

Instructions to Priests

by Ray C. Stedman

I never tire of the excitement and the joy of seeing Christians discover the fact of their priesthood. Many people have been church members for years yet have never understood this great truth. But then God leads them to discover that they can do more than merely come to church and sit there and pay the bills. They learn that they have been constituted priests unto God and that they have been equipped by the Holy Spirit with gifts which enable them to minister wherever they are, whether to Christians or to non-Christians. And when they catch on to this and experience the power that God has supplied to them through the Holy Spirit they become simply elated about what God can do in their lives! It is a great joy to see this kind of truth hit with an electric excitement and to watch people being changed by it.

Leviticus is the book of the priesthood. God is teaching us by means of these types, these pictures and shadows of the Old Testament, what our priesthood means for us today. You remember that in our last study we looked at the opening part of Chapter 10 and saw that this priesthood is no joke, that God takes it very seriously. He has given us careful instructions as to how to live and act as priests. He especially wants us to avoid the things that he says are dangerous. This is what is brought out so clearly in the story of Nadab and Abihu, the two older sons of Aaron, who carelessly assumed that as priests they could do whatever they wanted to do, that since they were priests they could interject their own ideas of how a priest ought to function. And when they did this, we are told, there flashed forth out of that cloud of Shekinah glory

which was the symbol of the presence of God a flame of fire which consumed them in their tracks and destroyed them, and thus they died suddenly before God in the sanctuary. This stunned and sobered the people of Israel. It was God's way of impressing upon them the fact that the priesthood is extremely important.

I wonder if we, here today, have any idea at all of how terribly important this priesthood is which God has committed to us as believers. This world is going through terrible struggle and is in a critical state, as we well know. I don't have to describe it to you. You know how confused and horribly broken it is. And the reason that we are going through such desperate conditions, and that society is literally falling apart at the seams, is the lack of a priesthood. The church has not been what it ought to be. Individual Christians have neglected this priesthood which is committed to them. As a result there has been no salt with savor in society and so it is corrupting at a fearful rate.

This past week I was in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where Jim Gordon and I spoke at two high schools. The student body of the first was entirely white, and there we received an ovation as we reported on the California scene and on how God is working in various ways through the Jesus Movement here on the west coast. The students were very excited about this. The second school was predominantly white but there were about two hundred fifty blacks there too. We noticed a tremendous difference in atmosphere. As we were hurrying down the hall with them on the way to the assembly all the white students were jostling and talking and laughing as

high school kids will. But all the black students were lined up along the walls. They weren't saying a word and were not responding to our attempts to smile at them or to speak to them. They just stood there – sullen, glowering, defiant, angry. It was obvious they were united in this and working together. And it was distressing to see that there was no salt at work in their lives, no priesthood reaching out to them with love and understanding to provide a vent for all the pressures and problems that were seething in their hearts and lives. At the end of the meeting that morning, though the white students gave us very loud applause, the few blacks who came into the assembly did not join in. And afterward, as we were walking down the hall, one of the local men who was with us was knocked down deliberately by a black student. So it was obvious that racial tensions were building to a tremendous pitch in this high school. Yet the whites were largely blind to it and unaware of it! I tried to point out some of the danger signs to them and to warn them that they could no longer ignore these people but must recognize that they are human beings who have problems which need an outlet and a remedy. They need somebody to reach out to them in love. And I could sense so strongly the desperate need for priesthood in that situation! This is what God has called us to, in order that these middle walls of partition between races and classes will be broken down by the ministry of men and women possessed with the Spirit of God – not great preachers, but common, ordinary, plain Christian people, just like you and me. These are the ones who have the priesthood.

Now, in Chapter 10, we come to three further **instructions to priests** which are very insightful and helpful. Following the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu we read, in Verses 8-11:

And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, “Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die; it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.”
{Lev 10:8-10 RSV}

There you notice two great privileges of ministry which priests enjoy:

- The first is *to discriminate between the clean and the unclean*, between the holy and the common. Of course in the ancient priesthood this meant to distinguish between animals which were marked as clean and those which were declared unclean, and between sacred vessels, buildings, etc., and those which were for common use. When this is lifted to the level of our priesthood, the spiritual level, it means to discriminate between that which merely feeds the natural life and that which improves a person's spiritual relationship, deep in his inner heart. And it means to distinguish between that which is harmful and that which is harmless.

