

FREE TO SERVE

by Ray C. Stedman

In the Gospel according to Leviticus we come today to a section which is specifically addressed to priests, to Aaron the high priest and his sons. This family, as you know, was set aside in Israel to do a specific work of ministry in relationship to God. All the members of Aaron's family were priests by birth. They did not become priests by choice or by desire on their part, but by being born into the family of Aaron. There was no other way to become a priest. No other family was ever recognized as having valid membership in the priesthood.

But even though they were members of the family of Aaron they could serve as priests only if they met certain qualifications. So there is a difference between merely being a priest and serving as a priest. That is important and instructive to us because, as we have seen, this priesthood of the family of Aaron is a picture of the ministry that we have uniquely as believers in Jesus Christ. Every one of us who is born again, born into the family of our great high priest Jesus Christ, is by that fact inescapably a priest. But whether we can serve as a priest or not depends upon the qualifications in our life. Membership in the family is by birth; service in the family is by qualification.

This is highlighted in a quotation from a classic treatment of the first five books of the Bible called The Notes on the Pentateuch by a Plymouth Brethren author who uses only his initials, C.H.M. This is what he says:

Every child of God is a priest. He is enrolled as a member of Christ's priestly house. He may be very ignorant, but his position as a priest is not founded upon knowledge but upon life. His experience may be very shallow, but his place as a priest does not depend upon experience but upon life. His capacity may be very limited, but his relationship as a priest does not rest upon an enlarged capacity but upon life. He was born into the position and relationship of a priest. He did not work himself thereinto. It was not by any efforts of his own that he became a priest; he became a priest by birth. The spiritual priesthood, together with all the spiritual functions attaching thereunto, is the necessary appendage to spiritual birth. The capacity to enjoy the privileges and to discharge the functions of a position must not be confounded with the position itself. They must ever be kept distinct. Relationship is one thing; capacity is quite another.

That distinction was made regarding the sons of Aaron and it is true also of us. When you became a Christian by faith in Jesus Christ you also became a priest -- with great privileges and functions, which we will examine in a moment. But you cannot exercise that priesthood and enjoy those privileges and reap the benefit and excitement of the ministry unless you fulfill certain qualifications which these chapters set before us. When the Old Testament pictures us here as priests it is talking primarily about that aspect of our life which concerns ministry to others, our outreach -- either to other Christians or to non-believers. We are all priests by virtue of being Christians, but how good a priest we are, how much we enjoy the ministry committed to us and how effective we are in it, depends upon our qualifications.

The ministry of a priest is summarized up for us in Verse 6 of Chapter 21:

**"They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the offerings by fire to the Lord, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy."
{Lev 21:6 RSV}**

Priests did two things: they offered the offerings, the sacrifices, and they offered the bread, the showbread, before God in the tabernacle.

This is directly applicable to us and very significant, because we have exactly the same ministry on the spiritual level. As we learn from the New Testament, these Levitical practices are shadows, pictures, symbols, which

speak of our own ministry. To offer the offerings is to deal with the effects of the death of Jesus. Those animal sacrifices represent the death of the Lord Jesus. Every lamb, every calf, every goat that was slain in the Old Testament was a picture of the work of Christ upon the cross in giving up his life on behalf of his own. And to offer these sacrifices was to apply this work, in type, to the individuals who brought them.

What does that mean to us? It is given to us as believers in Jesus Christ to apply the work of Christ to people who are in desperate trouble around us -- both other Christians and non-Christians as well. We are to do so by sharing the truth of the word of God with them, the facts that God has declared in the Gospel, and thus to deliver them from the burden of guilt for their sins and to set them free from the power of evil in their lives, from habits that enslave them and blind them and inhibit them in so many ways, and to bring them forth into freedom and health and liberty. The death of Jesus, the blood of Christ, is what cuts off the hurtfulness and the sinfulness of human life. It is the only solution to the problem of human evil. Therefore every problem which stems from self-centeredness, self-sufficiency, evil, at work in your life and mine, is to be dealt with by the death of Christ -- the understanding of it, the belief in it, the acceptance of it personally, and the appropriation of it. Helping people in this is the job of a priest, and exciting work it is!

