

Holy-Hearted Service

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[0 : 00] Do turn your Bibles back to Leviticus chapter 21, and there should be an outline as well for you to follow along. There are quite a few bullet points here tonight, but fear not.

We probably won't cover everything. I'll touch briefly on some of them, but focus on the others. Well, if you have responsibility for cooking dinner in the family, I wonder how many does that apply to?

Probably not that many in this congregation. Yeah, a few. You might often get asked, what's for dinner tonight? And then the conversation might go something like this.

Spaghetti bolognese. What? Not again. Yes, I've cooked in bulk, and it's nutritious for you. But it's been five times in a row this week.

Lunch and dinner. Yeah. I can see it's not funny for some of you because too close to home. Well, I'm afraid to tell you that since we are in Leviticus, as Michael suggested, holiness is on the menu yet again.

[1 : 09] Yep. Yep. It's holiness for starters, main course, and maybe even dessert. But I want to assure you that there's probably enough variety in our chapters tonight, 21 and 22, that it wouldn't bore you.

Because today we are considering the holiness of the priests and the food that they offer. But we can't run away from holiness in these chapters because, as you see from my first bullet point, six times in these two chapters, we have the phrase, I am the Lord that makes you, them, him holy.

Now, last week, you might recall that the command that was repeated was to be holy, for the Lord is holy. This week, slightly different.

I think the order is reversed. The Lord tells Israel that because of his relationship with them, I am the Lord your God. He has made them holy through atonement.

Hence, they, and in particular the priests, are to obey his laws. But the focus in these chapters are, is the priests and the high priests.

[2 : 22] They are given special rules to abide by because they have special work. They have a job to do, which is to offer up to God the food which is holy.

Thus, they are to be strictly clean when they approach God to make these offerings. And so, if we read again from verse 1, The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, except for a close relative, such as his father, mother, son, daughter, brother, or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him, since she has no husband.

For her he may make himself unclean. He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself. Priests must not shave their heads, or shave off the edges of their beards, or cut their bodies.

They must be holy to their God, and must not profane the name of their God. Why? And here's the reason. Because they present the food offerings to the Lord.

The food of their God. They are to be holy. Now, we'll get into the specifics earlier, read shortly, but the key verse is here, isn't it?

[3 : 39] In verse 6, and then again in verse 8. These laws are needed because the priests alone present the food offering to the Lord, and therefore are to be holy, just as the food offered is.

It's a bit like waiters at a restaurant. I mean, if you went to a restaurant, you know, the last thing you want for them is to, you know, bring out your, you know, hot, delicious, clean, uncontaminated food, when they themselves, you know, are unclean, right?

You know, maybe they've just wiped the table next door to you, there's ketchup on their hands or whatever, and then they serve you that food. No, don't. You want them to be clean. You want even their shirts and whatever to be clean.

Now, as an aside, people often wonder whether these food offerings here are any different, say, to what you might find in front of household idols or shrines, as some of you might see nowadays, or perhaps even back in Israel's time, any different to the sacrifices that the nations around them would have offered to their own gods, which they did to bring luck, for example, for harvest or, you know, before they went to war.

Well, I say that they are because, firstly, God explains why they are needed. The whole book of Leviticus is given over to that. God is not a fickle or capricious God that they need to proclaim, but he's given these to them so that they might atone for their own sinfulness and maintain fellowship, relationship with him.

[5 : 12] God is not asking for the food because, you know, he's hungry. In fact, most of what is offered is burnt, and what's not burnt is given to the priest to be eaten, provision for them.

But secondly, and I think this is very important, these sacrifices are being offered in order to earn favor or reward. In fact, the opposite is true.

God has already saved them. There was no sacrifices before they, you know, came out of it. God has already saved them and provided for them in the land. What they bring is from the crops and the herbs, herbs, yeah, herbs as well, crops, herbs and herds that God has already blessed them with when they're in the land.

What they do instead is bring it out of thanksgiving, out of gratitude for what God has already done for them, not to get to earn and get the reward for offering these sacrifices.

But for the priests, God now places additional stipulations because, as I said earlier, they're set apart to serve God in a special way. So what we have here in the first nine verses are extra conditions.

[6 : 30] The first set relates to matters of death. And if you want me to summarize it, it's basically that priests are not allowed to be funeral directors. Okay? So they can't set up shop and call themselves Lapine or whatever.

All right? The general prohibition is found there in verse 1. A priest isn't to make himself ceremonially unclean for anyone who dies. Now, not a lot is said to describe what that entails, but if you look at the reference I've given you in the outline, Numbers chapter 19, it occurs when, for example, you touch a dead person, or you go into a tent with a dead person inside, or you touch a grave.