That is not easy to do! It takes a very sharp eye and discriminating mind to be able to tell the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. You remember that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that though by that time those men ought to have been teachers, yet they needed somebody to teach them again the first principles of God's word because they were unable to judge between the right and the wrong, between the clean and the unclean. This is what a priesthood is for.

- And, second, it is *to teach the truth*. It is to unveil reality. It is to tear down all the illusions under which people live and to demolish all the lies and fantasies with which society is saturated, and to expose the way life really is. That is the business of priests – to teach the truth about life as the God of truth himself has revealed it. That is what these priests were to do. They were to teach the people of Israel all the statutes which the LORD had spoken to them through Moses. And that is our job – to unveil the truth and to help people to see and understand it.

You see, the first ministry corrects what is wrong; the second replaces it with what is right. That is what is so desperately needed in society today. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 2, he closes a section about the spiritual equipment of the believer by saying, "The spiritual man judges all things [discriminates between all things], but is himself to be judged by no one,"

{1 Cor 2:15 RSV}. And then he says perhaps the most amazing, astounding thing this apostle ever wrote. He says that when we are judging all things on the basis of an understanding of the Word of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, “We have the mind of Christ,” {1 Cor 2:16b RSV}. That is, we are looking at the world as Christ sees it, at the way it really is, and thus we become utter realists. That is the job of a priest – your job, my job – to take this truth and to set it before people in such a way that they can see the truth about themselves and about life.

They need this ministry in so many areas these days:

- Think of how many people today are all mixed up in the area of sex. How little understood is this great, driving force which motivates so much of our thinking and living! How easily it is twisted and distorted and perverted! That which was a great gift from God to man, designed to be beautiful and powerful and healing, has become sordid and nasty and perverted – and destructive to human relationships, destroying the very ones who are seeking to find through it a relationship of love. But its rightful use will enhance and glorify and beautify life. And how much the world needs to hear the truth about sex, taught from the word of God and not from the lies of men!
- Think of how much help we need in the area of understanding material values. So many people, even many Christians, seem to miss the truth that things don’t satisfy. I find so many people today who are suffering from what someone has well called *destination sickness*, the malady of having everything you’ve always wanted to have, but not wanting anything you’ve gotten. You’ve arrived, but you don’t want it when you get there. That is the emptiness of our day and it so desperately calls for the exercise of a priesthood which will tell the truth about what God can do and about the needs he can meet.
- Think of the need for truth in the area of marital relationships. I had an interesting experience on the plane yesterday coming back from Arkansas. I was working on the concluding phases of this message and I was studying from the Bible. A stewardess came by and said,

“What are you doing?” I said, “I’m studying.” She said, “What are you studying?” And I said, “I’m studying the Bible.” “Oh,” she said, “that’s very interesting. What are you studying about?” I said, “About life, and about you.” She said, “What do you mean?” “Well,” I said, “tell me a little about yourself, and I’ll tell you.” She told me, among other things, that she was married. I happened to have in my briefcase a copy of one of my printed messages, entitled *What Every Husband Should Know*. I handed it to her and said, “Why don’t you give this to your husband? There is also one for wives. I don’t have it with me but I’ll be glad to send it to you if you’ll give me your address.” She took the copy and went on about her work. After a while I looked up from my studies, and there she stood – with two other stewardesses. She said, “You know, I read a few pages from your pamphlet and it is great! I want my husband to have this very much – he needs it! And these other girls want to get copies too.” So I ended up with the names and addresses of all these stewardesses and a chance to send them these messages. Now, that is the work of the priesthood, exactly! It doesn’t have to be anything official. You can minister right where you live and work. And that is exactly what this passage is talking about – the need for the dissemination of the truth about God in ways that people will accept and understand and welcome – telling it abroad the way it is.

You notice also that there was one thing the priests must not do. Verse 8 says, “The LORD spoke to Aaron [evidently directly, not through Moses this time], and said, ‘Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations.’” Now, don’t misunderstand that. This is not a women’s temperance message. The Bible never says that anything is wrong with wine or strong drink except in the abuse of it, in its use to excess. But it does say, consistently all the way through, that any degree of drunkenness, any getting high, any lack of control is always regarded as wrong because it destroys our humanity to some extent.

