Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

I read once about a thief who broke into a widow’s home and put whatever he could quickly grab into a couple of bags. And when he got home he emptied the bags and sorted through what he had taken and among the jewellery and trinkets he discovered some envelopes with money in them that the widow had set aside for church offerings. And he mailed the envelopes with the money still in them back to the widow. So in his mind it was OK to steal jewellery but stealing tithes and offerings was crossing a line.

And this bizarre story highlights the fact that for most people there is a difference between the sacred and the common. So what is OK with common things or common places is not OK with sacred things or sacred places. And I’m guessing it is the same with you. For example, if you have a textbook or a novel that has a broken spine and missing pages, I am sure you would just throw it in the rubbish. But would you throw an old, tatty Bible in the rubbish? Many would not. And pretty much every Sunday evening, the children of our church chase each other around the auditorium and you can hear them laughing and squealing with delight. And I love that sound but some of us will remember a time back in the day when children running around in church was considered a terrible crime. And this was because the church building was viewed as a holy place. And I am sure you can think of other sacred and common distinctions.

Well, the reason I have mentioned these things is because the passage before us today is about the right way to handle holy things. Everything that was to do with the tabernacle and the offerings was holy, which means sacred, devoted, set apart to the Lord. And so, things that were common in and of themselves, like fire, animals, and eating food, because they were part of an offering, became holy. And the priests, even though they were human beings like everyone else, because they were priests, were considered holy. So because the tabernacle was where the Lord dwelled among His people, and because these things were to do with worship and ceremonial symbolism, it all had be handled very, very carefully. Get this wrong, as **7:21** says, and you were to be “*cut off from* [the] *people*,” which, as we shall see, was deadly serious. So what the Lord wanted to impress upon the priests was that holy things had to be handled correctly.

Well, by way of context, chapters 1-6:7 describe the five offerings that were to be presented to the Lord. And our text begins the instructions to the priests about extra details concerning these offerings. And verses 8-13 are about the burnt offering. And the first thing we want to see is how these instructions pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, and then we want to think about how the principles laid out here are relevant for us as New Testament believers.

So our theme today is: **Lessons to be Learned from Instructions about Handling Holy Fire**. And we will first look at the **holy fire** itself and then at the **holy firemen** who had to deal with the ashes.

So let’s begin with the lessons of the **Holy** **Fire** itself.

