curses related to the Israelites' obedience or disobedience to the covenant; while ch27 returns to addressing laws about redemption again. But, though the subject of our text is related to that of ch25, it actually covers new territory. The laws in ch27 speak to the question of whether a person or object that's been dedicated to the Lord could be redeemed, and if so, how were the Israelites to go about accomplishing this.

The laws mentioned at the beginning of the chapter all deal with voluntary gifts (1-25), starting with living things the Israelites were currently vowing to the Lord (people or animals), then turning to deal with inanimate things that they would be able to dedicate to the Lord once they had entered the Promised Land (houses and land). The final laws deal mostly with involuntary gifts of people or objects to the Lord (26-33). In each case, items given to the Lord or the price that was paid to redeem them, typically went to the tabernacle for use by the priests.

It may seem strange that this book, which is so important to the Pentateuch and so critical for understanding the OT, should end with a chapter on vows rather than with some thrilling account of a special, miraculous demonstration of God's glory and holiness. The fact that it doesn't teaches us one important spiritual truth: that our promises to the Lord must be as reliable and unchangeable as His covenant with us. As King Solomon said in [Eccl 5:2a, 5](#): "Do not be rash with your mouth and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God...Better not to vow, than to vow and not pay." Also, the subject matter of ch27 ensures that the Book of Leviticus does not end with a long list of curses.

Now, you may be wondering, if these vows were so important and fulfilling them was so critical for the Israelites, why would they voluntarily obligate themselves in such a way to begin with? The OT reveals that many of these vows were often made and fulfilled in response to the Lord answering a

specific prayer (Hannah, I Sam 1) or providing a blessing in some way (David, II Sam 8:11-12). Of course, they kept the commitments the Lord commanded them to make (tithes) as a way for them to acknowledge that the Lord was their King and had provided for their continual material needs. As we will see, their tithes were also a way for them to provide for those who led them in worship and for those who were needy. Making and fulfilling vows was how Israel showed gratitude to their loving, royal King.

1-8 – The text begins by explaining the redemption of voluntary vows. This means the vows weren't required by a command of law but was a freely promised and given gift to the Lord. The assumption throughout the passage is that vows to the Lord must be honored. Human beings are in no position to go back on their word to God. The beauty of these commands is that they gave the one making a vow something definite to do. These vows were thus far more than mere words; they required definite actions to be taken, that prevented people from making empty vows to God

This passage shows that the Israelites could use a vow to dedicate themselves or others to the Lord (2), that is, to His service at the tabernacle. This was clearly a special vow, even a difficult vow, and the Israelites making it could redeem those they had vowed. This was a gracious recognition by the Lord that people who were desperate for His help might make very difficult promises. These laws provide a compassionate way for the person to fulfill the vow and still not be bound by the full implications of the rash promise.

The text provides an assessment chart for any individuals who are dedicated to the Lord. The modern mind might be quick to point out a perceived sexism in the text but that erroneous idea would be based on the assumption that these prices are related to the intrinsic value of the person, is though males were of greater value than females of a similar age. That is not the case at all. The accurate explanation for the disparity is that the prices are related to a person's ability to perform physical labor in an agrarian society. A tractor that can harvest 50 acres a day simply costs more than one that can on harvest 30 acres a day. People aged 20-60 are in the prime of life, their price is highest; and since males are typically physically stronger, pound for pound, than females, their price is also higher, especially since females had extra time demands related to bearing and raising children. The prices reflect labor value, not intrinsic value.

V8 refers to a person who is too poor to come up with the standard assessment given in the previous verses. In this case, the person making the vow or redeeming the vow, would appear before the priest and the priest would assess them – assess what the person could afford to pay. It may still have been costly but on a relative scale. This shows that the Lord in His grace makes a way for all people; whether rich or poor, to participate fully in worshiping Him; in this case by fulfilling their vows. The Lord didn't only want the rich to vow things to Him; He wanted to make this special act of consecration within reach of everyone. In the same way today, everyone can give their lives to the Lord! There are none who are too small, too insignificant or too useless. God wants to use each and every person!

9-13 – This section deals with the redemption of animals that had been dedicated to God. If the dedicated animal was ceremonially clean (suitable for sacrifice), the Israelite could not exchange it (give an animal of a different type) or substitute it (give an animal of the same type). It could be very tempting to substitute an animal of lesser value (a bad one for a good one) because it is a natural human tendency to promise God much when we need Him, but to thank Him little when He meets our need. This law forbids any such faithless ingratitude by declaring that. If this is attempted, both animals become holy and the Israelite is prevented from keeping either of them.

If the vowed animal was ceremonially unclean, like a donkey for instance, it could not be presented as a sacrifice but it could still be given to the tabernacle for the priest's use. If the person wanted to redeem the animal, maybe it was the family favorite or was particularly well trained, the priest would assess the animal's value and establish a price. The person would then add 20% to the declared price and redeem the animal. So, you could dedicate your donkey to the Lord and still use him for yourself; it would just cost you the price of the donkey plus 20%. The 20% surcharge could possibly be to discourage the Israelites from making such vows too lightly.

14-15 – We've gone from vowing living thing to the lord to vowing inanimate objects, such as houses, to the Lord. As such, these verses anticipate Israel's imminent entrance into the Promised Land. These dedications could be done by means of a vow or a simple statement, like an oath. In either case, a solemn promise was made to the Lord, and the object had to be

given to His sanctuary for the use of the priests. In this case, the object is a house. The text doesn't specify if the house is in the countryside or in the city so either may be in view. If the owner failed to redeem the house, it's unclear what happened to it but it may be similar to that of the fields in the next passage.

16-25 – This text is a bit confusing but suffice it to say that, since priests didn't have time to care for all the land dedicated to the Lord, it seems the owners retained control of it until the Jubilee and made a living from it. Ideally, they would redeem the land before the Jubilee, paying the price as of the day they dedicated it and adding 20%. If they failed to redeem it, or if they leased the land during this time, they forfeited it and it became priestly property. It's thought the 50 shekels represents the full cost for the entire 50 year period from one Jubilee year to another; a value based on its potential production. A homer of barley for 1 year would be worth one shekel so the assessed value of the land would 50 shekels if it was dedicated on or during the year of Jubilee.

Again, if the owner failed to redeem the land before the Jubilee, they forfeited the land and it became irrevocably dedicated to the Lord, which meant that it could never be sold to a non-priest. It could, however, be rented out with a portion of the proceeds being given to the tabernacle. The owner also forfeited their right of redemption if they sold (leased) the land to someone else after it had been dedicated to the Lord. Why? Possibly because it would have been an insult to dedicate land to the Lord, profit from the land by leasing it to another person and then redeem the same land back from the Lord with funds that you didn't raise a finger to earn. It's one thing to redeem land from the Lord with money that cost you sweat and blood but it's an insult to redeem a gift with money that cost you nothing.

If a man dedicates a field he has bought (leased) from another, he who dedicates the leased field must pay the redeem price of its value on that day the priest assesses its value. The text doesn't give a reason but the requirement may have been intended to keep the land free of any liens and so to protect the rights of the original land's owner to redeem the land whenever he is able to. But, if the person dedicating the land didn't have the money to pay, it's presumed that he gave all the proceeds from the land to the tabernacle. At the year of Jubilee, the field would revert to the original owner. This all might sound like "inside baseball" rig-a-ma-role but it was a

vitaly important part of Israel's heartfelt worship and gratitude to their covenant King.

26-33 – The text now focuses on involuntary offerings. The passage deals with things that cannot be dedicated to the Lord because they already belong to Him (firstborn, tithes). It also addresses persons or objects that cannot be redeemed because they have been devoted to the Lord as His property.

At the first Passover, the Lord commanded that all firstborn males were to be set aside as holy to Him in order to commemorate His redemption of Israel, His firstborn son, from Egypt. Since the firstborn belonged to the Lord, they were already holy and could not be dedicated to Him. In other words, Israelites couldn't vow to give the Lord an animal they owned and then pay that vow with an animal that the Lord already owned Himself (firstborn). This would be like returning someone's property to them and claiming you had given them an expensive gift. If the firstborn was a clean animal, it had to be sacrificed. If it was an unclean animal it could either be redeemed for the assessed value plus 20%, or it could be sold by the priest for the assessed value.

V**28-29** deals specifically with things that cannot be redeemed. The root of the Hebrew word translated as devoted refers to giving someone or something irrevocably to the Lord. This strange occurrence could happen in 2 different contexts. 1st) the community of Israel was to give something irrevocably to the Lord in the context of certain wars, as seen in passages like **Num 21:2** and **Josh 6:17**, or when judging idolatrous Israelites (**Ex 22:20**). In these cases, those who were devoted to the Lord were always destroyed. In these situations, it was as if the Lord's final judgment had broken into human history and Israel was the instrument used in delivering His justice.

It seems obvious that this community context is best for understanding v29, a law that was particularly relevant to the anticipated conquest of Canaan. It cannot mean that an individual Israelite could irrevocably devote children or servants to the Lord and then kill them, since this would count as murder – the spilling of innocent blood – and was strictly forbidden. But individuals could still devote something irrevocably to the Lord, which leads to the 2nd context addressed in v28. When an individual devoted a person or object to

the Lord, they were actually giving that person or object permanently to the tabernacle for the priests. In the case of a human being, this would refer to some kind of permanent, non-priestly service for the benefit of the tabernacle (manual labor).

Although this is the first time Israelites are commanded to tithe, it shouldn't be a surprise, to them or us. For starters, their patriarch Abraham had done this and the Israelites would have seen themselves as following in his footsteps. Furthermore, giving a tithe to the king, a god or the priests was a well-known practice even among the pagans of the ancient Near East. Since the Lord was not only Israel's God but also their divine King, it was especially appropriate for them to acknowledge and honor Him in this way.

Num 8 teaches that the tithe's purpose was to meet the need of those who served at the tabernacle. Unlike the other tribes, the tribe of Levi didn't receive large tracts of land on which to grow crops. Plus, they had extra responsibilities at the tabernacle that didn't allow them much time to provide for their material needs. The tithes would address these issues. The way it worked was the initial tithe went to the Levites, who in turn gave a tithe of that to the priests. **Deut 14** adds that the tithe was also intended to provide for the needy every 3rd year, thus showing the Lord's loving care.

If a farmer needed to redeem any part of his tithe (for seed) he could do so by paying the value of it plus 20%. as for herd and flock animals, these would have been routinely counted by shepherds. It's thought that the scene of **v33** refers to animals born that year, just as the tithe of the land refers to new crops from that year. Naturally, no substitutions were allowed.

34 – The phrase on Mt Sinai links us back to **25:1** and **26:46** and binds these last 3 chapters together. These were not mere traditions or customs and they were certainly not given as suggestions – these were commandments given by the Lord to His people to instruct them on how His people were to worship Him and live before Him.

Since Christians are no longer under the Sinai covenant, this command to tithe doesn't automatically apply to us as stated here. But, just like other OT laws, the underlying spiritual principles continue. While the NT doesn't command or emphasize tithing, it still presents giving as a duty for God's people and never speaks negatively of tithing. Giving is commanded and is

not optional. It should be regular and proportional but should never be manipulated or coerced (I Cor 16:1-2). True giving comes as we first give ourselves to the Lord, only then can we give of our financial resource as we should (II Cor 8:5). Giving is a valid test of the sincerity of our love for God on others (II Cor 8:8).

But what NT spiritual principles on giving do we glean from our text? Christians are to return material blessings to those who lead them in the Lord's ways (I Cor 9:6-18) and to the needy, as well (Eph 4:28). We're not to do this out of guilt nor compulsion but in response to God's marvelous grace given to us in Jesus, a gift so rich and free that, if we understand it properly, it causes us to give liberally of our material possessions as an act of grateful worship to the Lord (II Cor 8:9). Poor Christians can do this by giving less than 10% since any gift would be costly, while wealthy Christians may give 10% and still not be doing this since a tithe is not costly to them at all. King David once declared, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (II Sam 24:24). This perfectly describes the heart of those who are so overwhelmed by God's goodness and greatness that they joyfully give Him gifts that are costly to them (alabaster box, poor widow).

To put it succinctly, the purpose for giving is to faithfully and cheerfully honor the Lord with what He has given you and then learn to trust Him to make up the difference. Biblical Christian giving is not something you add to your financial portfolio, although it is an investment of sorts. Giving is a financial investment in spiritual growth – for you, your marriage, your family and for all those who eventually come to Christ because of your gifts. Just like the Levites, here at Grace Chapel, 10% of all offerings that come in are passed on to our missionaries. Your regular offerings help to keep their ministries going. You're investing both in present spiritual growth and future spiritual decisions.

At the same time, giving isn't a "get-rich-quick" scheme either. It's not like you can sit down and calculate if you give "X" dollars, the Lord will turn around and give you so much % more. That's that calculating myth of the televangelist: "Plant a seed of faith and the Lord will return it 100-fold." Don't get me wrong; you can't out-give God but here's the thing about God's returns: 1) they depend on if your gift was truly a sacrifice. 2) God sees the motivation behind your giving. 3) Finally, the

returns almost always come when you actually need them, not when you want them.

This final section of **Leviticus (25-27)** form a natural transition to the Book of Numbers, where Israel departs Sinai and marches towards the Promise Land. Each of these last 3 chapters deals with issues that concern how Israel must live there, whether observing Sabbath of Jubilee years, acting obediently in general, or keeping various laws related to life there. Clearly, Israel was to be in that land very soon and these chapters whet our appetite for the fulfillment of that long-awaited covenant promise. The Law has now been given and Israel may now march boldly into Canaan; provided, of course, they maintain faith in their Redeemer and carry out His covenant mission of filling the earth with His righteous and holy kingdom. But, in spite of all the miracle and supernatural displays of power that they witnessed, the first generation out of Egypt failed to do these things while the second generation was largely successful in them. The question for us now remains: Which generation will we follow?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate just how many Christians today are going through this life thinking they are serving the Lord when all they're really doing is wandering around in the wilderness waiting to die – waiting for the next generation to catch the vision and then catch fire and win the world for Christ. Now, there's no reason the next generation couldn't do this: they have immense potential and immense opportunity. But, sad to say, there's no good reason why THIS generation couldn't do it either. We already have the knowledge of God's Word and God has given us vast riches of material resources. You might think you've missed out on that last part but the truth of the matter is, the poorest person in this fellowship is wealthier than the majority of the rest of the world, even with Bidenomics!

The question still remains – which generation will we follow? The first generation of Israelites died in the wilderness because they refused to trust the Lord to ring them into the Promised Land. Do we trust in God, as we sang earlier? Have we truly been overwhelmed by God's continual goodness to us to the point that we're willing to trust Him in faithful obedience? I pray that we have or that, at least, we will begin – nothing less that the fate of the world is at stake. 😊