

12. The cost of ministry

April 9, 2009

Jesus told us to count the cost before we start to follow Him:

Luke 14:28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it

It is because those who are around us may not like it if radical change happened in us. They'd prefer our old characters – partying, drinking, cussing and all the bad things we don't want to do anymore.

Being in the ministries of Jesus Christ also cost something from us. Time, effort, self-sacrifice for others and ultimately for the Lord. Let's not forget that it requires us to be examples to others and put us into a higher standard.

We have been studying the law as directed to the people from chapter 11 through chapter 20. Now we come to the law for the personal purity of the priests in chapters 21 and 22.

It had been God's original intention that the entire nation should be a kingdom of priests according to Ex 19. Their disobedience in the matter of the golden calf destroyed the possibility of the realization of a perfect and ideal society.

After Israel's failure, God chose only one tribe to be the priests, the tribe of Levi. In Israel, therefore, there were the congregation, the priesthood, and the high priest. The higher position required a higher obligation. The greater responsibility demanded a higher way of life.

The church today is called a royal priesthood. Every believer is a priest and has access to the Throne of Grace through Jesus Christ today. Every believer – priest is required to live a holy life which is possible only by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind

A. FORBIDDEN FROM ANY CONTACT WITH DEAD BODIES

Leviticus 21:1-4 And the LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: 'None shall defile himself for the dead among his people, 2 except for his relatives who are nearest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; 3 also his virgin sister who is near to him, who has had no husband, for her he may defile himself. 4 Otherwise he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself.

Death is a penalty of sin, and the idea is that they are not to be contaminated with sin. Physical contact with the dead brings defilement. The priest was permitted to defile himself for close relatives.

However, I am sure that you all have noticed that there is no mention of the wife of the priest. According to the old Hebrew documents, since through marriage, husband and wife become one, God didn't have to mention her as a separate person.

These listed here are all blood relations and by nature close to the priest. He must be permitted to express his feelings of sympathy and grief as a priest of God. He was not, however, permitted to defile himself for the dead of any others. He could mourn in his heart, but was denied physical contact.

The prohibition regarding dead bodies wasn't just about touching a dead body, but even being in the same room as a dead body or walking over a grave or touching a tomb.

In light of this commandment from the Lord, can you imagine the Pharisees' reaction when Jesus compared them to white washed tombs with full of deadmen's bones? Jesus couldn't find any worse insult to their high and mighty hypocritical hearts.

In their devotion and obedience to God, the priests were to be examples to the rest of the nation and above reproach. Unfortunately, the priesthood in Israel declined spiritually and led the people astray to the point of exile to Babylon.

I believe that pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and all others who serve in the church, should all be extremely careful about where they go, what they do and say. God is going to hold you and me more responsible if He has placed us in a position of responsibility.

It is indeed a privilege to serve God and His people. We need to focus on the privileges of ministry, rather than on the burdens and sacrifices. Our Lord Jesus is not a hard taskmaster and His commands are not burdensome.

From time to time, when I face some problems because of a few people in our church, I blurt out to our Assistant Pastor Jack, "Jack, remind me that I volunteered for this job." In his wisdom, he looks at me straight into my eyes and quietly says, "No, you were called."

B. THE MARRIAGE PRACTICES OF PRIESTS

Leviticus 21:5-9 'They shall not make any bald place on their heads, nor shall they shave the edges of their beards nor make any cuttings in their flesh. 6 They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God, for they offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy. 7 They shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God. 8 Therefore 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. 9 The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, she profanes her father. She shall be burned with fire.'

V5 was something to do with what the pagan people around them used to do as a mourning process.

Priests were only to take virgins for wives, again as an illustration of the commitment and purity that was required of priests. A priest – under the Old or New Covenant – was only to set their affections on that which is pure.

When you read the qualifications for pastors – elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, you can't help but see that a church officer's wife and family are an important part of his ministry.

Another important thing I need to point out is that the wife of a pastor is not an assistant pastor. Some denominations allow the wives of their pastors as pastors. It is completely unbiblical even though I have extremely high respect for my own wife Karen and her thoughts. Karen is not one of our assistant pastors, because she is not called to be a pastor by the Lord but the leader in the Women's ministry in our church.

C. THE HIGH PRIEST

Leviticus 21:10-15 'He who is the high priest among his brethren, on whose head the anointing oil was poured and who is consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes; 11 nor shall he go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother; 12 nor 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. 13 And he shall take a wife in her virginity. 14 A widow or a divorced woman or a defiled woman or a harlot—these he shall not marry; but he shall take a virgin of his own people as wife. 15 Nor shall he profane his posterity among his people, for I the LORD sanctify him.'

Note that the high priest gets to have higher standards than the regular priests. He is not even allowed to go near his own mother's and father's dead bodies.

