

Priests *and* Levites



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 9, 18, 19, 1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “And the Lord spake unto Aaron, . . . I am thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel” (*Numbers 18:20*).

After Korah's rebellion and the test of the staffs, it became necessary to emphasize further the distinct roles between the priests and Levites. Each had their God-appointed functions, and the Lord clearly drew the lines between those functions. And though all these roles and functions long ago have become obsolete, there still are lessons we can draw from them for ourselves today.

Notice, for instance, just how sacred and solemn these roles were. Thus, we could learn for ourselves how we need to take seriously our sacred responsibilities and trusts, whatever they are.

Notice, too, just how interdependent these people were with each other and the nation as a whole. We certainly can draw lessons from that for ourselves today as a church body.

Also, pay attention to the role of grace in these chapters, especially in regard to the gifts given these people through no merit of their own. They had these positions only because God gave those positions to them, not because of any inherent worth in and of themselves.

What a powerful symbol of the gospel.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 21.*

Division of Labor

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (*Exod. 19:5, 6*).

How can we relate those words above to ourselves, today, as a church called to bring a message to the world? Is this calling unconditional? See *1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 14:6–12*.

In Numbers 18:1, the Lord wanted to give assurance to the worshipers that they would not die, but only if they approached the sanctuary through His specially chosen priests, who would act as mediators between them and the Lord. The priests, as distinct from the remainder of the Levites, were responsible for seeing that no unauthorized person approached the tabernacle, thereby defiling it. This would allay the fears of the congregation that in coming near the tabernacle they risked death.

Read Numbers 18:1–7. What distinctions were made in the roles given these men?

What’s important to note here is that although all the nation was to be a “kingdom of priests,” only certain people were allowed into certain roles, as seen here in the division of the Levites and the family of Aaron from the general population and then in the division made between Aaron’s family and the Levites. Obviously, in New Testament times, hereditary roles, such as found with the Levites, clearly have been abolished, yet we find in the New Testament distinct roles in the church (*1 Cor. 12:28–31, Eph. 4:11*).

What are your gifts, and how could you better use them to serve your local church?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Numbers 18:20*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine how carefully God laid out the division of labor among the priests and the Levites.

Feel: Sense the sacred roles of our spiritual leaders and our interdependence on one another.

Do: Act faithfully in doing our part to support workers in God's service.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: The Gift of Work for God

A The work of the priests and the Levites was a gift from God, their services at the sanctuary were a gift to Israel, and they were supported by the tithes and offerings of the people. How do these gifts point toward Christ's ministry and our part in that ministry?

B How does tithing illustrate grace?

C How does the elaborate system designed to cleanse those ritually unclean because of death speak of grace?

II. Feel: Respect for Sacred Service

The orderly distinctions of who was responsible for what and how the offerings were to be used for the support of those who served at the temple were designed to save Israel from death through ignorance. Why is cultivating a sense of respect for the sacred so important? How do you cultivate respect for the sacred in your family and in church?

III. Do: Supporting God's Servants

A What revisions in your gift-giving need to be done in light of the lessons on tithe and offerings from Numbers?

B While we don't do elaborate ritual cleansing after being in the presence of or in contact with death today, what can we do to remind ourselves of the lessons of the red cow's ashes?

▶ **Summary:** Support for God's service is a sacred duty and honor.

The Gifts of Divine Service

When we read the Lord's instruction in Numbers 18:1–7, a few points stand out. First, the Lord makes it clear that He is the One who is appointing the people to these positions. Perhaps this emphasis was made because of the previous problems, not just with Korah and his cohorts but even with Miriam and Aaron. Now, though, there would be no question as to why these people were given these roles. They were there because God put them there—period.

Notice, too, the reason the Lord wanted to make these divisions. It was so that His “wrath may never again come upon the Israelites” (*vs. 5, NRSV*). Here, again, we see God's mercy even amid such powerful judgments. God seeks to save His people, not condemn or destroy them. The whole plan of salvation, from start to finish, reveals the Lord's desire to redeem sinful fallen beings from the destruction that sin otherwise brings (*John 3:16–18*).

What term is used to describe what the Levites are to the priesthood and what the priesthood was to Aaron's family? What lessons should we draw from it?

