

Be Holy for I AM Holy Series
The Holiness of God Among Us

Leviticus 24:1-23

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus

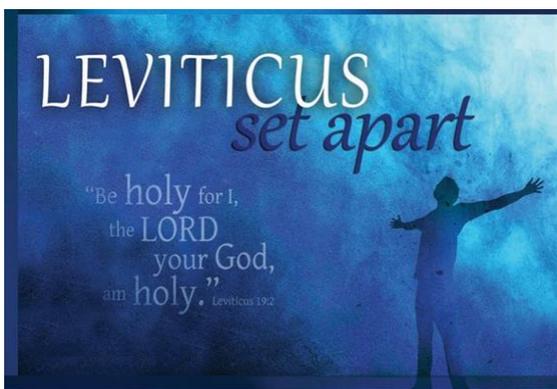
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

November 8, 2015

TEXTS: Leviticus 24:1-23

We continue this morning in our series on the Book of Leviticus, and the chapter before us this morning raises an immediate question: "Can we pick and choose portions of the Bible that we



like and don't like?" This portion of God's Word comes as an interruption. I don't know if you've ever had an interruption in your life, but at times interruptions are moments of opportunity and instruction. In Leviticus 24, there is an interruption in the narrative that calls for our close attention, and this interruption provides a setting in which God instructs His people further in His ways. It is an intense portion, and yet one that we need to hear.

The chapter begins with great peace, in the peaceful scene that continued from chapter 23 in which the year's pattern, the weekly pattern of worship was described. Leviticus 24 begins with an assurance of God's continual and ongoing presence within the community of faith. It is a signal in two very important ways. It is signaled by the light that burns in God's tent or tabernacle and the bread which is eaten by God's people as representatives of the priesthood week by week. The chapter begins in this promising way: the Lord speaks, as He does throughout Leviticus, and commands that the people bring pure oil, beaten olives, for the lamp. This is the very best quality, above extra-virgin olive oil. This is the best of the best, and again God teaches us that God should be the top of our affections. They bring oil to the sanctuary so that the lights of the menorah might be kept burning. The Lord describes this in Leviticus 24:3:

"Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the LORD regularly."

It is outside the veil which separates the holy place from the Holy of Holies in the Tent of Meeting. Aaron arranges this, and notice that it burns as the biblical days flow, from evening to morning. The lights are on, if you will, in God's House every day. They burn before the Lord regularly. It is a perpetual statute. God's house, His tent, in the midst of the people is the place where His own presence dwells, His indwelling, covenant presence. This would have been seen

throughout the camp. This is an artist rendition to give you a sense of the luminous awe and the beauty inside the sanctuary. Inside the sanctuary is covered with gold, and as these lamps are



lit, they burn every day. You know the feeling when you come home after a very long trip and the lights are on and there is joy and you are received and cared for. The lights of God's house never go out because the Lord said: "I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you." Some of us just need to hear that this morning, that God has committed His ongoing presence with us as His people. Not only do the lamps signify God's ongoing presence, but God's people are

there with Him by representation of the priesthood. They are brought in and share fellowship in an ongoing covenant meal with God in what is called the Bread of the Presence. In Leviticus 24:5, we read:

"You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf."

Again, it is not the leftovers; it is not your B-grade flour. It is your best. You give God your best. They bake 12 massive loaves. These are not small loaves. It is the two-tenths of an ephah loaf. That translates to about a five-pound loaf. There are 12 of them because they signify the 12 tribes are present. Just as the tribes are carried by name on the high priest's breastplates, so the tribes are represented by this Bread of the Presence. Every Sabbath day, new loaves are brought. It is a covenant forever, a perpetual offering, and the scene then is sublime. It is God's ongoing commitment to you and to me, that He is present to us in covenant, that we are carried safely in His presence by mediated priesthood, and we are welcomed in His sight.

This sublime scene, this scene of peace, this scene of beauty, this scene of holiness, is interrupted in the second half of Leviticus 24, and it is really this interruption that calls for our attention this morning. In Leviticus 24:10, we are introduced to the players, if you will, in this:

"Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel."

At first glance, this is a signal of great joy. This means that Exodus 12:38 is true, that when Israel came out of Egypt . . .

"A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds."

