THE LIFE OF A PRIEST

Leviticus 21:1-22:33

Key Verse: 22:20

“Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf.”

Thank God for giving us a new identity, living stones, a chosen people and a royal priesthood, in Christ Jesus. We could renew this identity through 2024 GTA SBC. Jesus is the Living Stone, rejected by men and having become a capstone, the foundation of the spiritual house of God through his death and resurrection. Thank God for choosing us as royal priests in our time. Today’s passage, Leviticus chapters 21 and 22, teaches us rules for priests and we can think of the life of a priest based on these words of God.

In 21:1-3 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 mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband—for her he may make himself unclean.’” This is about how a priest is to deal with the dead. Ecclesiastes 7:1-5 says, “A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke than to listen to the song of fools.” In short, it is better to attend a funeral ceremony than a wedding ceremony, for in that one can learn a more precious lesson in life, as a Psalmist prayed in Psalm 90:12, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” But the point of God’s words here in Leviticus is that the dead are unclean, for death is a result of sin (Ro 6:23). Yet, at that time, many things were done to the dead in the pagan culture and people even consulted the dead. God concerns how a priest has to handle such uncleanness of the dead. A priest should always know that he belongs to God. Human sympathy and sorrow can compel him to be involved in all the uncleanness of the dead. But the LORD gave priests a strict rule. A priest should know first of all that The LORD is not the God of the dead, but of the living. The LORD is the eternal God as One who is self-existing. To the LORD, death is not the end, but a process to eternity, eternal life or eternal death. We cannot do anything with the dead, but only with the living here and now. Ecclesiastes 9:4 says, “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!” A priest must know this and make himself unclean as little as possible following God’s commands, and give his time and strength to lead the living to God for their eternity in life. The LORD God proved that he is the eternal God through raising Jesus from the dead. What a grace it is that we have a living hope of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:22, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” and in verse 54, “‘…Death has been swallowed up in victory.’” And in verse 58, “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”

And in verses 5-6 the LORD says, “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. Because they present the offerings made to the LORD by fire, the food of their God, they are to be holy.” Certainly, priests should not follow the customs of other nations. Their bodies were dedicated to God to serve the LORD.

Then the LORD says in verse 7, “They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God.” The LORD also says in verses 13-15 concerning the high priest, “The woman he marries must be a virgin. He must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people, so he will not defile his own offspring among his people. I am the LORD, who makes him holy.” Here we see the significance of a godly marriage in serving the LORD. The husband and the wife in a priestly family are to serve the LORD together. For a priestly family, a priest should entrust his marriage to God, believing that God would bring God’s choice into his life. It is to marry by faith in full trust in God. At the time of Noah, people married the ones they chose. Definitely, people in our time are the same, relying on physical beauty and attraction and human security. From the viewpoint of the world, there is nothing wrong with such a marriage. However, in that desire and struggle, there are so many dangers. Proverbs 7 describes the vivid picture of how a boy is seduced by a tempting woman. It says, “All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life. Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say. Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death” (7:22-27). This is warning not only to the godly man but also to the godly woman, both watching out for a seducing woman or man. God does not want his young people to be victims of their desires and choices. One excellent example of a godly marriage is the marriage of Isacc, to whom God brought Rebekah into his life through the faithful servant of Abraham at the right time. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?” Marriage is to be yoked together with one heart and one spirit and one same mission in God. In such a family, godly offspring are raised. God desires such fruits as he said in Malachi 2:15, “Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit…” The book of Provers ends with these words, “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate” (31:30-31). May God raise up God-fearing women for the families of priests through godly marriages, one by one.

In verses 16-23 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. No man who has a defect may come near; no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the LORD by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the most holy food, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so decorate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.’” In these 8 verses, the word “defect” is written times and the phrase “not…come near” or “not…go near”, 5 times. No one with defects can approach God. A priest is to be Aaron’s descendants with no human defect at all. Then what a grace it is to be called royal priests in Jesus Christ. Peter said in 1 Peter 18-19, “…it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed…but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” Christ Jesus took upon himself all our defects and died on the cross shedding his whole blood and made us holy. In this sacrifice of the unblemished and defectless Son of God we have become priests, who can approach the throne of his grace. May we bear this precious priestly duty with a trembling and contrite spirit and a pure heart, repenting of our sins at each time. And verse 24 says, “So Moses told this to Aaron and his sons and to all Israelites.

Chapter 22:1-16 is about who could eat the sacred things. In verses 1 and 2, the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons to treat with respect the sacred offerings the Israelites consecrate to me, so they will not profane my holy name. I am the LORD.” The LORD continues, “Say to them: ‘For the generations to come, if any of your descendants is ceremonially unclean and yet comes near the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate to the LORD, that person must be cut off from my presence. I am the LORD.” What a strong warning about the sacred offerings.