When you think of a gift, you think of something that is not earned. It's totally of grace. This was a privilege bestowed upon these people, not because of any merit on their part but simply through God's grace and providence. In the end, the Lord needed someone to do this work, and in His divine wisdom these were the ones He chose.

Of course, with this sacred task came sacred responsibilities. Issues of life and death, both physically and spiritually, were involved here, for the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt on earth. The sanctuary was also the model for what Jesus would do here on earth and for His ministry in heaven (*Hebrews 9*). It was like a miniature Calvary being played out in types and shadows. The destiny of souls lay in the balance. Hence, the solemnity the Lord placed on the roles given these men.

Think about your innate talents, whatever they are. No matter how hard you work to cultivate them, they are still that—gifts, something given to you by God. What are you doing with those gifts? Are you using them for yourself or for the good of others and the furtherance of the Lord's work? Might you need to do some serious soul-searching and changing?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The gift of spiritual leadership originates in God's choosing, and we should support it as a sacred trust.

Just for Teachers: The church is organized by Christ as the center for worship and evangelism. To this end He has provided leaders to share His vision with His people. Not everyone is called to the same type or extent of ministry, but everyone has an important function in the body of Christ.

When jealousy, neglect, criticism, and selfishness are allowed to infect the body, the effectiveness of the church is diminished. There are three factors that can reduce the potential for this infection spreading. First, the church needs to have a clear understanding of the various roles members play within the church. The hands cannot do what the feet are designed to do, nor can a heart substitute for a lung. Yet, we are an interdependent community of believers, and when one function of the body suffers, the entire body is impaired. Second, the church needs a deep appreciation for the various ministries and spiritual callings. When some ministries are neglected or relegated to optional status, people are hurt, and the work of God suffers. Third, the cleansing power of Christ is powerful enough to purify our motives and wash away envy, jealousy, and anything that, left unchecked, might cause division within the church.

Activity: Using an anatomical model of the human body or diagrams of the human anatomy (overlying clear-sheet diagrams, such as those found in anatomy textbooks, are ideal), discuss the various body systems—digestive, circulatory, respiratory, reproductive, sensory, and skeletal. What does each part contribute to the health of the whole? Which one would you want to live without? How important is it that the systems and their parts work together?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: In the aftermath of Korah's rebellion, God

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Sanctuary Support

Having distinguished between the two groups of religious workers, the Lord next gives instruction regarding their economic support. Their positions were, apparently, full time. That is, they didn't "serve tables" (*Acts 6:2*) in order to support themselves. The support had to come from elsewhere.

Read Numbers 18:8–20. What points seem most pertinent to you?

Many interesting thoughts come through these texts. Notice, for instance, how closely the Lord related the offering given to Him with what was given to the priesthood. That is, though the offerings and gifts were made to Him, He gave them to the priests. Thus, by giving the offerings to the Lord, they were at the same time giving them to the priests. This shows the close link between the Lord and the priesthood, which served as intermediaries between God and the people.

At the same time, we can see the humanity of the priests, as well. Though in this privileged position, they still were depending on the people they served for their sustenance. No doubt, with the people giving them of their best oil, wine, grain, and so forth, the priesthood constantly was reminded of their obligation to serve these people faithfully and not to take advantage of the position that they had been given.

Also, to redeem a child or an animal by means of money was one of the ways the Lord taught Israel the concept of substitution. One day in the future Christ would give His life as a substitute for sinners (*see 1 Pet. 1:18, 19*). Salt, added to every sacrifice, was a symbol that signified the permanence of God's covenant with His people (*see Lev. 2:13*).

What kind of sacred responsibilities do you hold? How faithful are you in the tasks that others are trusting you with? How could you do better in faithfully executing your responsibilities?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

addressed the need for a clear understanding of the roles He had assigned to the various groups within Israel. While in the broadest sense Israel was a nation of priests, God had reserved certain roles for certain people. Each member of the community was important, but everyone was not called to the same function. The unity of the body depended, in part, on a clear understanding of God’s calling. Purity of motive and a conscience free of jealousy and self-promotion were also required.