So, hallelujah! When God acts to redeem and save, people from the nations join in and attach themselves to the God of the Bible. That was true then, and that is true now as well. The Gospel

of Jesus Christ is for all peoples, and there is a mixed marriage inside the camp. We are told that within this mixed marriage, the son of the Israelite woman and his Egyptian father get into an argument. Have you ever had an argument? Some of you have celebrated your 20, 25, or 30th anniversaries, and you're waiting for your first real argument. Some of you growing up got along so well with the people in your class at school that you just can't even imagine an argument breaking out. If you're too young to have experienced this, let me assure you that this happens. I remember when our children were very young, and they were in a co-op while we were in PhD classes. The co-op had kids from different parts of the neighborhood, and there was a group of African-American women that ruled this daycare co-op, and they ruled with an iron fist. If you were out of line, you would be stopped by the full articulation of your name. There was one girl in the daycare, Reese, and Reese had the problem that she was a biter. When she didn't get her way, she escalated the scene and bared her teeth and sank them into the person next to her to secure her desire. Whenever she would do that, then you would hear this voice come out from one of the caregivers, and you would hear: Reese Seneca Green, my face is not smiling," and it just froze the scene.

Here, though, we have an argument that begins. The text does not tell us about the nature of the argument. The word that is used *to argue*, or the ESV translates *to fight*, is the word used for a verbal argument. In Numbers 26:9 we read:

*"These are the Dathan and Abiram, chosen from the congregation, who **contended** against Moses and Aaron."*

This was a verbal argument. This same word is used of what happens when verbal arguments don't stay as verbal arguments and they escalate into physical altercations. This word is used in Exodus 2:13 when Moses saw two Hebrew men struggling and he said:

"Why do you strike your companion?"

The text does not tell us if this was just words or if it had come to blows. The text is also profoundly laconic and does not specify the nature of the argument itself. It doesn't tell us what they were arguing about, which is also instructive for us. Sometimes after our most heated arguments when we boiled over in rage, if we are asked six months or a year later what that argument was about, sometimes we can't even remember. The text does not tell us what the argument was about. We can speculate that this man that grew up with an Egyptian father took great offense at the calendar of Leviticus 23. We might speculate that just as it says in Exodus 8, Moses says that the Egyptians abhor the sacrifices we offer to the Lord. So, maybe, this mixed marriage Egyptian made a comment like: "Your festivals are garbage." Maybe he was upset about the description that we just heard about the ongoing light of God's presence in the sanctuary. In Egypt, light was personified as a god, the Pharaoh was the god incarnate. Maybe it was that the teaching that the light of God's presence would burn continually in the sanctuary

was offensive and upset him. We don't know. Maybe it was that the Bread of God's Presence as a perpetual statute upset him. Maybe he was not a five-pound- loaf sort of person. We don't know. We have no idea. What we do know is that this conflict escalates, and it is recorded in Leviticus 24:11 that in the heat of this argument:

“. . . and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed.”

The text stops. The name of God, spoken, named, and then cursed. This was an unimaginable horror, arresting in its audition and searing to the soul, a shocking sound—the precious name of God. The name of God must have carried with it a host of meaningful and profound associations. At the burning bush, at Sinai, when God reveals His name, Yahweh, I AM who I am, to Moses, He said in Exodus 3:15:

“This is My name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

When God brought the people, these very people, out from Egypt and crossed through the Sea, He reached out His mighty, outstretched arm, split the waters, brought 600,000 families across, the people burst into song. That song is a celebration of the beauty and sanctity of God's Name. Exodus 15:1-3 says:

“I will sing [to YAHWEH] to the LORD, . . . I will praise Him, . . . I will exalt Him. The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is His name.”

At Mount Sinai, when the people came to meet with God and His presence was visible upon the mountain, the Lord said in Exodus 20:7, as the third of the 10 Commandments:

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”

Yahweh will not hold guiltless the one who takes His name in vain. So the people, in the context of the great sin of the golden calf, discovered that the name of God was to be associated with mercy and grace. In Exodus 34:6, when the glory of the Lord God Almighty passed before Moses, He announced His name, and He said:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

I am the Lord the Lord, Yahweh. These are the associations of God's name. God's name is powerful, mighty to save, present to the community, assurance that He is with us, and assurance that He is gracious, and here this man picks up the name of Yahweh, the living God, and hurls it violently to the ground with a curse. This is not a casual swearing when you smash your thumb with a hammer. This is an intentional, deliberate lifting up of God's name and cursing it. He who is the source of life, blessing, and salvation is cursed, and what are we to do? The text stops, and the people don't know what to do. So they bring this man to Moses. We learn that his mother's name was Shelomith, which comes from *shalom*, which is *Mrs. Peaceful*.

It turns out that her son is the cause of anything but peace. Leviticus 24:12 says:

“And they put him in custody, till the will of the LORD should be clear to them.”

They asked God what they should we do.

This is an important application for all of us. You will face situations in this life when the will of God will be unclear, and often this will happen to you in the interruptions in your life. You have your plan, you are working your angle, doing what you plan to do, and then there will be an interruption from the side, sometimes a violent one. It is right to pause and ask God to clarify His will. Moses goes to God, and God speaks in response, and His response is arresting. We need to probe His answer. The Lord's response is this in Leviticus 24:14. The Lord solemnly declares:

“Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him.”

