

Chapters 19-20 are all built on chapter 19, verse 2:

“You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy.”

This theme returns at the end of chapter 20, verse 26,

“You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy
and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”

For the last few weeks we have been looking at how God called Israel to be holy.

For the next two weeks (chapters 21-22), we will turn to the priests.

The land is holy—yet there is a special holiness focused on the tabernacle.

Even so, the people are holy—yet there is a special holiness focused on the priests.

Chapters 21-22 focus on four things,

the first two we’ll look at tonight, talking about the holy *priests*:

21:1-15 avoiding defilement

21:16-24 physical holiness

And then next week, we’ll turn to holy *things*

22:1-16 who may partake of the holy things

22:17-33 holy sacrifices

Each of the four sections is prefaced with “And the LORD said to Moses...”

The first two parts are concerned with maintaining the physical holiness of the priests.

1. Warning Against Defiling the Holy: The Uncommon Social Practices of the Priests (v1-15)

a. Mourning Practices for Priests (v1-6)

And the LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, ² except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, ³ or his virgin sister (who is near to him because she has had no husband; for her he may make himself unclean). ⁴ He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people and so profane himself.

21:1-15 speaks of the social practices of the priests.

Verses 1-6 insist that the priests shall not engage in traditional mourning for the dead.

A priest shall not “make himself unclean for the dead.”

In other words, he may not touch their dead bodies,

or be involved in any way with the preparations for their burial.

The only exceptions are for the closest of his relatives,

Mother, father, son, daughter, brother or virgin sister.
The married sister was now a part of a different family,
so she was not included.

Verse four adds that he shall not make himself unclean “as a husband”
(other translations suggest that this has to do with persons related by marriage).
This seems to assume that he may also be unclean for the sake of his wife
(after all, if she died in bed, then he would be unclean),
but not for any of her kin.

But even in the rare cases when the priests were permitted to mourn,
they were not permitted to (verse 5)

⁵ *They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body..*

We heard back in chapter 19, that these were pagan practices,
forbidden to all Israelites (Lev 19:27-28),
but especially forbidden to the priests.

In other words, the priests are supposed to be exemplary Israelites.

Verse six explains why (read).

⁶ *They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the LORD's food offerings, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy.*

As those committed to the service of God,
and who served the covenant meals of Israel,
where God met with his people and communed with them,
they had to remain holy.

Think about what we have seen so far in Leviticus:

What does it mean to be holy?

To be set apart – to be separate – yes!
But just as much – *that you should be mine!*

God's holiness is not just his distinctness –
it is also what impels him to draw near to us,
and to draw us near to himself –
so that we might share his holiness!

Otherwise what does it mean “you shall be holy *to me*, for I the LORD am holy.”

God's purpose in our sanctification is that we might share his holiness.

God's holiness is *not* about him being far off and distant.

God's holiness is what impels him to draw near –
and to create a way for us to draw near to him.

Holiness requires separation from evil *because* we are separated *to and for* God!
He made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

Leviticus has been teaching Israel to think two ways –
the way of life and the way of death.

We've been learning to make distinctions:
between the holy and the common –
and within the common, between the clean and the unclean –
and within the unclean, there is also depravity and abomination.

Things that are moving in the direction of the unclean – and worse –
are moving toward death.

Things that clean – and moving towards the holy –
are moving toward life!

Which means that the priestly call to holiness is a call to life and blessing!

And we see this in the marriage practices for the priests in verses 7-9:

b. Marriage Practices for Priests (v7-9)

⁷ They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. ⁸ You shall sanctify him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for I, the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy. ⁹ And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.

The priest was not to marry a prostitute, a defiled woman, or a divorced woman.

In other words, only a virgin or a widow was permissible to the priests.

And part of this is because holiness is *in part* a physical concept,
and so defilement could come through the wife to the husband.

The reason again is given in verse eight that the priest is holy
because he offers the bread of your God.

This, then, warns the Israelites not to encourage a priest
to marry their defiled daughter,
lest they bring pollution upon the whole people.

Verse nine points out the implications of this for the children of the priests.

A daughter who becomes a prostitute profanes her father,
and therefore must not only be punished with death

(something that would happen to any Israelite prostitute),
but after she is dead, her body must be burned with fire,
a punishment reserved for the worst offenders,
since it destroyed their body in fire,
a picture of what their souls also deserved.
The daughter of the priest is also holy, because she is her father's seed.

Ezek. 44:22 expands upon the principle when it says that the priests
“shall not marry a widow or a divorced woman,
but only virgins of the offspring of the house of Israel,
or a widow who is the widow of a priest.”
But of course, Ezekiel is writing several hundred years later –
and the priestly family had grown considerably!

c. Mourning Practices for the High Priest (v10-12)

¹⁰ “The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes. ¹¹ He shall not go in to any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. ¹² He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him: I am the LORD.

Verses 10-15 then turn to the high priest.
If the priests have a standard of holiness even higher than the ordinary Israelites,
the High Priest has a standard even higher.
He may not even mourn for his father or mother.
He may not engage in even the simplest of mourning rituals,
not even the tearing of his clothes.

