

You know you are in trouble when you are training for a new job, and the person training you says, “First, I’m going to show you how it is supposed to be done...then I’m going to show you how I do it.”

When I was just out of high school I worked for a local cleaning company. The boss walked me through a couple of things and then left me on my own. Eventually someone came around and said, “They want you to clean it like this, BUT...”

Later when the boss came around and asked why I was cleaning the way I was cleaning, the person said, “Well, I showed him the right way!!!”

Have you ever had that experience? Where the person gives you two ways of doing something?

There is a procedure that should be followed, but the person in charge is telling you to do it another way. Sometimes there is a more efficient way. But more often than not, the standards and procedures are in place for a reason.

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at the standards and procedures God gave the Israelites for proper worship. Each sacrifice had a procedure. Preparing and ordaining the priests had a procedure. It is easy to get lost in all of this detail, and forget the purpose of all the pomp and circumstance of Leviticus 1-10 was for one singular purpose...to help people enter the presence of God.

The instructions were tedious. They were to be carried out exactly as prescribed. They had all this pageantry and smoke and fire and incense...these were grand events...but they were not merely in place to be events or a show to be watched...they were to bring people and God together. They reminded people of the grandeur of worshipping God.

At the end of the instruction giving in Leviticus 9:23-24 it says,  
Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.

Just as with worship today style and structure is not the point...being in the presence of God is...and it was the role of the Levitical priest to lead people into God’s presence.

Last week we looked at Leviticus 8-9 and the establishment of the priesthood. Being a priest carried with it the tremendous responsibility of...

representing the people to God (sacrifices, feasts, celebrations, prayers and intercession) and

representing God to the people (offering the sacrifices, teaching His word)

Leviticus 9 tells us after all the ordination requirements are met that Aaron and his sons, Nadab and Abihu, take over as priests...but at the beginning of Leviticus 10 there is this story, one of the few stories in Leviticus, and it should cause us to stop and reflect.

Leviticus 10:1-2,

"Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord."

The story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus is one of those tough stories of the Bible...it seems a bit harsh. Leviticus tells us Nadab and Abihu were put to death because they "offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command." At first glance their actions seem like such small infractions; not something that deserved death.

### **They offered unauthorized fire.**

This means they took fire from a place they weren't supposed to, and used it to burn the incense before the altar of God. Incense was to be burnt using coals from the altar of God. The priests were to tend this fire and to never let it go out. The fire on the altar would not be the common place fire used to cook food and keep a person warm...it was lit with the presence of God in the last part of Leviticus 9.

And for some reason, Nadab and Abihu, rather than get coals from that fire, grabs coals of their own to burn the incense.

Then they took this fire

### **Before the Lord**

This seems to indicate they may have tried to enter the the presence of God when it was not their right or responsibility to do so. They were priests, and they were supposed to burn the incense among other duties, but it doesn't seem to be the appropriate time.

This passage is rather difficult because we are pretty much left in the dark as to what exactly they had done wrong. We are so in the dark that every commentary I read leaned different ways. In fact there are 12 different Rabbinical explanations in ancient Jewish commentary. No one is quite sure what exactly they did wrong, but they all agree that the most troublesome for Nadab and Abihu...

### **They acted contrary to God's command**

God had commanded certain actions be taken, and here we have two of God's priests, two men called to lead the people of Israel, doing their own thing. Whatever the exact nature of their sin, Moses explains in Leviticus 10:3, "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.' "

Another wording might be, "I will show my Holiness through those nearest to me. I will be respected in the sight of all people."

These men were among the leaders of Israel.

Nadab and Abihu are present with Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel in the Tent of Meeting when the presence of God falls on it! They were part of the preparation of the tabernacle. They were chosen and ordained by God as His priests.

These men who were leaders of God's people and priests meant to represent Him acted in defiance toward God. And it is because of their role as priests that their actions take on a greater importance.

In Luke 12:47-48 in The Message, Jesus says,

“The servant who knows what his master wants and ignores it, or insolently does whatever he pleases, will be thoroughly thrashed. But if he does a poor job through ignorance, he'll get off with a slap on the hand. Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!

Most of us know this as, “To whom much is given, much is expected!”

Here we have two priests who take God and his commands lightly, and treat God as common place. They use unauthorized fire, treating God as common place and willfully disobeying God right in front of the people! They did things their own way, and expected God to accept it rather than follow the ways commanded by God.

These were the men who were supposed to be the representatives of God to the people. If the leaders were going to treat God in such ways, how were the people going to treat Him?

And that is an issue addressed over and over throughout the Old Testament and in the ministry of Jesus because...

