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## The Lord's Holy Name

### Leviticus 24:1-23

**Intro:** We're in the middle of a study of a section of Leviticus (21-24) that emphasizes the necessity for God's people to show due reverence to the holy things and the holy times of the Lord. The previous chapter (23) provided a list of all the holy events (7 in all) that were prescribed by the Lord on Israel's ceremonial calendar. 2 of those holy events or feasts – Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) – were holy times in which Israelite males were to bring offerings of harvest produce to the tabernacle. The first 9 verses of our text today naturally follows this by describing the use of some of that produce in 2 tabernacle rituals: lighting the lamps (which required olive oil) and placing the 'bread of the presence' (which required fine flour). As we will see, these rites served to recognize and acknowledge the presence of the holy King and to continually request His divine favor.

**1-4** – The tabernacle was simply a large tent and the area inside the tent was divided by a veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy place or Holy of Holies. Within the Holy Place, there were 3 pieces of furniture: the golden altar of incense, the table for the bread of the presence (shewbread) and the golden lampstand. As the priest faced the incense altar, the table would be on his right and the lampstand would be to his left. Since there were no windows in the tabernacle, it was necessary to have light in the Holy Place so the priests could see to minister there.

The lampstand is described in Ex 25:31-40 and others. It was fashioned out of pure gold and made into the shape of a miniature tree with a main trunk and 6 branches coming off of it (3 each side) and covered with flowering blossoms. The trunk and each of the 6 branches had a lamp (7 total) that held oil and a wick. Pure oil fueled the lamps on the branches. When lit, they provided all the light for the Holy Place. Each morning and evening, when the high priest burned incense on the golden altar, he was to care for the lampstand lights to make sure they continued to burn. The importance of this is emphasized by using continually 3 times in the passage. God didn't want His tabernacle to be left in darkness nor His servants to minister in darkness.

Of course, the command in our text emphasizes 2 essentials: 1) the people of Israel were to provide the olive oil regularly and 2) the oil had to be pure. The oil was to be clear and pressed. There was a method of extracting olive oil by heat but beating or crushing the olives and straining out the impurities produced the best olive oil and the God of Israel, their holy, covenant King, deserved the very best.

The purpose and function of the lampstand is rich with symbolism and NT truth. First, we can say that the golden lampstand symbolizes the Word of God, the light God gives us in this dark world (**Ps 119:105, 130; 2 Peter 1:19**). Nobody outside the Holy Place could see the light from the lampstand but those ministering within appreciated its light. So too, the unsaved cannot see nor understand the light of the Word of God because they lack the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. In fact, apart from the Word of God, God's servants can't see where they are or what they are doing, nor can they serve God effectively.

Also, even though the people were tasked with providing the pure oil for the lamps, they never once were able to see the lamps burning. The lampstand wasn't there for the people of Israel to see but for God to see and for the priest to use as he carried on his ministry. This teaches that what happened in the presence of God was far more important than what happened anywhere else in the camp. The proximity of the lampstand to the table of shewbread provides another beautifully illustrated truth. The light from the lampstand would have shown directly on the table and all of its contents. The symbolic effect of this being that the light of God, the light of His countenance, is seen to be shining directly on the 12 loaves of bread, all of which represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

**5-9** – A table covered in pure gold stood on the north side of the Holy Place, opposite of the golden lampstand. Since the furniture in the Holy Place was considered to be directly before the Lord's presence, the bread that was placed on that table was known as the bread of the Presence. By setting out this bread regularly before the Lord, Israel was acknowledging the Lord's continual presence with them and their continual willingness to serve Him.

Not only were the people to bring pure olive oil for the lamp, they were also to bring fine flour to the priests from which 12 loaves of bread were baked

each week. The Hebrew word for loaves (halla) describes flat unleavened loaves baked in an oven. Since they were flat, they could be stacked in piles. This was necessary because they were rather large; each weighing as least 5.5 lbs, while the tabletop was small (36"X18") and held other items. Pure frankincense was to be placed on (by) each row (pile), maybe in a separate dish so it could be easily removed and burned on the altar. A memorial portion was to be burned as a request of the Lord to remember the offeror with favor. As these 12 loaves clearly represent the 12 tribes, this was a request for the Lord to show His favor to each tribe.

V8 makes this even more specific by describing the bread as an everlasting covenant. Used in this context, the word covenant can describe an action or event that served as a sign of a particular covenant. Such signs served to assure the Israelites that the Lord would 'remember' His covenant with favor. Bread was an especially appropriate covenant sign, because covenants in the Ancient Near East were often sealed by eating a meal. Eating bread together was a mark of friendship and fellowship and the 12 loaves spoke of the covenant relationship Israel had with their God. In this case, the priests ate the bread on the people's behalf, confirming that covenant every time they did so.

The week-old bread was removed from the table and replaced with fresh bread every Sabbath. This bread was to be set...in order before the Lord and this was also to be done continually. These requirements are symbolic of 2 aspects of God's desired relationship with His people. He desires a proper, ordered relationship with His people. The Lord also desires a continual, unbroken relationship with His people. In Ancient Israel, this was accomplished through the faithful observance of these rites but ultimately, this relationship was made possible by the person and work of Jesus Christ the Messiah, who proclaimed Himself to be the Bread of Life ([John 6:35, 48](#)).

