

TWENTY-FIFTH MESSAGE:  
 CONDUCT OF A PRIEST AND HIS FAMILY WITH REGARD TO  
 UNCLEANNESS, GROOMING, AND MARRIAGE  
 Leviticus 21:1-15

Introduction

This MESSAGE deals with the conduct of the priests and their families. Specifically, it deals with their conduct with regard to uncleanness, grooming, and marriage. A high standard of faithfulness in keeping the requirements God made of the Israelites was required of them, because of their leadership positions. Jehovah did not give the priests and their families a different standard of living. He required the same standard of righteousness for all Israelites, but he did command the priests and their families to take special care to keep the requirements because they had a special relationship to him and because they were responsible for giving leadership to the other people of the nation.

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Interpretation

CHAPTER 21

Introductory Note (21:1a)

Verse 1a **And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying,**

A new MESSAGE to Moses is introduced with these words.

A. Conduct of an ordinary priest with regard to (21:1b-9):

1. Uncleanness (21:1b-4)

Verse 1b. **Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, A person must not make himself unclean for the dead among his people.**

Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them. Moses was told to relay this MESSAGE to the priests, the sons of Aaron. It is natural to question why the MESSAGE was not delivered directly to Aaron, as well as to Moses, as was done in Lev. 11:1; 13:1; 14:33; 15:1. Since that information is not given, it is useless to speculate on it, except to notice that at the time this MESSAGE was given the priests were not spending all their time in study and prayer, as they were at the time of

those previous MESSAGES were given (see comments on Lev. 8:33-36 in MESSAGE 10 and on Lev. 11:1 in MESSAGE 14). It is important, however, to notice how faithful Moses was in recording such details as the person to whom each MESSAGE was delivered. If Moses was that careful in recording details about who received the MESSAGE, he must have been just as careful in recording the details of what was spoken to him.

Moses was to deliver this MESSAGE to the priests because it had special application to them. It deals with the way that they were to conduct themselves in the face of the special responsibilities that were theirs.

A person must not make himself unclean for the dead among his people. The first requirement concerning a priest's conduct was that he was not to make himself unclean by touching the dead body of a relative. The word translated "make himself unclean" is often translated "defile himself," but the translation "make himself unclean" more clearly explains the meaning of the original, which referred to symbolic practices Jehovah taught to Israel. Uncleanness was a ceremonial condition that resulted from a number of conditions that God gave to Israel as symbols of sin. The Israelites were to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean as a reminder that they should be on guard constantly against allowing sin to come into their lives. The priests needed to be especially careful to avoid becoming unclean because of the influence they needed to exercise in encouraging the people to stay away from sin.

The various unclean conditions that symbolized sin are defined in MESSAGES 14-19 (Lev. 11-15). Uncleanness from touching a human corpse had not been mentioned in those MESSAGES or in any other previous MESSAGE. This verse, however, made it clear that touching a dead person was another of the conditions that would make a person unclean. Full regulations concerning that type of uncleanness were given in a later MESSAGE recorded in Numbers 19:11-22. In advance of that explanation, it is made clear here that a priest was not to let himself become unclean, even by touching the dead body of a member of his family. "The dead among his people" means the

corpse of a member of his family. If a priest was to be so careful about keeping himself away from uncleanness that he would not even touch the dead body of a relative, he certainly was expected to carefully avoid all other types of ceremonial uncleanness.

Verses 2-3. **2 Except for a close relative of his, for his mother, or for his father, or for his son, or for his daughter, or for his brother,**

**3 Or for his virgin sister who is near to him who does not [belong] to a husband. For her he may make himself unclean.**

Certain exceptions were allowed to this rule. If an ordinary priest lost his mother, father, son, daughter, brother, or unmarried sister in death, he was permitted to touch that relative's dead body. He would become unclean and afterward would need to go through the prescribed cleansing ceremonies, but becoming unclean for one who was so close to him was allowed because God recognized the special sorrow that comes from losing a member of one's immediate family. God did not forbid the natural emotions of sorrow at time of death, but still he insisted that priests should set a high example by avoiding touching the dead body of anyone except a member of their immediate family. Priests were to put their loyalty to their duties ahead of sorrow for any person other than a close relative.

Verse 4. **He must not make himself unclean as a leader among his people to be made common.**

4 The reason for this high standard of loyalty was that a priest was a "a leader among his people." Because he was an influential person, he was to follow a high standard as an example of the importance of putting one's responsibility to God first in one's life.

The word translated "to be made common" is the word used in Leviticus 10:10 that means objects and persons who were not holy in the sense of being set aside for God's service. It did not necessarily refer to an object or person who was evil, but to an object or person who was not sacred in the sense of being devoted to Jehovah's service. It can be

translated “secular” or “common.” Here the translation “common” is best, because it cautions the priest against being ordinary. He was devoted to a special holy purpose. If he let himself become unclean, he abandoned that holy purpose and made himself no different than a person who devoted his life to secular purposes (see comments on Lev. 10:10 in MESSAGE 12 under the heading the holy and the common).