### **Those representing God are held more accountable**

God is hardest on those who represent him. Jesus saves his harshest judgments for those who are the leaders and priests of the people of Israel.

Matthew 23:24

You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Matthew 12:34

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Mark 12:38-40

38 As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the

marketplaces, 39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 40 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

I could go on and on...time after time God judges the leaders and priests of the people more harshly than anyone else in Israel because they are the leaders, the ones who are supposed to be leading the people closer to God, and they aren't. They made the mistake, as many often do, that serving God meant more privilege...like how we think being the friend of or knowing someone famous puts us in a privileged position. But in Jesus' upside-down Kingdom...closer proximity means greater responsibility and more accountability.

God recognizes that people are fallible and sinful; even those who are in leadership. He had no false expectations they would live a sinless life. He knew they would sin and need atonement. In Leviticus 16, Aaron is commanded to sacrifice a bull every year on the Day of Atonement for his sin and his family's sin before entering the Holy of Holies. That means that God knows there is going to be sin.

Hebrews 5:1-3 says,

"Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people."

There was no expectation of perfection, but Nadab and Abihu didn't just sin...they did not represent God as Holy. To be holy means to be set apart, revered, awed, respected. We can replace the Holy with any of those words. "I will be awed by those who approach me." "I will be revered by those who approach me." "I will be respected by those who approach me."

I think that is why the punishment was so harsh. God's representatives to the people were treating Him as common place and without the proper honor due Him. His leaders were not doing as He commanded.

As a pastor and leader, my responsibility to represent God well to you is expected. But this also reminds us

**God holds us accountable for how we represent Him as His priests.**

If you were here last week, we talked about how God has called every single person who follows him to act as Priest for the rest of the world. A priest is someone who represents God to people, and represents those people to God...and the same thing holds true for us as it does for the people of Israel...closer proximity means greater responsibility and more accountability.

This started with His expectation that the people of Israel would be His priests.

Exodus 19:5-6 where God says to the Israelites,

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Then the Apostle Peter, reflecting on these words from Exodus, made the same call for the Church, for you and I...

1 Peter 2:9-10

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

I tend to keep things on the positive side around here: focus more on God’s call to love Him and receive His forgiveness than beating people up with judgment and harshness. But, just as Jesus saved his harshest words for those who were supposed to be representing God, part of telling the truth is reminding each and everyone of us who claim to follow Jesus Christ...that we will be judged for the way we treat others...for the way we do or do not love others...for the way we forgive or do not forgive...for the way we represent God or the way we bring dishonor on Him...and we will be held more accountable for our actions than those outside the walls because we have been called to represent Jesus.

Too many times the Church has been quick to judge the broken and beaten up...the “sinner” outside in “the world” and really, God’s sharpest judgment is for those sitting right inside...It isn’t that God is unconcerned with their sin...He loves them...of course he is concerned with their sin and their receiving His forgiveness...But when it comes to judging it and rooting it out...that is for you and I because we claim to be His people.

The Church has a long and regrettable history of acting poorly...through the years we have condoned wars and the murder of innocent people...we have taken part in the torture and murder of those labeled heretics...we supported, with God’s Word, the institution of slavery and many other social ills...we have done some horrendous things in the name of God...and the leaders and the people shouting their faith in Jesus Christ will be held accountable for the poor way they represented Jesus in those times.

On a more local, smaller scale we have seen or heard Christians professing Jesus and then being involved in horrific sins and shady business deals...lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, Just like those who are not part of Jesus’ Kingdom...we have acted out of prejudice and hatred toward others...we have wrongly judged and beaten up on those who are struggling...we have ostracized those who have asked the “wrong” questions or struggled through the difficulties of doubt...

And, again, it is not that we are expected to get everything right, we are sinful, fallen human beings just like everyone else, but we will be held accountable for how we represent Jesus to the rest of the world.

See, we don't get everything right, but over time we should be getting better because we are growing in our likeness to Jesus Christ, growing in the fruit of the Spirit. To often we don't represent God well...we don't represent Jesus well because we haven't submitted ourselves and allowed God to grow us into the likeness of Jesus or we have held on to sinful behavior we know to be wrong...we treat God in a common place way...like a religious add on to our lives.

When you claim the name of Christ...the way you talk about those you disagree with matters because you are not just representing your thoughts you are representing God...the way you conduct business and work matters because you are representing God...the way you forgive and love represents God...Every aspect of our lives represents the God we serve to the world around us.

And this passage serves as a sobering reminder that for those of us who claim to represent God...claim to represent Jesus Christ...so much more is expected.

That is the reality of what it means to follow Him.

What area of your life do you need God's work because you haven't represented Him well?