

Don't Underestimate God's Holiness

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Date: 02 July 2023

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[0 : 00] I wonder whether you sometimes feel the punishment doesn't fit the crime, that sometimes the penalty for mistakes is too severe, or maybe the opposite, that others are being let off too lightly.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Incidentally, I've done this over the three congregations, the third one.

This is the highest rate at the moment. Okay, second example. Okay, second example. Being charged a full month's interest at 20% on your credit card balance just because you're one day late on your payment.

[1 : 47] Okay, yes. Okay, yes. I think that's unfair too. Yeah, yeah. Okay, next one. Being charged an extra hour just because you're one minute late leaving the car park.

Okay, here's one for the students. Not being given any marks for a wrong answer in a math exam question out of five, let's say.

Okay. Even though it's clear from your workings, it was due to just one minor mistake in your calculation. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, this might bring back, trigger some unfortunate memories for some of you.

Having your internet devices confiscated from you for one week because you didn't do the chores assigned to you. Just Eric, all right.

Okay, I won't bother with the next one. The next one was going to say, how about if it's after you've been reminded for an entire week. But since you all think it's fair, that's fine.

[3 : 04] Okay, last one. Being consumed by fire because as a priest, you offered unauthorized fire in the temple. Jeff is the only brave one.

Thank you. Yep. I think some of you are just afraid that you might be stricken by God. But you know, with the last example, I have to say that if any one of you thought it was unfair, but you didn't dare to put up your card, I don't actually blame you.

Because if you think about it, what harm did Nadab and Abihu really do, right? Did they steal from somebody? Did they mistreat the poor?

Was anyone disadvantaged? Was anyone disadvantaged? Not really. So it doesn't seem fair on the face of it, does it? But perhaps we're missing something here. But perhaps we're missing something here.

And so I think it's worth us looking closer as we begin in verse 1 of Leviticus 10. So look with me either on the slide or in your Bibles. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, took their senses, put fire in them and added incense, and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

[4 : 17] So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Now most scholars would think that this occurred straight after chapter 9, in which case, if you compare them, the contrast is stark.

In chapter 9, the fire came from the presence of the Lord and consumed the sacrifices. Here, it consumes Nadab and Abihu.

Now we aren't told why the fire was unauthorized, but what we do know is that it wasn't done as the Lord commanded. It was contrary to what his command was.

Which again, is a contrast with the rest of Leviticus. Because as we've been seeing all along, time and again, we have been reading that Moses was doing exactly as the Lord commanded.

Now, Nadab and Abihu, as priests, would have seen all of this up front, close. For seven days, particularly during their ordination, they should have been paying attention, shouldn't they? [5 : 22] And it should have stuck in their minds. So why they decided to deviate from this, we're not sure. Nevertheless, in verse 3, Moses explains why the punishment is so severe.

This is what the Lord spoke of when he said, Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy. In the sight of all the people, I will be honored. You see, Aaron and his sons actually already knew. Moses is talking about what the Lord had said previously, spoken of. They, as those who approach God, ought to have known that they were coming face to face with God's utter holiness. And so, in a sense, this isn't about whether the punishment is fair or not. It is, in one sense, what it is. God is who he is.

And he cannot but reveal his true holy character. And so, if what they did showed their own unholiness, and that was the effect of it, well, that's the consequence.

[6 : 31] Also, it was a witness to the people, so that they could see who God really is. That his holiness really has to be taken seriously.

It's not to be underestimated, even though God has also said that he's gracious and slow to anger and merciful. Further, if God did not do anything, it would suggest that his word didn't matter, that he could be disobeyed at whim.

Now, more than that, as God's anointed, the priests were also his representatives and mediators. And so, of all the people, they were the ones that were meant to take God's word seriously. Otherwise, who else would? And further, the people needed to have the confidence that when the priests spoke, and when they offered sacrifices on their behalf, that it was acceptable to the Lord. And if it wasn't, that it was clear that it wasn't. Well, given the seriousness of the priests' role, Aaron knew, I think, that his son's punishment was just.

[7 : 42] And so, we read in verse 3, he remained silent. But to prevent the rest of the family failing further, Aaron and his remaining sons are now given further instructions.

They were told now to do the right thing by God as his anointed priests. Because as Moses said in verse 3, they are going to still be approaching God.

And so, they needed to act in a way that proved God's holiness and honored him. So, verse 4, Moses summoned Mishael and El-Zaphon, son of Aaron's uncle, Uziel, and said to them, Come here, carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary.

So, they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp, as Moses ordered. So, firstly, Aaron and his sons weren't allowed to remove their corpses. It would have defiled them and barred them from further priestly duties.