One other important aspect of our relationship with God is seen in this passage: God wants our fellowship with Him to be fresh. The bread was to be replaced every Sabbath. God didn't want a stale communion with Israel and He doesn't want stale communion with His people today. Too many believers rely on past experiences to define their fellowship with God. True, a past experience defines our relationship: we repented and accepted Christ days, weeks even years ago but that glorious event shouldn't define your

current fellowship with the Lord. Our fellowship should be fresh, on-going, a daily experience that draws us into the Lord's presence and transforms us into His image.

While the symbolism is instructive, I believe we can handle a deeper dive into the spiritual aspects of the text. Priests had several roles to fulfill in the tabernacle ceremonies and rituals but this passage highlights another part of the high priest's job description: servant of the Lord. The high priest makes sure the lights on the lampstand are trimmed and kept lit. He makes sure there is bread on the table. And, even though it's not mentioned here, he was also to make sure the altar of incense was perpetually burning. So, for all intents and purposes, metaphorically speaking, the high priest was the Lord's butler! He made sure the lights were on, the food was on the table and the aromatherapy was going. Sure, he was the chief butler, head of the servant staff, but a butler nonetheless.

This emphasizes for us again that, among other things, the tabernacle was the Lord's residence. In all reality, if the lights are on, the incense is burning and there's food on the table then somebody's home! But, the tabernacle wasn't just the Lord's home, it was His royal residence, and the high priest was servant to the King. The priest's duty was to make sure that the tabernacle was a welcome place for its royal resident to dwell.

Several times the NT refers to believers as priests and several of these passages emphasize the royal nature of this priesthood. While there is great honor attached to this priesthood, we must remember that it's royal character derives from the fact that it's also a priesthood in service of a King. We're a royal priesthood because we're on the King's servant staff. There is a certain amount of glory associated with this priesthood but it is still a service occupation. As such, we should never think of ourselves as being the stars of the show. Our priestly service to God doesn't give us celebrity status. There is a menial, mundane character to our priestly work. We're also called to a service occupation and the service we are called to render is to make sure our individual lives and our churches are places where God is pleased to dwell by His Spirit.

**10-12** – As the story of Nadab and Abihu (**10:1-11**) is a special warning to priests to honor the Lord by revering Him in His Holy Place, so this passage is a special warning to all in Israel – native born or resident alien – to honor

the Lord by revering His holy name. Thus, this story is an illustration, not an interruption. It may be placed here simply because it occurred at this point in the giving of the Law or because it fits well with the theme of the preceding chapters: showing due reverence to that which is holy. To respect a name is to respect the person who bears that name and our highest respect belongs to the Lord. This story is similar to others in which Moses seeks direction from the lord. In this case, the question appears to be: How does the law against blasphemy apply to a resident alien living among the Israelites?

During a fight in the camp between 2 men, one of the men blasphemed the name of the Lord, that is the holy name of the Lord. Since the name represented the very person, to blaspheme the Lord's name was to blaspheme the Lord. Blasphemy is attacking someone with your words. It's similar to the modern idea of verbal abuse but in this instance, it was directed towards the Lord. We use the word name in a similar way when we say someone has "dragged our name through the mud" meaning they have besmirched our character publicly. The man also cursed; most likely the name of the Lord as well. This man was half Egyptian (father) and half Israelite (mother). It seems it was common for Egyptians to curse their many gods. The root of this man's sin was that he considered the God of Israel to be the same as the petty, pagan gods of Egypt.

Upon hearing of the offense, the Israelites put the man in custody until the Lord's will was made clear to them on this matter. Obviously, they would have known blasphemy was wrong (Ex 22:28) and they could reason that if an Israelite who cursed their parents was to be put to death (Ex 21:17) then the same would apply to an Israelite who cursed the Lord. But this offender was of mixed heritage and since descent was usually traced through the father and this man's father was Egyptian, he wasn't considered a native born citizen. So they asked the Lord how they were to proceed. Notice: this isn't a mob working outside the process of law. The man was a foreigner and they needed guidance to understand to what extent the laws of Israel applied to foreigners among them.

**13-16** – The Lord opens His response to Moses with a guilty verdict. First, the man was to be taken outside the camp. This would be for 2 reasons: 1) the man's sin would have rendered himself ritually unclean and 2) dead bodies were ritually defiling and the camp of Israel was to be kept pure. 2<sup>Nd</sup>, those who heard him were to lay their hands on his head. This may have been a way for eye-witnesses to identify the guilty party and take the first



step in condemning him. Also, if hearing the curse somehow polluted the witnesses ritually, this rite might also transfer this pollution back to the guilty party. Of course, it's also possible for rites to accomplish more than 1 thing, so both of these options may be correct – killing 2 birds with 1 stone...