The priests were warned against this particularly when they went into the tent of meeting, the

tabernacle, for ministry. But don't take these Old Testament injunctions which were literal in the realm of the physical and carry them over literally into that same realm for us. If that were valid we would still have to be killing animals as did these ancient priests. But we know that animal sacrifice is a picture of the death of Christ on our behalf. Similarly, here the forbidding of the priests to drink wine or strong drink is a picture of something on the spiritual level in our lives. It signifies that we should avoid on the spiritual level that which wine and strong drink do on the physical level.

What is that?

Well wine and strong drink, of course, tend to excite nature. They arouse the flesh, and distort judgment as a result. So anything which arouses our passions, our flesh, in the exercise of our priesthood, with its necessity of discriminating and making judgments between what is harmful and what is harmless, is forbidden to us lest it destroy our ability to judge – both for ourselves and for others to whom we may be ministering.

How greatly this warning is needed! For instance, I have seen at least a dozen situations down through the years in which Christians, with the best of intentions, have gotten involved in shady financial deals, in trying to make a lot of money quickly, justifying it to themselves on the grounds that they would be better able to support missionaries or to contribute more to the church. But, despite their sincerity, in the process they have done things which were downright illegal and clearly wrong, things with which a worldly man would have had nothing to do because he would have recognized them for what they were. But their own cupidity, their own covetousness and desire for enrichment, blinded their minds to the situation and dulled their senses so that they couldn't distinguish right from wrong. This is what is forbidden to us here.

I have seen Christians, young and old, trying to help someone involved in a sexual problem. Sex is a powerful drive and those who try to help in this area must be very careful because they too can have their passions aroused. And many times Christians have not been careful and have fallen into the very problem they were trying to help correct. This is what God is warning against. Don't get yourself involved in a situation to such a degree that you lose the ability to be objective and to distinguish which is right and which is wrong.

The next section deals with **the sources of the priests' strength**:

And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons who were left, "Take the cereal offering that remains of the offerings by fire to the LORD, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy; you shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, from the offerings by fire to the LORD; for so I am commanded." {Lev 10:12-13 RSV}

This section, from Verse 12 to Verse 15, tells us where strength can be derived to meet these heavy demands for objectivity in the decisions we have to make. The cereal offering, as we have already seen, is a picture of the humanity of Jesus, his perfect manhood, man just as God intended man to be, with which we can identify because he was tempted in every point like as we are. He knows exactly what we go through. He experienced every pressure, every single temptation that we undergo.

But do you notice where they were to eat this? In only one place. They were to eat it beside the altar, right beside the place where the animals were put to death, as a reminder of that fundamental principle which runs all through Scripture: he who loses his life shall save it, but he who tries to hang on to it shall lose it. That is the basic law of life. If you try to hang onto your humanity, try to protect it and keep it for yourself, and are concerned only about what pleases you or does something for you, you will lose it. It will wither and die and you will turn hard and callous and cold and cruel. But if you fling it away, give it away to others, and are ready to invest it in somebody else's life and welfare, let it die, in other words, you will save it and it will be a joy to you.

There are **two other sources of strength** given here. Look at Verses 14-15:

"But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is offered you shall eat in any clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you; for they are given as your due and your sons' due, from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. The thigh that is offered and the breast that is waved they shall bring with the offerings by fire of the fat, to wave for a wave offering before the LORD, and it shall

be yours, and your sons' with you, as a due for ever; as the LORD has commanded. {Lev 10:14-15 RSV}

Notice the emphasis on the continuity of this provision. This is something which is available all the time, forever. We have seen already the meanings of these two portions of the animals. The breast is a symbol of the affections of Christ, of his love for us. The thigh symbolizes his strength, his power on our behalf. What this is saying, again, is that when you get discouraged and feel as if you are not accomplishing anything, and you are beaten down and it doesn't seem as if anybody is taking any notice, you are to remind yourself of the love the Lord Jesus has for you, to remember that he cares about you and accepts you and is with you, and that his love never changes. You are precious and dear to him. That is feeding upon the breast.

And then when you feel that you can't do something, that the demands upon you are too great, that you don't have the power to respond as you ought in some situation – perhaps you know you ought to love someone, but the person is so difficult to love – then you are to remind yourself that Christ's life is in you and that his strength is yours. If you will just step out and act upon it, it will be there to supply you with whatever power you need. That is feeding upon the thigh. Notice that both of these are to be eaten anywhere, not just at the altar but anywhere you need them. This is where the sources of strength lie.