It is an arresting declaration of the severity of what has taken place. Notice that when you curse God, it affects the people around you. The action of laying your hands on the person is the action throughout Leviticus which is a transfer of guilt. That means that if you curse God, your action does not affect just you, it actually negatively affects the people around you, and they transfer the guilt that they have incurred even in hearing God's name cursed, and so the community stones him. The punishment of stoning is execution for a religious crime in the Bible. This sin is an act of high treason, and there is a hierarchy of punishment in the Bible. The cursing of God's name is placed at the highest level of sin. The name of God represents His very person. To blaspheme the Lord's name is to blaspheme Him. We use *name* in a similar way when we say: “He dragged my name through the mud.” That is, he brings my character into disrepute. The offender curses the Lord's name. He has not merely used the Lord's name as a swear word, but he speaks and predicates great evil of the Lord and shows the Lord to be held in utter contempt. It is a sobering word. This is the Lord's judgment, not Moses', not the people's. It is the Lord who says this. Not only does the Lord speak this, but then He speaks not to just this one particular case, but He gives a hierarchy of punishment in which it is very important for us to understand the holiness of God. In Leviticus 24:15-20, the Lord gives a hierarchy of offense, and at the top of this list is the person who curses God who is said to bear his sin. The one who blasphemes the name of God is put to death. It is a capital crime.” Next, the Lord equates the taking of human life on this same level. In Leviticus 24:17, the Lord says:

“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.”

The Bible makes a great distinction between murder and manslaughter. Premeditated murder is that which is prohibited in the 10 Commandments. The taking of human life is regarded by God as a desecration of the image of God, and the death penalty in connection with

premeditated murder is actually God's way of affirming the supreme value of human life. Human life is placed on the level of blaspheming God Himself. The Lord moves down from taking His name and cursing Him, to taking a human life, premeditated murder, to an animal, and here we see a great difference. In Leviticus 24:18, the Lord says:

“Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life.”

Whoever takes an animal's life is not put to death, but the person who takes an animal's life makes restitution for that. We see that there is a great difference between an animal and human being in Scripture. Then the Lord moves down to the case of personal injury, and He cites this maxim which is repeated three times in Scripture: the punishment should fit the crime in the case of injury. This is a passage in Scripture that modern readers often misunderstand. Leviticus 24:19-20 says:

“If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.”

This statement is sometimes given the Latin expression the *lex talionis*, which sounds really fancy but just means *the law of the tooth*. The *lex talionis* means that the punishment should fit the crime. In other law collections in the ancient world, there is a habit of escalation or retaliation: if you bump into me, then I kill you; if you knock over my fence, then I burn down your house. The Bible's view is that the punishment should fit the crime. Lamech, early in Genesis, said: “I killed a man for wounding me.” Escalation and retaliation is the desire of the sinful heart, and God's law restrains that. God says that all are equal before the law. You should have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, and in a very sober scene in Leviticus 24:23, we read:

“So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses.”

This man who has picked up God's name and hurled it into the ground in blasphemy dies. What are we to make of such a text? We are to see in this text what Israel saw in this text: Israel is called God's people, and God's people are a holy people on a holy mission, their words matter, and God's name is associated with life and blessing. They are a holy people on a holy mission speaking holy words.

I am reminded of the scene in Shakespeare's play *King Henry V*. King Henry believed that he was on a mission from God to claim his throne in France. As he was moving his troops towards France, he received a report from one of his Welsh generals that one of Henry's soldiers, in the context of the campaign, had actually robbed a church and cursed God's name. He was brought

before the king on the charge of robbing the church and of speaking disdainful language. Henry V realized that the conduct of the soldier threatened the existence of the entire army. What made it even more painful was that the man who had done this was a childhood friend of the king. He was brought before the king and the king says:

“We would have all such offenders so cut off: and we give express charge, that in our marches through the country, there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language.”

After this man is executed, the army moves on. Leviticus 24 is a sober reminder that God’s people are to be a holy people, that they are on a holy mission, and that the name of God is a great treasure in our midst, because it is the very presence of God that distinguishes us as a people. How does this text apply to us today? Let me explore three ways.

First, I want to call us, **as a holy people on a holy mission with holy speech, to restrain our rage**. The Scripture says: “In your anger do not sin.” We live in a society that is quick to boil over into rage. We also live in a society where there is coarse joking, the name of God brought forward with obscene language. I checked a couple of films this week, and I did a random check on one of them that came out in the last couple of months. In my random check, there were 506 F-bombs in just this one film. I thought, “Wow, what are the statistics on the language around us?” God’s people are called to use His name for blessing, and we are to be people that restrain our rage. Paul applies this in Ephesians 5:1-4 when he says:

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for the Lord’s people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

I am appalled at some preachers I know that use profanity from the pulpit. I asked Pastor Scott: “Would you do that?” He said: “No, I wouldn’t!” I was relieved, but then I asked: “Why not?” and he just quoted this text. God’s people are to speak words of life, and we pull back from a society that takes God’s name and utters it with a curse.

