

Note: for Lev 25 – sing TPH 442

We have seen that the central question of the book of Leviticus is
“who may ascend the hill of the LORD”?

Who can enter the Holy of Holies?

And we have seen that Lev 16 – the Day of Atonement – when Aaron enters the Holy of Holies,
is the center of the book of Leviticus.

And just as chapters 11-15 set up the Day of Atonement
with the discussion of clean and unclean –
so also chapters 17-23 followed the Day of Atonement
with a discussion of the holy and the profane.

It’s not enough to be “ceremonially clean” –
God calls his people to be *holy* as he is holy.

As Michael Morales puts it,
“the only effective and lasting safeguard in God’s Presence
must necessarily be authentic holiness;
hence chapters 17-27 of Leviticus.” (186)

Just as *God* has drawn near to his people,
so he calls us to draw near to him – and to one another.

But besides the central focus on the Day of Atonement,
there are two “events” in the book of Leviticus.
The ordination of the priests with the death of Nadab and Abihu in chapters 9-10 –
And the blasphemy of the unnamed man in chapter 24 –
which is linked with the oil and the bread.

There are two sections to this chapter.

The first part deals with matters specifically focused on the tabernacle worship.
The final section deals with the violation of God’s holy name by a nameless man.

1. The Oil and the Bread: Holiness in the Holy Place (v1-9)

“The lampstand shining upon the bread of the presence offers a symbolic picture of the Sabbath:
Israel basking in the light of God’s blessed presence.” (Morales, 187)

a. The Light of the World Shall Never Go Out (v1-4)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. ³ Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the LORD regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. ⁴ He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold^[a] before the LORD regularly.

First Yahweh commands Israel to bring pure olive oil to Aaron
to ensure that the lamps of the lampstand in the tabernacle never go out.

The lamp has seven bowls – which connect with the importance of the “seventh” in Leviticus.
The seventh day in the week is the Sabbath day.
The seventh month (as we heard last week) is the month of Atonement.
The seventh year (as we’ll hear next week) is the year of release from debt and slavery.
The seventh seventh year (the 50th year) is the Year of Jubilee.

And so the seven branches on the lampstand remind us of God’s covenantal ordering of time.

He is to care for the lamps from “evening to morning” (verse 3).

The priests (and particularly the high priest) was to maintain the lampstands.

This was a task that could not be handed over to the Levites.

ONLY the priest could tend the lamps,

as indicated that he is to do it from “evening to morning.”

Elsewhere throughout the OT, “evening and morning” refers to the hours of darkness
between sunset and sunrise.

The assumption is that during the day it would be easy to keep track of this –
but the point is that the priests need to be especially careful to make sure
that the lamps do not go out at night.

The Light of the World should never go out!

All Israel is responsible for making sure that Aaron and his sons have sufficient oil –
but the priests must ensure that the lamp never goes out!

The focus here is on the responsibility of the people
to ensure the proper supplies for worship.

Incidentally, this is part of the reason why I have never been involved
in obtaining bread and wine for communion.

I am not a priest in the OT sense –

but the principle of God’s people providing the supplies for worship is important.

If you want to understand the importance of the lampstand, take a look at Zechariah 4

And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. ² And he said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. ³ And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left." ⁴ And I said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" ⁵ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." ⁶ Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. ⁷ Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'"

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁹ "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹⁰ For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

"These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth." ¹¹ Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" ¹² And a second time I answered and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil^[a] is poured out?" ¹³ He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." ¹⁴ Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones^[b] who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

Let me unpack this for you!

Zechariah sees the lampstand – the holy lampstand!

The problem with Moses' lampstand (or even Solomon's lampstand)
was that it went out.

We're not quite sure when Moses' lampstand went out –
but by the time of Shiloh – when the ark of the covenant was captured –
the lampstand seems to be unused.

And Solomon's lampstand disappeared at the time of the Exile.

The light of the world died out.

We need a light that will not die!

And for that we need a source of oil that will not dry up!

And so Zechariah sees a vision of two olive trees!

"These are the two anointed ones – literally, the two sons of fresh oil –
who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

If the seven are the eyes of the LORD – think also of the sevenfold Spirit of God –
then the Holy Spirit is the oil – the Holy Spirit is the glory of the LORD

that shines forth in the midst of the darkness.

After all, the Holy Spirit is the one who appeared at Mt. Sinai –
the one who led Israel through the wilderness –
the one who came to dwell with his people!

And the Holy Spirit is the oil.

The olive trees – the sons of fresh oil –
are the channels – the pipes that bring the oil to the lampstand.
Revelation 11:4 speaks of the Two Witnesses as the two olive trees
that stand before the Lord of all the earth.

In Zechariah's day it may have been Haggai and Zechariah that were the two witnesses.
In the 13th century it may have been the Franciscans and the Dominicans!

In every generation there are witnesses who continue to be the channel –
the mechanism that conveys the fresh oil of God's Spirit to his people!