The final section of this passage deals with a **problem which arose**. Verses 16-20:

Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron who were left, saying, "Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD? Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." And Aaron said to Moses, "Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD; and yet such things as these have be-

fallen me! [He is referring to the death of his two sons.] **If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been acceptable in the sight of the LORD?" And when Moses heard that, he was content.** {Lev 10:16-20 RSV}

Do you see the problem here?

There were two kinds of sin offering, as explained in the law of the sin offering in Chapter 6:

- In one the blood was to be carried into the inner sanctuary, into the holy place, and there it was to be sprinkled on the horns of the golden altar of fragrant incense. That was required as a picture of the depravity of man's evil. And because of that depravity no part of the animal was to be eaten but it was all to be taken outside the camp and burned. Only God could consume it, so deep is man's evil.
- But there was another kind of sin offering in which the blood was sprinkled on the horns of the brazen altar in the outer court. There the flesh of the animal was to be eaten by the priests as a picture of their understanding of the nature of their evil and as a token of their acceptance of the forgiveness of God.

This offering was of the second kind. The blood had not been brought into the sanctuary and so Moses said, "You should have eaten this meat! Why didn't you do it?" And he is afraid lest the judgment of God consume the rest of these priests. But Aaron explains. He says, "Two of my sons have sinned. And even though a sin offering had been offered this very morning, yet they died. Evidently there is some depth of depravity here that we don't understand but which has taken their lives. Therefore it seemed to me that the LORD would not be pleased if I ate the sin offering. So we have treated it as though the blood were sprinkled before the golden altar, and the body of this animal has been burned in its entirety."

When Moses heard that, he understood. He realized then that Aaron had gone deeper than the letter of the law; he had understood the intent of it. He had understood what God is after in these sacrifices and rituals and ceremonies, had recognized that there was a matter of deeper concern here. And so God, mercifully, does not exercise any judgment here because Aaron has pressed beyond

the letter to the deep intent of the law. And Moses is content with that.

This attitude always pleases God. You see, God is really not at all interested in our ritual. That is something we need so desperately to understand. He is not impressed by the fact that you come to church every Sunday, if that is all you do. He doesn't care the least bit that you stand and sing and pray and witness, or whatever you do, if your heart is not in it. Those activities, in themselves, do not make you any better in his sight. What he is after is what happens in the heart.

Listen to these words of David from the 51st Psalm, written after David himself had fallen into deep and dark sin, the double sins of murder and adultery. In Verses 15-17 of this great Psalm he cries out,

**O Lord, open thou my lips,
and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.
For thou hast no delight in sacrifice;
were I to give a burnt offering, thou
wouldst not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken
spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou
wilt not despise. {Psa 51:15-17 RSV}**

That is what Aaron saw, and so Moses was content to let the letter of the law be violated because the intent of it was so beautifully fulfilled.

And that is what God is after with us. He doesn't want any kind of religious folderol. He doesn't care about that. During this Christmas season he is not at all impressed by decorations and crèches and momentary sentimental remembrances

of the reason for the celebration of Christmas. What he wants is a heart that is open, responsive, honest, and obedient before him. With that God is greatly pleased. That delights his heart.

With that as our preparation, we will move right to the table of the Lord. Remember, this communion ceremony is absolutely useless unless it reflects the condition of your heart, unless you are looking beyond the elements of the bread and wine to the Lord Jesus, and to who he is and what he did. If you cannot stay you may leave now if you like. If there are those of you here who are not Christians yet, we invite you to become Christians right now. Then you may freely participate, because this is for Christians. In your heart just open your life to Christ and he will enter in, and you will belong at his table then.

In closing I would like to share with you these beautiful words, authorship unknown:

Ah, says the Holy Spirit, you cannot do it; just withdraw; come out of it and sit down, and as you sit there behold Him, look at Him. Don't try to be like Him, just look at Him. Instead of trying, just be occupied with Him. Forget about trying to be like Him. Don't let that fill you mind and heart, let Him fill it. Just behold Him, look upon Him through the Word. Come to that Word for one purpose, and that is to meet the Lord. Not to get your mind crammed full of things about the sacred Word, but come to it to meet the Lord, the living Word. Make it a medium, not of biblical scholarship, but of fellowship with Christ. Behold the Lord!

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