

The Sanctity of the Divine Name

Leviticus 24:10-23

I. Introduction

- A. The remainder of chapter 24 records the second of two narrative passages.
- B. The first narrative passage concluded the first part of the book (chs. 1-10) with an account of the sin and punishment of Nadab and Abihu.
- C. This second narrative passage concludes the holiness code (chs. 17-24) with another account of sin and punishment.
- D. At first, this narrative passage seems arbitrary and random. However, most likely its placement just after 24:1-9 indicates that this event occurred in close proximity to when the laws concerning the lampstand and the bread were given.
- E. Its occurrence here reminds us, first of all, that the laws revealed in Leviticus are set within a flowing narrative context.
- F. It also opens a window into how specific historical circumstances may have provided the context for some of the laws revealed in the OT.
 1. “The Old Testament law was not exhaustive or comprehensive but often only offered principles for direction” (Rooker, 297).
 2. “This episode illustrates how many of the case laws in the Pentateuch may have originated. They arose out of specific situations which were brought to court for a legal judgment. The penalty in a given case is recorded as a guide for judges in the future should similar cases occur again (Wenham, 310).

II. Exposition

- A. Historical Circumstance (24:10-12)
 1. A half-breed son of an Israelite woman (whose father was an Egyptian) quarreled with an Israelite man (Exod 12:38 indicates that foreigners were among those who left Egypt with the Israelites).
 2. During the ensuing engagement, the half-breed man blasphemed Yahweh’s name by cursing God.
 3. The issue was not simply that the man used God’s name, nor that he issued a curse. The issue was that he *cursed God’s name*.
 4. Several important theological elements are at play here:
 - a) Names in the ANE, and particularly in OT theology, was representative of the person as a whole.
 - b) God revealed his name as Yahweh, and connected with his character and reputation (Exod 34:5-7).

- c) Protecting the divine name was so critical, that the third commandment forbids using it in an empty or frivolous manner (Exod 20:7). When God's name is used, it must *mean* something, and it must mean what *God* reveals it to mean.
 - d) By cursing God's name, the man had committed blasphemy—the intentional expression of contempt for God, his character, and his word (Ezek 20:27).
5. Cursing God had already been condemned in previous revelation (Exod 22:28).
 6. However, because the perpetrator was not a full Israelite and thus not a member of the covenant community, it was unclear what the punishment should be. Do the laws concerning God's name and blasphemy apply to foreigners as they do to Israelites?
 7. This was the conundrum facing the people and Moses. Therefore, they placed the man in custody and sought God's direction for how to proceed.
- B. Divine Justice Declared (24:13-22)
1. The Penalty for Blasphemy (24:13-16)
 - a) God's instructions to Moses were that all who heard the man's blasphemy were to lay their hands on him and then stone him.
 - b) Laying on of hands was an act of identification—in hearing his curse, they had been drawn in the blasphemy and were now culpable.
 - c) By laying their hands on him, they were transferring the contamination back on the offender.
 - d) They were to then participate in the judgment by stoning him.
 - e) The reason for such a harsh punishment is given in vv. 15-16: "Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall surely be put to death."
 - f) The seriousness of blasphemy against God's name demands the most serious of consequences.
 2. The Principle of Retributive Justice (24:17-22)
 - a) Following the divine verdict, God gives a series of laws which illustrate the principle set out in the man's condemnation—the degree of a crime should be met with a fitting and commensurate punishment. In other words, *the punishment should fit the crime*.
 - b) Here, the familiar expression, "Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (24:20) is used.
 - c) The principle of *lex talionis* appears in two other passages in the OT (Deut 19:16-21; Exod 21:23-25).
 - d) The underlying principle is that punishment for crimes should be fair, not arbitrary.

