

God's People Honor God's Name (Leviticus 24:10-23)

To Read

1. Exodus 20:1-21
2. Mark 3:22-30, Luke 12:8-12, I Corinthians 12:1-3

I. Introduction

A. This morning we're continuing on in our study of Leviticus

- ② 1. If we go back to our outline for Leviticus, we remember that the first half of Leviticus dealt with judicial holiness
- ① 2. This section answered the question: how does Israel become holy?
- ① 3. And now we're entering the second section of Leviticus, dealing with practical holiness
- ① 4. This section is meant to answer the question: how should Israel be holy?
- ① 5. We started this section by seeing how Leviticus 17 connects judicial holiness to practical holiness - holiness lived in us is based on and is a reflection of holiness worked for us
- ① 6. Then, we looked at Leviticus 18-20 which focused on what Israel was to be like - instead of reflecting the nations around her, she should reflect the holiness and the glory of God
- ① 7. Then we looked at Leviticus 21-22 and we saw that the priests were called to an even higher standard of holiness because they served in the very presence of God and therefore represented Him
- ① 8. And two weeks ago we started a last section of Leviticus, which I'm calling 'The flavor of God's people' and we've seen two characteristics of God's people
 - ① a. God's People celebrate God's reign, symbolized in the festival calendar
 - ① b. God's People Serve in God's power, symbolized in bringing bread and oil back into the Tabernacle

① B. This morning we're going to look at a third flavor of God's people - God's people honor God's name

1. As we've seen, most of Leviticus is written as a set of case laws and instructions governing different aspects of Israel's life, and so it reads very much like a 'rule book'
2. But, even though it sounds like a 'rule book', Leviticus is supposed to be read as a narrative - the story of how God gave Israel's law to Moses - and we can see that when the bigger story gets interrupted by other, smaller stories
3. Our passage today is one of those stories, when the story of God speaking to Moses gets interrupted by a commotion out in the camp
4. Now, many commentators would say that this passage is put here in the midst of Israel's ritual calendar, which is given both before and after this story, just because this is when it happened in time - this story interrupted God's giving of the law to Moses
5. And I think that's probably true, but I don't think that's all that's going on here - mostly because that seems to minimize God's sovereignty, that He didn't really have a purpose for including this here or a purpose for interrupting Himself here - so I think this passage must relate to the surrounding passages somehow
6. And I'll admit, this is one of the passages that I've wrestled over trying to figure out how it relates to the surrounding passages - in many ways it does seem like an interruption in the flow that doesn't connect
7. And I'm not sure I completely understand, but after having meditated on it for several months, this story is what led me to call this section 'the flavor of God's people' because I think this story is just like the other stories
8. All of the stories in this section, the festival calendar - the daily offerings of bread and oil, the blasphemer, and the jubilee - are illustrations of what God's people are like, their little snapshots of what life in the people of God should be
9. And the story of the condemned blasphemer adds this characteristic to God's people - they honor God's name

① C. Let's start this morning by reading Leviticus 24:10-23 together

① D. Proposition: God's people must be vigilant to bring honor to God's name and must cast out those who bring dishonor on God's name.

- ① 1. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?
- ① 2. How should this point us to Christ?
- ① 3. How can this be applied to us?

