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 Exodus 22:28-31
 Forty-eighth Message
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HONORING GOD IN DAILY LIFE

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

The tragic, senseless shootings at Virginia Tech cause us to embrace a tragedy that is almost too large to swallow. Yet while the hot flames of questions rage out of control, with no answers, one thing seems crystal clear: Without community there is no survival. Charles Steger, the university's president, got it right when he encouraged the grief stricken student body that healing must take place in community: "In this time of healing, it is important that we take care of one another, and together we can move forward to 'Invent the Future.'" Let us take a moment now to reflect on our Principles of Community and reaffirm our commitment to strive to reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination in our community. Together, we pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of our motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve)." Could you have coped with such a tragedy? Friends, we live in very vulnerable times. If you are not in engaged in a spiritual community that is honest and intimate, you will not survive when your world collapses.

Today we continue our studies in the Book of the Covenant, which I have entitled "Creating Communities of Shalom in Daily Life." So far we have examined four themes which this material addresses. God desires that we cultivate a community in which:

- loyalty to God in worship is primary
- all life is considered sacred
- property is treated as the sacred extension of the individual
- supreme care is given to the poor, the underprivileged and the foreigner

We now come to a small unit, Exodus 22:28-31, that serves as "a kind of intermezzo amid social regulations (22:20-26; 23:1-9),"¹ and shifts the focus to how Israel should give honor to God.

"Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people. Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day. You are to be my holy people. So do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts; throw it to the dogs. (Exod 22:28-31 NIV)

The introductory command, "Do not blaspheme God," sets the theme for the entire unit, while the verses that follow give specific details concerning how Israel was to implement the command in their daily lives. So our text sets forth in very practical ways how Israel was to both protect and promote God's honor within the community.

The literary structure:

- a Protecting God's holiness by what proceeds out of the mouth (vs. 28)
 - b Promoting God's holiness in our offerings - "give me" (vs. 29)
 - b' Promoting God's holiness in our offerings - "give me" (vs. 30)
- a' Protecting God's holiness by what goes into the mouth (vs. 31)

God instructs Israel how he is to be publicly honored with profound simplicity. The text's outer frame (a/a') is focused on protecting God's honor with what proceeds out the mouth (28), and by what goes into the mouth (31); the center commands (b/b') is focused on promoting God's honor with the repeated command "to give." We will examine the outer frame first, and conclude with the center section.

I. Protecting God's Holiness from Abusive Speech Exod 20:28

"Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people. (20:28)

The first line sets the tone for all that follows. The verb translated "blaspheme" by the NIV is derived from the root *qalal*, which means to "be slight, swift," thus to show disrespect to someone by "making light" of them. It includes the idea of "cursing," but also pertains to any form of speech or behavior that would diminish or trivialize God or his authority within the community. The opposite of *qalal* is the verb *kabad* (the nominative is *kabod* - "weight, honor, glory"), which means to give someone "honor, social weight" in the community.

Following the glorious display of God's power in the Exodus, how could any Israelite even think of diminishing the glory of the One who turned the creation on its head to free them from all other gods? As Moses led them in glorious song,

Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?

Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Exod 15:8-11)

The second line, "[do not] curse the ruler of your people," brings our focus from God in heaven to his representatives on earth. The term "ruler" (*nasi*) "refers to any leader with executive authority at any level in society, not just a national ruler."² These included not just the national ruler (i.e. the Messiah in Ezek 44:3; 45:7), but also local clan leaders (Num 34:18; Josh 9:19; 1 Kgs 8:1). God instructs his people that if they curse those whom he has placed in authority over them, they are showing contempt for God and his sovereign rule. This is the clear teaching of the New Testament as well, as Paul clearly admonishes the Christians in Rome:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (Rom 13:1-2, 7)³

The Scriptures make no exception for immoral rulers, as it is likely that Nero was on the throne when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. Such an injunction, admittedly, is not easy. When Paul was

placed on trial before the Sanhedrin and began to make his defense, the high priest gave the order that those near him “strike him on the mouth.” Paul shot back in anger,

“God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!” Those who were standing near Paul said, “You dare to insult God’s high priest?” Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.’” (Acts 23:3-5)

Our culture so prizes freedom of speech that we thoughtlessly unleash untold damage in our communities with countless verbal assaults on those in authority, whether in governmental or church leadership. In protecting this freedom at the expense of all others we become blind to the grievous harm and long lasting psychological damage this causes to others. Our news media thrives on baiting the public to do this very thing. In the aftermath of the student massacre at Virginia Tech, I was encouraged by the mature response of one student. Asked if the university administration was at fault for not acting more quickly, he refused to place blame on the president of the university, adding that “finding fault” was unproductive to the healing which the student body needed. If the news media had taken these words to heart, they would not have been as obsessed with the vehement cursing and vile profanities of the perpetrator and would have focused more of their coverage on the cries and prayers of the victims and their families.