Verse 12 says that “he shall not go out of the sanctuary” –
that does not mean that the high priest had to remain in the holy place 24/7!
What it means is that he could not render himself incapable of serving in the holy place.

Obviously, if the high priest becomes unclean,
then he cannot enter the sanctuary!
And so if he ever touches a dead body – even his father or mother –
he would be rendered unclean – and thus unable to enter the holy place.
And that would *profane* the sanctuary of God
(it would take the holy place into a common place) –
Why?
“for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him. I am Yahweh.”

The high priest must remain holy at all times.

Without a holy high priest – there is no way that Israel can be holy.

And we have such a high priest - *holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.* ²⁷ *He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.* ²⁸ *For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*
(Hebrews 7:26-28)

The problem with the Levitical priesthood is that their holiness was *extremely* imperfect!

d. Marriage Practices for the High Pries (v13-15)

¹³ *And he shall take a wife in her virginity.*^[a] ¹⁴ *A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute, these he shall not marry. But he shall take as his wife a virgin^[b] of his own people,* ¹⁵ *that he may not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.”*

Verses 13-15 then amplify the high priest’s marriage practice.

He must marry only a virgin from his people.

While the rest of the priests could marry a widow,
the High Priest could only marry an Israelite virgin.

Later Jewish tradition insisted that he could only marry within the priestly family,
but that was not a scriptural requirement.

(After all, in Aaron’s day, such a requirement would have been to require incest!)

The concern again was for the purity and holiness of Israel.

If the high priest became defiled, then how could Israel be pure?

But the reason is given in verse 15:

“that he may not profane his offspring among his people,
for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.”

The high priest is the “most holy” Israelite.

He is the only one who may go into the “most holy” place.

Therefore, the woman he marries – the woman he goes into – must be a virgin.

We’ve seen repeatedly in these central chapters of Leviticus
how our sexual ethics connect with our worship.

The prophets regularly describe idolatry as “spiritual adultery.”

God create Adam and Eve for himself –

and he gave them the act of marriage as a picture of the sort of union
that he wants with us!

Whenever we turn to other gods – that is a sort of spiritual adultery.
When we love something else more than we love God,
we are ‘whoring after idols.’

Our culture has gone sexually bonkers.

If you are struggling with sexual temptation,
let's talk!

Talk with me – talk with one of the elders – talk with Hayley – talk to someone you trust!

The marriage relation between husband and wife is supposed to portray
a picture of the intimacy between Christ and his bride –
between God and the soul!

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Think about that!

Paul does *not* say, the body is not meant for sexual immorality – but for marriage!

No – the contrast is between sexual immorality *and the Lord himself!*

The purity that God calls you to – the purity that Leviticus is talking about –
is not just about “hold it until you get married!”

NO! as Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 6:14 –

¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined^[d] to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Paul says that union with a prostitute distorts and corrupts –
but that physical act is the act that is supposed to picture our union with God himself!

And so Paul says in the next verse:

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin^[e] a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. [because the sexual act *unites* two bodies] ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Much of what we have seen in Leviticus is the ugliness of sexual dysfunction –
but here in chapter 21, with the marriage of the high priest,
we get a picture of the beauty of Eden restored!
Or better yet – Eden *redeemed!!*

Because after the fall – you can't go *back*.
There is no way back into Eden!
The only way out is forward.

There must be a Redeemer.
And the marriage of the High Priest is part of that picture.

But not only his marriage!
Also his physical characteristics!

2. An Unblemished Man: the Physical Characteristics of the Priest (v16-24)

a. Description of “Blemishes” (v16-20)

¹⁶ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁷ “Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. ¹⁸ For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹ or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, ²⁰ or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.

The second part of chapter 21 deals with physical defects in the priesthood (16-24).

Only those who were physically whole could approach the holy place.

If a descendent of Aaron had a defect, he could not minister before the Lord.

Blind, lame, disfigured, deformed, crippled, hunchbacked, dwarfed—
any defect that was outwardly visible,
was sufficient to remove a man from active service.

A priest must be a properly functioning specimen of the human race.

Gregory the Great, in his *Book of Pastoral Rule* takes these qualities of the priest,
and applies them spiritually to the pastor.

Many have accused him of an overly-allegorical reading,
but when you line up Leviticus 21 with 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2,
you have an uncanny connection!

Undoubtedly, Moses intended these qualities quite literally.

But even within the OT, it is clear that these physical qualities
reflect spiritual realities.

Listen to the characteristics of the priest:

¹⁸ *For no one who has a blemish shall draw near,*
What does Paul mean when he says that the bishop – or the elder –
must be “above reproach”?
Well, he goes on to describe several qualities –
just like Moses had described what it meant to be “blemished.”

a man blind or lame,
Gregory says that a man is blind if he is ignorant of heavenly contemplation.
“When he perceives the coming light, he does not value it and,
as a result, does not know how to improve his conduct.” (p45)
Likewise the lame is one who sees the way he should go,
but “having unstable habits” he does not walk where he would.
If a man is spiritually blind – then he will not be able to see the way to go –
and if he is spiritually lame, then he will not be able to lead others in that way.

or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long,
Gregory’s manuscript said a “small nose” –
which he applied to the sense of smell.
If you cannot discern the difference between sweetness and a foul stench,
then you cannot guide others into the way of life!
(Think of Gandalf in Moria –
who made his decision based on the smell of each of the three paths!)