1 II. What Did This Teach the Ancient Israelites About God?

1 A. First, God's People Must Honor God and Bring Glory to His Name

1. In our story this morning, Moses is interrupted when two men in the camp get into a fight and during the fight one of the men blasphemes and curses God and the people aren't sure what to do about it - they know that something bad has happened, but they aren't sure how to respond so they go get Moses
 - a. Now, we'll get to the response in just a moment, but first I want to think about what happened - it says that the Israelite woman's son blasphemed and cursed God's name - and this was the big problem
 - b. To blaspheme means literally 'to pierce' - in fact, the only other time in Scripture this exact inflection of the word is used is when Jehoiada pierced a box to make an offering box for the people to put their offerings in
 - c. So the idea of blasphemy is very similar to the idea of profaning God's name which we discussed a couple weeks ago - it's to make pierce it, to harm or bring dishonor to God
 - d. And similarly, the word curse literally means 'to make small' - it's the same word that is used when Noah sent out a dove to see if the waters were receding from (or getting smaller) the face of the earth
 - e. When the Israelite woman's son cursed God's name, he spoke evil of God in a way that made God seem small, unimportant, something to be casually dismissed and disregarded
 - f. And the story is very punctuated in order to show that this man blasphemed and cursed God in a very intentional and egregious way - it wasn't an offhand comment or a slip of the tongue, but the fruit of a heart that found God to be small and lacking and cursed an Israelite who believed in such a small God
2. And the Israelites knew this was a problem right away - this wasn't something that could be overlooked or ignored
 - 1 a. And they knew this was wrong because they already had been given the backbone of the law when they all stood before the mountain and heard God speak, and the fourth word was Exodus 20:7 - *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."*
 - b. Now, a lot of people seem to teach that this commandment is about not speaking God's name wrongly - but that's not really what the commandment says and that's not what the Hebrew means
 - c. Literally it says "You shall not take up (or bear) the name of your God and ruin it, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who bears His name and ruins it."
 - d. The implication is that the people of Israel were to be God's People, YHWH's People, and they needed to carry His name in a way that brought honor and glory to His name from all peoples
 - e. So the commandment isn't really about speaking God's name, but this situation definitely fell under this commandment - there could be lots of ways to transgress this commandment in thought, in word, in deed without ever speaking God's name, but when this man blasphemed he broke this commandment in the most egregious manner - he went the complete opposite way from this commandment
 - f. Instead of bearing God's name in a way that brought honor to God, he publicly cursed God's name and invited ridicule and scorn to be heaped on God - it was the ultimate breaking of the 4th Commandment
3. So when the Israelites bring this man to Moses and God tells Moses that the sentence is death, the sentence reaffirms the 4th Commandment - God's People must Honor God's Name
 - a. Which means first, that God's people must esteem God in their hearts, to think highly of their God, to give Him the reverence and the worship that He deserves
 - b. And then to let that esteem flow out into outward deeds and words of honor - acting in this world in a way that brings honor to God - so this story serves to underline the 4th commandment - what are God's people like? They are people that honor God

1 B. Second, bringing Honor to God's Name is Really Important (that is: Dishonoring God's Name is Equal to Murder)

1. Another challenging aspect of this story is that we have an interruption and a story about a blasphemer, but in the middle of a story that is already an interruption, we get a right turn and the story veers off in a different direction
2. So, in verse 17-21, we get a commandment from God about what retributive justice is supposed to look like - retribution, punishment, is supposed to match the offense - and especially this passage seems to defend the idea of the death penalty - when someone takes a human life the penalty is death
3. And this little section is actually a complicated Hebrew poem - almost like it was meant to be memorized as a guideline for how a judge should dispense justice - this is what justice looks like
4. Now we could talk about the justice that is displayed in this passage, and there are excellent guidelines for a just society in these verses, but I don't think that's what this is really here for
5. Or we could talk about how God's law is full of mercy, that justice was limited to the offense, which was unlike most of the other nations - this law served to limit retribution to match the harm that had been caused - which is why Jesus can quote this passage in Matthew and then call for showing mercy to others without contradicting Scripture - and I think this is getting closer to why these verses are here

6. But I think the ultimate reason these verses are here is to contrast with the penalty that has just been set for the blasphemer - we might hear that this man was sentenced to death and think, "wow, God is really harsh"
7. So, right after sentencing this man to death, God reminds Moses and the people that His law is just - punishment always matches the crime and is not dispensed arbitrarily or excessively
8. And this should have caused the people to consider - God is not injustice, in fact He is a merciful God full of justice - so if this man is to be publicly executed then the offense must be equal to or worse than murder
9. And I think that is the point - intentionally, publicly, and egregiously dishonoring God's name was an offense equal to or worse than murder, an offense that could not be allowed to continue within God's people
10. And in many ways, the reason it is so evil is closely related to the reason that murder is wrong, Genesis 9:6 gives the reasoning for the death penalty - *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.* - murder is wrong not first because it is an offense against the murdered person but first murder is wrong because it is disregarding and dishonoring the image of God which that person bears
11. Murder merits death because it is an egregious means of dishonoring God and other egregious means of dishonoring God are viewed in the same light - dishonoring God is the ultimate sin and merits an ultimate punishment - and that's what this man did, He intentionally and egregiously heaped scorn on God's name