It is even worse when we as Christians take pleasure in “crucifying” public officials who hold positions contrary to our “values,” or who are caught in scandalous activities. Without knowing it, our so-called “cursing” conveys to the world around us that God is not sovereign and that his rule is thwarted by those in power. The more we churn and complain, the more we drown those around us with dark, gloomy pessimism. The bottom line is that such actions diminish God’s holiness and tarnish faith in his rule.

The apostles by contrast conveyed the exact opposite attitude. Living in an age dominated by evil rulers and corrupt power brokers, in both the secular and religious realms, they went about with supreme optimism and enthusiastic joy, knowing that God was using these pompous egomaniacs like little puppets dancing on his strings. When the apostles suffered at the hands of wicked rulers, they rejoiced “with joy inexpressible” (1 Pet 1:8), knowing that “the Spirit of glory and of God” (1 Pet 4:14) was resting on them. When Paul and Silas were unjustly beaten with rods and thrown into prison by the magistrates in Philippi (Acts 16), the prisoners were awakened at midnight not by angry cursing, but by sweet songs of praise which Paul and Silas were singing to God. God answered their prayers with an earthquake, which led to the conversion of the jailer and his entire household. So who was really in charge, the magistrates or God? Therefore, as Peter exhorts us, “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet 2:17 NASB).

Coupled with this command to preserve God’s holiness with what proceeds out of the mouth is the final command to guard Israel’s holiness by what goes into the mouth.

II. Protecting Our Holiness by What Goes Into the Mouth Exod 22:31

“You are to be my holy people. So do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts; throw it to the dogs. (Exod 22:28-31 NIV)

As God’s people, Israel was instructed with detailed dietary laws designed to set them apart as holy to God. Some situations called for extreme vigilance. Houtman describes the situation envisioned here: “In the field a wild animal attacks a goat or a sheep from the flock. The victim is so seriously bitten or mauled that afterward it dies, but owing to the intervention of the shepherd the wild animal does not have the chance to devour the prey. The meat of the mangled animal is considered unclean.”⁴

There are certainly good health reasons behind the law, as such meat was subject to contamination, but the reason cited in the law is that “you are to be my holy people,” and as such, Israel was never to eat like scavengers. Even during a famine it was to be beneath Israel’s dignity to eat like the animals. The fact that this type of law is repeated five times “shows its importance as a principle of covenant purity not to be ignored or practiced halfheartedly.”⁵

Even though the dietary laws find their fulfillment in Christ as our pure food and true drink (John 6:53), eating still remains a primary way we celebrate our holiness and separation to God in the New Covenant. Eating constituted the greatest expression of fellowship and hospitality in the early church. While the world indulged in their feasts of idolatry and drinking bouts, the church gathered in homes for “love feasts,” with no social or national distinctions. The climax of the meal was the celebration of the body and the blood of the Lord. In those moments each member of the family and guests would find cleansing grace and embracing love.

It is my conviction that this has been all but lost in the modern church. It is so difficult in our fragmented culture to engage in a family meal, let alone a love feast. We eat on the run, as meals have lost their central focus for fellowship, worship and evangelism and have degenerated into “necessary” interruptions between meetings or events. Communion rarely takes place in the intimate and relaxed atmosphere of the home or even a restaurant. Yet, I find it a wonderful complement to receiving it in church when we are all gathered as one body. During my recent trip to Croatia and Romania we enjoyed communion perhaps on ten occasions, most of which took place in restaurants, and once in a home. On each occasion it elevated an ordinary meal into a holy memory of Christ’s sacrifice. And as we went back to the same restaurant more than once, it opened the door to give witness to our faith to several waiters and waitresses. I encourage you that if you can recover this practice, you will discover moments of holiness within the circle of your community that you never thought possible.

