

INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS CHAPTER 21

This chapter might borrow its title from **#Mal 2:1**,

"And now, O you priests, this commandment is for you."

It is a law obliging priests with the utmost care and jealousy to preserve the dignity of their priesthood.

I. The inferior priests are here charged both concerning their mourning and concerning their marriages and their children, **#Le 21:1-9**.

II. The high priest is restrained more than any of them, **#Le 21:10-15**.

III. Neither the one nor the other must have any blemish, **#Le 21:16**.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 9.

It was before appointed that the priests should teach the people the statutes God had given concerning the *difference between clean and unclean*, **#Le 10:10-11**. Now here it is provided that they should themselves observe what they were to teach the people. Note, Those whose office it is to instruct must do it by example as well as precept, **#1Ti 4:12**. The priests were to draw nearer to God than any of the people, and to be more intimately conversant with sacred things, and therefore it was required of them that they should keep at a greater distance than others from every thing that was defiling and might diminish the honour of their priesthood.

I. They must take care not to disparage themselves in their mourning for the dead. All that mourned for the dead were supposed to come near the body, if not to touch it: and the Jews say,

"It made a man ceremonially unclean to come within six feet of a dead corpse;"

nay, it is declared (**#Nu 19:14**) that all who come into the tent where the dead body lies shall be unclean seven days. Therefore all the mourners that attended the funeral could not but defile themselves, so as not to be fit to come into the sanctuary for seven days: for this reason it is ordered,

1. That the priests should never put themselves under this incapacity of coming into the sanctuary, unless it were for one of their nearest relations, **#Le 21:1-3**. A priest was permitted to do it for a parent or a child, for a brother or an unmarried sister, and therefore, no doubt (though this is not mentioned) for the wife of his bosom; for Ezekiel, a priest, would have mourned for his wife if he had not been particularly prohibited, **#Eze 24:17**. By this allowance God put an honour upon natural affection, and favoured it so far as to dispense with the attendance of his servants for seven days, while they indulged themselves in their sorrow for the death of their dear relations; but, beyond this period, weeping must not hinder sowing, nor their affection to their relations take them off from the service of the sanctuary. Nor was it at all allowed for the death of any other, no, not of a *chief man among the people*, as some read it, **#Le 21:4**. They must not defile themselves, no, nor for the high priest himself, unless thus akin to them. Though *there is a friend that is nearer than a brother*, yet the priests must not pay this respect to the best friend they had, except he were a relation, lest, if it were allowed for one, others should expect it, and so they should be frequently taken off from their work: and it is hereby intimated that there is

a particular affection to be reserved for those that are thus near akin to us; and, when any such are removed by death, we ought to be affected with it, and lay it to heart, as the near approach of death to ourselves, and an alarm to us to prepare to follow.

2. That they must not be extravagant in the expressions of their mourning, no, not for their dearest relations, **#Le 21:5**. Their mourning must not be either,

(1.) Superstitious, according to the manner of the heathen, who cut off their hair, and let out their blood, in honour of the imaginary deities which presided (as they thought) in the congregation of the dead, that they might engage them to be propitious to their departed friends. Even the superstitious rites used of old at funerals are an indication of the ancient belief of the immortality of the soul, and its existence in a separate state: and though the rites themselves were forbidden by the divine law, because they were performed to false gods, yet the decent respect which nature teaches and which the law allows to be paid to the remains of our deceased friends, shows that we are not to look upon them as lost. Nor,

(2.) Must it be passionate or immoderate. Note, God's ministers must be examples to others of patience under affliction, particularly that which touches in a very tender part, the death of their near relations. They are supposed to know more than others of the reasons why we must *not sorrow as those that have no hope* (**#1Th 4:13**), and therefore they ought to be eminently calm and composed, that they may be able to comfort others with the same comforts wherewith they are themselves comforted of God. The people were forbidden to mourn for the dead with superstitious rites (**#Le 19:27-28**), and what was unlawful to them was much more unlawful to the priest. The reason given for their peculiar care not to defile themselves we have (**#Le 21:6**): *Because they offered the bread of their God, even the offerings of the Lord made by fire*, which were the provisions of God's house and table. They are highly honoured, and therefore must not stain their honour by making themselves slaves to their passions; they are continually employed in sacred service, and therefore must not be either diverted from or disfitted for the services they were called to. If they pollute themselves, they profane the name of their God on whom they attend: if the servants are rude and of ill behaviour, it is a reflection upon the master, as if he kept a loose and disorderly house. Note, All that either offer or eat the bread of our God must be holy in all manner of conversation, or else they profane that name which they pretend to sanctify.

ii. They must take care not to degrade themselves in their marriage, **#Le 21:7**. A priest must not marry a woman of ill fame, that either had been guilty or was suspected to have been guilty of uncleanness. He must not only not marry a harlot, though ever so great a penitent for her former whoredoms, but he must not marry one that was profane, that is, of a light carriage or indecent behaviour. Nay, he must not marry one that was divorced, because there was reason to think it was for some fault she was divorced. The priests were forbidden to undervalue themselves by such marriages as these, which were allowed to others,

1. Lest it should bring a present reproach upon their ministry, harden the profane in their profaneness, and grieve the hearts of serious people: the New Testament gives laws to ministers' wives (**#1Ti 3:11**), that they be *grave and sober*, that *the ministry be not blamed*.

2. Lest it should entail a reproach upon their families; for the work and honour of the priesthood were to descend as an inheritance to their children after them. Those do not consult the good of their posterity as they ought who do not take care to marry such as are of good report and character. He that would *seek a godly seed* (as the

expression is, **#Mal 2:15**) must first seek a godly wife, and take heed of a corruption of blood. It is added here (**#Le 21:8**), *Thou shalt sanctify him, and he shall be holy unto thee.*

"Not only thou, O Moses, by taking care that these laws be observed, but thou, O Israel, by all endeavours possible to keep up the reputation of the priesthood, which the priests themselves must do nothing to expose or forfeit. *He is holy to his God (#Le 21:7)*, therefore *he shall be holy unto thee.*"

Note, We must honour those whom our God puts honour upon. Gospel ministers by this rule are to be *esteemed very highly in love for their works' sake (#1Th 5:13)*, and every Christian must look upon himself as concerned to be the guardian of their honour.

III. Their children must be afraid of doing any thing to disparage them (**#Le 21:9**): *If the daughter of any priest play the whore*, her crime is great; she not only pollutes but *profaneth herself*: other women have not that honour to lose that she has, who, as one of a priest's family, has eaten of the holy things, and is supposed to have been better educated than others. Nay, *she profaneth her father*; he is reflected upon, and every body will be ready to ask,

"Why did not he teach her better?"

And the sinners in Zion will insult and say,

"Here is your priest's daughter."

Her punishment there must be peculiar: *She shall be burnt with fire*, for a terror to all priests' daughters. Note, The children of ministers ought, of all others, to take heed of doing any thing that is scandalous, because in them it is doubly scandalous, and will be punished accordingly by him whose name is *Jealous*.

Ver. 10. thru Ver. 15.

More was expected from a priest than from other people, but more from the high priest than from other priests, because upon his head the *anointing oil was poured*, and he was *consecrated to put on the garments (#Le 21:10)*, both which were typical of the anointing and adorning of the Lord Jesus, with all the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, which he received without measure. It is called *the crown of the anointing oil of his God (#Le 21:12)*; for the anointing of the Spirit is, to all that have it, a *crown of glory*, and a *diadem of beauty*. The high priest being thus dignified,

I. He must not defile himself at all for the dead, no, nor for his nearest relations, *his father or his mother*, much less his child or brother, **#Le 21:11**.

1. He must not use the common expressions of sorrow on those occasions, such as *uncovering his head*, and *rending his clothes (#Le 21:10)*, so perfectly unconcerned must he show himself in all the crosses and comforts of this life: even his natural affection must be swallowed up in compassion to the ignorant, and a feeling of their infirmities, and a tender concern for the household of God, which he was made the ruler of. Thus being the holy one that was entrusted with the *thummim and the urim* he must not know *father or mother*, **#De 33:8,9**.
2. He must not *go in to any dead body*, **#Le 21:11**. If any of the inferior priests were under a ceremonial pollution, there were other priests that might supply their places;

but, if the high priest were defiled, there would be a greater want of him. And the forbidding of him to go to any house of mourning, or attend any funeral, would be an indication to the people of the greatness of that dignity to which he was advanced. Our Lord Jesus, the great high priest of our profession, touched the dead body of Jairus's daughter, the bier of the widow's son, and the grave of Lazarus, to show that he came to altar the property of death, and to take off the terror of it, by breaking the power of it. Now that it cannot destroy it does not defile.

