

The Sanctity of Priests

Leviticus 21:1-22:16

I. Introduction

- A. The holiness laws called Israel to its covenanted purpose of being separate from the world and dedicated fully to Yahweh.
- B. Israel's observance of these holiness laws depended heavily upon whether its spiritual leaders—the priests—exemplified holiness in their lives.
- C. Israel's history evidences the truth that so goes the priests, so goes the nation.
- D. Thus, 21:1-22:16 concerns those details which are necessary to ensure the purity of the priesthood in their daily lives.
- E. Israel's priesthood was hereditary. Nonetheless, God had physical and spiritual characteristics that would qualify an individual for priestly ministry.
- F. "By delineating the physical and spiritual qualifications and conduct of the priestly leaders, God claimed the totality of their lives. The point was that the priesthood was not an occupation but a life. By giving these rulings for ancient Israel the LORD was also saying something about the holy nature of the ministry that warranted such standards" (Ross, 381-2).
- G. Structure
 - 1. This section divides into 5 sections
 - 2. Each section is concluded by the basic phrase, "I am Yahweh your sanctifier" (21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16).

II. Exposition

A. Holiness in Mourning and Marriage (21:1-15)

The first two sections deal with the two major themes of priestly holiness. God is particularly concerned that priests reflect the holiness of God and covenant loyalty in how they mourn for the dead and in whom they marry.

The underlying principle of this section is that God's people—and especially those who serve him at the tabernacle—must not conform to the world's practices of mourning. They must at all times reflect the hope of the covenant, even when mourning those closest to them who have died.

- 1. For ordinary priests (21:1-9)
 - a) Mourning (21:1-6)
 - (1) Death is part of life, but only life in a cursed world (Gen 3:19).
 - (2) Death thus represents the opposite of what God is—the author and source of life.

- (3) Priests were required to maintain a proper perspective on death—they must not let death become a hindrance to serving Yahweh.
- (4) Priestly contact with the dead was only permitted with close relatives—mother, father, son, daughter, brother, unmarried sister. Although the priest’s wife is not mentioned, it may be assumed since she is his “flesh” (cf. chapter 18) through marriage.
- (5) All other contact with the dead was prohibited, even among those to whom he was related through marriage (21:4).
- (6) They were also restricted from shaving the head and beard, or making cuts on the body (21:5), which were practices associated with pagan mourning rites (cf. Isa 3:24; 15:2; Jer 47:5; 48:37; Ezek 7:18; 27:31; Amos 8:10; Mic 1:16).
- (7) The rationale for these restrictions was that the priests were responsible for offering the sacrifices—called “Yahweh’s food”—on the altar. His holiness required their purity (21:6).

b) Marriage (21:7-9)

- (1) As spiritual leaders, the women whom the priests married reflected their spiritual character—what they valued most.
- (2) The priest’s marital life also modeled godly marriage to the people.
- (3) For these reasons, priests were prohibited from marrying anyone with an immoral background—either through prostitution, sexual defilement, or divorce.
- (4) Part of the reason for these prohibitions was polemical—priests were to make as much distance as possible from pagan cultic practices, which included prostitution.
- (5) But beyond that, priests were to value purity and righteousness, and desire such qualities in their wives as well.
- (6) Verse 9 offers a parenthetical command related to the daughters of priests who defile themselves through prostitution. In such instances, the girl was to be put to death and burned. Not only would this avoid any pagan associations, but it ensured the priest give no tolerance for immorality, even in his own family.

2. For the high priest (21:10-15)

The standards for the high priest exceeded even that of the ordinary priests, exemplifying the principle that higher positions of authority and responsibility are met with higher levels of accountability (cf. 1 Tim 3; Tit 1).

a) Mourning (21:10-12)

- (1) Special emphasis is placed upon the high priest by noting that upon him was poured the anointing oil and he wore the special garments that distinguished him from other priests.

The Sanctity of Priests

- (2) Thus he could not dishevel his head or tear his garments, which would undermine his consecration.
- (3) The high priest could not defile himself through contact with any corpse, even for his closest kin—this father and mother (21:11).
- (4) His position also meant his priestly duties took precedence over mourning for family. He could not abandon his sacred duty to mourn his family—his life was one of total dedication (21:12).

b) Marriage (21:13-15)

- (1) The high priest could only marry a woman who was a virgin (21:13). He could not even marry a woman of upstanding moral character who was widowed or divorced (21:14).
- (2) Several possible reasons are given for this:
 - (a) Such a standard underscored the high accountability of his office
 - (b) It ensured the legitimacy of his children to the priesthood

B. Holiness in Physical Condition (21:16-24)

Priests had to meet physical qualifications in order to serve God at the tabernacle. The principle behind these qualifications relates back to divine creation as a standard of purity. Blemishes and defects did not reflect the perfection of God's creation.