III. Honoring God by How We Give Exod 22:29-30

“Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day. (22:29-30)

A. The Standard for Giving: The “first” and the “best”

It is of supreme importance for God’s people to regularly express their devotion to God in practical, tangible ways. Just as in any marriage love grows cold when words like “I love you” are not backed

up with regular acts of devotion, so it is with our relationship with God. God required his people to regularly express sacrificial devotion to him by giving him the “first” and the “best” of all that they produced, whether from their crops, cattle or children. In the case of Israel’s harvest, the term “tithing” (*ma’aser* - meaning “tenth”) became the standard term representing the first portion that was designated as holy to the Lord. It was first used in Gen 14:20, when Melchizedek king of Salem blessed Abram. Abram recognized that he was a priest of the One God and gave him a “tenth” of the spoils. Later in Genesis 28:22, when God appeared to Jacob and blessed him, Jacob responded by promising God a “tenth” of all that God would give him.

In the case of children, the firstborn male was not sacrificed directly to the Lord, but was redeemed by the blood of a lamb (Exod 13:11-16). This would serve as a constant reminder to the people of God that their redemption from Egypt did not come cheaply, but by the precious blood of Egypt’s firstborn sons. By giving God the “first” and the “best,” an Israelite was declaring by faith that all of his life was the gift of God, and that God was the rightful owner of the land and all that he possessed.

Given these requirements, God lists two temptations that could profane God’s holiness. The first was to be too lax in one’s giving; the second was in being too legalistic.

B. First Temptation In Giving: Being Too Lax

“Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. (22:29)”

The first temptation for Israel was to hold back for oneself what rightfully belonged to God. The term “hold back” (*’achar*) can also be translated “withhold” or “delay [in bringing].” The phrase, “your granaries or your vats,” reads in Hebrew, “your fullness and your dripping,” which may be referring to a bumper crop of grain along with the best vintage wine. In good years of abundant rainfall, when God gave a bumper crop or an especially select year of vintage grapes, it was very tempting to “delay” one’s offering to God. Whenever we procrastinate and hold back what rightfully belongs to God, it isn’t long before we treat it as rightfully ours and we end up keeping it for ourselves. Instead of giving God the “first” and the “best,” and joyously proclaiming that he owns everything, we give to God from the leftovers – a reluctant tip at best. Such an offering tarnishes his holiness and is a stench in his nostrils. This was Cain’s sin. His brother Abel brought the “first” and the “best” to God – “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (Gen 4:4). Cain, on the other hand, “brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD” (Gen 4:3). Instead of the “first fruits” he merely came into God’s presence with the leftovers. His offering was not accepted to God.

After centuries of instruction and discipline, Israel still didn’t seem to learn the lesson. When the nation returned to the land after the exile, they still seemed plagued by offering God leftovers that no one else wanted. Through the prophet Malachi God voiced his anger:

“When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty.” (Mal 1:8)

C. Second Temptation in Giving: Being Too Legalistic

If the first temptation is being too lax in our giving, the second is being too strict and legalistic. It is tempting to view God in the same way we view that impersonal, unyielding organization called the Internal Revenue Service. Each April 15th, the IRS collects our taxes with supreme exactness, to the letter of the law, with little relational compassion for extenuating circumstances. By contrast, our text on giving concludes with a very tender touch with regard to firstborn lambs and calves:

“Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.” (22:30)

No reason is given for the delay, but we can certainly see God’s compassionate concern for the mother doe or ewe which is forced to give up her young. To take the newborn animal immediately after birth, with no chance for the mother to clean or feed its young, would be shocking. So a time period of one week is allowed to perhaps lessen the shock of deprivation for the mother.⁶ Though Israel’s devotion to God was costly, it was never to be done legalistically or devoid of compassion.

Now let us briefly examine the development of the “tithing” in the New Testament.

D. New Testament Giving

1. Giving the first and the best

As in the Old Testament, God still desires that we promote his holiness in the community by the way we give. Like the Old Testament, the standard remains the same, i.e. that we give God the first and best of all that we produce. So Paul instructs the Corinthians in regard to the money he is collecting for the relief fund in Jerusalem: “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (1 Cor 16:2). Notice we set our money aside to God “on the first day of the week” to show our devotion to God.