* 1. In one house that my family lived in we had a log burner. And a fire is a lot of work but when it comes to the warmth of a fire verses the warmth of a heat pump, the fire wins every day. Yes? Well, in Winter, I would put a log on the fire just before going to bed and in the morning I would hope that the fire had not gone out completely and that there was still a glowing ember that could light some paper for the new day’s fire. And I did this just because it was satisfying and it saved 1/2c on a match ☺ Well, we see in **verses 9&12&13** that the fire on the altar of burnt offerings was not allowed to go out. And during the day, because the burnt offering was the most common of all of the offerings that the people presented, this was not a problem. But there were no offerings laid on the altar during the night. Well, we learn in Numbers 28 that the Lord required the priests to offer a whole lamb as a burnt offering first thing in the morning and last thing every night. And part of the reason for the night offering was because the burning fat and the wood combined to keep the fire burning all night through.
  2. But why was this necessary? Why was the fire not allowed to go out? Well, I have called this fire *holy* fire. And this is, in part, because it was fire on the altar. But there was something even more incredible that made this fire *holy* fire and why it was important that it not go out. Later on in **Leviticus 9** we read about the very first time that offerings were presented to the Lord on the altar. And after the animal parts and grain were laid on the altar, listen to what happened next: “*Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar*.” So the first fire on the altar was a jet of fire that came from the place inside the tabernacle where the Lord dwelt above the Ark of the covenant! And the same thing happened later on when the temple was built; the first fire on that altar came from the place inside the temple where the Lord dwelt above the Ark. And once the Lord started the fire, the priests had to keep it burning, night and day, forever. And this is why it was a holy fire and why it was not allowed to go out.
  3. And this holy fire was a symbol of two things:
     1. First, it was a symbol **of the Lord’s permanent presence among His people**. Do you boys and girls remember what form the Lord took as He led His people out of Egypt and through the Wilderness? It was a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. And once the tabernacle had been built, we read that the glory cloud of the Lord came down and filled the tabernacle, “*For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel*.” So this eternal and holy fire was a symbol of the Lord’s permanent presence among His people.
     2. But the fire was also a symbol **of the Lord’s wrath and judgment**. What this fire did was to consume the animal parts that were placed on the altar. And in **Leviticus 10**, we will read about two priests who tried to offer “*unauthorized fire*” to the Lord. And this is what happened to them: “*And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD*.” So this perpetual fire was also a symbol of God’s wrath and judgment.
  4. Well, as we have seen in this sermon series, everything about the tabernacle pointed forward to a greater tabernacle – the Lord Jesus. When He came to earth the first time, it is described in **John 1:14** as Him tabernacling among us.And I want you to listen to these words that John the Baptist said about Jesus and you will hear how the twin emphases of this holy and permanent fire pointed to Jesus. John said, “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but … He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire*.”
     1. So here is the **good news** of what John said for believers today:
        1. Jesus is Immanuel, which means? God with us. So the holy and permanent fire of the tabernacle is a symbol of the permanent presence of Christ within us.
        2. And Jesus also said, “*If anyone loves me … my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him*.” So we also have the permanent presence of the Father within us!
        3. And Jesus also said, “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you [the Holy Spirit] to be with you forever.” And do you remember how the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples is described in Acts 2? “*And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit*.”
        4. So putting all of this together: The holy and permanent fire of Leviticus teaches us that because we have received the Holy Spirit, the Triune God has made His permanent home within us! Isn’t that amazing?! Do you think about that often? What a wonderful encouragement – God has made His permanent home within me!
     2. But there is **bad news** in what John said for unbelievers today:
        1. The holy and permanent fire of the tabernacle is a symbol of what they will endure in eternity – the unquenching fire of hell.
           1. **Revelation 20:9-10** describes the intense persecution of the church that will take place before the Second Coming of Jesus. Satan will lead those opposed to Christ and His church in this persecution. But listen to how it ends: “*They marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever*.”
           2. **Mark 9:47-48** says, “*And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'*”
        2. The holy and permanent fire of the tabernacle is a symbol of what all those who refuse to recognize Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord will endure for all eternity – unquenching fire.
        3. And I can’t spell this out any clearer. Can you imagine being in a fire that never goes out? Can you imagine experiencing pain that never stops? Can you imagine a loneliness that never ends? Whatever is bad here on earth will be all that there is in hell and it will never stop. But whatever is good here on earth is all that there will be in heaven and it will never stop. So please take hold of Jesus, today. Repent of your sins and believe in Him as your Saviour and Lord and you will receive eternal life!