I. Division of Labor and Gift of Divine Service (*Review Exod. 19:5, 6; Num. 18:1–7; John 3:16–18; Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:28–31; Eph. 4:11; Heb. 5:4; 9; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 14:6–12 with the class.*)

God had chosen a people to carry forward His mission to the world. In a sense, the nation of Israel became a “priest nation” to mediate God’s grace to a fallen world. Israel was God’s spiritual gift to the world. Within that gift were individual people whom God had chosen for specific roles in the execution of the mission of redemption.

Clearly not everyone had the same role. The perception that the more visible role of priest was therefore more important than the supporting roles carried out by the other Levites in the temple system led to dissatisfaction, and that led Korah to rebel. After God quashed the uprising, He revealed a careful delineation of the responsibilities and roles of the priests and Levites. Rather than being an occasion for jealous rivalry, their sacred calling was to be a foundation for thanksgiving. Understanding their part could facilitate a harmonious working together.

In the Corinthian church there also were factions. Some were swayed by this personality and some by another. There was contention over who had the “best” spiritual gifts. Evidence suggests that some were coveting the gifts, abilities, and roles of others. Fifteen hundred years after the time of Moses, in a different cultural setting (pagan converts versus Jewish), in a different spiritual context (*after* versus *before* the Cross), we find God’s chosen people still bickering over who gets to do what, who gets the more prominent positions, and who gets to be the leader. How frustrated God must be with His people—whether an Old Testament congregation or the New Testament church!

Consider This: Since the Bible says that spiritual gifts originate with and are assigned by God, what should the Christian’s attitude be toward his or her individual abilities and assignments? How spiritual is the pastor who is always worried about “moving up” to some other pastor’s larger or

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The Tithing Plan

Although the tribe of Levi had no land territory, they were given 48 cities, 13 of which were for the families of the priests (*Josh. 21:19, 41*). The Lord declared that He was their “part” or portion (*Num. 18:20*).

In addition to their portion of the sacrificial offerings, what other plan did the Lord devise to care for both priests and Levites? *Num. 18:21–32.*

Returning a tithe of one’s income to the Lord (*Lev. 27:30*) was an ancient practice. It is first mentioned in the Bible when Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek, King-priest of Salem (*Gen. 14:18–20; Heb. 7:1, 2*). Jacob promised the Lord he would render “the tenth” of all he would earn in his future (*Gen. 28:22*). Now, the Lord adapts the use of Israel’s tithe, giving it for the support of the entire Levitical tribe—including the families of the priests.

Even the Levites, who were paid in tithe, tithed as well, their tithe going to Aaron. The Levites were to give the “best part” of what they received as tithe. Hence, not only did that tithe go toward the support of the priesthood; it also enabled the Levites to realize their dependence upon God and that all they received was from Him. They, too, needed to show their gratitude by faithfully returning the “tithe of the tithe.” If the people always needed to remember their dependence upon the Lord, how much more so the Levites?

Read Numbers 18:32. What point should be taken away from that regarding the sacredness of their calling?

In this divine plan, everyone had their role, everyone had something to do. The priests and the Levites had their sacred duties to carry out regarding the service and ministry in the sanctuary, while the people had theirs in regard to the paying of a faithful tithe. The tithe was a small thing to give, considering what the Levites and priesthood performed in their behalf. In a sense, all the different groups were dependent upon the function of each other, and all were dependent upon the Lord.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

more affluent church? How spiritual is the elder or deaconess who is always dictating to the pastor what needs to be done, especially with the inference that if he or she had the position things would be done differently? How much gratitude do we display toward God when we rebel against our current opportunities to serve in the pursuit of some “higher honor”? How do you think God feels when our rivalry keeps us from the objective of reaching the lost with the story of redemption? How do you think He feels when we give mundane things priority over God’s mission?

II. Sanctuary Support and the Tithing Plan (Review *Gen. 14:20; 28:22; Lev. 2:13; 27:30; Num. 18:8–32; Josh. 21:19; Mal. 3:8–12; Matt. 23:23; Acts 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:6–14; Heb. 7:1, 2; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19* with the class.)