Since the firstborn son of the high priest became the next high priest, it was important that no alien issue invade the family. In other words, the high priest could marry only a virgin. In most cases, the priests chose their wives from the tribe of Levi.

While these special regulations don't apply to workers in the church today, the principles are still important and applicable. If we want to have God's blessing on our ministries, we must keep ourselves, our marriages and our families pure and dedicated before God.

According to v10, the high priest is not to tear his holy garments. He was not to be a violent man. At the trial of Jesus this law was broken when Caiaphas the high priest tore his clothes in Matt. 26:65.

D. DISQUALIFICATION FOR PRIESTLY FUNCTION

Leviticus 21:16-24 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 17 "Speak to Aaron, saying: 'No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. 18 For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, 19 a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, 20 or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. 21 No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to the LORD. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. 22 He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy; 23 only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the LORD sanctify them.'"

24 And Moses told it to Aaron and his sons, and to all the children of Israel.

Everyone born into Adam's descendants is a sinner, suffering from the tragic consequences of Adam's fall, but our physical and moral defects aren't an obstacle to either salvation or service. When God invites the lost to be saved, He calls everyone including handicapped people.

Luke 14:21 So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.'

If that is the case, why would the Lord exclude handicapped people from coming to the altar and serving Him there? Didn't God say He is the One who made them even though it is hard to take sometimes? Yes, He did and He does.

Exodus 4:11 So the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord?"

It is not that the Lord was against those who were handicapped. It was a matter of representation of the high priest without a blemish. The ultimate High Priest Jesus Christ did not have a sin in His life. It means that He was without a blemish, without a handicap.

While priests with physical defects couldn't serve at the altar or in the holy place, they were still considered priests and were allowed to share with their families in the sacrificial meals and the other material benefits that the tribe of Levi enjoyed.

I have one caution here: This biblical passage must not be used today to humiliate or intimidate anybody with a physical disability. It was never written for that purpose. The priests were special people with an important job to do, and God wanted them to be the very best physically. A beautiful soul often lives in a crippled body, and people like that can be greatly used of the Lord.

As you all know I have absolutely no problem with our handicapped brothers and sisters in the ministries as long as they have the right hearts for the Lord and His people.

E. ETC.

In chapter 22, we find many verses coming from a little different angle but pretty much the same topics as chapter 21. So we will just pick a few verse here.

Leviticus 22:4 'Whatever man of the descendants of Aaron, who is a leper or has a discharge, shall not eat the holy offerings until he is clean.

If a priest touches something unclean, nobody may know it except God and himself. He could go on without anyone else notice.

To our God that is not good enough because it is carelessness and professionalism without heart. The Lord wants us to be right with Him from our hearts, not just in what we do in ministries. The greatest protection against carelessness and hypocrisy in ministry is the fear of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 7:1b let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Leviticus 22:7 And when the sun goes down he shall be clean; and afterward he may eat the holy offerings, because it is his food.

The Jews start their days at sundown, not sunrise or midnight. With this description, God indicates that one can start the new day clean and pure to the Lord. No matter how we might have failed the day before, we can begin each new day pure and close to Him. His mercies are new every morning as it says in Lamentations 3:23.

We can stop beating ourselves up for yesterday's sin. We should confess it, repent of it, and then get on with the business of walking with the Lord today.

In v10-16, we find priests have to say, "No" to someone who are dear to their hearts from eating the holy offerings.

One of the most difficult things in Christian ministry is having to say, "No", but to keep our fellowship pure before God, we must sometimes do it. If I refuse to officiate a wedding between a believer and an unbeliever, most likely I will make enemies, especially among their relatives, but I got to keep my pure conscience before God.

Some of you received my e-mail that Rick Warren said during CNN's "Larry King Live". He claimed that he has "never been and never will be" an "anti-gay marriage activist," and made a point to inform Larry King that he apologized to his homosexual friends for comments he made in October to his church in support of Proposition 8 in California.

Actually, he was not making friends with homosexuals, because they don't believe him. The Christian communities think that he is a turncoat. Warren tried to please men, now he is displeasing the Lord.

In v17-32, the Lord is telling us that just as the priests had to be free from physical defects, so the sacrifices that they offered had to be perfect or the Lord wouldn't accept them.

Malachi 1:13 You also say, 'Oh, what a weariness!' And you sneer at it," Says the Lord of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; Thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" Says the Lord.

God didn't want the cast-offs from the people. He wants our best. No offering with a blemish was to be permitted because the offerings pointed to Christ.

F. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Every believer – priest is required to live a holy life which is possible only by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- 2) We need to focus on the privileges of ministry, rather than on the burdens and sacrifices.
- 3) God gave us His best – the only begotten Son Jesus Christ to all of us. He doesn't deserve anything less than our best.