Have you ever had the privilege of helping someone in this way -- someone you have come to know or to love but who is troubled, blinded, who is discouraged, depressed, defeated, who has fallen into a morass of evil thoughts and attitudes and activities which are destroying him or her? Have you had the privilege of setting them free with a word of release and helping them see what God has done for them? The lifting of guilt, the freeing from sin, the deliverance from the power of evil in human affairs, the healing touch, the freeing, delivering Word -- only this will help, and this is our ministry, yours as well as mine, to help people wherever we find them, whoever they are. That is the privilege given to us as priests. That is what we are here for -- to minister to others in this way.

The priests were also to offer bread. They themselves were to eat of the showbread, the loaves that were baked in the tabernacle, and they were to offer this before God along with the animal offerings. Bread speaks of strength and of life. This is a beautiful picture, as we have already seen, of feeding upon the available life of a risen Lord, of taking from him the strength we need to be patient, to be cheerful and joyful, to be quiet and understanding and loving and wise. So here you have in view both the death and the life of Christ -- the blood that was shed, and the bread upon which we feed day by day.

All this is beautifully symbolized by the Lord's table. We have here blood and bread, just as in this text. The work of priests is to administer the blood and the bread. Here is a wonderful study of what it means when we take the cup and eat the bread. It is certainly not a magic, hocus-pocus act that makes something religious happen to us. It is a recognition that we understand these great principles -- that it is the application of the death of Jesus Christ which sets us free from all that once enslaved us or still does enslave us or hinder us, and that it is his life available to us which we feed upon and which strengthens us, restores us and gives us hope again, renews our walk and encourages our heart and picks up our spirits and makes us able to go on.

From time to time we have people sitting here in these services (perhaps there are some this morning) who are right at the very limits of their endurance. They are confronted with problems which are so oppressive, so demanding, so terribly pressuring that they are ready to take their own lives. Again and again it has been my privilege as a priest to speak a word which has released them and relieved them and strengthened them again, and they have told me about it afterward. I take joy in that ministry. But my ministry is no different than yours. You have the same privilege -- perhaps not in as public a way, though some of you may have that as well. It is our calling, and high privilege, to do what no other people can do in this world today -- to set people free in these ways. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that every one of us share this ministry together.

That is what makes life exciting! I had lunch this week with an outstanding businessman who is a captain of industry with literally thousands of people under his supervision and who makes tremendous decisions which involve tens of thousands of people. Yet he spent the whole lunchtime telling me of his excitement in ministering in ways which helped people out of their depression and enabled them to solve their problems. That is what was exciting to him. All the demands of his company and the challenges of his work were nothing as compared with the joy of ministering. That is what makes life full and satisfying, complete and worthwhile. I hope that you appreciate your priesthood and your ministry, because God has called us to this.

In order to exercise this priesthood a priest must be holy. This is what God says: "They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; [then he says what it is they are to do]; therefore they shall be holy," {Lev 21:6 RSV}. Once again let me remind you that this word, holy, like so many other words from the Bible, has been twisted and distorted in our thinking so that it is usually taken to mean something which is not very attractive. We are likely to think that being holy is to be long-faced and solemn and sour. But it isn't that at all! Holiness means wholeness. It means to be healed. How can you help someone unless you yourself have been helped? How can you encourage someone when your own heart is discouraged and defeated? How can you help somebody to cheer up and be joyful and genuinely glad in the midst of pressure unless you have learned how to be glad in the midst of pressure and struggle? How can you deliver somebody from a loathsome moral sickness if you are a victim of the same thing yourself? How can you help somebody who has a blemish in their spiritual life unless you have been delivered from that blemish yourself and thus know how to say the delivering word? You must be set free, first. You must have experienced the joy of God, the life of liberty in the spirit of God, in order to help. You must be whole in the area in which you are attempting to help. You may not be whole in every way, but you must be whole in that area where you are trying to help. So these two entire chapters deal with this matter of the wholeness of priests, in order that they might have a part in the excitement of ministry. Although they are priests by birth they can exercise their ministry only by fulfillment of these qualifications. These passages set forth for us what wholeness consists of, and in what areas need we be free from that which defiles.

The first qualification is given in the first five verses of Chapter 21:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them that none of them shall defile himself for the dead among his people, except for his nearest of kin, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, or his virgin sister (who is near to him because she has had no husband; for her he may defile himself). He shall not defile himself as a husband among his people and so profane himself. They shall not make tonsures [abnormal cuttings of the hair] upon their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuttings in their flesh. They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God..." {Lev 21:1-5 RSV}

The first limitation upon a priest was that he not defile himself with the dead. You remember that earlier in this book we saw that it was forbidden for any Israelite to touch a dead body. Or if for some reason he had to, as in the case of those who buried the dead or who accidentally touched a dead body, he was unclean until the evening and had to wash in recognition of the defilement that had come upon him. But for the priests, those who exercised ministry, there was no allowance for any occasion of touching a dead body -- except for those near of kin. Not even for his own wife could a priest defile himself. This is all very suggestive and significant.