In fact, later on, if we look in Leviticus chapter 21, this ban on touching corpses is absolute for the high priest. Can't do it at all. But Moses goes further in verse 6 to say, They're not even allowed to mourn for them.

[8 : 52] Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, Do not let your hair become unkempt, untidy. Do not tear your clothes, or you will die. And the Lord will be angry with the whole community.

Not just them, but the whole community. Now, like any father, I think Aaron would have longed to mourn his son's death. But here, his duty as God's high priest restricted him from doing so.

Now, we see here that God wasn't being heartless to Aaron, because next he says, your relatives, all the Israelites, They may mourn for those that the Lord had destroyed by far.

They can do it on your behalf, Aaron. But as for you and your sons, Do not leave the entrance to the tent of meeting, or you, again, will die. Because, and here's the reason, the Lord's anointing oil is on you.

And so they did as Moses has said. So the key here really is that the Lord's anointing oil is still on them. They are first and foremost set apart as God's priest.

[9 : 56] And those duties, those obligations, took precedence over even their duty to family. And furthermore, in this case, as God's high priest, Aaron had to stand with God in his judgment.

He was, after all, God's representative and mediator. So yes, he was Nadab and Abihu's father. But much as he loved his sons, showing God's holiness and justice was more important.

It's like, you know, for example, if there was a judge who had to sentence his own son for a crime. As the judge, someone who was administering the justice for the state, he still had to don the wig and pronounce the judgment.

Even though, in his heart, he would have been aching for his son when he did it. And if you think about it, God did the same, didn't he?

He poured out his wrath upon Jesus. Turned his face away. Even though, that was the hardest thing for him to do. Now in verse 8, God gives more instructions.

[11 : 13] This time, to prevent any more of these sort of sins from occurring. So, the Lord said to Aaron, you and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die.

This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean. And so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses.

Now, some have wondered whether this was actually Nadab and Abihu's problem in the first place, that they were drunk while serving at the tabernacle. And so, being careless, they had offered unauthorized fire.

Now, we don't know whether that's true or not, but whether that was the case, the point here is that it takes great care, doesn't it, to do the job of the priest. Wanting to distinguish what is holy from the common, what is clean from the unclean.

They had to be careful to do that, meticulous in how they did it. And so, the command not to drink was to stop them being impaired in their abilities.

[12 : 18] Otherwise, they would make the same errors as well. It's similar, isn't it, when we get on a plane. We take comfort, don't we, that our pilots, or if we get on a bus or a train, the drivers, that there is a ban on them drinking alcohol or having drugs in their system.

Why? Because we entrust our lives into their hands. Lives are at stake. And so, it is here as well, not just for the priest, but actually for the people too.

Because the people were relying on the priest to ensure that there was forgiveness of their sins.

That they were right before God. But again, I want you to notice too the two distinctions, the two steps, isn't it, which we'll see more of next week, but we've been talking about already.

Aaron was to distinguish what was holy from what was common, and then what's clean from unclean. Slightly different things, isn't it? Common things can either be clean or unclean.

But holy things, holy things are those things that are not common. Holy things are consecrated from what is clean. So, you have to have a clean common thing that becomes holy.

[13 : 30] Not an unclean common thing. And Aaron and his sons here are to teach these things not just with words, but through modeling with their lives and their actions as well.

And as priests, they were called to a higher standard. More stringent because they had to be consecrated for the Lord. And thus, they had instructions of not defiling themselves by touching dead bodies or mourning God's judgment of sin or offering unauthorized fire, even if it was inadvertently.

And the closer they got to the tent or the closer they got to the holy place, the more they had to maintain their holiness. All this was to paint a picture of just how serious God took holiness.

And they were to model this and teach this and demonstrate this so as to impress this on the people. And we see this now in the next section because here, there is again with the food offerings a distinction between what's holy and what's clean, isn't it?

So, as I read it again, see if you can pick up the differences between the grain and the wave offering. So, Moses said to Aaron and his remaining sons, Eliezer and Ithamar, Take the grain offering left over from the food offerings prepared without yeast and present it to the Lord and eat it beside the altar for it is most holy.

[14 : 52] Eat it in the sanctuary area because this is your share and your son's share of the food offerings presented to the Lord. For so I have been commanded. But you and your sons and your daughters may eat the breasts that was waved and the thigh that was presented.

For eat them in a ceremonially clean place. They have been given to you and your children as your share of the Israelites' fellowship offerings. The thigh that was presented and the breast that was waved must be brought with the fat portions of the food offerings to be waved before the Lord as a wave offering.

This will be a perpetual share for you and your children as the Lord had commanded. So, did you pick it? The grain offering is most holy, right?