1. So those are the lessons from the **holy fire** itself. But there are also instructions here for the **holy firemen** who had to remove the ashes. So what can we learn from these instructions?
   1. Well, if you have or ever have had a fire at home, you will know that removing the ashes is something that needs to be done, regularly. And the nature of ash means that it is a messy business. So today, removing the ashes might be a job that Mum and Dad assign to one of the children as a chore, so long as they are old enough not to cover the whole lounge in ash ☺ Well, because the altar fire burned continually, the ash needed to be removed every day. Now, altars were a common feature also of the pagan nations that surrounded Israel. And I don’t know if you know much about pagan cultures, but pretty much every aspect of idol worship is sexualized in one way or another. Even today you will see National Geographic images of priests and priestesses, who ‘clothe’ themselves with ashes from ritual fires, and all sorts of wild and chaotic screaming and dancing and sexual immorality goes on around the fires of their altars.
   2. But this was **not to be the case in Israel**. And that is why we read what we read here. These ashes were not just the common by-product of an ordinary fire. This was a holy fire, and these ashes were the result of holy offerings, so they were holy or sacred or special or set apart, and needed to be handled in a holy way.
      1. And so, we see in **verse 10** that it was not a slave or a servant who took out the ashes but one of the Lord’s priests.
      2. And he had a specific uniform for collecting the ashes that was a linen overcoat and linen underwear. And it had to be linen to minimize sweating, because bodily discharges of any sort were considered unclean, as we shall see later in Leviticus 15.
      3. And **Exodus 28:42-43** says this: “*You shall make for [the priests] linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs; and they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place, lest they bear guilt and die.*” And **Exodus 20:26** explains this more: “*And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it*.” So the Lord did not want the priest’s private parts exposed while he was doing his work at the altar, which is why he had to wear this linen underwear.
      4. And having scooped up the ashes, he had to place them “*beside the altar*.” And then in **verse 11** we read that he had to go and take of his ‘holy fireman uniform’ and put on other clothes, because now he was going to exit the tabernacle courtyard and go to the “*clean place*” outside the camp of the people where the ashes were put. So there was a ‘holy tip’ or a ‘holy landfill,’ if you like. But because he was leaving the tabernacle, he had to wear different clothes to maintain the distinction between the sacred and the common.
      5. And the point of all of this, congregation, is that unlike the ‘worship’ of pagan nations that was chaotic and sexually impure, God wanted every aspect of the worship of His people, including even the removal of ashes, to be careful and considered and orderly and reverential and pure. Why? Because God is holy and the worship that was owed to God had to be holy in every way.
   3. Now, many today would say, Yeah, but that was then and this is now. All of that reverence and order was appropriate for Old Testament times but it was all fulfilled in Christ and we have been set free from the law and we can let our hair down a little and jazz our worship services up, right? Well, the first problem with that way of thinking is that God has not changed; God is still holy. So in **Hebrews 12:28-29**, which, just to be clear, is in the New Testament, we read these words: “*Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*.” And in a New Testament chapter where chaotic worship is rebuked, **1 Corinthians 14:40** says, “*But all things should be done decently and in order*.”
      1. In our bulletins last week there was an advert for a conference later this year that will be hosted by the Palmerston North congregation. The topic of the conference is worship in Spirit and truth. I am pretty confident it will be a conference well worth attending.
      2. There is also a very recent and excellent documentary that I highly recommend called ‘*Spirit and Truth’* that is about worship. Just Google spirit and truth movie. It begins with clips of ‘worship services’ in a number of churches. And I very deliberately put ‘worship services’ in inverted commas because what is in those video clips has more to do with the chaotic and sensual pagan worship I have described than the holy worship that the Lord commands here in Leviticus.
      3. And it is because of our text and verses like the ones in Hebrews 12 and 1 Cor. 14 that the **Westminster Confession of Faith** article about worship says,

*The acceptable way of worshiping the true God has been instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshiped according to the imaginations or devisings of men, or the suggestions of Satan, or under any visible representation, or any other way not commanded in Holy Scripture.*

* + 1. And this, brothers and sisters, is why biblical worship, spirit and truth worship, is simple and orderly and reverential. God is not our buddy and what we do in church is the most sacred thing we can do. So we hear God’s word read and preached – that is God speaking to us – and we sing, pray, recite, have the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, and present offerings – these are our response to His word. There are many things we could add to worship services that would affect our emotions and feelings and that appeal to our senses. And emotions and feelings and senses are good things; don’t get me wrong. But our focus must not be creating emotional responses but doing what the Lord commands because that is what is best for our emotions.
    2. And none of this is to say that so long as we do all the right things in the right order, it becomes acceptable worship. It is acceptable worship because it is the worship that the Lord commands and it has Christ at the center; when we look to Christ and love Him and trust in Him and honour Him, with reverence and awe, He receives our worship and presents it to the Father as acceptable worship.

The lessons from the instructions about rightly handling holy fire are that God is holy and by His Spirit He has made His permanent presence within us! Therefore, let us look to Christ and offer our God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe. **Amen.**