The touching of a dead body is a picture, the New Testament tells us, of any involvement with the flesh, with the fallen nature, the old life within us, or within others. You remember that Paul says in Romans that the mind of the flesh is death and that they who live according to the flesh are defiled, are at enmity with God, and cannot please him. So this is an illustration of the necessity in ministering of avoidance of the flesh -- that spirit of self-sufficiency which is inherent in all of humanity and which boasts itself in how capable it is, how able and adequate it is to accomplish things. For those who minister there must be no involvement with this except, and notice how exquisitely accurate Scripture is here, that which is our own flesh. There is in each of us a nature inherited from Adam which is fleshly, and we can't avoid that. You see, those near of kin live with us and picture that which is within us, that with which we are identified. God is very realistic and is not suggesting that we will ever be freed from that in this life. We can't escape it. We are too close to it.

Now, we must deal with it. We can be cleansed from it when it arises, and of course we can avoid it by recognizing its appeal and rejecting it, renouncing it in the Spirit, this is true. But there is no way that we can avoid the flesh altogether. There is no way that we can be so spiritual that we never fall into sin. Even the most earnestly dedicated Christian, even the one with the best of intentions and the most determination to walk in the Spirit, is going to be tripped up some time or other by his own crafty, tricky, wily, deceitful flesh. And when that happens we need to deal with it and honestly admit it and not try to hide it and pretend that it isn't there and call it some fancy name to try to make it seem to smell a little better when it is really nothing but the old flesh.

The flesh never dies but it goes on smelling that way. This we must recognize and remember. Though on occasion we are going to be defiled, the Scriptures teach, our ministry will not be permanently affected so long as it is our flesh that has tripped us up and we cleanse ourselves from it.

But the chief warning here is against being in contact with the flesh around us in the world, against adopting the principles, in other words, by which the world operates -- with its insistence that it is adequate to handle problems and therefore doesn't need God, with its worldly wisdom, its external and superficial approach to problems, and its emphasis upon activity rather than attitude, outwardness rather than inwardness. This passage is exhorting us not to borrow from the world around us the spirit of the flesh. Don't get involved in those enterprises which rest upon human ambition and dedication and self-motivation -- that spirit which says, "I've got what it takes and I can do it. Just watch my speed." That is the flesh. And if you intend to help people you will find that if you try to do it from the standpoint of appealing to their pride in themselves, and so on, you will not set them free. What this Scripture says is that you won't stop being a Christian if you get involved with that, but you will end your ministry. You can't help people in the area of their desperate need, delivering them by the death of Christ, nor can you encourage and build them by the life of Jesus, if these defilements are present.

Notice that this thrust is carried to a deeper level in Verses 7-9:

"They shall not marry a harlot or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman who has been divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God. You shall consecrate him, for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you, for I the Lord, who sanctify you, am holy. And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire." {Lev 21:7-9 RSV}

Here is a prohibition against forming close alliances, marriages, with that which represents the flesh. Not only is a momentary contact with it forbidden but especially prohibited is any tie, any commitment to it on a long-term basis. This robs the priest of his right to minister. He can no longer in the power of God apply the death of Christ to deliver people nor can he enrich their lives with the food of God and with the fellowship of the son of God. In other words, this is a severe warning against the idea of picking up the processes and programs of the world and baptizing them, calling them Christian, and going on from there.

This is very instructive. In most of the mission fields I have visited in the last few years the flesh is rampant in the church. Christians there have set aside almost entirely any sense of dependence upon the life of Jesus Christ in them. They seem to know nothing of this and have borrowed almost completely the attitudes and the resources of the world around them to carry on the work of God. They evidently assume that churches are nothing but business organizations to be run like any other business. They buy the world's approaches and depend upon the same resources. They try to influence people in the same way that any non-Christian would. As a result very little is really being accomplished. They are just stumbling and faltering along. And the most horrible thing about it is that they are doing exactly as they were taught by American missionaries! For what is true out there is true here in the United States to a very considerable degree.