So now – in the light of the lampstands! –
we may perceive clearly what is going on with the bread of the presence!

(Indeed, when you look at God's instructions in Exodus 25,
it is clear that the lampstand is supposed to shine on the table of the showbread!
These are the two main pieces of furniture in the holy place –
and their function is interconnected.)

b. The Bread of Life Shall Never Run Out (v5-9)

⁵ “You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah^[b] shall be in each loaf. ⁶ And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold^[c] before the LORD. ⁷ And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. ⁸ Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. ⁹ And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due.”

The twelve loaves clearly connect to the twelve tribes.

The only light in the holy place comes from the seven lamps of the golden lampstand.
And in that light, Aaron is commanded to maintain the twelve loaves of the showbread.

Notice what day it is!

Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly.
“It is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.”

Twelve loaves are to be baked each week,

with two piles of six loaves on the table in the holy place.
Frankincense is to be put on the bread “as a food offering to Yahweh,”
It was to be arranged on the Sabbath day,
which suggests that it was a weekly baking.

Why is this bread called “a covenant forever”?

It is a weekly covenant renewal, whereby the priests partake of the covenant.

And of course, our Lord Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life –
the true bread which came down from heaven.

He is the bread of the presence –

and so it is not surprising that he said, “this is my body” –
as he gave the bread of the presence to his (12) disciples!

But Leviticus also says that Aaron and his sons were to eat it in a holy place.

It was holy food—not to be eaten by laymen.

But what about David?

In 1 Samuel 21:1-7 David asks for bread, and Ahimelech the priest
says that he only has the holy bread of the presence.

He gives it to David and his men,

on the condition that they have kept themselves from women.

There is nothing in Leviticus 24 (or anywhere else) that would permit this.

This bread was to be eaten by the priests.

It was explicitly commanded that only the priests should eat it,
and they in a holy place.

Sometimes the Bible simply reports the actions of people,

without making any statement about whether they were right or wrong.

Is this such a case?

Look over at Matthew 12:1-8.

Jesus’ disciples are plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (reaping).

The Pharisees get all upset about it because it is not lawful to do this.

Jesus responds (verse 3-4).

³ He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?”

Jesus agrees that David had no warrant to eat the holy bread.

It was *not* lawful for David to eat that bread—nor his men.

But he did it. And he was right for doing it.

How can Jesus say this?

Keep going. (Verses 5-8)

⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

What is Jesus saying?

There are two basic points—and the second is rooted in the first.

1) The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

The ultimate standard of righteousness is not a written document,
but a living person.

Jesus the Lord.

2) therefore you cannot take a strict constructionist approach to the law,
not even the law of God.

No law has ever been written that can produce justice in every situation.

Not even the Mosaic law.

Jesus gives two examples.

The first is an occasional weakness of the law

—a situation not conceived by the law.

If people are weak with hunger

(and in context, if the anointed one and his people are in need),
then even the holy food of God may be given to them.

You may “break” the law in order to practice justice and mercy.

This is the principle of equity:

what do you do when the strict application of the law
would produce injustice?

You do what is right!

But the second example Jesus gives is not an occasional problem,
it is a systemic problem with the law.

Further, it is not merely a reference to some ritual matter,
it cuts to the heart of the moral law.

The priests *profane* the Sabbath and are guiltless.

The law *requires* the priests to work on the Sabbath.

They not only do the ordinary “work” of the daily sacrifices,
but they also must perform extra Sabbath sacrifices.

Jesus says this to shock the Pharisees.

He knows that they are strict constructionists

who attempt to ensure that they do not break the letter of the law.

But in focusing exclusively on the letter of the law,

they neglect mercy and justice.
No written law can produce justice in every situation.

Because God's justice is not a code of statutes,
but the all-wise judgment of Yahweh himself.

The great irony is that if the Pharisees had understood Leviticus 24
they would have learned this.

2. The Blasphemer Put to Death: Proportional Justice (v10-23)

a. The Holy Name of God Blasphemed (v10-12)

¹⁰ Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, ¹¹ and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. ¹² And they put him in custody, till the will of the LORD should be clear to them.

Read Lev. 24:10-12.

In these verses we are returned to the narrative of what is happening at Mt Sinai
while Israel is learning how to worship God and do all that he has commanded.
What was the last narrative event?
Chapter 10—the death of Nadab and Abihu.

Here we learn that it is not merely the priests who will die for their failure to treat God as holy.
All Israelites—and even those of mixed birth
are to be holy in their conduct and in their speech.

Who was this man?

What was his name?

We hear that he was the son of an Egyptian and an Israelite woman.

We hear the name of his mother, and of his grandfather, and of his tribe.

But by the time that Israel is settled in the Land,
no one alive knew his name.

Verse 11 says that he “blasphemed” the name of Yahweh in the midst of a fight.

Literally, he “pierced” the name of Yahweh,

he attempted to cut down his opponent by weakening his god.