## 2. Grooming (21:5-6)

Verse 5. **They must not make bald a bald spot in their heads, and they must not shave the sides of their beards, and they must not make cuttings in their flesh.**

Grooming of the body and hair always has been important to human beings. Grooming is symbolic of the philosophy and beliefs of the person. Thus, it was important for the priests to show their convictions by avoiding grooming customs that were associated with pagan ideas and religions. Except for shaving the head, the grooming customs mentioned here of rounding off beards and cutting marks in the flesh had been forbidden already to all Israelites in Leviticus 19:27-28, because they were practiced by devotees of false religious of that time (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 23). Shaving the head in certain ways was forbidden for the same reason. That prohibition, like rounding off beards and cutting the skin, probably were intended for all the people, but the priests were to be especially careful to set an example for all others. This verse shows that it was especially important that the priests set an example for all Israelites by avoiding any grooming practices that might seem to approve of pagan ways or beliefs.

Verse 6. **They must be holy to their God, and they must not make common the name of their God because of the fire-offerings of Jehovah. They are offering the bread of their God; therefore, they shall be holy.**

A second reason for the high standard of conduct expected of the priests was that they were men set apart to Jehovah to bear His name and to offer His fire-offering. Here “bread of your God” is parallel with “fire offerings of Jehovah,” showing

that the two terms were synonyms. God’s portion of the fire-offerings, especially of the peace-offerings, was considered to be His share of a fellowship meal with His people and with his priests. The words do not mean that the worshiper provided food for Jehovah to eat, so he would not go hungry, like the pagan’s believed about their gods. They mean Jehovah, his worshipers, and his priests shared table fellowship together (concerning “fire-offerings,” see comments on Lev. 1:9 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading a fire-offering; concerning “food of your God,” see comments on Lev. 3:1 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading a slaughter-offering of peace-offerings).

It was necessary for a priest to conduct himself in such a way as to properly represent the name he bore. Otherwise, he would make God’s name common and ordinary. The word translated “make common” is the same word translated in that manner in verse 4 (see comments on that verse above and on Lev. 10:10 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading the holy and the common). It refers to any object or person that was not set aside for God’s service. It means to be dedicated to secular purposes. Nothing is wrong with being secular, unless God has set a person apart to a holy vocation. When a priest acted like a secular person, he secularized the name of Jehovah, which he bore. In other words, he took away its special meaning and made it ordinary. In so doing, he misrepresented the special holy nature of God.

## 3. Marriage (21:7-9) a. Of a priest (21:7-8)

Verse 7. **They must not take [in marriage] a prostitute or a common woman. They must not take [in marriage] a woman divorced from her husband, because he is holy to His God.**

Another area in which the priest and his family were to set a high example for the people was in their marriage relationships. Three limitations were set on whom a priest might choose for his wife. He was not to marry: (1) a woman who was a prostitute, (2) a common woman, that is, one who was not set apart to God’s service, or (3) a divorcee. The word translated “common” is the same word translated in that manner in verses 4 and

6. A “common” person was a “secular” person, that is, someone who had not been set apart to the service of Jehovah. A priest was to marry a woman who had been set apart for Jehovah’s service, as he had been. At that time, the plan was that all firstborn males in Israel would be set apart to Jehovah because Jehovah had spared Israel’s firstborn when he killed all the firstborn males of Egypt for refusing to allow the Israelites to go free (Ex. 13:2). However, a little later Jehovah substituted the tribe of Levi for Israel’s firstborn males (Num. 3:12-13). Therefore, the effect of this command was that the priests were to take their wives from among the women of the tribe of Levi. The wives of the priests were chosen for their places of service just as the priests were. They were to come from the tribe that gave them the best opportunity to have the temperament and training necessary to understand the holy responsibilities that had been given to their husbands, making it possible for them to assist their husbands effectively.

The three requirements for a priest’s wife in this verse all show that God’s priests needed to have wives who were as devoted to God as they were and who were ready to join him in unselfish service to God.

Verse 8. **You must hallow him, because he offers the bread of your God. He must be holy to you, for I Jehovah who hallows you am holy.**

The Israelites were to respect the priests as holy people because they offered the offerings that pictured the fellowship Jehovah shared with His people and because God had made the whole nation a special holy people.

- b. Of a priest’s daughter  
(21:9)

Verse 9. **And the daughter of a man priest, if she makes herself common to become a prostitute, she is making her father common. She must be burned with fire.**

In addition to the priest and his wife, it was also important for their children to set a high example for the people. If a daughter of a priest departed so far from the ideal as to become a

prostitute, she was to be executed and then her body incinerated with fire, that is, cremated (see comments on Lev. 20:14 in MESSAGE 24). Her becoming a prostitute made both her and her father unholy or secular (see comments on Lev. 10:10 in MESSAGE 12 under the heading the holy and the common and on Lev. 21:4,6,7 above). Her sin was a sign of complete rebellion against God and against her calling. The punishment for complete rebellion was death by stoning. Since she was a priest’s daughter, her body was to be cremated also (see comments on Lev. 20:14 in MESSAGE 24).