Anyone who does that, not just a priest, anyone makes himself or herself unclean for seven days. Verse 5 also talks about shaving of heads, trimming of beards, or cutting of bodies.

That appears to be mourning rituals, which the other nations around them, the Canaanites, used to observe. But again, we saw last week in chapter 19, this prohibition is really for all Israelites, not just for the priests.

But I think this is particularly included here as an added precaution for the priests, because if they become unclean by it, then they are actually barred from serving at the temple for seven days.

[7 : 54] And that's no good to God, because God needs them to be dedicated to serving Him. And so they're asked to avoid this altogether. The only exception is when there is a close relative.

In such cases, the priests would indeed become unclean. Notice, just by the by, the in-laws are not part of close relatives. But if that were to happen to a brother, sister, mother, father, then the priests can, you know, essentially take compassionate leave for seven days, because they're going to be unclean.

But this was a concession for close family members only. Now, why does death make someone unclean? Well, I think in one sense, we kind of get it, don't we, intuitively, because God is the source of life, and associated with it is wholeness and purity and vitality.

Death, sadly, is the loss of these things. And by touching a person, say, the picture is conveyed of someone being tainted by death, by association with death.

And so for the priests to become ceremonially unclean, that would mean they were unable to come before God. The next set of verses in 7-9 move on to restrictions related to marriage by the priests.

[9 : 17] Here we read that the priests, who are incidentally all male, must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorce from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God.

Regard them as holy, because they offer up the food of your God. Again, same reason. Consider them holy, because I, the Lord, am holy. I who make you holy. If a priest's daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father, she must be burned in fire.

So again, we have the same reason, don't we? This time, however, the priest is to maintain sexual purity and wholeness because of his role. And marrying a prostitute or a divorcee defiles him because he is committing adultery in God's eyes.

And so I think what we're beginning to see is that although all of Israel, the whole nation, is to be holy, the priests are held to a higher standard because of their job. It's somewhat analogous, I think, to how we look at our leaders today.

So, you know, we hold judges and police officers to a higher standard, don't we? Anyone taking a bribe is corrupt, but if judges or police officers did it, somehow we get, you know, more enraged by it.

[10 : 33] This seems worse, don't we? Because they are the ones tasked to enforce the law. Well, if that's what God saw of the priests, wait till we now come to the high priest in verses 10 to 15.

So looking there again, other than your Bibles on the slide, the high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head, who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must not let his hair become unkempt or tear his clothes.

He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. So here we get again more details about what makes a person unclean. Tearing of clothes, letting your hair become unkempt are more signs of mourning, it seems.

But notice then that God goes one step further in the next verse because there is now no exemption for the high priest. He must not make himself unclean even for his father or mother, nor leave the sanctuary of his God or desecrate it because he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God.

I am the Lord. So for the high priest, there is no compassionate leave even allowed. He can't even leave his post at the sanctuary. It's sort of like, your job is more important.

[11 : 51] Can't even go out there to observe any funerals. You are to stay where you are in the sanctuary. Further, when it comes to marriage, the woman he marries must be a virgin. He must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, one defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people so that he will not defile his offspring among his people.

I am the Lord who makes him holy. And so too with marriage, there is a higher standard of purity. Not just prostitutes of divorce, but only virgins and only someone from his own people, which I think refers not to just his own people being the Israelites, but being the Levites.

And the reason for this is because his offspring is likely to be the next high priest. Someone who will represent the people before God. And so it was particularly important for that person to be kept hold and untainted, as it were.

Now, I think for the modern year, this all sounds rather harsh. And we do need to be careful that we don't, as Christians, need to apply this literally today.

But I think the significance lies in the fact that in those days, the high priest was really the only person, the only one that God allowed to come to him, to approach him, draw near to him behind the curtain.

[13 : 15] He alone is able to wear those garments. And so because of his unique role, his life needed to be given wholly, fully to serving God, dedicated to doing God's work.

And you know, if you consider Jesus' own life on earth, I think you'll see that he recognized this aspect of his calling. For he is our true high priest, isn't he?

So if you remember, he was 12, and he went to the temple for the first time, and then recall that he didn't follow his parents' home. And then when he was found later, remember what he said, Luke 2, verse 49?

He said, why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house? And likewise, when Jesus' mother and brothers searched for him one time, because you know he was too busy, remember that, doing God's will, too busy to eat?

Well, he said in Mark chapter 3, verse 33 and 34, when people said, hey, your mother and your brothers are outside, he said, who are my mother and my brothers? And then looking at the disciples around him, he said, here are my mother and my brothers.

