

THE NEED TO RESPOND

by Ray C. Stedman

In the book of Leviticus this morning we will continue our study of the five offerings, which we began last week.

When I say five offerings I don't want anyone to panic because, by offerings, I mean not collections, but the sacrifices of the Jewish faith as set forth in Leviticus.

Many of you may think that these sacrifices, which ceased long ago, are simply relics of a bygone day and that they have no meaning at all for us today. But that is not true. These are symbols, accurately designed and detailed by God to teach men what we need to know -- the truth about ourselves and also about our relationship with God and with each other. There is much of great value to us that we can learn from these Old Testament sacrifices, all of which, of course, found their fulfillment in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, in his life and in his death. Therefore as we study them we will relate them to Christ.

Last week in the first chapter of Leviticus we studied the first offering -- the burnt offering. You remember that this reflects the most basic need of humanity: the need to belong, the need for identity, the need to be accepted, to be welcomed and loved. This is fundamental in our human nature. Psychologists everywhere, though they may differ in many of their opinions about how to deal with men, always start here. They all recognize this fundamental need to be loved which is evident all around us.

As we saw last week, this need can partially be met by your family and your friends. Anyone who finds acceptance in his family or by his friends finds a sense of security in that, a sense of identity that is very, very important. But what we must understand, and what this burnt offering teaches us, is that there is no possibility that you will ever find that clamant cry within you fully satisfied unless you find it in the death of Christ. Unless through Jesus Christ you belong to God, belong to his family, you will never find that need really met. There will be a deep, restless, longing hunger in your heart. But all Christians can testify that when they came to Christ the thing which produced the joy of that moment was that they recognized that they belonged to God. They were his children forever. A relationship had begun which could never be broken and they were one with the Father in his family. That is what the burnt offering sets before us.

Now we come to the "cereal" offering, as it is called in the Revised Standard Version. Many versions call it the "meal" offering. In the King James Version it is called the "meat" offering because meat was the old English word for "food," or "meal." But there is no meat in it at all. In fact this is the only one of the offerings that is bloodless. In all the others animals had to die but in this one no blood was shed.

It could be offered in any of three forms. In verses 1 through 3 of the second chapter of Leviticus we find that the first form was that of simple, fine flour. We read,

"When any one brings a cereal offering as an offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour; he shall pour oil upon it, and put frankincense on it, and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense; and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion upon the altar, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord. And what is left of the cereal offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings by fire to the Lord." {Lev 2:1-3 RSV}

You can see that this was intended to be food for the priests. Their meat and cereal came from these offerings. In verse 4 there is a second form in which the offering could be presented:

"When you bring a cereal offering baked in the oven as an offering, it shall be

unleavened cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, or unleavened wafers spread with oil."
{Lev 2:4 RSV}

They could bring loaves or cakes of unleavened bread which, as subsequent verses specify, could be either baked, grilled, or pan fried. The third form is found in Verse 14:

"If you offer a cereal offering of first fruits to the lord, you shall offer for the cereal offering of your first fruits crushed new grain from fresh ears parched with fire." {Lev 2:14 RSV}

They could take freshly harvested wheat and shake the grain out by hand and crush it. That was then acceptable as a cereal offering.

It is obvious that the essence of this offering was that it was bread. It was food, the staff of life. This theme is the key to the cereal offering. All through the Old Testament you find people offering meal offerings, often in the form of three loaves of bread. And in the tabernacle there was the showbread.

The reason for all this becomes apparent when you remember that in the New Testament, after the great miracle when he took loaves and fishes and fed five thousand people, Jesus stood before the people and said, "I am the bread of life. I am the living bread which comes down from heaven. He who eats me shall live by means of me," {cf, John 6:33-35). He was indicating that he himself is to be our food and that we are to feed upon all of his character and his life.

This gives us a clue to what the meal offering is depicting. It is a description of humanity as God intended it to be. This was seen in its perfect form only in Jesus Christ -- the perfect, unsullied, spotless, God-pleasing humanity of the Lord Jesus. It bears relationship to us only if we as Christians are drawing from, feeding upon, the humanity of Jesus which is given to us.

I want to stop for just a minute here and make something clear. I find that everywhere I go people have the idea that the gospel, the good news, is that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross in order that you might go to heaven when you die. That is a form of the gospel and is a part of it. Unfortunately that is all of it which you hear in many places. But that is not the whole gospel by any means. If that is all you think the good news is then you have believed only a part of the gospel.

The *really* good news is that Jesus Christ died *for* you in order that he might live *in* you. It is his living in you *now* which is the exciting part of Christianity. You see, if you are not linked with his humanity and all that he is, if his perfect humanity is not available to you, then you are not enjoying the fullness of the Christian life or experience, because that is what it is all about.

This is what the meal offering is looking toward. Eventually it is looking toward us -- we who can say with Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," {Gal 2:20a KJV}. His perfect humanity is available to me. All the fullness of his life, the fineness of his character, the balanced quality of his humanity is available to me. And as I draw upon it by faith, as I expect him to link himself with me and to be part of me as I work and live, I shall find that I am privileged to present that perfect humanity back to God to be used as he wants. That is the fullness of the gospel and that is what the meal offering is all about.

Do you see how beautifully the fine flour expresses that? If you take a pinch of fine flour and run it through your fingers you can't feel any coarseness, any granularity, any roughness there at all. There are no uneven, jagged corners nor anything sharp. It is smooth. It is consistent, no matter where you sample it. It is balanced, even. That is why fine flour is such an apt picture of the humanity of Jesus -- and of man, as God intended man to be. If we had a meal offering to symbolize our natural humanity it would be of something like rough-cut oatmeal, with a lot of chips of husk and straw and other chaff. But the humanity as God made us to be, and as he intends us to be, and which is available to us in Christ, is a balanced life.

All of us keep trying to balance our lives and we have a great struggle in doing so. We push to one extreme

and then find we have gone too far. So we have to compensate in another direction. It is a zigzag, seesaw pattern. We never seem to be able to strike the happy medium. Well, that is because we are not drawing upon the life which is already balanced. You do not have to balance the life of Jesus. It is already a balanced life. And if you draw upon it, if you expect him to live in you, what you do will be balanced. Because he is the meal offering with its perfection of fine flour.

As you move through this passage you note that there are three things which always had to be included in the meal offering and two things which never could be included. It is important to heed these. The three things always included were oil, frankincense, and salt. Every mention of the meal offering in any form includes oil and frankincense.

The oil was used in two ways: it was mingled with the fine flour and it was also poured on top of it. That is very instructive, as we will see in a moment.

The frankincense was perfume, the "Chanel #5" of those days. It was a delightful fragrance. The use of salt is specified in Verse 13:

"You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking from your cereal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." {Lev 2:13 RSV}

Again we have these marvelous visual aids which God uses to teach us what he wants in our lives. In our new humanity which we have received in Christ he wants three elements clearly present.

The first is oil, which is a type, or picture, of the Holy Spirit. All through the Scriptures you find that it symbolizes the Spirit of God.

With this offering the oil is to be used in two ways. It is, first of all, to mingle with our humanity. This speaks of the indwelling Spirit. When you became a Christian by faith in Jesus Christ the Spirit of God was shed abroad in your heart. He came in to live in you and he is part of you. He is mingled with your humanity. That is also called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It has nothing to do with speaking in tongues. It means that, by the Spirit, "we are all baptized into one body," as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12 {1 Cor 12:13a RSV}. But then also, when you do something, when you minister, you need to have the Spirit anointing you, empowering you. You need to take fresh hold of him, so that you speak or act or think or write or work with power. That is the pouring of the Spirit upon you: "We are all made to drink of one Spirit," {1 Cor 12:13b RSV}. Notice that this was true of Jesus Christ in his own life. He was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. But then there came the day when, in the baptism at the river Jordan, the Spirit of God anointed him for his ministry. This is to be true of us as well.

The second element which is to be in our new humanity is frankincense. The frankincense was all offered to God. Verse 2 says, "And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil with all of its frankincense; and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion...a pleasing odor to the Lord." In other words, this is primarily something which God wants, something which he sees. Therefore it is not something outward but something inward. What it is, I think, is made clear by various passages in Scripture which speak of the things that delight God. What would you think is something about your life which delights God, which pleases him?

Well, let's look together at some passages. Read Psalm 69, Verses 30-31. The Psalmist says,

**I will praise the name of God with a song;
I will magnify him with thanksgiving.**

**This will please the Lord more than an ox
or a bull with horns and hoofs. {Psa 69:30-31 RSV}**

So don't bother to bring the ox or the bull; just bring a thankful, cheerful, praising heart. That will please the Lord. You remember what the Apostle Paul says about giving in Second Corinthians 9: "God loves a cheerful

giver," {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}. He wants you to be hilarious in your giving and to say, "What a joy to be able to give!" God loves a cheerful giver, a thankful, cheerful, ungrudging heart.

Or read Hebrews 13:15-16:

Through him [i.e., Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. {Heb 13:15-16 RSV}

In other words, the frankincense of our lives is to be a thankful, cheerful, willing, voluntary, obedient heart. That is what God likes. That delights him. And as we present our redeemed humanity to him this is what he wants to see.

The third element is salt, which, as you know, is a preservative. Some of us who are older remember the days before we had refrigeration. Of course we had ice boxes back then and we could keep a few things by bringing in ice every couple of days and filling the ice chest. I remember how the ice truck used to drive up and down the street and sell ice for that purpose. But that was cumbersome. So we preserved a lot of meat by putting salt on it. We had salt pork, salt ham, salt bacon, etc. Salt is a good preservative.

You remember that Jesus said to his disciples on one occasion, "You are the salt of the earth," {Matt 5:13a RSV}. That is, "You Christians are intended to be the thing which keeps society from getting rotten, from degenerating, from becoming corrupt and smelling." And he said, "You are the light of the world," {Matt 5:14a RSV}. Light, of course, is truth revealed. And salt is truth obeyed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is what is wrong with the world today. The church has had the truth, and it has been talking great words but it has not been obeying them. And until Christians begin to obey what God has said -- these great words of truth and love and mercy and peace and the bearing of one another's burdens -- there is no preservative in society. Society gets rotten. But when the church begins, as it is doing now, to come back and to act upon what it says -- to love instead of cutting people off, to reach out toward them -- then it is salt, a preservative.

"With all your offerings," God said, "you shall offer salt."

Then there are two things which were excluded from the offering, and both are found in Verse 11:

"No cereal offering which you bring to the lord shall be made with leaven; for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as an offering by fire to the Lord." {Lev 2:11 RSV}

You housewives know what leaven is. It is yeast. When you have made bread you have taken yeast, or leaven, and put it in the dough. Why? Because it has the power to expand, to puff up. Thus leaven is a fitting illustration or symbol of that in our human life which puffs us up. What is that? Pride.

I remember that a doctor told me years ago, "You know, human beings are funny. When you pat them on the back, their head swells up." And there are amazing forms of pride. Sometimes we disguise it as though it were really humility. I heard of a church which gave its pastor a medal for humility -- but they took it away because he wore it! Every one of us knows that there is something about our hearts which is easily susceptible to being puffed up.

Paul said to the Corinthians, "Love builds up, but knowledge [i.e., pride in your knowledge] puffs up," {cf, 1 Cor 8:1 RSV}. This is so true. You see, what God is saying is, "When you come to offer your humanity to me, don't have any ego in it. Don't be doing this for your own glory. Don't be trying to derive from this a certain amount of satisfaction or credit for yourself." "No flesh," he says, "shall glory in my presence."

There must be no leaven in the offering.

Second, there shall be no honey.

"Well," you say, "what's wrong with honey?" There is nothing wrong with honey, in many ways. Remember that the Israelites were called to live in a land flowing with milk and honey. God didn't say that there was anything evil about honey, so don't go home and throw your honey out, or your leaven, either. Just keep what they symbolize out of your life. That is the point.

But again this is a fitting symbol. Honey, as many of you know, is natural sweetness. Sugar is refined sweetness. Sugar cane or sugar beets are processed in a way that brings out the sweetness. But you don't need to refine honey; it is natural sweetness. There are some people, rare among us I admit, who are naturally sweet. Some people have an even temper and disposition. They do not get upset very easily. They are easy to live with. Even though they may not be Christians at all they still have a natural sweetness. But God says, "Don't bring that to me because it won't work." The only sweetness he accepts is the sweetness of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ working in you. He does not want your natural attributes. Not that it is not nice for others to have you around if you are naturally sweet, but that will not do anything for you in God's sight.

He refuses the honey.

There is one other thing to note about the meal offering which is most important. If you read through the book of Leviticus and other texts in the Old Testament you find that the children of Israel never offered a meal offering by itself. It was always accompanied by an animal sacrifice. These meal offerings were designed to go with one of the animal sacrifices, and most often with the burnt offering. That is why it is put right next to the burnt offering in the order of the sacrifices. There is the burnt offering, then the meal offering, then the peace offering. The meal offering is always offered in connection with the burnt offering.

That is very instructive, because it is telling us something significant about the meaning of this meal offering. The burnt offering, remember, was the need to be loved -- the need to be accepted and to belong. But if God reaches out to you and says, "You are mine," then that lays a demand upon you, doesn't it? You need to do something. You need to say something back to God. You need to respond to his love. You need to open up your life toward him. He has reached out toward you; you need to reach back toward him. That is what the meal offering is all about. It exemplifies this basic, inherent quality of humanity: it cannot develop, it can never go anywhere, it can never fulfill itself, until it is ready to respond to the love which reaches out to it.

Again, you can see this all around you -- in your home and in your own nature and experience. We are made to respond. Usually we respond in kind to the way we are approached.

If I come to you and level my finger at you and say, "Look, you and I have been friends for five years. But I've been thinking about that, and there are some things I'd like to take up with you. I want to talk to you about some things I don't like about our friendship." What would you do? You would level your finger back at me, and say, "Yes, we have been friends for five years -- seems like ten to me. I've been thinking about our relationship, too, and I've got a few things I'd like to settle with you." My hostility would arouse your hostility and we would be at odds just like that!

But if I come to you and say, "You know, I've just been thinking about the five years of friendship that we have enjoyed with each other. And the more I thought about it, the more I have begun to appreciate some of the things that you have meant to me, and how you've helped me. So I just wanted to tell you about it." Do you know what you would do? You'd say to yourself, "You know, I've always liked this guy, but I never saw so much in him before. This is really an astute observer. He obviously is a deep and perceptive person!" And you'd begin to thank me, and tell me some things about what my life had meant to you. That is because inherent in our humanity is this quality of response.

Now, sometimes there are factors which hinder it. Sometimes there are barriers of fear and suspicion and hostility and hate and resentment which need to be removed. But the way they can be removed is to respond to love. As long as there is no response, there can be no progress in the love. You can't go any further.

The one who loves and reaches out toward you can never go any further than that initial act as long as you do not respond. As long as you remain cold and frozen and indifferent and turn your back there is no possibility of its going any further. Even God cannot give you any more until you say "Yes" to what he has already

offered you.

This is why you read in Hebrews 4:2 that when the good news reached the people of Israel, "... the message that they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith" {Heb 4:2b RSV}. That is, they did not do anything in return, they did not respond to the Word when it came to them. This is why Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians cries out to them with such pleading eloquence:

Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return -- I speak as to children -- widen your hearts also. {2 Cor 6:11-13 RSV}

He says, "There is nothing limiting us. We love you and want to help you, to reach you. I want to minister to you, but you are not responding. You won't say anything back. You won't open your heart. You won't widen your life." And so he pleads with them as a father. "I speak to you as children," he says. "Let me in -- widen your hearts also."

This is why God is often represented in the Scriptures as pleading with men. "Come, let us reason together," says the Lord, {cf, Isa 1:18}. "Come unto me," says the Lord Jesus, "and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28 KJV}. "Turn." "Repent." "Come back." God is forever pleading with men to do something about the love with which he has reached out toward us.

In Hebrews 11:6 the most basic approach to God is described in this way, "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him," {cf, Heb 11:6b}. God has been seeking us, and he says, "Now it is time for you to begin to seek me. I've been reaching out to you. Now you reach back to me." Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. This is the law of response in human nature. This is why John says, "We love, because he has first loved us," {1 Jn 4:19 RSV}.

This is why the meal offering is the second of the offerings. In the burnt offering you have God reaching out and saying, "You're mine. I want you." But in the meal offering you must say in response, "Yes, Lord, I'm yours. I give myself to you." This is what God is after. Love creates the possibility of response. But if that response is refused then nothing can happen until, at last, the heart begins to respond.

This is why many Christians never seem to grow beyond a certain point with God. At a certain point you stop saying "Yes" to his love. There is an area you don't want to give up, that you want to protect for yourself. There is an area you want to be yours and not his. At that point you are saying "No" to the love reaching out from God to bless you, and to open you up like a flower before the sun, and fill your life with fragrance and devotion. As long as you say "No" at that point nothing can happen.

This is why God, again and again through our lives, calls us to times of crisis, times of decision, times when we recognize that we are shutting ourselves away from the grace and love he wants to give us. And we have to come to him and say,

"Lord, here I am. Here is my redeemed humanity, with its oil and its frankincense and its salt, but with no leaven and no honey. I want to be your man, your woman, your boy, your girl, so that today you can express all that you are through me. I give myself to you. Here I am, Lord. Let's walk together this day."

When that happens you have offered the meal offering unto the Father, just as the Son of God, in the beauty of his life, constantly offered his humanity -- through the Holy Spirit and without spot or blemish -- unto God.

Perhaps in this moment we can have a time of silent prayer in which you can respond in your heart to God. If there is an area where you have been saying "No"? Well, then start saying "Yes". If there is an area from which you have been shutting him out will you now say, "Yes, Lord, here I am. I need your love. I need to belong. I need to be identified with you. And as you have reached out to me, I now reach out to you."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the love which is everlastingly reaching out toward us and which never seems to stop. Even though we've said "No" so many times your love keeps pursuing us. Lord, we thank you for that everlasting quality which never says "No" to us, which never seems to give up but keeps pleading and waiting for that response of our heart. Now may we in this moment respond to you, our Father, respond in grateful appreciation and thanks and love for all you want to do in us. Take us this day, Lord, and be our God and live through us, so that we might give ourselves again tomorrow and all through the days of this week and for the rest of our lives, and that everything you are, we may be. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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