Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you have done high jump or watched it, you will know that each time you make it over the bar it gets raised a bit higher. And it is from this sport that the saying, “**raising the bar**,” is borrowed. And we talk about “raising the bar” to describe having higher expectations of achievement or behaviour. And we do this, for example, with anyone in a leadership position; we ‘raise the bar’ of what we expect from them because they have to set an example for others. And so, last year, during lockdown 1, the whole country was shocked to learn that the **minister of health** had broken lockdown rules to go for a bike ride. And he eventually resigned because he realized that he had set a poor example as a leader. And some of us will have heard the very sad news about **Ravi Zacharias**. Ravi defended the Christian faith and debated people of other religions or no religion. And some of his talks on YouTube are amazing! Well, sadly, he died last year of cancer. But even more sadly, since his death, allegations of sexual and financial misconduct have proven true. And this behaviour has devastated those he abused but also undone a lot of the good work that he did as a Christian Apologist.

Well, in this part of Leviticus, God raised the ‘holy’ bar for the priests of Israel. In chapters 18-20, God outlined His expectations *of the people* in terms of holy living. But because the priests represented God to the people, and because their holiness had a huge influence on the spiritual well-being of the people, the priests had to be the purest of the pure. So they had to obey all of the commands of chapters 18-20 *and* these regulations.

Now, it shouldn’t surprise us any more that the first thing we are going to see in connection with these regulations is that they pointed forward to Christ. But what we will also see is that these rules have application for leaders in the church today, because their holiness has a huge influence on our spiritual well-being.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, our focus today is chapter 21. And we want to see how **Raising the ‘Holy’ Bar for Priests Speaks a Message about Christ and Christian Leadership**. And our two main headings will once again simply be **explanation** and **application**.

1. So first of all, an **explanation** of the content of chapter 21.
   1. Earlier chapters of Leviticus focused on the priest’s duties and uniform and ceremonial duties. And our sole focus then was how these regulations pointed to Christ as our perfect priest. But the priests were not always on duty at the tabernacle; they also lived out in the camp among the people, with their families. And they had to be holy in these areas of life also. And that’s what the regulations of the first half of chapter 21 are about – being holy while ‘off-duty’,’ so to speak. So, let’s look at these ‘off-duty’ regulations, which have three parts; the first is **verses 1-9**, which is regulations for *all* priests.
      1. **Verses 1-6 are about corpse contamination and mourning practices**.
         1. Christian pastors today take a leading role in ministering to families who have lost loved ones. And ‘highlight’ is clearly the wrong word but supporting families and ministering at funerals is a very precious and rewarding part of a minister’s work. But the old covenant priests were forbidden from coming into contact with the dead, **except for close relatives**, as we see in verses 2-3.
            1. And you might have noticed that **wives are not specifically mentioned in the list of close relatives**, but the nature of marriage as a one-flesh relationship leads most commentators to assume that wives were so obviously among the close relatives that they did not need to be specifically mentioned.
            2. **Verse 4** is a little obscure but it is generally understood as **excluding in-laws** from among the close relatives. So it was just his wife, his children, and his immediate blood family that he could become ceremonially unclean for by coming into contact with the dead. He wasn’t even allowed near relatives by marriage that had died. And this regulation was because death is the most obvious symbol of the curse of sin. So as much as was humanly possible, the priest had to avoid contact with the dead.
         2. And from **verses 5-6**, when the priests mourned for the dead, they were **not to imitate pagan mourning customs**. Weeping, tearing your garments, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and loosening your hair – practices that we read about elsewhere in Scripture – they were allowed. These were kind of random acts of distress. But making bald patches and shaving the beard and tattooing, these were deliberate disfigurements of the body that had pagan connotations. So they were forbidden, because they were incompatible with holiness.
      2. **Verses 7-9** **are regulations about the priests and marriage**.
         1. A woman who was or had been a prostitute, a woman who had been raped, and a divorced woman were not suitable marriage partners for the priests; they were only to marry a virgin or a widow. And the point here is purity; there was not to be even a hint of defilement or questionable moral character, because she was about to become one flesh with a man who was “*holy to his God*,” as it says in verse 7.
         2. And from **verse 8**, the whole community had a responsibility to sanctify the priest, or treat him as holy, by making sure that he did not enter into forbidden relationships.
         3. And from **verse 9**, this meant also that if a priest’s daughter took up prostitution, it not only profaned her but also her father. And to profane is to make impure or unholy or defiled. And drastic measures were needed to remedy this sin – she was to be “*burned* *with* *fire*.”