But here is God's warning signal raised to say, "Look, if you go about your ministry in this way, no matter how hard you try you will lack my blessing." You may make a very impressive demonstration in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God and in the accomplishment of his work and his will it will be one hundred percent ineffective. Nothing of eternal value will happen as a result and your own heart will tell you that it is all shallow and empty and useless. This is why the Christian life is often boring to many people. It is because they don't have any real ministry. They are priests but they are not exercising their priesthood. And even though they try, even though they attempt to have a ministry, they cannot do so successfully because God knows the heart. He is not fooled. And where these limitations are being violated no ministry is possible.

The next passage deals with the high priest, and here certain further restrictions are given. He is the example to all. As we look at this passage you will remember that our high priest is, of course, Jesus himself. How beautifully this passage describes the way he lived!

"The priest who is chief among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor rend his clothes; he shall not go in to any dead body, nor defile himself, even for his father or for his mother; neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him. I am the Lord. And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or one divorced, or a woman who has been defiled, or a harlot, these he shall not marry; but he shall take to wife a virgin of his own people, that he may not profane his children among his people; for I am the Lord who sanctify him." {Lev 21:10-15 RSV}

How intensified are these restrictions with respect to the high priest! He cannot defile himself in any way for the dead. That is, he has no contact whatsoever with the flesh. How true this was of the Lord Jesus! He was born without a sinful flesh, and he never in any way identified with it. Notice how this is symbolized. Here are the characteristics of the high priest.

First, he was to have no loose hair. We have seen in earlier studies that hair is always the picture of beauty. Jesus' beauty was never in disarray. As you look at the record of our great high priest in the gospels you can see how fully he met this. There was no lack of orderliness or of discipline in the beauty of his life, no looseness. There was never a time when he acted beyond what was required by the situation. He was never out of control, never exhibited any impatience of spirit, never any imbalance, but his life was all beautifully in order. How gentle he was, how patient, how compassionate, how thoughtful and careful of others, how strong and courageous he could be, how set upon the accomplishment of the will of the Father he was! Everything in his life reflected beauty; there was no disarray. The high priest was never to tear his garments, for as you remember, garments are a picture of the character of an individual. "What you wear is what you are," to paraphrase Flip Wilson. "What you see is what you get." In other words, the character of the high priest is never to be inconsistent or defective but always in place, always balanced and whole. As you read through the gospels you can see how fully Jesus fulfilled these words.

The prohibition against defilement with the dead extended even to father or mother in the case of the high priest. In other words, he was not to defile himself even with those closest to him. This may touch upon our Lord's frequently strange-sounding words to his mother, Mary. There were those occasions when she came to him and drew upon their natural human relationship. And you remember how he spoke in a way which disassociated himself from that. When she asked him to change the water into wine his answer was, "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come," {cf, John 2:4}. He did the miracle she asked, but he made it very clear that it wasn't because she was his mother that he did it; it was for another reason. And remember how he answered his human parents at the age of twelve: "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" {cf, Luke 2:49}. He did not permit any kind of natural relationship to intervene with his work or in any way hinder what he came to be and to do. There was no involvement with the flesh at all, either in himself or with others. His spotless, unsullied character is set forth here in Leviticus.

Finally, there was to be no blemish in his marriage. This is beautifully suggestive! The high priest was to marry only a virgin daughter of his people, and she was to be without any blemish at all. Does that not recall the words of Paul in Ephesians 5:

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." {Eph 5:25-27 RSV}

"Well," you say, "how can this be? We are part of the church, and we have all these blemishes and spots and wrinkles and everything. Just look at us!" Well, this is why the Lord has set aside, totally, everything which comes from the flesh. That is why in his relationship with us he will never accept or tolerate or put up with any evidences of the flesh nor allow it to be honored or exalted or blessed in his presence. That is why he will not acknowledge any ministry which is based upon self-sufficiency, the feeling that "I've got what it takes," or, "God ought to feel lucky that I'm on his side because I've got something that he needs." He has set all that aside. He has already written off all the blemishes and wrinkles and spots. They are there in our experience, but he has dealt with them, taken care of them already, and so no action which arises from the flesh will ever

have any standing in God's sight. As Paul says in First Corinthians, "No flesh shall glory in his presence," {cf. 1 Cor 1:29 KJV}.