[14 : 28] And so, important was his work for God that he even neglected, intentionally, his earthly ties. And so, while some of the details of these verses may seem a bit unclear as to why, I hope you're beginning to see the bigger pattern here, which also continues in the next section, that this is what they were required to do in order to remain whole so that the priests can come before God to serve on behalf of the people.

And so, as we look at the next section, we'll see that there are even instances where even if the priests can approach God in normal circumstances, they're barred because of certain situations.

So, let's look at verses 16 to 23, which deals with those in Aaron's household who would otherwise have been able to work as priests but are now barred because of physical irregularities.

And so, we read, the Lord said to Moses, say to Aaron, for the generations to come, none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. And then he goes through the list of the blind, the lame, the disfigured, the hunchback, a dwarf, those with eye defects, which I think means if you're short-sighted like me, festering or running sores, and damaged testicles, which tickled a few young people in the morning today.

Again, all of, calm down, again, all of this sounds a bit, I don't know, distressing maybe, unfair.

[16 : 08] You may be thinking, you know, how is God discriminating against disabled people? Which I'm included because I have bad eyesight. But actually, if you read on verses 22, you'll find that this is not actually the case.

And 22 is actually a very important verse. For these people who are otherwise disabled, so-called, may eat the most holy food of his God as well as the holy food.

Yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the Lord who makes them holy. You see, to be able to eat God's holy food is actually a privilege.

Later on, further down, in chapter 22, verse 10 to 16, there's a very careful list given of those people who counted in Aaron's household. Everyone else was outside that and only Aaron's household was allowed to eat the holy food.

And so, a person's defect didn't bar them from eating the holy food provided they're part of Aaron's household. You may be the richest person in Israel, the most able-bodied, but if you're not part of Aaron's household, you actually can't eat the holy food.

[17 : 23] This food was blessings that God gave to Aaron's household for them to enjoy. So, what this person who otherwise has a defect was prevented from doing was the work of the priest or the high priest.

And the reason for that is because the person offering the food is to be whole physically in the same way as the food that he brought, the animal that he brought, was to be as well.

And so, if you jump to chapter 22, verse 17 to 30, which we don't have time to read, but I encourage you to read it on later on, what we have is a list of the animals that can be brought or the kinds of animals, those without blemish or defect.

And the idea was that the one offering had to mirror the actual animal that was being brought as well. And again, this is to reinforce the idea of wholeness because only a perfect animal can be an acceptable substitute to atone for people's sins.

In fact, there's only really one exception if you read those verses. A deformed animal can be offered if it was a free will offering. That it was entirely voluntary, not required by God to atone for sins or for fellowship offerings and things like that, but entirely voluntary.

[18 : 48] That is the only instance where an animal with defect can be brought. So really, it has nothing to do with the priest's worth or capability, but more that it had to mirror the sacrifice.

Wholeness was required when approaching a holy God so that the substitute is acceptable. Outward cleanliness and wholeness was an expression, symbolic as it is, of this inner purity.

And then when you get to chapter 22, verse 1 to 9, we have even a list of circumstances where if this outward cleanliness was inadvertently breached, how a priest may overcome it through washing.

So verse 3 gives the blanket warning not to come near to God if such a thing happens or they will be cut off from his presence, presumably for good. And then verses 4 to 7 make provision for a priest to be able to wash himself of uncleanness.

And then finally in verse 9, the reason is repeated again. The priests are to perform my service in such a way that they do not become guilty and die for treating it with contempt.

[20 : 00] I am the Lord who makes them holy. all right, as I said, I wouldn't go into verse point D at the end because I think I've sort of referred to some of those sections already.

It's only to say, I think, by way of summary that what we're focused here really is not just on Israel being a holy nation set apart for the Lord, but the priests as well being holy with these additional dimensions because they have this special job special role of serving God at His temple.

They alone are the only ones that can draw near to God with food offerings at His dwelling place, His holy dwelling place. Now, I don't know how that makes you all feel, but all of these laws ought to make us, everyone, whether you're priests or not, search our own hearts, isn't it?

Because what we have is a picture of a wholeness that is really, really high standard that's really saying to us, no one can approach God. You know, a priest may be able to do so physically as a concession by God because they're whole and clean outwardly, but inwardly, you know, spiritually, they, like us, and all the people in Israel are really barred because of their sins.

And so, even when Aaron and his sons approach God, they need to do it humbly, don't they, in reverence. The food, the holy food that God has allowed them to eat, well, they need to be able to eat it gratefully, in thanksgiving, not as though they earned it or had any right, but only because God was gracious to be allowing them to eat of it.

[21 : 50] That is the picture I think we get when we read these chapters. And so, we need to now come then to what that means for us in light of Christ, as Christians.

