

Lawbreakers and the Priest

Imagine this. A nation of slaves, whose only laws have been the laws of their slave-masters, suddenly becomes a free nation with no laws at all. There are probably about 2 million people who have no legal code to tell them how to manage their society, how to resolve disputes, what's not permitted and how to punish violators. Nothing. They are wandering around in tribal groups of over 100,000 people each, on average, and there are no rules to govern their behavior.

Worse still, the One who has rescued them from slavery has expectations that they will live in gratitude to Him for the deliverance He granted them. But they barely know Him and they've never given much thought to how they might please Him.

So this whole scene is like the biggest blank slate that you could imagine. Except that this people are descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They have a history with the God of their forefathers, Yahweh. They stand on the eastern shore of the Red Sea, and watch as the waters crash down on the Egyptian army and realize that this God has delivered them. How will they respond to Him? What will their new life be like? Where do they go from here?

A brand new nation, without a legal code, without a process for settling disputes, with a God but no real idea of how to worship Him ... and so we have the remainder of Exodus and the book of Leviticus. Here we find the laws that God gave to govern His people and to guide their worship. Here we read about the priests, the people who represented the people to God, who carried out the actual work of offering the sacrifices on the altar that atoned for the sins of the people. In these books we see the relationship between a holy God and a stubborn people established and defined, and in these chapters we see the way being paved for the coming of the Messiah, and what He would do to redeem God's people.

I'm sure you've all heard about some goofy laws that are still on the books in different parts of the world. But did you know that is illegal to whistle in Petrolia, Ontario. In fact, on the town's website, Article 3, 772.3.6 says, or used to say, "Yelling, shouting, hooting, whistling or singing is prohibited at all times."

If you happen to live on a corner lot in Souris, Prince Edward Island, you are not permitted, by law, to build a snowman that is taller than 30". You'll have to make one in the neighbour's yard, I guess.

The Maritime Provinces seem to specialize in restricting the freedoms of their citizens. Another example is found in New Brunswick; in Fredericton it is illegal to wear a snake or carry a pet lizard on your shoulder in public unless it is kept in a container.

And the city fathers of Toronto are certainly on top of current trends as they have a bylaw that states that no one can drag a dead horse down Yonge Street on Sundays. St. John's Newfoundland is more concerned with living animals, and prohibits you driving cattle through the city streets after 8 in the morning or keeping cows in your

house. And, of course, you're not allowed to paint a ladder in Alberta because you might be making it hard for someone to see a defect. It's harder to find reasons for the Edmonton rule that says that cyclists must keep both hands on the handlebars of their bicycle at all times and must signal with their arms extended when making a turn. In Drayton Valley, Alberta, you can be fined for throwing a snowball inside city limits.

We are among the most regulated people on the planet. There are so many things that are illegal that we are all, quite likely, guilty many times over of breaking the laws of our land. We're all criminals, if that's all it takes.

Governments tend to see the purpose of their existence as regulating people who could not possibly be as bright or as responsible as they are. And if the elected people think that way, just imagine what the unelected bureaucrats think! Here's a picture of the federal regulations in the U.S. that were made in one recent year by unelected officials. On the top of the cabinet are the laws that were passed by those who were elected to govern. This year, Congress passed 65 bills, which turned into 3659 new regulations.

As a result, in Pennsylvania, it's against the law to tie a dollar bill on a string and pull it away when someone tries to pick it up. In Florida, someone decided that it was important to pass a law that says an elephant tied to a parking meter must pay the regular fee. In Alabama it is illegal for anyone to drive a car while blindfolded. A prophetic city council in Danville, Pennsylvania decided that all fire hydrants must be checked one hour before all fires! Maybe the best comes from the Pacific Island Samoa where it is illegal to forget your wife's birthday!

By contrast, the laws that God gave to the Israelites were laws that helped them in a variety of ways. They helped them to determine property rights, to resolve disputes, to live in a healthy way and in a moral way. When Moses retells the law in the book of Deuteronomy, there's this verse that sums up really well what I'm saying (4:8):

*What other nation is so great as to have such
righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am
setting before you today?*

The laws God gave them also showed them how to deal with their failure to fully obey His laws. There are provisions for various kinds of offerings that are a payment for violating God's laws, much like a traffic ticket is a payment for driving too fast or turning left on red. Of course, God's laws are more serious and more demanding and the payment for disobeying them is also more serious.