1. The term “blemish” is used often to describe unacceptable animals for sacrifice (cf. 22:19). In other words, both the sacrifice and the priest must reflect health and wholeness.
2. Defects which disqualified priests from service could include blindness, lameness, disfigurement, deformity, a crippled foot or hand, a hunchback, a dwarf, an eye defect, festering or running sores, or damaged testicles (21:18-20).
3. Those priestly individuals who exhibited such maladies were prohibited from serving as priests (21:21).
4. However, his physical condition did not affect his ability to participate in other priestly activities, including eating the priestly portions from the sanctuary. They were simply restricted from offering sacrifices at the tabernacle (21:22-23).

C. Holiness in Sacrificial Food (22:1-16)

The privileges of the priesthood were that they received their food from the offering made at the tabernacle. Since they were not allotted any land, God provided for the priests through the sacrificial system. But such provision was not a blank check. Care was required when eating this food, since it was set apart as holy.

1. Restrictions for priests (22:1-9)

- a) Priests has to be ritually clean in order to eat the portions available to them at the sanctuary (22:1-3). Violation of this would result in the individual being cut off from God's presence (21:3).
 - b) Naturally, any condition that rendered a person unclean would affect the priest's condition as well
 - (1) Skin diseases and unnatural discharges presumably rendered the priest unclean for as long as the condition remained (22:4a).
 - (2) Other scenarios—contact with a corpse or an unclean animal, or natural discharge—rendered the priest unclean until evening, and his purity required bathing in water (22:4b-6), after which he could eat the holy food again (22:7).
 - c) Further, his decisions had to reflect his intention to remain clean—he couldn't eat an animal that had died naturally or was killed by another animal (22:8).
2. Restrictions for laymen (22:10-16)
- a) All lay persons were forbidden from eating the priestly food (22:10).
 - b) However, members of the priest's family, including slaves purchased or born in the priest's home, were sanctified and could eat it (22:11).
 - c) As long as the priest's daughter remained under his authority, living in his home, she could eat it. But if she married a layman, she would no longer have access (22:12) unless her marriage ended through divorce or widowhood and she returned to her father's house without children (22:13).
 - d) Accidents could happen in which a lay person unintentionally ate a priestly portion. Such an act was considered robbery and the offender was required to repay the priest with an additional fifth added on for restitution (22:14).
 - e) Even though it was done by accident, it still constituted a transgressing of the common and the holy, and caused the offender to bear iniquity and guilt (22:15-16).

III. Chapter 21:1-22:16 and the NT

Several points of contact exist between these chapters and the NT. Some emphasize the discontinuity that exists between the old and the new. Others remind us that there still remains continuity, and thus these chapters have much to teach us on how to live righteously.

- A. How we mourn for the dead reflects our faith and hope in Christ. While death is part of life on this fallen earth, our response to it must reflect the hope offered in Christ. The world mourns because it has no hope (1 Thess 4:13). But Christ, in his resurrection, has removed death's sting (1 Cor 15:55).
- B. Whom we marry has a profound impact on our spiritual lives. Likewise, whom we marry reflects our highest priorities. Our choice in marriage partner reflects our own hearts.

The Sanctity of Priests

Likewise, our status as God's holy people means God has placed restrictions on whom we marry (cf. 2 Cor 6:14-16).

- C. Since the priesthood has been done away with ending of the old covenant law, the physical standards are no longer applicable to Christian leaders. Since Christ is our unblemished high priest (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:14-15; 7:25-28; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5). He is supremely qualified to represent us before God. As such, he has qualified us to stand before God regardless of any physical defects we may exhibit.
- D. Nonetheless, God has placed standards on Christian leaders, but they are moral standards (1 Tim 3:1-13). Leaders are still expected to exhibit righteous living, even if they are not required to exhibit physical wholeness.
- E. Since all NT believers are priests, we are all called to live according to a higher standard (1 Pet 2:9-17).