Second, I want to apply this in positive way, and that is to **speak the name of God with blessing**. This is the summons of Numbers 6:24-27 that the priests among God’s people utter the name of the Lord with blessing:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.’

So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

God's name is to be spoken by us. We know His name, and we speak it with blessing. We hold His Name as something holy. This is the first petition of course of Jesus's instructions in the Lord's prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name,” that the name of God would be something holy, cherished, sanctified, in our midst. We are to speak it in blessing.

What happens when you collide in society, in your extended family, or in your workplace with terrible language all around you? Let me submit two illustrations for you, one from Ken Elzinga, who spoke here a couple of years ago, gifted economist from the University of Virginia who has testified as an expert witness in a number of Supreme Court cases. Ken was brought out to Microsoft in Seattle to help Microsoft with a very important antitrust case. He was telling me about the scene in the upper level readership of Microsoft. He said, “You know, Bill Gates has a reputation for having a terrible mouth, and there is a culture at Microsoft of bad language of profanity.” Ken was working closely with an upper-level executive at Microsoft, and people told Ken this guy has a terrible mouth. Ken was going to be there working for week. Day one, he heard a lot of this and it really bothered him. On day two, he felt like it was really interfering with his soul, with his soul dynamics, but others told him there was nothing he could do about it. Ken Elzinga is a master of contextual discipleship, and he said to this upper-level executive of Microsoft: “You know, when you take the name of my Lord and Savior in that way and hurl it to the ground, I just want you to know that it shatters my concentration, and I will not be able to do a successful job defending you in the litigation of this antitrust law.” It just froze the guy, and he cleaned up his mouth the rest of the week, and they actually did win the case. The second example is an African-American woman friend of mine, Alberta McNeil. She was in a workplace setting where someone was speaking the name of the Lord in blasphemous ways. Her spirit was so disturbed after a while that she finally interrupted her colleague, and she said: “Honey, if you keep speaking like that, then I'm going to have to tell you all of the reasons in my soul why I love Him.” Either of these directions is available to you. Speak the name of God with joy, for a blessing.

Third, I want to ask: **What are we to do with our own blasphemy?** The Word of God in this text says that those who take the name of God and curse this name are liable to death. When we think of our sinfulness before Almighty God, I would imagine that all of us in the sanctuary would be condemned on this point. The question comes, what shall we do with our blasphemy? What shall we do with the utterance of the names of God with anything less than blessing, adoration, and praise? Do we stone one another? I submit with fear and trepidation that we do not, and that we do not for a very critical reason. We do not, because the punishment of our blasphemy has been paid for. Recall the scene of the Lord Jesus before His accusers. When

Jesus stood before the highest religious court of the land, and the high priest said to Him: "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ the Son of God," and Jesus' answer is: "Yes, I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." Jesus utters the divine name of the Royal Son, and he is accused of blasphemy. He did not blaspheme because what He said was true. But the charge of blasphemy nails Jesus to the cross. The high priest tears His robe. He accused Jesus of blasphemy and applies Leviticus 24 to Christ.

What will you do with your blasphemy? What will I do with mine? I will turn, and I will invite us all to turn, to Jesus Christ who paid the penalty for our blasphemy, and then, having received the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, I will say, and I want you to say this morning, what the apostle Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:12-14:

"I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, . . . though formerly I was a blasphemer, . . . I received mercy . . . and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Jesus Christ has atoned for your blasphemy and mine, and He has called us to new life, to a restrained rage and to a speaking of His Name with blessing. We are going to sing together a song: *Revelation Song*, and I want you to hear the mention of His name in the midst of this song. The Lord has entrusted to us His people His holy Name, and He has called us to sing and announce that name, that name which brings life and peace and joy, and that name is given to you and me. Let us pray.

Dear Lord Jesus, we love You this morning. We love You that You have borne the punishment of our sin, and we see this in a very vivid way this morning. I pray that the grace of Jesus would flood our spirits this day, that You would restrain by the power of the Holy Spirit our inclination to rage and blasphemy. I pray, Lord Jesus, that You make us bold to defend Your name in our families, and our workplace, in whichever way You lead us. Lord we want to stand together, and we want to sing to You because You have revealed Yourself to us in holiness and righteousness, and we want to give the greatest value to human speech and use it as an instrument of praise.

In Jesus Name,
Amen