And that leads us into our Old Testament theme for today, which is understanding the role of the priests of Israel, how it prepares for the high priesthood of Jesus and how we function as priests for one another and to God.

The primary function of a priest is to act as a mediator between human beings and God. The priest of the Old Testament could make a sacrifice to God, for example, that

had the effect of cancelling the punishment for a person's wrongdoing. The priest's role in that case was to remove an individual's guilt by offering the sacrifice on his or her behalf.

When you open the book of Leviticus, you will be reading a book that is all about the Levites -- that's what the name of this book means; "relating to the Levites" -- and the Levites were the tribe within Israel that were set apart to serve the nation as their priests. The actual priestly family were the direct descendants of Moses' brother, Aaron, which was one family within the tribe of Levi. But the rest of that tribe was responsible for everything that went on in the tabernacle, and later, after King Solomon built it, in the temple. This priestly tribe was responsible for the ceremonial vessels, for the sacrifices and for teaching the people the requirements of the law. Particularly after the reign of King David, these Levites would also take care of the music ministry, playing the instruments and singing the songs. In addition they kept the temple courts clean and assisted the priests in the preparation of sacrifices and offerings.

In some ways, Leviticus is like a manual for these people who serve in the sanctuary because it tells them how to perform their duties. In other ways, it is like a manual to the people for how they are to approach their God, what they are to bring, how they are to prepare, for example, the grain offerings or offerings of thanksgiving. I'm not going to attempt to summarize all the regulations that you find towards the end of Exodus and in Leviticus, but I do want to point out some details from these books that give us some insight into the role of priests in Israel.

1. God made a big deal about the priesthood. He had very ornate robes designed for them, including some extras for the high priest. He honored them because they had fought for the honor of their God. He gave them cities within the other tribes, but no territory, because He had called them to serve Him. As a result the remainder of Israel tithed the increase of their crops and herds to sustain the Levites in their ministry to Yahweh. And, when they began their ministry in Leviticus 9, God appeared to all the people of Israel and fire came from His presence and consumed the sacrifice they had prepared.

2. God made regulations that produced good health among the people of Israel. He didn't allow them to eat the meat of any animal that will, even occasionally, eat the decaying flesh of dead animals. He gave them clear regulations about infectious skin diseases and made sure that they knew how to deal with mildew. Incest was a violation of God's law. These were good laws that, if they were obeyed would produce a healthy people. The priests had responsibilities in relation to these laws, specifically in determining if an infectious skin disease was healed or if a home had been cleansed of mildew.

3. The emphasis in Leviticus is on the holiness of God. That's why, as you read through it, you're struck by all the things that are pronounced "unclean" or "defiled". That's why there is such a focus on atonement, or cleansing, for the people of Israel.

That's why there is such clear teaching about the sacrifices -- that God gave the people of Israel the opportunity to have their sins paid for by the offering of the blood of one of their animals. In Leviticus 17:11 God says, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." In other words, a life for a life. The one who sins deserves the death penalty; but the penalty is paid by another living creature.

That background helps us a great deal in understanding the New Testament book of Hebrews. Let's turn to that letter now, and I'll read from chapters 7 & 8:

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (the Levites of the Old Test.) why was there still need for another priest to come?

A few verses later, the writer of Hebrews is talking about the priests of the old covenant and says (7:23-27):

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need -- One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself.

Notice what Jesus the priest does for us. He is blameless and therefore is, Himself, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He is able to save us "completely", which means that there is nothing lacking in our salvation, there is nothing yet to be completed. Jesus has done the whole work of redeeming and rescuing those who are now the people of the New Covenant.

Notice also that Jesus always lives to make intercession for us. He acts as our priest by advocating for us before the throne of the Almighty in heaven. He is, in plain and simple English, on our side. He is defending us against the many accusations of the enemy and is pleading mercy for us, and this continues day and night.