- B. Conduct of the high priest and his family with regard to (21:10-15):
  - 1. Uncleaness (21:1-12)

Verses 10-12. **10 And the chief priest among his brothers, upon whose head was poured the oil of anointment and whose hands were filled to wear the [holy] clothes must not loosen [the hair of] his head, and he must not tear his clothes**

**11 He must not go in toward any dead body. He must not make himself unclean for his father or for his mother.**

**12 He must not go out of The Tabernacle, and he must not make common The Holiness of his God, because the commitment of the oil of anointment is on him. I am Jehovah.**

Jehovah set an even higher standard of devotion and faithfulness for the high priest when he was on duty at The Tabernacle. Even greater faithfulness was required of him because of his higher office and heavier responsibilities. He was not to leave his duties at The Tabernacle to mourn for anyone, not even for his father or his mother. He was not to show the customary signs of mourning, or to touch the dead body of his loved one. He was to put his duty to God above all personal feelings of sorrow. He was not forbidden to be sorrowful, but he was expected not to leave His duties to God at The Tabernacle even to express sorrow for a member of his immediate family. His position and duties were that important.

“The Holiness of his God” is a variation of the term for The Tabernacle that is explained in Leviticus 12:4. It identifies The Tabernacle as a

place that was holy because it was dedicated to God's service. This verse adds words that state that The Tabernacle was holy because it was devoted to Jehovah God and the high priest was holy because he had been anointed to set him aside to Jehovah's service. (see comments on Lev. 12:4 in MESSAGE 15 under the heading The Holiness).

The reason for these high expectations of the high priest was that he served Jehovah, who was distinct and above all other gods. Because Jehovah was distinct, His high priest also needed to excel above priests of all other gods.

2. Marriage (21:13-15)
  - a. Of the high priest (21:13-14)

Verse 13-14. **13 And he must take [in marriage] a wife in her virginity.**

**14 He must not take [in marriage] these: a widow or a divorced woman or a common woman, a prostitute. He must take a wife of his people.**

Also a higher standard in marriage relationships was expected of the high priest. In addition to the requirements for marriages of ordinary priests in verses 7-9, Jehovah added that the high priest was not to marry a widow. The high priest's wife was to be so devoted to her husband and to his service to God that she was required to be a woman who had never had a relationship with any other man. Also, the high priest's wife, like an ordinary priest's wife, was to be "of his own people," meaning that she was to be of the tribe of Levi. This statement shows that Jehovah already planned to substitute the Levites for the firstborn of Israel, even though their formal separation and hallowing did not take place until Numbers 3 (see comments on Lev. 21:7 above and on Lev. 25:32-34

in MESSAGE 37). She was to come from the family God was going to set aside as special servants devoted to His holy service. She needed to be called to her place of service as much as her husband did.

- b. Of the high priest's seed (21:15)

Verse 15. **He must not make common his seed among his people, because I am Jehovah who hallows him.**

The high priest's seed or descendants also needed to separate themselves to a holy life. The whole family of the high priest, including all of his descendants, held especially significant positions. They needed to recognize their responsibilities by living a life devoted to God and not try to live like secular people whose lives were not separated out for God's service. Only the daughter of a regular priest had been mentioned to be punished if she failed to live by the high standards set for the priest's family. All the seed or descendants of the high priest are mentioned as responsible for not being common or secular in their interests. All the high priest's seed probably included his daughters, his sons before they were of age to serve as priests, and also his grandchildren. All of them were to live in such a way as to show that their lives were set apart to God's service. Their lives were to stand out as being more than ordinary because they set their lives apart to serve God.

The reason for these special requirements for a high priest's family were that the One who had set them aside was Jehovah, and Jehovah was distinct and above all other gods.

### Application

Christian ministers are leaders among the people of today, set aside to represent the name and cause of Jesus. Therefore, they must be exemplary in their conduct. They do not live by a different set of morals, but they have a special obligation to live strictly by those morals. They must set an example of faithfulness to God's commands because of their influential position. They are responsible to show their faith in times of sorrow and death. They are not required to refrain from touching the dead body of their loved ones like Israel's priests were, because the symbols of clean and unclean are no longer required of God's people. However, Jesus' ministers are expected to put loyalty to God ahead of their sorrow and show their faith in the face of death.

The dress and grooming of a minister is also important. Grooming standards change. No abiding rules can be set to detail a minister's dress and grooming, but it is important that his grooming show that he is not of the world and is set apart unto God. This responsibility does not mean that he is obligated to wear distinctly "ministerial" dress but that he should avoid dress and grooming that is recognized as worldly, indecent, or even unkempt and sloppy.

The marriage and home of a minister is of special importance. He must take care to marry a woman who shares his high standards of righteousness and unselfish devotion to God's service. A minister's children should also feel the special privilege and responsibilities that are theirs. They should especially take care to avoid serious infractions of God's marriage and moral standards. The higher the standard by which they live, the more their father's ministry will be strengthened.