And as I said earlier, we know that we don't have to apply it literally. Instead, as I say in my outline, this is a picture for us as priests being God's holy servants.

Now, as Christians, our high priest is an Aaron, is it? Our high priest is Jesus. And you know what?

By faith, we actually now belong to Jesus' family. We are part of Jesus' household. Remember what Jesus said earlier in Mark chapter 3?

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. We are by faith in God's household. And so, we belong to God's household or Jesus' household.

[22 : 53] We're able to eat the most holy food. regardless of our physical condition. Whatever disability we may have, we are free to eat of his most holy food.

And what was the food that Jesus offered as a high priest? He did not bring any goat or bull, did he? No, he offered his very own body and life.

Perfect, unblemished. which means that what Jesus is asking us to do is feed on him. Not literally, but by faith.

Jesus says himself in John chapter 6 verse 53, on the next slide, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

And he's not talking about physical eating, he's not even talking about the Lord's Supper, which is just symbolic, he's talking about feeding on him by faith, on the work of his death on the cross, trusting in him, relying fully on him in everything for life.

[24 : 04] What a wonderful thing, isn't it? That we get to come into Jesus' household and we get to eat the most holy food, which during the time of Israel, only the high priest and his family could.

we get to do that now by faith in Jesus. So the first question I want to ask is, are we doing that? Are we feeding on him each and every day of our lives?

Firstly, trusting in Jesus, trusting in his death for forgiveness, but then relying on him for everything in life. Are we doing that?

Secondly, as members of Christ's household, then we're also called, as the priests were, to holy service, aren't we? Except now, the criterion is an external wholeness or ritual cleanliness, but a pure and contrite heart.

Wholeheartedness, which I've called being holy-hearted. Same thing. So, Jesus said in the reading by Tiff, we're to leave all if we're to follow him, isn't it?

[25 : 14] when one man asked to bury his father first, he said, let the dead bury the dead. A bit like saying that to the priest, isn't it? But you go proclaim the kingdom of God.

Another wanted to say goodbye to his family. Jesus replied, no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. And so, Jesus is not saying that we don't look after our families and be caring to those people that are close to us.

But what he's talking about is the heart. What are our priorities? Are we wholehearted in serving the Lord? Are we single-minded in living for him?

That is, do we only serve God when we're involved in church activities? Or do we serve God each and every day of our lives? When we head back out to work?

When we go home to our families? Are we serving God wholeheartedly there? Doing his will? When we turn on our computers and look at our computer screens, are we serving God there wholeheartedly?

[26 : 25] Are we living consistently as light for Christ? Or only when we come to church? Because it's easy when we come to church, we're among Christians, it's easy to be quite Christianly, isn't it? But when we're by ourselves, when we're with people we find a struggle to be with, are we still wholeheartedly serving the Lord?

It's possible, isn't it, to be one kind of person at church, a model Christian, maybe even out at Christian Union, or part of change, but then totally different with other people, isn't it?

Well, Paul writes in Romans chapter 12 verse 1, That's a definition, isn't it?

a call to wholehearted service, offering ourselves every moment of our day, every day of our lives. You know, last week in the letter that Peter wrote, the first letter, the church was called a holy nation.

That's a definition of who we are, set apart, that's our identity, but we're also called a royal priesthood, which emphasizes the role that we have to serve God wholeheartedly, just like the priests were meant to do at the temple.

[28 : 06] And one more last point, which is on your outline, when we do this wholeheartedly, we don't profane the holy name of the Lord, which is another phrase that recurs in the chapter.

We don't have a lot of time to unpack that, but essentially, when we do this, we glorify his name and the name of Jesus, because we reflect God's character in the world.

All right, let me stop there, because what I want to do is just leave you some time right now. I know I've been quite challenging, I'm not accusing anyone of not being wholehearted, but now is the time for us just to reflect personally.

God alone knows what's going on in our lives and our hearts, so let's be honest with him right now. Are we wholeheartedly serving him? Are we single-minded in doing his will?

I'll give you some time for that, and then I'll close in prayer. Here we loads more hours, coming in all and to out vos degrees, and combine Village Herojo with Tour and modeled Father, you alone know our hearts.

[29 : 46] You search it. You know exactly what's going on in our lives. All of it. Forgive us if we have not been wholehearted in serving you, in living for you.

Even though you have been abundantly gracious to give us everything that we need in Christ Jesus. Enjoying all the richest blessings, including the spiritual blessings, through his death.

Purify our hearts so that we may serve you wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. In the name of Jesus, our high priest, we pray. Amen. Well, let's rise and sing undivided.