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- e) The law is principial, not literal, as some assume. It did not call for the literal breaking of bones and teeth and the plucking out of eyes. It called for commensurate punishment that matched the severity of the crime.
- f) In the vast majority of cases, *lex talionis* called for punishment in the form of compensation for loss, whether it be animal, property, or injury.
- g) “It seems likely that this phrase *eye for eye*, etc. was just a formula. In most cases in Israel it was not applied literally. It meant that compensation appropriate to the loss incurred must be paid out. Thus if a slave lost an eye, he was given his freedom (Exod 21:26). The man who killed an ox had to pay its owner enough for him to buy another (Lev 24:18). Only in the case of premediated murder was such compensation forbidden (Num 35:16ff). Then the principle of *life for life* must be literally enforced, because man is made in the image of God (Gen 9:5-6)” (Wenham, 312).
- h) In the case of the blasphemer, death was commensurate with the crime, for it involved contempt for God and the misuse of his name, which was to be honored and sanctified among his people (cf. Lev 18:21; 19:12. 21:6; 22:2, 32).
- i) “The Bible doesn’t present capital punishment as ‘cure-all’ for crime. It presents it as a form of punishment that shows respect for law, for life, and for humans made in the image of God” (Wiersbe, 121).
- j) Thus, this passage develops two important theological and legal points in the OT:
 - (1) “Retribution is a principle goal of the penal system in the Bible” (Wenham, 312).
 - (2) The laws of Israel applied equally to foreigners as well as to Israelites. In fact, the entire structure of vv. 13-22 points to this as the principle lesson of the narrative. “The alien was protected by the law (Exod 23:9), but he was also subject to it” (Rooker, 296).

C. Divine Justice Implemented (24:23)

1. The chapter concludes with the carrying out of the divine punishment.
2. The people brought the man outside the camp and stoned him.

III. Leviticus 24:10-23 and the Christian

A. God’s people are called to protect his name and reputation

1. Misusing God’s name involves more than just using it with empty meaning. It involves misrepresenting God and so compromising his reputation.
2. How do we contribute to God’s reputation?
3. How do we compromise it in our speech and our conduct?
4. Christians “must speak and live as if God’s reputation is at stake. Part of the application should be to be on guard against the improper use of the name of the

LORD; but the primary application is to sanctify the name of the LORD, for it is a holy name, a name above every name, a name before which every knee will bow” (Ross, 448).

B. God’s people must honor and uphold true justice

1. The laws presented in 24:17-22 are part of the legal code of the old covenant which is not operative under the New Covenant. The church is not Israel, and the laws of the OT governed the *national* life of Israel.
2. Nevertheless, they reflect the character of God and his justice which all Christians must embrace and uphold. In no way should believers spurn justice, even in the name of “mercy.” Doing so represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the character of God, who is *always* just and who *will* punish evil—either eternally in hell or vicariously through the shed blood of Christ.
3. Jesus dealt specifically with the principle of *lex talionis* in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-39):
 - a) Many have proposed that Jesus was rejecting this law, but that represents a misunderstanding of his entire discourse.
 - b) Instead, Jesus was correcting of series of misinterpretations of the OT law, among them being the misapplication of the ‘eye for an eye’ principle.
 - c) Jesus’ purpose was not to nullify the law, but to return it to its proper *legal* sphere. It was never intended to be a principle to justify personal vengeance.
 - d) “The context of vv. 38-39, therefore, makes it improbable that Jesus was rejecting the *lex talionis* as such. What seems more probable is that Jesus is attacking those who turn this legal principle into a maxim for personal conduct. Christ’s followers are not to live on a tit-for-tat basis. Total selfless love like that of God must characterize their attitudes to others” (Wenham, 313).
4. In the legal sphere, God has given the responsibility of legal justice to the governing authorities of the nations. Christians are to be subject to those laws and respect the authority God has invested in them (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17).
5. In the religious sphere, God has given his authority to the local church to carry out moral and ethical justice among believers (Matt 18:15-20). Where at all possible, believers are to resolve their grievances in the context of the local church, who are spiritually equipped to discern and arbitrate such cases (1 Cor 6:1-8).
6. In the private sphere, God calls individual believers to love others, to be quick to forgive, and to allow the church and the governing authorities to mete out justice where applicable. In no case should believers execute justice personally. Rather, they must trust that God will punish evil, even if justice seems unlikely to come in this life (Rom 12:17-21).