

Leviticus 22

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

The Levitical priesthood had been called to serve and guard the ‘holy objects’ that had been declared sacred. The altar, the tabernacle, the showbread, incense, menorah and more did not belong to the priests themselves; they belonged to God. Thus failure to keep them holy was to profane the Name of the Lord. Because the Lord is holy and subsequently anything bearing His Name is holy, the priests had to perform temple service while in a state of ritual purity.

Uncleanness was not always avoidable of course. Often impurity resulted from normal, everyday activities that are not considered sinful. The purpose of the mandate for priestly holiness was to protect the sanctity of the tabernacle. Worship, sacrifice and service were always meant to be special, unique and never commonplace. Familiarity breeds contempt and making God and the ritual surrounding His worship something common is dangerous ground spiritually and theologically. Deliberately choosing to be in the presence of the Lord in an unclean state indicated a heart of contempt for God’s holiness and would result in excommunication. Impurity in and of itself was not a ‘sin’ and could be rectified through water and time. A defiled priest would become clean at evening, the start of the day during Creation Week and symbolic of new beginnings.

Bodily disfigurement was thought of to be a reflection of inner impurity in the ancient world. So one of the commands of Moses is to instruct the priesthood not to allow disfigured priests to serve before the Lord. The clergy were not the only things to be pure, as we had already seen a similar injunction related to the quality of the Lord’s offerings. Sacrificial animals were required to be without a blemish and were to be a reflection of the priests' own purity. The worshipper, the offering, and the serving clergy all equally appeared before the Lord in united holiness. Several times in Leviticus we have the sentence ‘I, the Lord, make you holy’ and we have it occurring here again in this chapter. Holiness is imbued upon us through the love and blessing of a holy God. Our obligation in return is to maintain that sanctity. The prophet Malachi prophesied against a generation that deliberately brought defective animals into the temple (Malachi 1 vs7-8). The teachings and instructions of God have unfortunately and tragically been ignored by both the Jewish people and the Church.

Holiness and impurity are personal as well as communal. Both are transferable. So utmost care was taken to restrict access by those deemed impure to segments of the community and the sanctuary grounds themselves. Priests could not marry divorced women as the principal charge against a woman in a divorce was infidelity. The stain of unfaithfulness was not to be brought before a faithful God just as the stain of death was not permitted before the God of life.

Holiness and impurity could also be consumed through eating sacred offerings, which were the right of the priests to partake, just not while in a state of impurity. Paul makes a reference to this instruction when he warns of partaking the Eucharist in an unworthy manner: akin to eating and drinking damnation.

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There is a lot of meaning in the order, ritual and instructions concerning sacrifices. Moses gives a new instruction that newborn animals had to be eight days old before they were acceptable as sacrifices. It is tempting to put humanitarian reasons for waiting eight days and many scholars do this in their commentaries. However, the eighth day carries connections for Jewish listeners to circumcision, the covenant with Abraham and the completion of Creation by the eighth day.

Having called the people to be holy, the worship space and its objects holy, the priesthood and offerings holy, in the next chapter we move into another thing called to be holy – time itself.