1 C. Third, it Is Possible to Appear to Be Part of God's People Without Really Being Part of God's People

1. Another interesting thing about this story is the fact that a little bit of genetic history is given about the man who blasphemed - specifically He was half Israelite and half Egyptian - his father was an Egyptian
2. At first it would seem that this would be unnecessary information or perhaps it could seem almost racist to our ears - "look, the half-breed couldn't make the cut..." - but, again, I don't think it is unnecessary or racist in that sense, but is meant to illustrate something important for Israel - this man was a man on the edge of the covenant, he existed in a grey area, was he part of the covenant or not, was he Egyptian or Israelite?
3. In many ways, he looked like he was part of Israel, he left Egypt with Israel, he crossed the Red Sea with Israel, he witnessed God descend on the Mountain and heard God's voice speaking, He saw God's glory descend at the inauguration of the Tabernacle - he could easily have passed for an Israelite and seems to have been welcomed to this point as an Israelite - he hadn't been kicked out yet
4. But simply tagging along with God's people for a while really hadn't changed who he was, and he eventually showed that really he wasn't part of a special people called out by God, but really still an Egyptian - all his experiences with Israel hadn't helped anything
5. When he curses God, it shows that though he might have looked very similar to an Israelite, done many things like the Israelites, he really was an Egyptian and wanted nothing to do with God
6. This story should have called Israel to consider if they were living in God's covenant or merely onlookers as well, if they would prove to be those God had called out of Egypt, or if they really belonged to Egypt
7. And, unfortunately, as we know, most of this generation turned out more like this Egyptian than like an Israelite - in the end, most of this generation decided they would rather return to Egypt than go to the promised land - and like this Egyptian, most of them perished in the wilderness
8. This story should have been a warning to Israel to leave Egypt, to not be half-hearted or merely onlookers to God's covenant, but to truly devote themselves to their God, a warning that unfortunately was mostly ignored

1 D. Fourth, God's People Must Reject Those Who Dishonor God's Name

1. The last part of this story I want to consider is God's command in verse 14 - *"Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him.*
2. Why are the witnesses called to put their hands on the man who cursed God and why is all Israel called to stone him? Is this just some sort of mob justice, or is there meaning here? Obviously, I think there is meaning...
3. Israel is called to put their hands on several things before they die in Leviticus, and it always has to do with assigning or transferring guilt - and in this situation, I think it is a statement from the witnesses that they disavow this man's curse, the guilt belongs to him, - it is an emphatic statement that he does not represent Israel
4. And then all Israel was to stone him, together they were to cast him out from their midst in the most permanent way possible, they were to cut off and get rid of the one who would dishonor God's name
5. In other words, the entire congregation was to be vigilant to make sure that their ultimate purpose was being fulfilled - their purpose was to be a kingdom and a priesthood to God most high, they were to be God's ambassadors in this world bringing honor to God's name
6. So the entire congregation had to exclude, to cut off, to destroy the one who refused and thwarted that purpose, the one who refused to honor God's name and instead heaped scorn upon it
7. That was Israel's task and Israel must come together to make sure that she remains pure, that her testimony and her witness to the nations remains clear - here is the place where YHWH is honored, we are His ambassadors

1 E. Kid's Question

1. What is the purpose of God's people?
2. To display the glory of God to a watching world.

1 III. How Should This Point Us to Christ?

1 A. First, Jesus Was the One Who Honored God Perfectly

1. God's redemption of Israel and their adoption as His people was meant to restore a people as the image of God which had been marred in the fall - Israel was to be an honor and a glory to God - and our story this morning is the negative side of that story, those who refused to honor God's name must be cut off and cast out
2. Unfortunately, the story of the Old Testament shows us that most of Israel was more like this blasphemer than not,
 - 1 a. So God charges them in Isaiah, Isaiah 52:4-5 - *For thus says the Lord GOD: "My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now therefore what have I here," declares the LORD, "seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail," declares the LORD, "and continually all the day my name is despised.*
 - 1 b. Or in Ezekiel 36:22-23 - *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.*
3. The Old Testament ends as a condemnation of Israel for being like this blasphemer, and this is how the New Testament starts - Israel failed to be better than this story - something better needed to happen
4. And this is where Jesus stands where Israel had fallen - Jesus did honor God's name and display His glory
 - 1 a. So Jesus, talking to the Jews, says, in John 8:48-50 - *The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.*
 - 1 b. And in John 12:27-28, as Jesus approaches the cross, He prays - *"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*
5. Jesus' life and His death were designed intentionally to honor and display the glory of God - Jesus was the opposite of the blasphemer, the One who fulfilled what Israel was supposed to be

1 B. And Yet, Second, Jesus Bore the Curse for Us

1. One of the dark ironies of the Gospel stories is that the only One who truly had never blasphemed was charged and killed as a blasphemer
 - 1 a. From the earliest days of his ministry, the elite in Israel were charging Jesus with blasphemy, Mark 2:5-7 - *And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*
 - 1 b. And this is how the story ended as well, Jesus was formally charged by the High Priest with blasphemy, Matthew 26:63-66 - *But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."*
2. But the amazing thing is that Jesus bore the charge, the opposite of the blasphemer was executed as a blasphemer, He who had never cursed yet bore the curse
 - a. As I've studied this week, I think the charge that Jesus died under is really important, because, as we think about it, blasphemy is at the root of all sin - all sin is a belittling of God, a dishonoring of His name, a marring of His glory
 - b. Our story this morning was about a man who very publicly and definitively blasphemed God, but all of us have lived on that continuum, making God out to be less than He is
 - c. So, when Jesus was charged with blasphemy, He was charged with what all of us are - but He suffered the charge and bore the curse and allowed all of us to lay our hands on Him as He was executed
 - 1 d. And so Paul can say, Galatians 3:13 - *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us---for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"*
 - e. Jesus had never cursed and yet He bore the curse, He died as a blasphemer so that blasphemers could go free

1 IV. How Can This Be Applied to Us?

1 A. This Story Calls Us to Be Careful to Honor God with All of Our Lives

1. Our passage this morning calls us not only to not be the blasphemer, but to go completely the opposite direction
2. So, our response to this passage shouldn't be, "Where exactly is the line of blasphemy and dishonoring God?" but rather, "How can I be the opposite of the blasphemer, seeking to intentionally honor God with my life?"
3. And that starts in our hearts - we need to think about God rightly so that we can truly honor Him
 - 1 a. So Peter exhorts us to have a holy honor for Christ rule our hearts, I Peter 3:15 - *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy,*
 - 1 b. And Paul warns us that all sin starts with a dishonor for God, Romans 1:21-23 - *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*
 - 1 c. And Paul warns us that when we allow false, corrupted beliefs about God that it can tend toward blasphemy, a dishonoring of God by making Him out to be less than He is, I Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20 - *As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. ... This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*
 - d. So, the opposite of blasphemy starts with a heart that loves Christ as He is revealed in Scripture, a heart that honors God and wants to display His glory, a heart that would never be able to say that "Christ is accursed"
4. But then it ought also to flow out in our actions - we need to act in ways that show we honor God and in ways that bring honor to God
 - 1 a. So Peter exhorts us to keep our conduct honorable because we are representing God and are to bring glory to His Name, I Peter 2:12 - *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*
 - 1 b. And Paul warns His presumptuous Jewish readers that their profession to be God's people paired with an immoral life was dishonoring God's Name, Romans 2:23-24 - *You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*
 - 1 c. And Peter says that this will continually be a problem, people claiming to be part of God's people and yet acting in ways that dishonor God, II Peter 2:1-2 - *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.*
 - d. If in our hearts we honor God, then our lives will be a honor to God - one who lives in a way that dishonors God and disregards His rule and His reign is blaspheming God, is dishonoring God's Name, is making God look small - our lives ought to be brought under God's rule so that the people around us can see the glory of God

1 B. This Story Calls Us to Consider Whether We Are Really Part of God's People

1. As we saw in our story this morning, one aspect of this story should have called every member of Israel to consider if they were truly God's people or merely onlookers to the covenant
2. And this is true for us as well, it is possible to be part of a church, to participate week after week in singing God's praises, listening to the preaching of God's Word, and eating at Christ's Table and yet really have nothing to do with God and to have never really submitted to the Gospel
3. In fact, Scripture warns us over and over about this, about those who were near, a 'part' of God's people and yet in the end turned away and displayed that they never were
 - a. So John warns us that there will be those who appear to be God's people but will eventually display that they never were truly part of us, I John 2:19 - *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*
 - b. And Peter sees those who knew the way of truth but after participating for a time, turned and rejected it, and he says that this is the most dangerous position to be in, II Peter 2:20-21 - *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.*
4. So, if you're here this morning, you shouldn't be resting in the fact that you come to church every Sunday morning, you shouldn't be resting in the fact that you're a member of a church, you shouldn't be resting in the fact that everyone around you thinks you're a Christian
5. The only thing you should be resting in is the fact that Jesus died for you and you are trusting in Him - and Paul would call us to, in II Corinthians 13:5 - *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?---unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*
6. So, I'm grateful for the many testimonies I know about people who grew up in the church, professed to be believers, participated for years in a church, even sometimes in leadership roles, but then realized they were never truly believers, but were brought by the Spirit to true repentance and faith
7. All of us ought to consider, are we merely hangers-on, or are we truly believers in Christ? Am I an onlooker, deceiving myself and those around me, or have a truly repented and entered into covenant with Christ?
8. If this morning, as you examine yourself you find that you have never really repented and believed, there is no greater joy than to admit that, to repent and to believe

1 C. This Story Calls Us to Be Vigilant to Keep the Church Pure

1. God's command to Israel about the blasphemer, the one who would dishonor God, was to publicly disavow his blasphemy and to destroy him from among the people
2. And, though God's New Testament people are not given the power of the sword, we are called to the same thing, to disavow the one who would intentionally dishonor God and to cast him out from our midst for destruction
- 1**3. We see this in places like, I Corinthians 5:1-5 - *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*
4. Our passage this morning should call us to exercise careful church discipline so that our witness can be kept pure - the church ought to be those who honor God in attitude and in action and for the sake of glorifying God, we must cast out those who refuse to live in ways that honor God