So if we operate in the flesh, in a spirit of ambition and desire to exalt ourselves, to be prominent in the eyes of others, it will never accomplish anything in God's program. That is why God will never rest until we learn to draw from the strength of his life in us in order to serve him. Unless we do he will never allow our ministry to have any spiritual effect at all. It may be impressive in the eyes of people, and you can make "a fair show in the flesh", as Paul calls it {Gal 6:12 KJV}, so that even other Christians are fooled. But you will never deceive God one moment and there will be no power and no effect in your ministry. There can be no offering of the offerings nor of the bread of God if these blemishes are present. That is why he has already set them aside -- so that his fellowship with his church is one in which all these things have been dealt with, already anticipated and handled. It is only we who get involved in and disturbed about these areas. But the Lord has cleansed the church and washed it with the Word. And now he is eliminating these defects from our lives in order that we might be without spot or blemish before him.

In verses sixteen on to the end of the chapter you have the hereditary blemishes which disqualify a person for the priesthood. These are things which come to us through our family connections, which in that sense are unavoidable, but which nevertheless disqualify us until they are dealt with:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. [That is, there is no way by which you can encourage others in the strength and fellowship of Jesus Christ if one of these blemishes is there.] For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles; no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat of the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not come near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord who sanctify them." So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel. {Lev 21:16-24 RSV}

This is almost self-explanatory, isn't it? Here were people who were members of the priestly family and as such they were to eat the bread of God. There is no limitation against that. They could feed upon it themselves. They could grow by its strength. Interpreted to our level, we can take the life of Christ and draw upon it for our own spiritual nourishment no matter what our personal lives are like. We are not cast out of the family of God even though there are defects. But we can't pass it to others if we have a blemish like one of these. We cannot minister until they are handled, taken care of. In the case of the Israelites, they were set aside all their life long because of these blemishes. They may not even have been their own fault, but God said, "No one with a blemish can minister in my presence," because that would have taught a false lesson about the God who is behind the priesthood. But the glorious thing is that in the application to our lives these blemishes can be healed, they can be cleansed! We don't have to be forever set aside from ministering.

Here again we are dealing with a reason why the Christian life is often boring to many. You may know that you are a priest, that you have the opportunity of ministering to others and helping them, but perhaps you can't do it. Why? Well, it may be because there are blemishes in your life. Each of these blemishes has an antitype in the Christian economy:

- Were some of these Israelite priests blind? Well, some of us are, too. We just don't see things very clearly. Our spiritual eyes are blinded.
- Were some of them lame? Some of us are, too. We don't walk very well. We limp and stagger and stumble and fumble and fall on our faces at times.
- Did they have deformed hands or feet? Well, such can be the case with us. Something in our work or walk may be faulty at times, perhaps because it has been in our family for several generations and we are afflicted with the same hereditary tendency.

- Are there spiritual hunchbacks in the church -- men and women with warped or twisted spiritual mentality, spiritual views, or spiritual structure in their lives? Yes, there are those among us, and they have little ministry. There is not much that they can do, other than to feed upon the life of God themselves.
- Are there dwarfs? There are so many dwarfs in the Christian churches today, people who by this time ought to have grown to full spiritual stature, tall and strong, but instead they are pygmies, dwarfs, stunted in their growth.
- Are there those with a wrongful sex life, pictured here by crushed testicles? They have no ministry. They may try, but there is no power, no effectiveness. They don't deliver people, cannot heal them.

All these blemishes prevent ministry. They don't stop us from feeding upon the life of Christ but they prevent us from ministering effectively to others and, though we may perform the outward form of ministry, God withholds the power. The New Testament teaches this too. Paul says that if we purge ourselves from that which is wrong we shall be a vessel unto honor, fit for the master's use {cf, 2 Tim 2:21 KJV}. He says that God is the one who determines energizings of ministry and that we are to work on that basis. And God knows our hearts {cf., 1 Th 2:4}. He knows what limits us.

Again and again, especially in dealing with young people, I have found so many Christians involved in wrongful habits and faulty outlooks, with obscured spiritual vision and impaired hearing of the Word. In working with them I find that at first they usually have a sense that everything is fine -- but they can't understand why their ministry and life is not as full and as satisfying as it ought to be. But finally we begin to get down to the nitty-gritty and they acknowledge that there are areas in their life which are wrong. Sometimes there is a great deal of resistance. But over and over I have seen young people and older people alike take this seriously and clear up these areas. And invariably they have an experience of sweetness and freshness and wider effectiveness in their spiritual lives -- increased power, increased vision, and the ability to do much more than they were ever able to do before. And they say, "I didn't understand. I didn't realize that this habit that I was practicing was limiting me because it seemingly didn't interfere with my own enjoyment of the Lord." But it was interfering with their ministry, their priesthood. And very often they give heartwarming testimonies of what God has taught them through this experience of deliverance.