Remember that the OT speaks of curses as having literal power.

The spoken word has the power to accomplish things in the spiritual realm.

Therefore, by cursing Yahweh, he hopes to overthrow this Yahweh-worshiper.

And to “curse” means to declare someone worthless or weightless.

If you blaspheme the NAME of Yahweh,

if you disgrace his name,

then your name will be forgotten,

and worse, the name of your family will be disgraced!

There's a reason why "you shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."
When we treat God's holy name as "common" – or worse, as a swear word! –
we "profane" the holy name of God.

And if this is going to be a holy community,
then the community needs to treat God's name as holy.

Verses 13-14

b. The Particular Judgment: Death (v13-16)

¹³ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 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.

The death penalty in Israel was a community event.

You cannot hire someone to do it for you.

Those who heard the curse must place their hands on the head of the offender,
so that they may not be held guilty of that curse.

(Just as the imposition of hands is required on the sacrifice
in order to transfer guilt,

so also with the blasphemer it is important to ensure
that no guilt remains upon you who heard the curse.)

The execution of an offender is a stain on the name of the congregation.

Therefore the entire congregation must be involved in his death.
(The elders—and in a difficult case, the priests—would conduct the trial)

But here it is made clear that the sojourner as well as the native
should be executed for blasphemy.

Verses 15-16 form an interesting contrast.

¹⁵ And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin.

¹⁶ Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

You may have missed it at first.

"Whoever curses his god shall bear his sin;

Whoever blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall surely be put to death."

The pronoun is important.

Whoever curses his god.

There were lots of gods in the land of Canaan.

You will encounter people who curse Baal, Ashtoreth, El, Elohim.

If a man curses his own god, let his own god deal with it.

(There is a sense of mockery here)

But if he blasphemes Yahweh, he must be put to death.

This led to a very strong reluctance among Israelites
to even use the name Yahweh.

And the principle applies to the sojourner as well as the native.

c. The Underlying Principle of Proportional Justice (v17-22)

¹⁷ “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. ¹⁸ Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. ¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. ²¹ Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. ²² You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the LORD your God.”

In verses 17-22 we then hear the principle of proportionate justice.
Much of it is a quote from Exodus 21:23-25.

It takes the Golden Rule quite literally:
do unto others what you would have them do unto you!

Whatever you did to others will be done to you.

If you attacked someone and broke his jaw,
then the proper punishment is for your own jaw to be broken.
“Whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.”

It is worth noting that in Exodus 21 there is an example given of turning the punishment
into a financial penalty.

In other words, we should not take “eye for an eye” exactly literally.
(Proverbs 6:35 suggests that a financial penalty could be offered for many sins).

The point is that if you have harmed another person,
then the proper penalty is for you to pay the same price.
I recently faced a situation where I had used my time improperly –
so the proper penalty was to forfeit the time that I wanted for something else.

The Law of Moses has a lot of really helpful reflections on how this should work.
For instance, when it says “whoever kills an animal shall make it good” –
what does that mean?

Well, if you killed a man’s sheep, then the proper penalty would be to replace the sheep.

Of course, if you did it on purpose –
that is another thing!

In Exodus 21-22, we are told that if the offender steals a sheep,

he must repay two sheep.

Obviously, he must return the sheep – but simply returning the sheep is not a penalty!
He sought to impoverish his neighbor –
and so the penalty is that he must enrich the neighbor by the same amount
that he sought to impoverish him.

But if he steals a sheep *and kills it*
the offender must repay four sheep!

Why?

Because not only must you replace the sheep that you stole,
you also must replace the sheep that you killed.
Stealing is bad enough – but stealing and killing is worse!

The more that I have reflected on the principle of proportionate justice in the Law,
the more convinced I am of its benefits for parenting –
as well as its benefits for society.

Think of how Jesus deals with this in Matthew 5.

In every case, Jesus quotes or paraphrases the Law –
“you have heard that it was said” –
and then provides a faithful understanding of what that law was *really* about:

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, ^[1] let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Everything that Jesus says there is clearly laid out in the Law of Moses!

This is a proportionate response!

If you think of “an eye for an eye” as a system of vengeance –
then you have totally misunderstood the Law of Moses!

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was all about *holiness*.

Drawing near to God – honoring his holy name.

Which is why Jesus concludes that section:

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, ^[1] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore

must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

d. The Execution of Judgment (v23)

²³ So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses.

And so in obedience to God's command,
the people of Israel brought out the man who had blasphemed God,
and stoned him to death.

What is remarkable about this passage
is that the same law was applied to foreigners as well as to natives.
While God established Israel as his unique people.
He will not let them forget that all people are his.
And because he claims all people as his,
therefore, anyone who comes to sojourn in the land of Israel
will be treated as one of the people of God.

That comes to its full expression in Jesus Christ,
where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ.

God's name is holy because *he is holy*.