LEVITICUS

Chapter 21

*Rules for Priests*

**The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: ‘A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die, 2 except for a close relative, such as his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother, 3 or an unmarried sister who is dependent on him since she has no husband—for her he may make himself unclean. 4 He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself. 5 “ ‘Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards or cut their bodies. 6 They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God. Because they present the offerings made to the Lord by fire, the food of their God, they are to be holy. 7 “ ‘They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God. 8 Regard them as holy, because they offer up the food of your God. Consider them holy, because I the Lord am holy—I who make you holy. 9 “ ‘If a priest’s daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire. 10 “ ‘The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must not let his hair become unkempt or tear his clothes. 11 He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother, 12 nor leave the sanctuary of his God or desecrate it, because he has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God. I am the Lord. 13 “ ‘The woman he marries must be a virgin. 14 He must not marry a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman defiled by prostitution, but only a virgin from his own people, 15 so he will not defile his offspring among his people. I am the Lord, who makes him holy.’ ” 16 The Lord said to Moses, 17 “Say to Aaron: ‘For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. 18 No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; 19 no man with a crippled foot or hand, 20 or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. 21 No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the Lord by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. 22 He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; 23 yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the Lord, who makes them holy.’ ” 24 So Moses told this to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites.**

**21:1–22:33** Directions for the priests’ conduct, especially about separation from ceremonial uncleanness. (CSB)

**21:1–22:16** Joins the code of the priests (21:1–9) to the code of the high priest (21:10–15); lists defects that disqualify a priest from eating sacred food (22:1–9); provides a list of residents within a priest’s house disqualified from eating sacred food (22:10–16). (TLSB)

**21:1** *for any … who die.* Touching a corpse (Nu 19:11) or entering the home of a person who had died (Nu 19:14) made one unclean. A priest was only to contract such uncleanness at the death of a close relative (vv. 2–3), and the regulations for the high priest denied him even this (vv. 11–12). (CSB)

Touching a dead body (Nu 19:11) or entering the home of a dead person (Nu 19:14) made a priest unclean. (TLSB)

**21:3** An unmarried sister was legally a member of her brother’s family. (TLSB)

**21:5** *cut their bodies.* See 19:27–28. Such lacerations and disfigurement were common among pagans as signs of mourning and to secure the attention of their deity (see 1Ki 18:28). Israelite faith had a much less grotesque view of death (see, e.g., vv. 1–4; Ge 5:24; 2Sa 12:23; Heb 11:19). (CSB)

Priests were devoted to God and were not to mark their bodies as a sign of devotion to the deceased person. (TLSB)

**21:7** Priests were forbidden to marry women who engaged in sexual activity with other men because they defiled a priest’s holiness. (TLSB)

**21:8** *I … am holy.* See note on 11:44. (CSB)

The nation of Israel is to honor and respect God’s priests and avoid doing anything to desecrate their holiness. (TLSB)

**21:9** See Ge 38:24 and note. (CSB)

If the daughter of a priest became a prostitute, she defiled her father. Such sacrilege was punishable by burning. Although not specifically stated, some commentators believe this analogy also applied to priests’ sons. (TLSB)

**21:11–12** See note on v. 1. (CSB)

**21:15** *profane his offspring*. Any male child born of a priest’s union with a widow, divorcée, or prostitute was disqualified from priesthood. (TLSB)

**21:16–24** Physical blemishes disqualified a priest from entering God’s sanctuary or holy places. The disabled or misshapen were not regarded as profane, for the Lord allowed them to perform other tasks and eat holy food. (TLSB)

**21:17** *defect.* Like the sacrifices that had to be without defect, the priests were to typify Christ’s perfection (Heb 9:13–14). (CSB)

**21:23** *curtain.* Between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (see Ex 26:33). (CSB)

**21:24** *all the people of Israel*. Conduct of priests was a matter of concern because priests were national leaders. Cf v 8; Ex 19:6. (TLSB)