

Rules for Priests and for Us
(Leviticus 21:1-24)
Expository Lessons from the Book of Leviticus

I. Review and Introduction to This Lesson

- a. **Leviticus 18-20**, which we recently completed, addressed a number of *moral and ethical laws*, which included
 - i. the second greatest commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself, and
 - ii. the teaching that God's people be holy, as He is holy.
- b. In **Leviticus 21-22**, the subject shifts to *requirements for priests and for the priestly offerings (sacrifices)*. The topics covered include:
 - i. Restriction on priests regarding the dead (not touching dead bodies, and not doing certain things to their bodies to mourn the dead).
 - ii. Restrictions on whom a priest may marry.
 - iii. How priests serving at the altar cannot have any physical defects.
 - iv. Restrictions on who may eat of the holy things offered.
 - v. How animals being offered as sacrifices must not be physically defective.
- c. An obvious question may come to mind: "*Why should we study this material?*"
 - i. After all, the old Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system were done away with almost 2,000 years ago. Plus, the New Testament says that the old sacrificial system was cancelled at the crucifixion of Jesus. **(Colossians 2:13-14)**
 - ii. However, let us remember what Paul said in **Romans**, after quoting a passage from the Old Testament:
 - 1. "For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." **(Romans 15:4, NKJV)**
 - 2. These next two chapters (**Leviticus 21-22**) may put Paul's assertion (that everything in the Old Testament was written *for our benefit*) to the ultimate test!

- iii. Also, shadows in the Old Testament point to current realities.
1. “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are *a shadow of things to come*, but the substance is of Christ.” (**Colossians 2:16–17**, NKJV)
 2. Examples of such shadows include:
 - a. Passover Lamb foreshadowing Christ’s sacrifice. (**1 Corinthians 5:7 / Exodus 12**)
 - b. The life of Moses foreshadowing that of Jesus Christ. (**Acts 3:22-23 / Deuteronomy 18:15-19**)
 - c. Jonah in the whale for three days and nights foreshadowing Jesus in Hades. (**Matthew 12:40 / Jonah 2**)
 - d. The bronze serpent raised up in the Wilderness foreshadowing Jesus being raised up on the cross. (**John 3:14-15 / Numbers 21**)
 - e. The tabernacle / temple was a model or foreshadowing of heavenly realities (**Hebrews 8:5, 9:23 / Exodus 25-40, Leviticus**)
 - f. The Exodus journey of the Jews from Egypt through the Red Sea and the Wilderness, on the way to the Promised Land was a foreshadowing of the Christian spiritual journey (**1 Corinthians 10:1-13 / Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy**)
 3. A recent example from our study in **Leviticus**: the high priest, the ‘anointed one’, was foreshadowing Christ, who is *our* high priest (**Hebrews 3:1-10:21**).
 - a. The high priest was specially anointed with oil, and sometimes referred to as “the anointed one”. That is the same term in Greek (*christos, χριστός*) which is applied to the Messiah, the Christ (see **Leviticus 4:5** in the LXX).
 - b. The high priest was the only one who could enter the Most Holy Place, once per year, on the Day of Atonement. This foreshadowed how Christ alone would enter the presence of God on our behalf, with His own blood. (**Hebrews 9:7-14, 9:23-26**)

4. Likewise, the priests who ministered at the temple were foreshadowing us, the Christians. This connection (referring to us as priests, or as those offering sacrifices) is made in at least five books of the New Testament, by at least three different writers.
 - a. In **1 Peter**, the apostle Peter says:
 - i. "... you... are being built up a spiritual house, a *holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God* through Jesus Christ." (**1 Peter 2:4-5**, NKJV)
 - ii. "But you are a chosen generation, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;" (**1 Peter 2:9**, NKJV)
 - b. In **Romans**, Paul says:
 - i. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you *present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*" (**Romans 12:1**, NKJV)
 - c. In **Philippians**, referring to the gift of support that the Christians had given him, Paul says:
 - i. "Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a *sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.*" (**Philippians 4:18**, NKJV)
 - d. From the last chapter of **Hebrews**:
 - i. "*We have an altar* from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat." (**Hebrews 13:10**, NKJV)
 - ii. "Therefore by Him let us continually *offer the sacrifice* of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for *with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*" (**Hebrews 13:15-16**, NKJV)
 - e. In **Revelation**, John says in his introduction:

- i. “and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us *kings and priests* to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (**Revelation 1:5-6**, NKJV)
 - ii. Note that in the Majority Text as well as the NU (Nestle-Aland / United Bible Society) Greek text, it says “a *kingdom, priests*” rather than “*kings and priests*” here.
- 5. Therefore, since the priests and their sacrifices were foreshadowing us and our service to God, let us consider the directions that God gave to the priests with that in mind.
 - a. *PERHAPS* these instructions to the priests under the old covenant also *foreshadow lessons for us Christians today*, who have become the new ‘priests’ under the new covenant!

II. Priests May Not Be Defiled by or for the Dead

- a. Read **Leviticus 21:1-6** and **21:10-12**.
 - i. *Priests* could not be “defiled by the dead”, except in the case of very close relatives (members of their immediate family, generally).
 - ii. However, the *high priest* could not go near the dead bodies of any soul who died, *even in the case of his parents*. Nor could he uncover his head nor tear his clothes.
 - 1. I think of what Aaron was told when his two sons were struck dead for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord, in **Leviticus 10:1-7**.
 - iii. Also, the priests were not permitted to cut their beards, hair nor flesh to mourn the passing of those who had died.
- b. From Tertullian, an early Christian writer from Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 217 AD:
 - i. “Us, moreover, Jesus, the Father’s Highest and Great Priest, clothing us from His own store - inasmuch as they ‘who are baptized in Christ have put on Christ’ (**Galatians 3:27**) - has made ‘priests to God His Father,’ (**Revelation 1:6**) according to John. For the reason why He recalls that young man who was hastening to his father’s obsequies [= *funeral* /

burial rites], is that He may show that we are called priests by Him; (priests) whom the Law used to forbid to be present at the sepulture of parents: ‘Over every dead soul,’ it says, ‘the priest shall not enter, and over his own father and over his own mother he shall not be contaminated.’ (**Leviticus 21:11**)

- ii. “Does it follow that we too are bound to observe *this* prohibition? No, of course. For our one Father, God, *lives*, and our mother, the Church; and neither are we dead who live to God, nor do we bury our dead, inasmuch as they too are living in Christ.
 - iii. “At all events, *priests we are called by Christ*; debtors to monogamy, in accordance with the pristine Law of God, which prophesied at that time of us in its own priests.”
 1. (Source: Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, chapter 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 64)
- c. Points made by Tertullian here include:
- i. The priests of the Old Testament foreshadow Christians, based on **Revelation 1:6**, where John refers to the Christians as priests.
 - ii. In being “clothed with Christ” in our baptism, we have taken on priestly garments.
 - iii. According to Tertullian, the restrictions on priests regarding the dead foreshadows something for us.
 1. It pointed to what Jesus said to the young man who wanted to follow him:
 - a. “Then He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.’” (**Luke 9:59–60**, NKJV)
 2. Our father (God) and mother (the church) don’t die. Furthermore, our brothers and sisters in Christ who have died physically are *still alive to God*.
 - a. As Jesus said after quoting from the account of Moses and the burning bush in **Exodus 3**, “For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, *for all live to Him*.” (**Luke 20:38**, NKJV)
 - b. Christians have a different way of looking at death than the rest of the world.

- d. Another thought regarding priests not touching dead bodies that would defile them.
 - i. Read **Isaiah 52:10-12**.
 1. This is immediately before the famous passage about the Suffering Servant, the prophecy of **Isaiah 52:13-53:12**.
 2. “Those who carry the vessels of the Lord” (Levites and priests) are called to “touch no unclean thing”.
 3. This appears to be the same passage Paul is citing, and applying to us, in **2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1**.
 - a. Touch no unclean thing, and the Lord will receive us.
 - b. Therefore, we need to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.
 - c. Perfecting holiness in the fear of God.
 4. So, while the Old Testament priests were forbidden from physically touching things that were unclean, we as the New Testament priests are forbidden from coming into contact from things that make us unclean, mainly sins of our flesh and our hearts.

III. Restrictions Regarding Who a Priest May Marry

- a. Read **Leviticus 21:7-15**.
- b. Priests could not marry prostitutes, defiled women nor divorced women.
 - i. Note that it was legal under the Law of Moses for other Jewish men (non-priests) to marry a previously divorced woman. (**Deuteronomy 24:1-4**)
 - ii. **Question:** In view of the fact we Christians (both men and women) are *members of the new priesthood*, might these instructions be foreshadowing directions that Jesus would later give to His followers?
 1. “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.” (**Matthew 5:32**, NKJV)
 2. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.” (**Luke 16:18**, NKJV)
 3. This is a very hard teaching!

- a. That is why the apostles said to Jesus, regarding His teaching on divorce, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, *it is better not to marry.*” (**Matthew 19:10**, NKJV)
- iii. While the permanance of marriage (grounded in the teaching of **Genesis 2:24**) was a core Christian teaching in the West for about 2,000 years, it has been badly eroded in both Catholic and Protestant circles. People have created so many “exceptions” to this hard teaching that in most churches, virtually anyone who has been married before can get divorced and remarried.
 - 1. However, Jesus calls marrying a divorced person: *adultery*.
- c. Note that the high priest could only marry a virgin (**Leviticus 21:10-13**). Is there any significance in that requirement that would apply to Christians, today? What about those among us who were involved in fornication *before they became Christians, or before they became married*?
 - i. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither *fornicators*, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. *But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, NKJV)
 - ii. When we repent and are baptized, our past sins are washed away. That includes fornication. We have been washed, sanctified (made holy) and justified (made right in the eyes of God).
 - iii. **Question:** What about those who have been divorced?
 - 1. Our sins are washed away. However, our marriage commitments, parental responsibilities and mortgages are not washed away in baptism!
 - a. Also, we will not be forgiven from adultery (or any other sin) unless we *repent* and *turn away* from committing that sin any longer.
- d. Special additional requirements for the high priest.
 - i. Unlike the other priests, he cannot even go to the funeral of his parents. (**Leviticus 21:10-12**)
 - ii. “He shall take a wife in her virginity... he shall take a virgin of his own people as a wife” (**Leviticus 21:13-14**)

1. In the passage we read from *On Monogamy* by Tertullian, one of the points he made in pointing back to the restrictions on the priests was regarding *monogamy*, which he saw in this passage from **Leviticus 21**.
2. Apparently, the traditional Jewish understanding of **Leviticus 21:13** was that the high priest (alone among Jewish men) could only have one wife. Even though polygamy was allowed for the other priests and for all other Jewish men.
 - a. Re-read **Leviticus 21:13**.
 - b. That certainly was a surprise to me! I had never before read this passage with that understanding.
3. It strikes me that the idea the high priest *must be monogamous* has all kinds of implications.
 - a. Jesus' teaching on remarriage being adultery eliminated the possibility of polygamy (which had been allowed under the Law of Moses).
 - i. Carefully think about the implications of what He said in **Matthew 5:32** and **Luke 16:18**, regarding marrying a second wife (while still married to one's initial spouse).
 - b. Many false prophets over the years have tried to restore (revert to) polygamy. In some cases they took on dozens of wives for themselves, including those who previously had been married to others. That includes Joseph Smith and the early Mormons; Mohammad in Islam; and various cults since then.
 - i. For more on the polygamy of Mohammad, including marriage even to those who had been previously married to others (including in one case to his own adopted son), see the book *Twenty-Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad*, by Iranian author Ali Dashti.
 1. The book describes 20 wives of Mohammad. Other Muslims were permitted to have up to four wives.
 - ii. The polygamy of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, and other early Mormon

leaders like Brigham Young, are well documented, with information readily available from online sources, including Mormon historians and researchers.

1. Joseph Smith claimed that an angel had told him to restore the practice of polygamy.
 2. Smith even took the wives of some of his followers to become his own wives.
- iii. We were warned that false prophets like this would come, men consumed by their immoral desires of the flesh.
1. Paul said, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (**2 Timothy 4:3–4**, NKJV)
 2. Peter warned of false teachers to come, “having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children.” (**2 Peter 2:14**, NKJV)
 3. Paul warned, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (**Galatians 1:8**, NKJV)
- c. The idea that the high priest would have *only one wife* also points to Jesus, who would have *only one bride: the church*.
- i. Read **Ephesians 5:22-32**.
 1. This is a challenging passage for all husbands, calling them to lay their lives down for their wives, to present them as radiant brides.

2. Paul says here, "This is a great mystery, *but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*"
- ii. Read **Revelation 21:1-2** and **21:9-14**.
 1. Our high priest (Jesus Christ) has *the church* as his one and only bride.
 2. The church here is the radiant bride coming down from heaven.
- d. Perhaps this also points to the reason why elders / bishops and deacons in the church must be "*the husband of one wife*" (**1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12; Titus 1:6**). Similar requirement for those accepted into the order of widows (**1 Timothy 5:9**, "the wife of one man").
- i. Since polygamy was prohibited for all Christians, this statement regarding "husband of one wife" could not be addressing polygamy (contrary to what many modern Christians assume when reading these passages).
 - ii. Early Christians understood this to mean that while Christians in general could remarry after death of a spouse, those who were bishops/overseers/elders, or deacons, or those women who were members of the special order of widows could not (**1 Timothy 3:2, 3:12** and **5:9**). They could have no more than one spouse in their lifetime.
 - iii. For more on this, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Twice Married'.

IV. No Defective Priests

- a. Read **Leviticus 21:16-24**.
- b. No physical defects for those offering the sacrifices and ministering.
 - i. **Question:** Is the Lord prejudiced against those with physical handicaps?
 1. **Answer:** Certainly not!

2. The Lord showed that He cares about those with physical handicaps and infirmities, in previous passages we have read from **Leviticus**. Let's not get the wrong message here!
- c. Christ is the Lamb "without defect"; however he calls us to be *spiritually* without defect as well.
 - d. Read **Ephesians 5:1-7** and **5:25-27**.
 - i. The church is to become a radiant bride.
 - ii. Consider also how the church is portrayed in the **Book of Revelation**.
 1. At the beginning of the book, in **Revelation 2-3**, we see in the seven churches of Asia Minor a very imperfect church, with many problems.
 2. At the end of the book, in **Revelation 21-22**, we see a glorious, radiant church with no defilement.
 3. **Question:** What happened to the church that resulted in such a great change?
 - a. **Answer:** The church was refined by the Day of Judgment, in **Revelation 20**. This appears to be similar to the refinement that takes place in the story of judgment of the sheep and goats in **Matthew 25:31-46**, and the Parable of the Dragnet in **Matthew 13:47-50**.
 - iii. In view of Christ's return, Peter closes his second letter with the challenge: "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, *be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;*" (**2 Peter 3:14**, NKJV)
 1. There is *effort on our part required* for us to become without spot and blameless.
 2. God's concern for us, his modern priests, to become spiritually blameless and without spot or defect.
 3. **Closing Challenge:** Take inventory of your own spiritual condition. Be diligent to repent, and confess to a trusted brother or sister any spiritual blemish or defect, so that you can be found without spot and blameless when Jesus returns.