Also in verses 10-13, “No one outside a priest’s family may eat the sacred offering, nor may the guest of a priest or his hired worker eat it. But if a priest buys a slave with money, or if a slave is born in his household, that slave may eat his food. If a priest’s daughter marries anyone other than a priest, she may not eat any of the sacred contributions. But if a priest’s daughter becomes a widow or is divorced, yet has no children, and she returns to live in her father’s house as in her youth, she may eat of her father’s food. No unauthorized person, however, may eat of it.” The LORD continues in verses 14-16, “If anyone eats a sacred offering by mistake, he must make restitution to the priest for the offering and add a fifth of the value to it. The priests must not desecrate the sacred offerings the Israelites present to the LORD by allowing them to eat the sacred offerings and so bring upon them guilt requiring payment. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.’”

In these verses of 2-16, the word, “a sacred offering”, “the sacred offerings” or “the sacred contributions” is written 9 times. God’s command is that the priests should treat the sacred offerings with respect, clearly discerning who are allowed to eat. What does this mean to us? Jesus said in Matthew 7:6, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” The words of God are sacred and precious. We should be careful and discerning when we hear or speak the words of God to others. Proverbs 26:12 says, “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” And Proverbs 9:8 says, “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.” And apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:1, “…we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” Apostle Peter was so painful when he saw believers becoming worse and worse. He said in 2 Peter 2:20, “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.” Again may we be very careful and discerning of what we hear or teach or in treating sacred things related to God.

Now verses 17-25 are about the offerings acceptable to God. In verses 17-22, the LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them: ‘If any of you—either an Israelite or an alien living in Israel—presents a gift for a burnt offering to the LORD, either to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering, you must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be acceptable on your behalf. Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf. When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to the acceptable. Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering made to the LORD by fire.” One’s offering is directly related to his or her heart. The LORD God does not lack anything. He is the owner of everything as the Creator. He wants our hearts which are expressed in our offerings to him. The LORD continues, “You must not offer to the LORD an animal whose testicles are bruised, crushed, torn or cut. You must not do this in your own land, and you must not accept such animals from the hand of a foreigner and offer them as the food of your God. They will not be accepted on your behalf, because they are deformed and have defects.”

In our human relationships, we give the most precious thing to those whom we love or respect most. God said to the Israelites in Malachi 1:8, “When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice cripped or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” Our offerings show where our hearts are. Jesus said in Matthew 6:21, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” We remember the beautiful offerings of the Magi, wo came from east to worship the baby Jesus. For this worship they opened their treasures and presented the baby Jesus with gift of gold and of incense and of myrrh (Mt 2:11). We also remember a widow who put in two very small copper coins. Jesus said, “This poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:2-4).

We are living in a time when material and external things are counted more than spiritual and internal things. Even in Christianity, it is easy to evaluate a church according to the size of the church building or the number of attendees. But we remember how apostle Paul served the Lord in carrying out God’s given mission. He said in Romans 1:5, “Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.” Paul’s concern was the Gentiles becoming believers and their obedience to God. And he said in Romans 15:16, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s priestly duty was that the Gentiles might become an acceptable offering to God through the gospel. And Paul said in Colossians 1:28-29, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect/mature in Christ. To this end I labour…” His struggle was whether those he served were presentable to God as mature and perfect ones in Christ. We remember Jesus’ high priestly prayer just before crucifixion, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” The completion of Jesus’ work was particularly raising 12 disciples. He prayed continually, “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.” Jesus kept praying, “Sanctify them by the truth; you word is truth…For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (Jn 17:12, 17, 18). We should know that we ourselves must be acceptable to the LORD and then those whom I serve be presentable to the LORD in the end. Our offering and service in the LORD may bear fruit acceptable to God without any defect in Christ Jesus.

Finally, the LORD says in verses 31-33, “Keep my commands and follow them. I am the LORD. Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the LORD, who makes you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD.” God’s commands show who he is and what he wants from his people. As we obey him and his words, we can come to know him and grow in him. The priests are to follow God’s commands so that they may reveal the LORD, the holy God, who brought them out of Egypt and makes his people holy.

In this passage, we could think of the LORD, who is not the God of the dead, but of the living, and the significance of the godly marriages, and how to treat sacred things. Especially, we thank and praise God for raising us as royal priests in Christ Jesus, the Lamb with blemish and defect, who took upon himself all our defects and died on the cross shedding his whole blood and made us holy. In this grace, may we offer our best to him, the best time, the most precious thing and the best service for his flock of sheep to be presentable to him.