The 3<sup>rd</sup> step was the blasphemer was to be stoned to death by the entire congregation (possibly certain men acting on the people's behalf). In ancient Israel, as in many cultures, treason against the king was a capital crime, since it was a personal offense against the king as well as a danger to the safety and well-being of the kingdom. It shouldn't be a surprise that cursing a king was also a capital crime, since those who did so were acting as traitors by speaking evil of the king and showing him utter contempt. That's exactly what this blasphemer had done to the King of heaven, and so he faced a punishment that suited his crime. In a way, the death penalty sealed his own decision.

The passage ends by declaring 2 parallel laws (15-16). The 1<sup>st</sup> half of each describes the crime and the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of each describes the punishment: first generally (shall bear his sin), then specifically (shall be put to death). By stating the law 2 different ways and then repeating the punishment twice (16) the severity of the crime is underscored. To reject our Maker is to forfeit the life He has granted us. The Lord then states that these laws applied to the resident alien as well as the native-born; to all those within Israel's legal borders. Justice was to be applied equally to all. This was a principle of both divine justice and mercy. It allowed the foreigner to enter into the nation of Israel but those who enter the Kingdom of God, and enjoy its privileges, must also be governed by its laws. To enter that Kingdom is to renounce all other lordships and to accept its laws.

**17-22** – These verses appear between 2 others that make clear that justice applies equally to all. This tells us that this passage is also stating principles of justice. 3 principles in particular can be seen. 1<sup>st</sup>) crimes against humans are far more serious than crimes against property. This is because humans are created in the image of God and as such, have special worth. This also explains why murder was a capital offense in ancient Israel but crimes against property was not. 2<sup>nd</sup>) penalties must be appropriate to the crime, not just match them. For example, a master who injures his servant isn't injured in return; instead, the servant is freed, which equates to a fine for the master and liberty for the servant. Far from being barbaric and bloodthirsty,

this approach to justice actually limited the scope for revenge, which tends to escalate endlessly in any tribal society. It also ensured that the punishment always fit the crime.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> principle is similarly related: the penalty must not only fit the crime, it must be applied equally to all, whether resident alien or native-born citizen and, by implication, whether rich or poor, slave or free. This again is in keeping with the biblical teaching that all humans are created in God's image. It also stands in contrast with other Ancient Near Eastern laws where the eye-for-an-eye principle was applied if you injured someone of your own social status or higher but not if you injured someone of a lower status. Thankfully, our God is no respecter of persons so His laws are applied equally, and fairly, to all.

The Law made a distinction between murder and manslaughter. Murder was intentional and often premeditated while manslaughter was usually accidental or due to negligence. Those that committed manslaughter had the option of running to a city of refuge to await trial but the murderer was to be put to death. All life is sacred because it belongs to God and human life is especially so because we're created in His image. Those who destroy human life commit the ultimate wrong; thus, they must face the ultimate penalty. Capital punishment in cases of murder doesn't conflict with this truth, it actually emphasizes the sacredness of life. No one can take a life without surrendering their own.

In the case of damage to property, the offender was to replace what was damaged or give money equal to its value. A neighbor refers to any person dealt with in the normal course of a day; it could be anybody. Finally, the reason Israel was to follow this command and apply justice equally across the board was because their Lord, their covenant King, was a God who loves resident aliens; who has made them in His image. He expects Israel to give them the same justice they give themselves.

**23** – This ties the whole story together: Israel sought the Lord's direction, the Lord revealed it to Moses and he passed it on to them and they obeyed the Lord's command.

This story made it very clear to the Israelites that those who reject the lord will be rejected by Him. The NT teaches this same point when it states that

those who reject the Holy Spirit's testimony about Jesus will likewise be rejected (Mk 3:28-29). Plus, since disobeying the Lord is a sign of rejecting Him, this story was also a warning to Israel. The negative example of the blasphemer was an exhortation to Israel to treat the Lord's name (His person) as holy. When Jesus teaches us to pray, "hallowed be Your name" (Mt 6:9), He's teaching us to pray for this very thing: that all the earth would set God apart as holy by bowing the knee before Him in humble worship and obedience.

As for the laws dealing with the principles of justice (17-22), it seems, at 1<sup>st</sup> glance, that Jesus takes a negative view of these and other OT laws in His Sermon on the Mount. But on closer inspection we see that Jesus isn't criticizing the OT, He's criticizing the understanding of the OT that many of His hearers had adopted. It seems that many of the people of Jesus' day were applying the laws of 19-20 in the context of personal relationships, using it as an excuse for revenge, instead of recognizing that it was given to ensure equity in the context of public justice. Jesus corrects this misconception by declaring that, in personal relationships, it's not the law of 'equal justice' that applies, but the law of love and forgiveness, a law that causes us to imitate Him by being generous with others, even when we have been wronged or when there is no chance of us ever being repaid.

Love, not retaliation, is the mark of the righteous person. If you, as a Christian, don't understand how God can expect you to forgive those wretched people who have hurt you, then you don't understand the depth of your own sin, the severity of your own offense and the length God had to go to to offer full forgiveness of your sin. You have done more in your short life to offend the divine sensibilities of God than anyone could ever hope to do to offend you. Because God has loved us even while we were still sinners and because He has given His all to offer us forgiveness, we should be willing to love others enough to forgive them as well. Forgiveness is not part of our divine DNA. ☺