But the breast and the thigh, no, they're not. Thus, only the sons of Aaron who are priests, who offer the sacrifices as priests, they can eat the grain offering.

Whereas with the breast and the thigh, those can be eaten by all the members of the family, including the daughters. Provided they do it in a ceremonially clean place.

[16:07] So, that means not eating it, for example, in a moldy house or next to a corpse. Not that, I don't know why anyone would do that. But that's a ceremonially clean place.

They can eat it there. But by contrast, the grain offering, it has to be eaten in the sanctuary. The holy place. Or holy place, isn't it? Clean versus holy.

Now, if you want to check all these out in detail, you just need to look back to Leviticus 2, 3, and 6. And they're all sort of spelled out a bit more there as well.

But whereas prior to this section, God has been instructing them on what not to do, I think here now the instructions have turned into the more positive side of things. What they are to do to signify themselves and show their status as priests.

And here God gives them these instructions almost to indicate that despite his son's sin, God still considered Aaron as his anointed priest.

[17:09] He and his sons, therefore, had God's blessing to share in the holy food that was being offered. To eat it even in his presence in the sanctuary. But they are to do it in a way that maintains the purity of the sacrificial system.

So that if they ate the wave offering with their family outside the tabernacle, they must not defile themselves but had to eat it in a clean place.

Otherwise, as they approached God, they came back into the tabernacle to approach God to atone for the people's sin, they would have been unclean themselves. So there is a really elaborate system, isn't it?

Aaron and his sons have to go to great lengths to be ceremonially clean. But none of these, even though required by God, made Aaron and his sons sinless.

They may have been ceremonially or ritually clean, but spiritually they were not. They were still as sinful as the rest of the people. And we have already seen, haven't we, in the past weeks, that the priests themselves had to atone for their own sin, even as they were being anointed for ministry.

[18:23] But the point here now is that with Abihu and Nadab's sin, what occurred was that their sinning took place at the very point when they were meant to be mediating for the people for their sin.

So if as mediators they stood between God and Israel, then who would stand between them and God for their sin as they were mediating?

There's no one left, is there? No one else between God and them. And I think that's the other reason why they were exposed and therefore consumed by God's holy fire.

And this was Aaron's dilemma, I think, because even though he and his remaining sons had God's approval to continue as priests, deep down, Aaron knew that he himself was not without sin.

And as Nadab and Abihu's father and as head of the priestly family, I think he felt the responsibility of what happened. And so that when now we turn to verse 16 and we look at the sin offering, Aaron then does something which he would not ordinarily do as he would have as a priest in other circumstances.

[19:42] So we read, Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found that it had been burnt up. He was angry with Elisa and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and asked, why didn't you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary area?

It is most holy. It was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the Lord. Since his blood was not taken into the holy place, you should have eaten the goat in the sanctuary area as I commanded.

Now notice here that this is the sin offering, so not the grain or the fellowship that was spoken of earlier. And it was offered for the guilt of the community, not the priest. And we know this because Moses said that the blood wasn't taken into the holy place.

So if you read chapter 4, if the blood is taken into the holy place, that was to make atonement for the priest. But if it wasn't, then the offering was for atonement, only for the atonement of the community.

And so accordingly, the priest as mediator is entitled or even required to eat the portion of that sin offering that was reserved for him. And yet, Aaron felt, I think, the weight of the sin of sin on this

specific occasion, and therefore chose not to eat his share, what was his right of the food offering, but instead had his sons burn it on the altar instead.

[21 : 01] And this, on the face of it, angered Moses, because, you know, Moses is saying, here it is again, the priests are disobeying God, right? Abihu and Nadab has just been killed.

And these, and we read, these are Aaron's remaining sons. If God was to strike them again, what would happen? No more sons to continue the line. But when Moses questioned Aaron, this was his answer in verse 19.

Aaron replied, In other words, given the sin of my sons today, how can I eat the food like my family is holier than the people?

So yes, Aaron still had the anointing oil on him. He was ritually clean, holy in that sense, had the right to eat the sin offering. But Aaron was trying to express a deeper spiritual reality.

To mourn almost, to show remorse, not so much for the death of his sons, but the sin that caused it. And so he chose to deviate from the Lord's specific command.

[22 : 20] But you have to realize that it's not every day that the priests are punished by God, even as they brought an offering to the Lord for the people's sin. So Aaron here is not being carelessly disobeying the law, but rather understanding the true intent of the law, he chose to break the letter of the law in order to follow the spirit of the law.

And you know, in some ways, if you think about it, it's happened before elsewhere, hasn't it? Jesus and David both broke the Sabbath laws in order to do a greater good.