2. Giving in proportion to blessing

However, unlike the Old Testament, the percentage is left up to individuals according to how the Lord has blessed them. Because the Holy Spirit has now written the law on our hearts, there is no required percentage. As we see in the book of Acts, the Spirit makes people generous almost to a fault. So appreciative are they of their salvation they can’t give enough back to the Lord. In Acts 4, the Holy Spirit had filled the early church with such a spirit of generosity that many were selling their possessions and homes and giving to those in need. The most valuable possession to a Jew was his land, yet not even this was this exempt from sale. A Levite from Cyprus named Barnabas sold a piece of property and brought not just a tenth of the sale but 100%, and laid it before the apostles. The act stirred more generosity, but unfortunately it became tainted by the desire for prestige and public acclaim. Ananias and Sapphira also sold a piece of property but kept back some of the proceeds for themselves. There was nothing wrong with keeping back some of the sale (it was their property to begin with); their sin was that they said that they, like Barnabas, were giving 100%. With that subtle shift they were using the act of giving as a way to promote their own honor, not God’s. They lost their lives as a result. This may seem harsh to us, but had that leaven not been checked, the whole church would have been shot through with hypocritical giving. Because of the judgment, Luke records:

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events... No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. (Acts 5:11,13-14)

What a wonderful thing it would be if we so promoted God's holiness as a congregation that it would be a fearful thing to join the church, yet the beauty of our lives would be so attractive that, despite the fear, many outsiders would believe in the Lord.

3. Giving that is thoughtful, pre-planned and not emotionally based

Some Christians may even choose to live as sacrificially as Christ, who "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Paul himself lived his whole life as a sacrifice serving others, but as a leader he refused to abuse people's generosity. That is why he asked that all collections be made before he arrived in Corinth. He knew how easy it is to manipulate people emotionally to give to a critical need (in this case a famine). But he insists that all giving to be done reasonably and methodically, out of what people can afford, not out of what they don't have.

I can't imagine that Paul would have ever resorted to modern church strategies for giving, such as taking "pledges" on the people's projected future income, or worse, or asking them to turn over their investments or retirement savings to fund a building campaign and the church would give it back to them with interest. He would never have allowed plaques with donors' names. He would have considered motivational methods to increase giving with matching corporate sponsors, or receiving gifts if people give at a certain level, as an affront to God's holiness. These practices shift our motivation from pure devotion to God, to self-interest. Does the precious blood of God's Son need our cheap modern dressings to motivate us to give? It is absurd, abominable.

Since our inception, our elders have governed our finances in this way. For over half a century, we have never had a budget; we do not take pledges; all gifts are anonymous, and all expenses are paid in cash, with no debt allowed, not even for building projects. I am proud to say that this heritage was bequeathed to us by our founder, Ray Stedman, and the first generation of faithful elders who themselves modeled sacrificial giving right to the grave.

4. The greatest gift of all: A "living sacrifice"

Yet, beyond money, the New Testament takes our giving to an even higher plane, as Paul exhorts in the book of Romans:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. (Rom 12:1)

In stark contrast to the Old Testament worship, where the Israelites brought the best of their flocks to God as a sacrifice, New Covenant worship demands not just the best of what we own, but our very selves, not as dead sacrifices, but living sacrifices totally available to God to be used by him for his kingdom. The text goes on to describe our spiritual gifts, which are divine empowerments for speaking or service, given to every Christian to channel Christ's life and love through his body, the church, and the whole world. This daily active presentation to God, to live for him, and through him to serve others, is what Paul defines as our "spiritual [or "reasonable"] act of worship." Therefore the notion of "full time Christian work" is a terrible misnomer. All Christians are expected by God to be totally available to him, to be divinely empowered by their spiritual gifts to serve him for the benefit of others all the day. This is not radical worship; it is most reasonable thing we can do, given what he has done for us.

Just as without community there is no survival, it is also true that no community can survive unless it lives to serve others. There is no greater example of this ideal than the actions last week of former Holocaust survivor and professor, Liviu Librescu. With the threat of the approaching gunman in Norris Hall, he held his classroom door shut against his attacker, while his students jumped to safety from a second story window. Even after the unspeakable Holocaust, this Romanian Jew did not live in isolation to serve himself, but lived in community to serve others. And ultimately, like our Lord, he laid down his life for his friends. May we follow his example to bring honor to the name of our Lord.

"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." (Rev 4:11)

1 Cornelis Houtman, Exodus (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 3:230.

2 Douglas L. Stuart, Exodus (TNAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman: 2006), 520.

3 See also 1 Thess 5:12; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 2:17.

4 Houtman, Exodus, 3:235.

5 Stuart, Exodus, 523.

6 Stuart also suggests two other reasons: "It would have denied Yahweh and the worshipers the benefit of a week of rapid growth, fattening the young animal and making it more desirable as a sacrifice... Moreover, a newborn animal needs time to be cleaned up by its mother and thus to be more presentable as a respectful gift to Yahweh." Stuart, Exodus, 522.