That is what Chapter 22 goes on to tell us about. We will not take the time to read it now because it goes on in much the same vein and repeats much of what we have seen earlier in the book. I will merely summarize it.

In Verses 1-9 we are taught the truth again that if there is uncleanness, it must be cleansed.

Then in Verses 10-16 a restriction is placed upon strangers, foreigners. No one other than the children of Aaron, and especially no non-Israelite, could hold the priesthood. This, of course, is a picture for us that God is not interested in having those who are outside the family of God doing spiritual work for him. A non-Christian cannot do the work of God. No one who is not born again into the family of God can ever accomplish anything for God. It may appear that he is, in many ways, but, in the sight of God and at the judgment seat of Christ {Rom 14:14:10, 2 Cor 5:10}, it will be revealed as nothing but wood, hay, and stubble instead of gold, silver, and precious jewels {1 Cor 3:12}. You may offer your talents to Christ but he doesn't use them for spiritual advance. He uses only spiritual gifts which can be given only to Christians. Your talents may be channels for those gifts but it is only the gifts that advance anyone spiritually.

And finally, there is to be no blemish in the offerings that are given. They are to be perfect because they are a picture of the work of Jesus Christ. Our understanding and presentation of the death and of the effectiveness of the life of Jesus must be clear and uncomplicated, without distortion. We are to understand these facts very plainly and apply them correctly.

The chapter concludes with these wonderful words, Verses 31-33:

"So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the Lord. And you shall not profane my holy name, but I will be hallowed among the people of Israel; I am the Lord who sanctify you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the

Lord" {Lev 22:31-33 RSV}

What tenderness and compassion there is in those verses! "I am the Lord," he says, "who brought you out of bondage, out of slavery. I set you free. And I want to heal your life and bring you into a land of abundance and promise, of excitement and blessing and fruitfulness, with a sense of worth and power, and to be your God, to be available to you to teach you how to live as men were ordained to live in the beginning -- in dominion over all the earth, over all the powers of darkness and evil that exist in the universe, and to walk as free people, healed and whole. That is why I speak to you this way," the Lord says. "That is why at times I will not allow you to exercise ministry even though you want to, until you deal with the blemishes of your life. When they are healed, then your ministry can begin."

When we submit to this we discover that our priesthood begins to be rich and fulfilling and exciting. God begins to enlarge our borders. A sense of worthwhileness comes into our life -- beyond anything that we ever dreamed. We discover that God is not so much interested in our activity as he is in our attitudes -- our being rather than our doing -- and that we can please God while we are washing the dishes, by the right attitude of heart, that we can please God and be used of God when we are spading in the yard or working in the shop. His life begins to flow through us so that we are effective in applying the death of Christ to the disease and heartbreak of humanity around us and are effective in encouraging and building up and feeding and enriching by the bread of God the lives of those with whom we come in contact. There is an entire world around us waiting to be ministered to, hundreds and thousands of people with whom we are in touch each day and who need to be helped, need deliverance. Yours can be the word of that deliverance, yours can be the word of power. You can encourage them and build them up and strengthen them, if you deal first with the blemishes of your own life.

May God help us to do this as we come now to this Lord's table, which speaks so eloquently of these very things. As we administer the bread and the blood we must do so as whole people, healed before God. If some of you must leave, you are free to do so. This table, of course is for the family of God, for those who belong to him. No strangers are to partake of it unless they have, in this very moment, become a part of that family by faith in Jesus Christ. The whole family is now invited to remind ourselves in symbol of what we have been learning from God's word.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, how grateful we are for the truth that you have set before us, a truth which you endeavor to teach us in so many ways -- not only by this Word which comes with such clarity to our hearts as taught by the Spirit, but also by this symbol which Jesus himself instituted as he met with his own on the last day before his crucifixion. Lord Jesus, teach us now to draw strength from our God, to be holy, and to set aside our blemishes. How many of us have found renewed ministry when we have dealt with these areas which were wrong in our lives! We didn't know why our ministry was so shallow and so weak until we dealt with them, Lord. But when we handled these areas it opened up a whole new realm of ministry, a whole new level of maturity and effectiveness. So we thank you, Lord, because deep in our hearts we don't want to be phony. We want to be real and to be genuine. We want to be whole people able to help others to wholeness. Thank you for that possibility, Father, and thank you for the privilege of our priesthood and our ministry, in Christ's name, Amen.

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