¹⁹ *or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand,* ²⁰ *or a hunchback or a dwarf
or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.*

The hunchback is always looking down – and does not lift his eyes to heavenly things.
This is one of my favorite images –
because Psalm 68 is the only other passage in the OT to use this term –
and Psalm 68 uses it in the context of how to enter the presence of God
(the very heart and soul of what Leviticus is all about!).

And a hunchbacked priest cannot enter the presence of God!

Turn over to Psalm 68.
I want you to see this!
Verses 7-10 talk about how God led his people forth in the Exodus –
referring to God as the “One of Sinai” – who led his people to the Promised Land.
There are lots of allusions to the history of Israel –
which I will omit in order to get to the point!
Look at verses 15-18:

O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan;

O many-peaked^[c] [literally, O hunchbacked] mountain, mountain of Bashan!
¹⁶ *Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked [hunchbacked] mountain,
at the mount that God desired for his abode,
yes, where the LORD will dwell forever?*

The mountain of Bashan is said to be hunchbacked –
the same characteristic that is forbidden to the priests.

What is the problem with being a hunchback?

It's that the mountain of Bashan looks with hatred at Mt Zion.

Bashan is the modern "Golan Heights" to the east of the Sea of Galilee.

Israel had defeated Og, king of Bashan,
and it became part of the half tribe of Manasseh.

The mountains of Bashan are far more impressive than Mt. Zion.

So it is perhaps not surprising that the mountains of Bashan
would be jealous that God chose Jerusalem to be his dwelling place.

Mt. Bashan is a defective mountain –
it is warped by jealousy and pride.

But notice verse 17 –
what is God's response:

¹⁷ *The chariots of God are twice ten thousand,
thousands upon thousands;
the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.*

What does that mean?!!

It's the same thing that happened at the end of Exodus 40 –
when the glory of the LORD left Mt. Sinai
and filled the holy of holies in the tabernacle!

Sinai is now in the sanctuary!

The glory that shone on Mt. Sinai now dwells in Jerusalem!
God dwells with his people!

And so – verse 18

¹⁸ *You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men,
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.*

Notice the last line!

When God ascends on high –
then even rebellious, hunchbacked Mt Bashan

will bring gifts to God!

Paul will paraphrase this verse in Ephesians 4,
when he says that when Christ ascended on high, he led captivity captive,
and *gave* gifts to men.

Paul says that when the glory of the LORD filled the temple –
that was good –
but when Christ ascended to the heavenly temple –
that was even better!

Because he didn't just receive gifts from men –
He *gave* gifts to men!

What are the gifts that Christ gives?
“and he gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets,
some to be evangelists, pastors, and teachers.”
Among the gifts that Christ gives to his church
are those officers whom he gives to his church.

In other words, when talking about church officers as gifts to the church,
Paul quotes the Psalm that just spoke of the jealousy of the hunchbacked mountain –
And Psalm 68 goes on to talk about the nations singing praise to God –
in other words, Psalm 68 prefigures the redemption of the Gentiles!

All of that to say that the physical defects of Leviticus 21
are designed to show that the one who offers the bread of God
is to be “above reproach” – “blameless.”

So now here how Paul says it in 1 Timothy 3:2-7
*Therefore an overseer^[a] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,^[b] sober-minded, self-
controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not
quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity
keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own
household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may
become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must
be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

The NT does not use a physical list of characteristics –
but you can see that the basic principle is that the overseer – the bishop –
is to be an exemplary Christian.

And our passage closes by giving the reason:

b. Blemishes Profane the Altar (v21-24)

21 No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. 22 He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, 23 but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries,^[e] for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.” 24 So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

Notice that verse 22 allows the blemished man to partake of all the food,
whether the holy or the most holy.

The defect does not remove him from the priestly family.

It is not a *spiritual* disqualification!

Rather, it prevents him from approaching the altar,

because nothing impure or deformed belongs in the presence of God.

Since the most holy food was to be eaten in the courtyard,

this makes it clear that he could be involved in much of the priestly service,
(so he would have been able to perform many duties),

but he could not serve at the altar.

He could not offer the LORD's food offerings.

Israel was to be holy.

Therefore their priests must also be holy.

To allow one who is impure and deformed to offer sacrifices to God,
would be to profane the sanctuary of God.

(It is worth noting that Jeremiah was of the priestly family,

but he does not appear to have served as a priest,

and so some have wondered if he had one of these defects?)

c. We Have an Unblemished High Priest

These social and physical characteristics emphasize the need for a high priest who will be pure,
a perfect representative of the human race.

And such is Jesus:

“For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest,
holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.”
(Heb. 7:26).

Jesus is the Holy one—the high priest who is himself holy and pure.

The Levitical priesthood could never get us there.

*For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath,
which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (7:28)*