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## The Price of Spiritual Privilege

### Leviticus 21:1-24

**Intro:** The Book of Leviticus is considered by many to be a difficult book to comprehend. It's filled with chapter after chapter of seemingly obsolete laws and regulations that amounts to a whirlwind of information that leaves the reader scratching their head and wondering just what they have gotten themselves into. If you try to take it all in at one time, it's a challenge but if you understand the basic outline of the book, you can categorize the information and begin to make some sense of it all. As we have seen, ch 1-17 deal with ritual purity as it relates to the tabernacle. The section we have just completed (18-20) deals with moral purity: how individual Israelites are to live out the Lord's commands in the most basic matters of their daily lives: worship, sexuality and family relations.

The section we are entering today encompasses ch 21-24. The main theme of this section is a focus on showing due reverence to the Lord's holy things and holy times. Each chapter deals with its own topic or topics but in each, the reason for such reverence is pretty straightforward: the Israelites are to make sure the Lord's holy things remain holy.

By doing this, they not only respect the Lord deeply; they also fulfill their unique privilege as the people of God by maintaining a society in which the Lord's concern for holiness is clearly displayed.

Speaking of privilege, ch 21-22 focus on the responsibilities of the priests and they teach us that priests in Israel were held to a higher standard of holiness than other Israelites. There are at least 2 reasons for this: 1) the Lord calls His priests to a special role as those who serve constantly in the courts of His palace. Since the Lord is the holy King, it is especially important that His palace servants maintain their own holy status, not only so they can come near Him, but also to communicate to His people how much their King values holiness. If the palace servants were in the habit of desecrating their holy status, it would appear that they thought very little of their privileged position and worse, it would suggest to Israel that their King cared little about holiness.

It's comparable to a surgeon's assistant that leaves the OR, comes in

contact with germs and bacteria and returns to the OR without properly sterilization. Not only would this show how little the assistant thought of his position; it would also communicate to others that the surgeon himself cared very little about cleanliness. Those in special roles of service are held to higher standards, not only so they can continue in their divinely appointed roles, but also so they can communicate properly to others the values of the One they serve.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason is similar: priests are not only to be models of ritual purity but of moral purity too. While we expect this of most leaders, we especially expect it of those who lead us in the things of God. This isn't just an OT concept. It's no surprise that the NT lists specific moral requirements for spiritual leaders (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). Leaders of the Lord's people are to be uniquely holy, no matter which Testament they serve in. We must keep these reasons in mind as we study through these chapters as some of the expectations placed on the priests may seem harsh at first.

**1-6** – If you thought the call to holiness in the previous chapters was extensive for the common Israelite, the call for the priests is even more so. In these verses, the Lord gives specific commands to the priests concerning the death of their close relatives and their participation in the mourning process. Mourning for the dead usually involved coming in contact with a corpse, which was one of the most ritually defiling things in ancient Israel. A dead body is a picture of sin's result in this world, especially in the way the body quickly rots. Any such contact resulted in a major 7-day ritual impurity and because of his holy status, a priest couldn't make himself ritually impure in this way, even for his own tribal relatives.

Of course, the Lord allowed exceptions in the case of the priest's close relatives: parents, children, brothers and unmarried sisters (still member of father's household). No exceptions are made for in-laws as there were other family members who would tend to that situation. No mention is made of an exception for a wife but that is assumed as she was now 'bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.' This suggests that a wife was considered his very closest relative.

Note: this prohibition was in direct contrast to most, if not all, of the pagan religious systems of Israel's neighbors. In fact, Israel was little more than a year out of their bondage in Egypt and their memory of the gods of Egypt

was still fresh in their minds. Egyptian worship was performed in a context in which death and holiness were connected. That was not to be the case in Israel; priests were forbidden from preparing bodies for burial. Holiness gives life; the Lord didn't want His holy priests to be closely associated with death; the ultimate result of sin. The Lord didn't want His priests and His worship to be dominated by death, but with life.

The Lord also didn't want His priests engaging in any activity that even remotely paralleled the death cults of the pagans. Thus the prohibitions of 5-6. This has nothing to do with natural baldness; it involves the intentional shaving of a part of the head to make a bald spot, shaving the beard or cutting the flesh. These were general customs among the pagans as a way to mourn their dead. Such rites were especially wrong for those who were to be ritually holy.

The reason for this is made clear: like royal servants presenting food to a king, the priests presented the Israelites' food offerings to the Lord. Since the Lord was a most holy King, those drawing near to Him could not be impure. To do this would be to profane (treat as common) His name. It would be to say, in effect, that the Lord's holiness was of no great importance and worthy of no real respect. So, not only did the Lord want His priests to be holy, He also wanted them to constantly display that holiness to the people as a reflection of His own holiness.