* 1. In the second section of this chapter, **verses 10-15**, the ‘holy bar’ is raised even higher for the High Priest, as tighter restrictions are made in these same areas.
     1. In **verse 10** he was forbidden even from letting his hair hang loose and/or tearing his clothes for mourning, which ordinary priests were allowed to do. And this was because his head had been anointed with oil and he wore the high priests’ uniform. So to disturb his hair or his clothes would be to attack the signs of his office.
     2. And in **verses 11-12** he was forbidden from taking part in the funeral of even his closest relatives! His duties in the tabernacle were so important that he could not leave that work, even when close relatives died. And we saw an example of this back in chapter 10 when Aaron’s two sons died and he was not allowed to grieve for them or bury them.
     3. And in **verses 13-15**, the High Priest was forbidden also from marrying a widow. And from verse 15, the most likely explanation for this rule is that a widow probably had children from her first marriage. And this had the potential to interfere with the High-priestly line of succession, because it was his eldest son that would be the next High Priest. And so, the High Priest was only allowed to marry a virgin from the tribe of Levi, which is what “*from among his own people*” means. And in this way there would be no question at all about the legitimacy or the lineage of his children.
  2. And that brings us to the third and last section of the chapter, **verses 16-24**, which are again rules for *all* priests.
     1. **1 John 1:5** says, “*God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all*.” So God is complete and perfect in all of His attributes. And so in the same way that animals for sacrifice had to be unblemished and without defect, which is what the second half of chapter 22 is about, the priests who performed sacrifices had to be without deformity or disability or sickness. e wasHeGod was setting a ‘high bar’ for who was fit to represent Him.
     2. Now, from **verse 22**, we see that those in this category were still priests and entitled to enjoy the parts of the sacrifices that the priests were entitled to, but they could not perform the sacrifices or draw near to the altar or go inside the tabernacle itself.
  3. Now, if you have read the Old Testament, you will know how regulations like these affected the spiritual well-being of the people of Israel. Think, for example, of the High Priest Eli. Was he a good high priest, boys and girls? No. And do you remember how his sons are described? They were worthless fellows who behaved very wickedly as priests! And this had severe consequences for the people. And every time we are introduced to a new King in the Old Testament, we read something like, after King so and so died, his son, such and such, reigned in his place. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and all Israel with him. Or, and he did what was good and right in the sight of the Lord and commanded the people to keep the law and the commandment. But sadly, there was much more of the disobedient type than there was of the obedient type. Right? And eventually, the repeated failure of Israel’s leaders to set an example of holiness is what led to invasion and exile.