3. He must *not go out of the sanctuary* (#Le 21:12); that is, whenever he was attending or officiating in the sanctuary, where usually he tarried in his own apartment all day, he must not go out upon any occasion whatsoever, nor cut short his attendance on the living God, no, not to pay his last respects to a dying relation. It was a profanation of the sanctuary to leave it, while his presence was requisite there, upon any such occasion; for thereby he preferred some other business before the service of God and the business of his profession, to which he ought to make every thing else give place. Thus our Lord Jesus would not leave off preaching to *speaking with his mother and brethren*, #Mt 12:48.

II. He might not marry a widow (as other priests might), much less one divorced, or a harlot, #Le 21:13,14. The reason of this was to put a difference between him and other priests in this matter; and (as some suggest) that he might be a type of Christ, to whom the church was to be presented a *chaste virgin*, #2Co 11:2. See #Eze 44:22. Christ must have our first love, our pure love, our entire love; thus the *virgins love thee* (#So 1:3), and such only are fit to *follow the Lamb*, #Re 14:4.

III. He might not profane his seed among his people, #Le 21:15. Some understand it as forbidding him to marry any of an inferior rank, which would be a disparagement to his family. Jehoiada indeed married of his own tribe, but then it was into the royal family, #2Ch 22:11. This was not to teach him to be proud, but to teach him to be pure, and to do nothing unbecoming his office and the worthy name by which he was called. Or it may be a caution to him in disposing of his children; he must not profane his seed by marrying them unsuitably. Ministers' children are profaned if they be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

Ver. 16. thru Ver. 24.

The priesthood being confined to one particular family, and entailed upon all the male issue of that family throughout their generations, it was very likely that some or other in after-ages that were born to the priesthood would have natural blemishes and deformities: the honour of the priesthood would not secure them from any of those calamities which are common to men. Divers blemishes are here specified; some that were ordinarily for life, as blindness; others that might be for a time, as a scurf or scab, and, when they were gone, the disability ceased. Now,

I. The law concerning priests that had blemishes was,

1. That they might *live upon the altar* (#Le 21:22): *He shall eat* of the sacrifices with the other priests, even the *most holy things*, such as the show-bread and the sin-offerings, as well as the *holy things*, such as the tithes and first-fruits, and the priests' share of the peace-offerings. The blemishes were such as they could not help, and therefore, though they might not work, they must not starve. Note, None must be abused for their natural infirmities. Even the deformed child in the family must have its child's part.
2. Yet they must not *serve at the altar*, at either of the altars, nor be admitted to attend or

assist the other priests in offering sacrifice or burning incense, **#Le 21:17,21,23.** Great men choose to have such servants about them as are slightly, and it was fit that the great God should have such in his house then, when he was pleased to manifest his glory in external indications of it. But it was especially requisite that comely men should be chosen to minister about holy things, for the sake of the people, who were apt to judge according to outward appearance, and to think meanly of the service, how honourable soever it was made by the divine institution, of those that performed it looked despicably or went about it awkwardly. This provision God made for the preserving of the reputation of his altar, that it might not at any time fall under contempt. It was for the credit of the sanctuary that none should appear there who were any way disfigured, either by nature or accident.

II. Under the gospel,

1. Those that labour under any such blemishes as these have reason to thank God that they are not thereby excluded from offering spiritual sacrifices to God; nor, if otherwise qualified for it, from the office of the ministry. There is many a healthful beautiful soul lodged in a crazy deformed body. Yet,

2. We ought to infer hence how incapable those are to serve God acceptably whose minds are blemished and deformed by any reigning vice. Those are unworthy to be called Christians, and unfit to be employed as ministers, that are spiritually blind, and lame, and crooked, whose sins render them scandalous and deformed, so as that the offerings of the Lord are abhorred for their sakes. The deformities of Hophni and Phinehas were worse than any of the blemishes here mentioned. Let such therefore as are openly vicious be put out of the priesthood as polluted persons; and let all that are made to our God spiritual priests be before him *holy and without blemish*, and comfort themselves with this, that, though in this imperfect state they have spots that are the spots of God's children, yet they shall shortly appear before the throne of God *without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.*