And so when Moses heard this, he was satisfied. He's saying, OK, I understand you did do the thing that's not required by the law or shouldn't have done by the law, but I'm satisfied because I've heard your reason.

So that's the passage. And I don't know whether you found this mildly interesting or maybe totally boring. But I guess the question then is, how is this relevant for us today?

So are we in danger, for example, of being consumed by fire the minute we sin? I know sometimes as parents, we threaten our children with, you know, stop lying or lightning will strike you immediately, something like that.

[23 : 42] And sometimes, you know, when we do something wrong and bad things happen, we tend to think, isn't it, oh, is this a sign of God's punishment? Well, to start off with, if your conscience is stricken because of what you're doing is wrong, then good.

But I don't think God needs to work like that with us anymore. So I don't think that that's the application from this passage. Rather, I think the lesson is, again, to realize God's holiness. As I said last week, it hasn't changed. And the truth is, God will show himself holy one way or another. Now, in many ways, God has shown forbearance by withholding judgment on humanity in a lot of instances as we look around the world.

But make no mistake, there will be a day of judgment and reckoning for all because of his holiness. And the fact that sometimes, you know, we are just a bit blasé, aren't we, with sin, whether it's with us or with the world, I think that's an indication that we're still underestimating God's holiness, I think.

The good news, of course, is that for those of us who believe in Jesus, then God has already poured out his judgment on his son. And so, unlike Abihu and Nadab, we don't have to fear.

[25 : 05] And besides, unlike Abihu and Nadab, when Jesus approached his father with his offering, he did absolutely what was required by the Lord.

He did nothing wrong but offered a perfect sacrifice. But, even though he did, God's judgment fell on him anyway. Not for what he'd done, but on account of us.

And so, if there's anyone here today and you've not taken refuge in Jesus yet, then the Bible says that this is the only way to avoid God as our consuming Father.

But, when we've done that, then actually there needs to be no fear any longer. Because we know that Jesus did exactly what the Father commanded him.

And so, when we approach God in Christ, and that's the key, in Christ, we can do so boldly and confidently. And that's why we had in our second reading in Hebrews chapter 12 in verse 24, that we read that those who believe in Jesus come to God, yes, the judge of all, all, but also to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[26 : 26] And further down in verse 29, we have this assurance that, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, that is the kingdom of Jesus, let us be thankful. And so, worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

For our God is, not was, is a consuming fire. And this is our unique, this is unique in the combination that is only true with Jesus, isn't it?

That firstly, we can come thankfully with joy, without fear, even though God is our consuming fire, because we are confident in what Jesus has done for us. But, the writer of Hebrews also say that we come with reverence and awe, because God is still holy.

And more than that, as God's people, remember last week, we are his priesthood of believers, aren't we? And therefore, we have the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

That means, just like Aaron and his sons, we are able to share in the most holy feast with God. We come and eat at the Lord's table, with that open invitation. We are anointed to serve.

[27 : 38] We are able to do all these things, but, being clean and holy still matters to God. This time, of course, it is not about ritual cleanliness anymore.

Right? So, if today, before you came to church, you forgot to wash, have a shower, or, you know, some of your hair is a bit untidy, I have no problems there.

That is not a problem to God, is it? Because, it is not about outward cleanliness anymore. Rather, what is God concerned about now? It is about cleanliness and holiness in our lives, isn't it?

In our hearts. Our humility and integrity before God. Our obedience to Him. Our love for others.

Putting to death our sinful desires. And repenting of pride and other sin in our lives.

These are the things that still matter to God. Even though we can be assured of our salvation, holiness still matters. And as Christians, I know I often hear that we yearn so much to be filled with the Holy Spirit, don't we?

[28 : 43] We ask, fill us and empower us. Well, guess what? If you ask for that, the focus of the Holy Spirit is what? On your holiness. If you ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit, His primary work in you is actually to transform you in holiness.

We ask for the Holy Spirit to do a lot of other things, but actually, what He wants to most do in your life is to attend to your holiness.

So that even the smallest transgression in our lives pricks our conscience and causes us to want to change, to repent and to be humble before God.

So yes, let's be thankful that God has shielded us from our consuming fire, God. But even as God's Spirit then comes upon us, let us remember that we are called to serve and honor Him by paying attention to living holy lives for Him.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us when we make light of your holy laws and try to negate or avoid them. We try and do that rather than ask for your power to live up to them.

[30 : 00] Please forgive us. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, who offered Himself as the one perfect sacrifice so that we are not consumed. And now, with the anointing of your Spirit, help us to live holy and acceptable lives for your glory.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.