**7-8** – The fact that v7 is necessary suggests the women it describes did routinely remarry in ancient Israel. There was no prohibition against this among the common Israelites but priests were holy and their role as holy servants of the holy King required model purity; not just ritually but morally as well. Thus, they were to only marry those who set a similar model of purity; those women who were beyond reproach both in their past and present behaviors. This was another way to illustrate the commitment to purity that was required of priests. A spiritual leader - OT and NT - was to only set their affection on that which is pure.

The Israelites themselves were to treat the priests as holy, which is to say they were to help him maintain his holy status, particularly in this matter. The context suggests that they are to literally "make sure he is holy." Again, the rationale for this lies in the priest's holy role (offers the bread of your God) and the holiness of the King they serve. The repetition of this rationale

emphasizes the connection between holiness and fellowship with God. The bread (or food) of God was a picture of fellowship; it was as if God and His people shared the bread together. This same connection between holiness and fellowship is also clearly stated in the NT (**I John 1:5-6**).

**9** – Here we see that the holiness expected of a priest was also extended to his household; to his immediate family. Any daughter engaged in prostitution in Israel greatly dishonored her parents by committing such evil and the result was to be death by stoning (**Deut 22:21**). This was the common fate for all those who dishonored their parents, sons or daughters. But in this case, the daughter's sin was doubly severe: she not only dishonored her parents in general; she profanes her father in particular by treating his holy calling and the One who called him (the Lord) as a common thing, unworthy of respect. Her punishment was thus, doubly severe: Her corpse was to be burned after she was stoned to death; effectively removing her name and even the memory of her from the community of Israel. This idea that a leader among God's people must lead his household well is also repeated in the NT (requirement for elders).

**10-15** – While the common Israelite could go about planning weddings and funerals as they saw fit, within the bounds of the Law, of course; the common priest could not. And while the rules that governed the priest's behavior in these matters were strict, the rules for the high priest were stricter. Our text also deals with the issues of mourning and marriage, but since the high priest had the highest level of ritual holiness; he had to guard it more carefully.

The high priest had a special responsibility to honor and illustrate the holiness of God. He was set apart into a higher level of ritual holiness by having a special anointing with oil and by wearing special garments to perform his particular duties. All the laws that applied to other priests applied to him; just to a greater extent. The common priests were commanded not to defile themselves for the dead by going near a corpse; but exceptions were made for certain close relatives. But, the high priest was prohibited from engaging in mourning rites or coming into contact with any dead body, including his own father and mother! Again, no mention is made of his wife or what concession may have been made in this regard.

Now, v12 can't mean that the high priest could never leave the sanctuary,

otherwise, it would be impossible for him to live with his family or have physical relations with his wife since she was forbidden to enter the sanctuary. Not even Aaron remained in the sanctuary all the time (Num 12:1-4; 16:47). The context suggests that the high priest could not leave the sanctuary for the purpose of engaging in mourning rites and thus inviting a major ritual impurity. He had been dedicated for a special role in the tabernacle and to willfully defile himself with such an egregious impurity would be to profane the holiness of the place in which he must always be ready to serve.

While the common priests were commanded to not take a wife of a divorced woman, harlot or a defiled woman; the standard for the high priest was even higher. Not only must his wife be free from any accusation of misconduct; she could not even be a widow, she could only be a virgin. This was most likely to ensure that any child born to his wife was his beyond any shadow of a doubt. His wife could also only come from his own people – his own tribal relatives. This was because the next high priest must come from the offspring of the current high priest and since priests could only come from the tribe of Levi, this was to ensure that the high priest's offspring was a Levite through and through.

Failure to ensure these things was to profane his offspring; to disqualify them from the holy, high-priestly role in the midst of his holy Levite relatives. Such profaning was forbidden to the high priest, the one whom the Lord sanctified – setting him apart to live in a holy manner.

Israel as a nation was called to holiness (19:2). Yet, the priests were called to a greater holiness (1-9). In turn, the high priest was called to an even greater holiness than that of the common priests (10-15). We might consider this to be unfair and unnecessarily burdensome for the priests and the high priests but this 3-fold degree of holiness that existed among the Israelites – the people, priests and high priest – corresponds precisely with the graduation of holiness that existed in the tabernacle – the outer court, the Holy Place, the Most Holy Place. The greater your access to the Lord was, the greater your responsibility was to maintain your divinely appointed status of holiness.

**16-24** – While 1-15 focuses on priests maintaining their holy status so they can serve the Lord within His holy palace, these verses describe the



descendants of Aaron that were barred from serving in the tabernacle. And, if the previous requirements sounded harsh and unfair to our modern sensibilities, the subject of our current text may seem down-right offensive! But, the requirements presented here are not offensive – they're necessary; and what's more, they're logically necessary.

There are 12 physical defects listed that would bar a male descendant of Aaron from being a priest. The number 12 likely indicates that the listed defects are not to be taken as either complete or exhaustive but merely representative. Also, these 12 defects are all external, visible, surface defects. This shows that the concern here is on appearance, **not** worth. The servant staff of the holy King must appear to be sound in body. Also, what is the most repeated requirement for any animal brought to be sacrificed to the Lord? They were to be without spot or blemish: no defects! If the animals that are to be presented to the Lord as food offerings are to be without blemish or defect, then it just stands to reason that those who handle and present these food offerings to the Lord must also be without defect.

While the text offers no explanation for this prohibition, we can surmise that it's rooted in the rich symbolism of the tabernacle itself. The tabernacle was like the garden of Eden, where the Lord once 'walked' among His people. As such, it was to be a place of perfection and those serving in it were to be free of physical blemishes as a way to symbolize the perfection that used to belong to all humanity and will one day belong to all those who enter into God's presence in the heavenly tabernacle. Also, as the Lord's representatives, a priest's lack of physical blemishes was a way to symbolize the Lord's own perfection and completeness. To disregard this requirement was to profane – treat as unworthy of respect – the Lord's holy tabernacle and all that it represented. It would undercut and deny the very message the tabernacle was meant to communicate.

Now, while this requirement may seem severe, v22 makes it very clear that these descendants of Aaron were not to be looked down on but honored and loved. The Lord underscores this Himself by stating that they still have a seat at His royal table. Just as King David welcomed disabled Mephibosheth to his table, demonstrating to all in his royal court that this son of King Saul was to be given full honor as one loved by the king – so the Lord makes it known that these individuals are welcomed guests at His table and are to be given full honor as those whom the King loves.

These higher standards of holiness to which the priests were called to reminded them of their privileged role as those who served in the very courts of the holy King. This role required holiness not only so they could draw near to the King, but also so they could communicate to the rest of the King's people just how much He valued holiness. The holiness of the priests' lives – ritual and moral – was to be a picture to the Israelites of the Lord's own holiness.

But this was not the role and responsibility of the priests alone. Just as the priests were privileged to reflect the Lord's holiness to the Israelites, so too were the Israelites privileged as a kingdom of priests to reflect the Lord's holiness to the world. And just as the priests who served faithfully helped the Israelites to understand who the Lord was and what He valued, so too the Israelites who served faithfully helped the world to understand the same. All of the Lord's people are His servants and are privileged to reflect His holy character and spread His holy kingdom in the world.

How are we to do this? Well, we're to do this in every aspect of our lives but this chapter highlights at least 2 specific areas. First off, we should understand that God calls us to reflect His truth in the midst of our grief. The 1<sup>st</sup> regulation for both priests and high priests in ch21 concerns how they were to mourn the loss of a close relative. By the same token, the way we behave after the death of a loved one reveals what we truly believe about life, death and God. Funerals can reveal a lot about our character. God calls us to reflect His truth in our grief. [1 Thess 4:13](#) shows that believers aren't supposed to grieve the same as the lost. Why is our grief different from those who don't know Christ? We have hope!

God tells us in His Word that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, He gives us eternal life. God says His people will live forever after death and we reflect God's promise in the way we grieve. Yes, we sorrow over the loss of a loved one, whether family or close friend, yet we don't mourn from a position of hopelessness but of expectation! Our grief changes dramatically when we know that our loved one knew Jesus as their Savior and are living with Him forever in heaven and we will see them again. We reflect God's truth in our grief.

Secondly, God calls us to represent Him in our marriages. In today's text,

the OT priests were held to a high standard for marriage. In the NT, all Christians are priests and as such, God calls us to maintain the purity of our marriages. If you're a believer and you've experienced the pain of divorce, that's in your past. From now on, God calls all of us to represent His design in marriage. Eph 5 teaches us that a marriage between 2 believers is really a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church, giving Himself up for her; and wives are to submit to their husbands even as the church submits to Christ. I Tim 3:2, 12 also tells us that God requires spiritual leaders in the church to have exemplary marriages. In the old covenant, God held a high standard for the marriages of priests. In the new covenant God continues to hold a high standard for the marriages of all followers of Jesus, who are a royal priesthood.

The high responsibility of holiness reflects the privileged access one has with God. Heb 4:16 instructs us to come boldly to the throne of grace... If we have been given such great privileged access, what must the Lord's expectation of holiness for us be? If you've never experienced this level of access to God, coming freely and boldly before His very throne; then you can have this access by simply trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Will you do this today? 😊