And finally from this passage, notice that the sacrifice that Jesus offered on Calvary never needs to be repeated. It is good for all time, for all people, for all the sins that have been or will be committed by human beings. There is nothing about Jesus' sacrifice that is inadequate, that is temporary, that needs some kind of completion from us.

The new priesthood is so different from the old. Where once the priests would offer sacrifices on a daily basis and would burn incense and complete rituals on a daily basis, the great high priest who gave His life for us lives forever to intercede for us. There are no more animals, or people, needed to offer their blood for us. The great high priest has completed His work once and for all.

But, there is another dimension to the history of the Levites that we haven't touched on yet. In a passage from 1 Peter that I read last Sunday it says that we are a "royal priesthood", among other things. And in the closing book of our Bible, in Revelation, we read in a couple of places (1:6; 5:10) that God has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God. Let me read the second reference in its larger context, starting with verse 9:

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

So, in what sense are we now, because both texts seem to indicate that this has already happened, a kingdom and priests? The phrase originates back in the Sinai Desert, with Yahweh calling Moses up to the mountain just before He gave the Ten Commandments. Yahweh told Moses to remind Israel of what they had just seen, their deliverance from Egypt, and then He placed before Israel the opportunity to be His chosen and favoured people. He gave these words to Moses to speak to the children of Israel when he returned from the mountain:

If you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5,6)

And here again, at the end of the Bible, He is calling us a new Kingdom, and priests to serve our God. It's one thing, and a very wonderful thing, to be rescued from the power of sin and of Satan and to be granted forgiveness and a new life in the Spirit. But this goes beyond. We're no longer simply ex-cons, but are now given responsibility that comes with honour, with esteem. We are, in Peter's words, "a royal priesthood" and here in Revelation we are told that we will reign on the earth.

What does that mean to us today? Is it simply a hope for a future in a strange new world that we haven't yet experienced? Or is there something of this new priestly office that we should know about and do something about? It seems to me that the texts we're looking at tell us that this is right now, this is today. God has made us a kingdom and priests to serve our God -- so let's figure out how we're supposed to do that.

1. We can't take away from Jesus any of His priestly ministry. What He did was unrepeatable and fully adequate. So our priesthood is not like His priesthood.

2. We minister together. 1 Peter makes this very clear in a teaching from earlier in chapter 2:

As you come to Him, the living Stone -- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him -- you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. (2:4-5)

What Peter says here is that the church, the living body of Christ, is being built into a spiritual house, a house filled with the Holy Spirit, so that we can offer spiritual sacrifices to God. This primary ministry, this first love ministry, is not something we do mostly on our own; it is something that we mostly do together. Why else would Peter used this image of us being built into a spiritual house, a new temple, as it were, where we all have the same function -- we are all a part of this holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God.

3. Our ministry is to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. What are those? We offer worship, because God is worthy and because that sets our values in proper order. We worship God because when we worship other things our lives lose a healthy orientation and we are easily caught in the lies and traps of the enemy. We also exercise faith. We pray for one another and we encourage one another with stories of how God has answered our prayers. We ask for miracles and trust God to do impossible things for our spiritual family. We use the spiritual gifts God has given us to serve and to bless the body of Christ, helping them to grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus.

4. We are in training for ruling in the Kingdom of God. We have been made (past tense) to be a kingdom and priests, and we will (future tense) reign on the earth. We can only rule effectively if we have learned to be fully committed to the purposes of God, if we have learned to be dependent on Him to lead us and if our desire is to see Him glorified.

The world makes goofy laws, but God's laws are good and lead to healthy lives and healthy relationships, with one another and with Him.

Even when the laws are good, we aren't particularly good at obeying them, and so we need a priest to act as a go-between, an intercessor, between us and God. Jesus, through His death on the cross, has become that priest, the Great High Priest, for all time, for all our sin, for all those who trust in Him.

But we are also called to be priests. We are called to a ministry of honoring God, of loving and serving His church and, eventually, to reign, under Him, on the earth. We honor Him now by growing in our worship, in our love for one another and in our service to our brothers and sisters in the faith.