1. And this brings us to our second heading, which is **the Application**. Now that we understand what the regulations required, why were they given? What was their purpose? And how do they apply for us today?
   1. Well, the first thing we must do is acknowledge just how **outrageous** some of these regulations sound to our modern ears. If you are here for the first time today and this chapter is your first exposure to the Bible, you are probably apoplectic, which means extremely angry and about to blow up! To suggest that contact with the dead is somehow bad and to be avoided if possible sounds culturally offensive today. And to suggest that a prostitute or a woman who has been raped or divorced is somehow defiled or immoral is outrageous and highly offensive today! And the notion that disability or deformity or sickness made you unfit for a job would attract the ire of the Human Rights Commissioner today! And so, as one commentator says, “That this was a deliberate policy set up by the God of the Bible makes it appear even worse and a very good excuse for having nothing to do with God or Jesus Christ.”
      1. However, we need to see this in perspective*.* These regulations are **not about the value and worth of people**. We have seen that God’s law is very clear on the need to respect all life, treating others as we would like them to treat us. And that includes victims of rape and prostitutes and people with disabilities, deformities, or sickness.
      2. We have to understand these regulations in the context of *those* times and against the whole background of the holiness laws. God was teaching His people very important lessons with these regulations. Holiness, as we have seen, means wholeness, fullness of life, completeness and purity. And when Jesus came to earth, He intentionally touched the dead and healed the disabled and had meals with prostitutes. And on the cross He paid the price for every sin and made it possible for us to enjoy peace with God. And when He comes again, He will bring in the new creation where there will no longer be sin and abuse and disability and disease and death. But these things exist now because we live in a fallen world. It is because sin has come into the world that there is prostitution and rape and divorce and disability and deformity and sickness and death. So by calling on the priests to live a ceremonially and morally pure life, the Lord was reminding His people that they lived in a broken world. And they ought to have looked forward to and longed for Messiah who would repair all of this brokenness. That is the sermon in these regulations.
      3. So if you are new to Christianity and the Bible, please don’t write it all off because of Leviticus 21; understood in their context, these regulations are a message of hope and renewal in Jesus Christ. And they should lead us to pray that Christ would return soon and bring with Him the new and holy creation.
   2. But secondly, in terms of application, this passage speaks also to leadership in the church today.
      1. And the first thing we must say here again is that **Christ is our perfect priest**. Only He kept all of the commandments of Leviticus. And He is the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And He is the One who perfectly represents God to us and us to God. And only He will never let us down, will always give us good counsel, and can guard our souls from falling away. But this was what we explored in detail in the first sermon about the priests.
      2. But in His grace, the Lord Jesus has also given us spiritual leaders – elders and deacons. But God raises the ‘holy’ bar for them also.
         1. In **2 Corinthians 6**, Paul spoke about his duty as a minister of God to set an example for the congregation. He said, “*We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as ministers of God we commend ourselves in every way: by … purity, knowledge, patience, kindness … genuine love,* [and] *by truthful speech*.”
         2. And in **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1** we are given long lists of the character qualities that make a man worthy of being considered for leadership in the church. And not only must they be blameless and above reproach, they have to “*manage their own households well*,” and, if they have wives, their wives are to be “*dignified*” and “*sober-minded*” and “*faithful in all things*,” and if they have children, their children are to be “*believers and not open to the charge of debauchery*,” which means drunken or immoral behaviour.
         3. And as it was with the priests, the raising of the ‘holy’ bar for elders and deacons also has in view the spiritual well-being of the congregation. In **Hebrews 13:7**, congregation members are pointed to the leaders of the church and told, “*Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*.” And the Greek word translated as imitate is literally **mimic**.
            1. Boys and girls, do you ever play that game where you repeat whatever words one of your siblings says, or if they laugh, you laugh, or if they groan, you groan? Well, when you do that, you are mimicking your sibling – doing exactly what they do or saying exactly what they say.
            2. Well, we are to **mimic elders and deacons** – find out how they do their daily devotions and what resources they use, and do the same, model your marriage on their marriage, imitate their approach to parenting, mimic the way that they participate in church life, copy how they do hospitality, find out their approach to social media or watching TV or Lord’s Day observance and imitate it.
            3. But notice what it says in Hebrews 13:17, “*Consider the outcome of their way of life, and* ***imitate their faith***.” This is not just about outward behaviour; it is about the faith motivation that influences how they and we live.
            4. Let me illustrate what I mean with **John the Baptist**. He truly was a godly man. And on one occasion, some of John’s disciples complained that people were leaving John to follow Jesus. But John responded, I am not the bridegroom, He is! I am just the friend of the bridegroom and seeing people go to Him makes my joy complete. “*He must increase, but I must decrease*.”
            5. And this is how it should be with elders and deacons. They don’t want to gather followers; they want people to love Christ! They are happy to decrease and for Christ to increase! What they want people to see is that their love for Christ is why they live as they do. And congregation, as imperfect as they are, we are blessed with elders and deacons who have a way of life and a faith in Christ that is worth imitating.
      3. And here is what at stake in this: To a young minister, Paul said, “*Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity … devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching … Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress … Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers*.” Now, Paul was not advocating salvation by minister. We are saved by faith in Christ. But Paul began that chapter with a warning; he said, “*The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves [to false teaching]*.” And what the Holy Spirit uses to prevent people from departing from the faith is the godly example of church leaders and the faithful preaching of the gospel. That is why God raises the ‘holy’ bar for leaders in the church. So pray for our elders and deacons. Pray that they may practice godliness and remain devoted to preaching the full counsel of God’s word. And pray that God would raise up a new generation of elders and deacons who we can imitate the faith of.

So congregation, the regulations about the lifestyle of the priests are a three point sermon; they teach us about the holiness of God, the brokenness of a fallen world, and the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of creation through Jesus Christ. They point us, first and foremost, to the Lord Jesus as our perfect priest and prophet and king. But they are also a reminder that godly leaders are a gift from the Lord.

Let us pray: