

Serving in the Presence of God (Leviticus 21-22)

I. Introduction

A. Several weeks ago we started the second half of Leviticus starting with Leviticus 17

- ②1. If we go back to our outline for Leviticus, we remember that the first half of Leviticus dealt with judicial holiness
- ①2. This section answered the question: how does Israel become holy?
- ①3. And now we're entering the second section of Leviticus, dealing with practical holiness
- ①4. This section is meant to answer the question: how should Israel be holy?
- ①5. 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
- ①6. Then, we looked at Leviticus 18-20, which we saw was a discrete section that 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
7. And ultimately, we saw that this reflection would be centered on Leviticus 19:18 - you shall love your neighbor as yourself

①B. This morning we're going to start a new topic in Leviticus, moving away from the people as a whole and focusing on the priesthood specifically

1. The priesthood has already been dealt with at length in Leviticus, but as laws are being given to the community as to what it means to live as God's people, the priesthood is singled out for special instructions as members of the community
2. The priests were not angelic servants of God that only dwelt in the temple, they were men as well dwelling in the community, but men with a special calling that required a special way of life in the community
3. So the next two chapters of Leviticus turns to speak to the priests

①C. We've already read our passage this morning, so we'll go ahead and start with our proposition: The priests served in the presence of God Himself and therefore were held to a higher standard of holiness which calls us to rejoice in our perfect High Priest and to consider our own calling as priests of God.

- ①1. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?
- ①2. How should this point us to Christ?
- ①3. How can this be applied to us?

1 II. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?

1 A. First, these laws reminded Israel of the significance of the priesthood

1. Most of Leviticus 21 and 22 are commands to the priests about how they needed to keep an even higher level of holiness and cleanliness than the general population of Israel
 - a. Priests are not to approach a dead body or to mourn for the dead
 - b. Priests must marry an unblemished woman
 - c. Priests must not be blemished in order to serve in the temple
 - d. Priests must not be unclean while they perform their duties
 - e. Priests must not share holy food outside of the priesthood
 - f. And priests must not offer any blemished sacrifices on behalf of Israel
2. These laws are similar to and reflect earlier laws given to the whole of the people of Israel, especially the holiness code, but the notable thing about these laws is how they are more intense for priests
 - a. For example, approaching a dead body would always bring uncleanness, but priests were never to do it and were not to mourn for the dead except for close family, and the chief priests was not even to do that
3. The other notable thing about these laws was that they dealt with the priests not only in their role of service in the tabernacle and temple, but in everyday life as well
 - a. The holiness of a priest was not only ceremonial and did not only occur during his temple service
 - b. So these laws set the priests apart not only in status and in duty - which they had already been set apart for in Leviticus 8-10, but these laws set them apart in lifestyle and interaction in the community as well
 - c. Priests were to display the holiness of God with their daily lives, not just their temple duties
4. The great implication of these laws is that priests had to uphold an even higher standard of holiness than Israel
 - a. The priests' calling was holy, they served in the presence of God Himself and they needed to reflect that
 - b. If the priests were not careful to display the highest level of holiness in all of life, not only would they risk contaminating God's dwelling, they would also incorrectly display God's devotion to His holiness
 - c. A good illustration of this that I heard once is a surgical assistant who leaves the operating room, intentionally goes and interacts with the sickest patients in the hospital and then returns to the operating room - not only would that assistant endanger the surgery but he would also cause people to wonder whether the surgeon cared about cleanliness
 - d. In that same way, priests needed to display cleanness and holiness of God at all times not only so that they would not contaminate the sanctuary but also so God's holiness would be revered among the people

1 B. Second, these laws reminded Israel of the holiness of God

1. So there are two repeated refrains through this passage
 - a. First, the great care of this passage is that the priests would not profane holy things
 - 1 i. The priests could profane the priesthood in Leviticus 21:4, 9, and 15
 - 1 ii. The priests could profane the sanctuary in Leviticus 21:12 and 23
 - 1 iii. The priests could profane the holy things in Leviticus 22:9 and 15
 - 1 iv. And, perhaps most importantly, the priests could profane God's name in Leviticus 21:6, 22:2 and 32
 - b. So, perhaps we should ask what profane means? How do you profane something?
 - i. The word here translated 'profane' literally means to perforate, to poke holes in something
 - ii. In fact, it's derived from the word 'flute' because a flute has holes poked in it
 - iii. So, to profane something is to belittle something which belongs to God - to poke holes in it, uphold it to scorn and make it out to be less than it really is
 - iv. All of the things the priests interacted with belonged to God and they must represent Him and His things rightly, not to make them look less significant than they really are
 - v. Priests were to display the holiness of God not only in their temple duties, but in their daily lives as well
 - 1 c. And that brings us to the second repeated refrain in our passage, "I am the Lord who sanctifies you"
 - i. The reason that the priests must not profane these things, make them look small and insignificant, is because it is God who sanctified them and set them apart
 - ii. God set apart the priesthood to serve Him, He set apart the sanctuary to be His dwelling place, He set apart the holy things as His personal possessions
2. So these laws, and the priest living out these laws, would continually display and remind the people of the holiness of God - the priests had to refrain from things that the rest of Israel could do because God was unimaginably holy
 - a. If they were to approach Him with any trace of un-holiness they would desecrate His dwelling and dishonor His name - such a thing could not happen
 - b. The priesthood was significant because God was holy

1 C. Kid's Question

1. Why must priest uphold a higher standard of holiness?
12. Because they serve in the presence of the holy God

1 D. Third, these laws reminded Israel of the corruption of death

1. There are many things here that the priests are called to refrain from, but the one that stuck out to me was the laws about caring for and mourning for the dead
 - a. This is actually the second time we've seen prohibitions on the priests mourning for the dead - Aaron was commanded something similar after the death of his sons
 - b. The priests were not to be associated with death - the lesser priests could mourn for their closest relatives, but the high priest could not even mourn for his wife or children
2. As the priests multiplied and scattered through Israel, this would become more and more conspicuous - perhaps a priest had a close friend that died, he would not be able to attend his funeral or acknowledge the death at all
 - a. The priests, living in the midst of Israel, would continually remind Israel that death was something that could not be reconciled to God's people - death was a corruption, an uncleanness, a perversion
 - b. It was not simply the natural destination of life, it was something contrary to God's purposes and out of line with God's covenant
3. Israel had not been freed from death, but it also couldn't be reconciled to Israel
 - a. These laws longed for something more, but how isn't very clear
 - b. But as long as death reigned over Israel, Israel would continually be marked by uncleanness and corruption and the priests must continually display that this is not God's plan - death cannot be reconciled to God

1 E. Fourth, these laws reminded Israel of the importance of sacrifice

1. These laws end with a renewed reminder that the sacrifices offered to God must be unblemished
2. This is hardly something new in Leviticus, but the renewed reminder emphasizes again how important this was
3. In fact, this was one of the priesthoods primary goals - to offer unblemished sacrifices on behalf of the people
 - a. A sacrifice that was blemished would not be accepted for them, it would dishonor God, desecrate His holiness and be worse than worthless
 - b. And a blemished priest could not offer an unblemished sacrifice which really explains all the other laws in this section - the priests must be set apart because they must offer the unblemished sacrifice
4. The creation and continued existence of Israel depended on God accepting a sacrifice on their behalf, so bringing unblemished sacrifices was unacceptable

1 III. How should this point us to Christ?

1 A. Christ came to be the perfect priest who displayed the holiness of God

1. As we've just seen, Leviticus 21-22 reminded Israel why the priesthood was so important: they served in the presence of a holy God and represented His holiness to the people
2. But the priests continually and ultimately failed at this charge - they could never be holy enough to serve in the presence of God's holiness nor could they rightly display God's holiness to the people
3. So, the prophets are full of judgments against the priests, charging them with profaning God's things
 - 1 a. Ezekiel 22:26 - *Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.*
 - 1 b. Zephaniah 3:1-4 - *Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men; her priests profane what is holy; they do violence to the law.*
 - 3 1 c. Malachi 1:6-12 - *"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.*
4. So ultimately, Leviticus longs for a better priest, one who can serve in God's presence without profaning His name, a priest who can be unblemished and holy - and Jesus is that priest
 - 1 a. So the author of Hebrews celebrates that Jesus was separate and unstained, Hebrews 7:26 - *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.*
 - b. These laws in Leviticus set out a higher standard for the priests because we needed a completely perfect priest, one consumed by holiness - we needed a priest whose holiness was equal to God's
 - c. And Jesus is that priest - He can serve in God's presence without fear and as we look at Him, we can truly see the holiness and the glory of God: He will never profane God's name or God's temple

1 B. Christ came to destroy the corruption of death

1. These instructions to the priests in Leviticus reminded Israel that death could never be fully reconciled to God's people and so the priests must stay away from death
2. But no matter how much the priests avoided death they had no ability to conquer it - they could not banish it from Israel nor could they prevent their own death - the priests stood powerless against death
 - 1 a. So Hebrews makes a wry remark about priests that highlights how futile their stand against death was, Hebrews 7:23 - *The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office,*
 - b. Those who were forbidden from recognizing death died nonetheless - a priest could uphold these laws perfectly, and yet fail at the end because he couldn't escape his own death; and so death reigned in Israel

3. So, once again we need a better high priest, one who not only was separate from death but one who could defeat death and destroy its corruption - and Jesus is that priest who came to taste and to defeat death for God's people
 - 1 a. So Hebrews celebrates Jesus' defeat of death as the rescue of God's people, Hebrews 2:9, 14-15 - *But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone... Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*
 - 1 b. And Paul declares that death no longer has power over God's people because it has been defeated in Christ, I Corinthians 15:53-57 - *For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
 - 1 c. And listen to how Paul describes Jesus in II Timothy 1:8-10 - *Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,*
4. Jesus is the priest who tasted death in order to defeat and abolish it among God's people
 - a. Where the former priests could only stand and say that death was corruption and evil they could do nothing to prevent it, but Jesus has come to defeat death so that it can no longer reign in God's people

1 C. Christ came to be the unblemished sacrifice

1. Leviticus 21-22 also reminded the people that a perfect, unblemished sacrifice was necessary to appear in the presence of God - and I think it's interesting that the passage that starts with a prohibition against priests attending death ends with a command to the priest to preside over ritually perfect deaths in sacrifice
 - a. The connection between those two things is not extremely clear in Leviticus, but I don't think the contrast is an accident - the priests offered unblemished sacrifices to God because only through an unblemished sacrifice could death ever be defeated
 - b. But no matter how many bulls and goats were sacrificed in the tabernacle and later at the temple, the perfect sacrifice eluded the priests
 - 1 c. So Hebrews says, Hebrews 10:1-4 - *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*
2. So Leviticus was not only looking for a well-built animal to be sacrificed, but a truly unblemished sacrifice that could stand in our place and be acceptable to God - and Jesus is that sacrifice
 - 1 a. So Hebrews contrasts the sacrifice of bulls and goats with the truly unblemished sacrifice of Christ, Hebrews 9:11-14 - *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*
 - 1 b. And Peter celebrates that we have a perfect redemption, one without blemish or spot, I Peter 1:18-19 - *knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*
3. Jesus was not only the perfect priest who defeated death, He defeated death through the sacrifice of Himself - He came to fulfill the need for a perfect, unblemished sacrifice

1 IV. How can this be applied to us?

1 A. We need to serve in the presence of God

1. Leviticus 21-22 sets out a higher standard that the priests must live by because they serve in the presence of God Himself
2. And it would be really easy to ignore this passage and skip applying it to us - we know that we have exactly One High Priest who mediates for us and there is no longer a priesthood that serves on our behalf
3. If there are no priests, then obviously this passage doesn't apply to anyone anymore - but I think that would be a hasty decision because there is still a priesthood - in fact every believer is a priest to God
14. So Peter reminds us, I Peter 2:4-5, 9 - *As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*
 - a. Peter reminds us that all believers stand at least partially in the role of a priest - we serve in the presence of God and we represent God to the nations and are to proclaim His excellencies
15. And Paul tells us the same thing, Ephesians 2:19-22 - *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*
 - a. A those who are redeemed, we are being built into a holy temple, we serve in the presence of God as His Spirit dwells in our midst
6. And so these laws calling the priesthood to reflect the holiness of God are really for all of us - not that we are bound to these specific laws but the purpose of these laws is for us
 - a. We need to live our lives as though we were in the very presence of God, which we are, and as though we were His representatives to this world
 - b. We need to take care that we do not profane His name, to make God look small and worthless to the nations
- 1 c. So Peter calls us to pursue an infinite level of holiness, I Peter 1:14-19- *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*
7. In the end, our holiness ought to be greater than the holiness the priests were called to in the Old Covenant because in many ways their holiness was merely ritual and external
 - a. We too must display the holiness of God but we must do it in truth from the heart, reflecting God's character in our lives

1 B. Leaders in the church need to take special care to serve in God's presence

1. Although we just considered how there is no longer a unique priesthood but that every believer is a priest, I think there is still an application specifically to the leadership of the church in these verses
 - a. Although the mediatorial role of the priesthood has been completely assumed by Jesus alone, that was not the only role of the priests - another significant role of the priests was to teach Israel the law of God
 - b. And this priestly role has devolved to the leadership of the church, the elders and pastors, the shepherds and teachers of the church; and in this role they have a special responsibility to display God rightly
2. So, throughout the New Testament, the leaders of the church are called to a higher standard
 - 1 a. Paul spends the most time teaching on this, and one place we see this is in I Timothy 3:1-7 - *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*
 - 1 b. And Paul extends this idea to the other leadership role in the church, the deacons, as well, I Timothy 3:8-13 - *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest*

gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

3. Now, we should be clear, these aren't different standards than what every believer should pursue - but those in leadership in the church ought to pursue them all the more, they ought to be exemplary in their pursuit of them
 - 1 a. And so Paul will tell Timothy that half of his job is to make sure that his life reflects the holiness of God, I Timothy 4:16 - *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*
 - b. Leaders in the church ought to be more intentional about living out the holiness of God and the church should hold their leaders to that standard - not as those who are different but as those who represent the church

1 C. We need to trust our High Priest to bring us into God's presence

1. I started our application by applying the call to holiness in Leviticus 21-22, but as we hear that call to holiness, that ought to cause us to despair a little bit
 - a. If you can hear these calls to holiness and be proud of yourself and perfectly confident in your ability to live up to that standard, I worry that perhaps you don't know yourself very well and the corrupting presence of sin
 - b. I'm not saying this to excuse us from striving for these standards or to excuse failure, but we need to face reality - we all fail miserably at these calls
 - c. We do live and serve in the presence of almighty God, and yet we do profane His name, whether privately or publicly, by choosing sin over delight in Him, making Him out to be less worthy than He is
 - d. None of us is here without sin this morning, that's why we're here this morning - because we are sinners that need to be redeemed
2. So above the calls to holiness this morning, not setting them aside, but above those calls is a call to rest in our High Priest who has done this for us and can present us before the presence of God blameless, without blemish or spot
 - a. These things are impossible for us, but they are not impossible for Jesus - He has already accomplished them on our behalf and He is accomplishing them in us
 - 1 b. So Hebrews, meditating on Leviticus, points us to Christ, saying He will be able to cleanse our conscience so that we can serve before a holy God, Hebrews 9:14 - *how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*
 - 1 c. And Paul, speaking to husbands and wives, says that Christ came to specifically to make His church holy, without any wrinkle or stain, Ephesians 5:25-27 - *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*
 - 1 d. So, in Colossians Paul rejoices that Jesus will present us before Himself holy and blameless, Colossians 1:21-22 - *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,*
 - 1 e. And Jude rejoices in the same thing, Jude 24-25 - *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*
3. So yes, our passage this morning is a call to intense holiness, a call that can only be heeded by resting in our Savior who has won that holiness for us and will work that holiness in us
 - a. So we can't go out and pursue these commands on our own power, in fact, despairing of our ability to live according to this call to holiness is the right first step - there's no way we can
 - b. Instead, we need to go to Jesus and seek His power to work in us admitting our inability, our failure, our unholiness and pleading with Him to change us and ultimately to present us blameless before the presence of His throne, with great joy!