In God’s design 1 tribe in 12 would devote itself to full-time sanctuary ministry, the central figure in God’s redemptive work. God was not satisfied with “part-timers”—a group that would offer God the leftovers of their time once planting, harvesting, and other tasks were completed. This was of highest value and required a group whose *first* work was the sanctuary. Practically this meant that the other 11 tribes would have to provide support for the physical needs of the Levites. They would provide food, shelter, and basic temporal needs. While other tribes were free to enrich themselves according to their ability, the Levite was to depend on the Lord and those faithful to Him for their support. The system consisted of (1) offerings and (2) tithes. The offerings had ritual significance but also provided food for the priests. The tithe was a tenth of a person’s increase.

Consider This: If I withhold support for the Lord’s ministry, what does that say about my appreciation for God’s redemptive plan?

III. The Red Heifer (Review *Numbers 19, Heb. 10:21–23, 13:12, Rom. 5:12–20* with the class.)

While a clear picture of our roles and faithful financial support of God’s work are vital, nothing is more important than God’s cleansing power, which alone purifies our motives and qualifies us for service.

Consider This: How could God’s cleansing power prevent a gifted leader from becoming compromised?

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The Red Heifer

The sacrifice of an unblemished red heifer that never had been yoked is the strangest rite in Israel's sanctuary system (*Numbers 19*). What lessons can we learn from it?

This heifer was to be red, a symbol of blood, Christ's blood obviously. It had to be without blemish, as well, and never had borne a yoke—another symbol of Christ, a spotless sacrifice who came voluntarily to accomplish the work of atonement. There was no obligatory yoke upon Him, for He was independent and above all law.

The sacrificial heifer was brought forth without the camp and slain. Thus Christ suffered without the gates of Jerusalem (*Heb. 13:12*), for Calvary was outside the city walls. This was to show that Christ did not die for the Hebrews alone but for all humanity (*Rom. 5:12–20*). He proclaims to a fallen world that He has come to be their Redeemer and urges them to accept the salvation He offers.

After slaying the heifer, the priest, clothed in pure white garments, took the blood in his hands as it issued from the body of the victim, and cast it toward the tabernacle seven times. Thus, Christ in His own spotless righteousness, after shedding His precious blood, entered into the heavenly sanctuary to minister in the sinner's behalf. And there His blood is brought into the service of reconciling God to humanity (*see Heb. 10:21–23*).

The body of the heifer was burned to ashes, which signified a whole and ample sacrifice. The ashes then were gathered up by a person uncontaminated by contact with the dead and laid up in a clean place without the camp. When the ceremony of cleansing was to be performed, these ashes were placed in a vessel containing water from a running stream. A clean and pure person then took the hyssop and sprinkled the contents of the vessel not only upon the tent where someone died but also upon its contents and the people inside of it. This purification ceremony was repeated several times in order to be thorough, and was done as a purification from sin.

The cleansing water, sprinkled on the unclean, symbolized the blood of Christ spilled to cleanse us from moral impurities. The repeated sprinklings illustrate the thoroughness of the work that must be accomplished for the repenting sinner. All that he has must be consecrated. Not only should the sinner's own soul be washed clean and pure, but he or she should seek purity and holiness in all aspects of his or her existence.

Look at your life. What things still need to be submitted to the purification process? What are you holding on to, and why?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: As God set forth the distinctive functions of the priests and other Levites, He affirmed their positions. It is God's call to any task or ministry that makes our participation legitimate. If God is for it, who can be against it? The letter to the Hebrews (*Heb. 5:4*) says that the priesthood is not something to strive for but something that one receives because God chose. So it is with the spiritual gifts listed elsewhere in the New Testament. While it is not our work to choose which gifts God should give to whom, we can affirm the gifts that God has given to our fellow believers. When we receive affirmation, we are less likely to covet others' gifts. When we give affirmation, the result is strangely the same. Why would we covet from someone else something we have affirmed in them?

Review the spiritual gifts in preparation for the following activity: *Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:7–10, 28; Eph. 4:11*. Note the difference between spiritual gifts and talents or natural abilities. Talents include music, cooking, various technical skills, art, clear voice, athletic abilities, friendliness, biblical knowledge, and more.

Activity: Write affirming notes to fellow class members, telling them which gifts or talents you recognize in them. Say how you think those gifts may be used or have been used in the church's mission. This may be done by assignment—for example, you may ask each student to write something about the person on his or her left, or across from him or her—or recognition may be voluntary. The best plan may be to encourage both kinds of participation so that no one is left out, encouraging members to affirm others of their choosing.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Because we love and value our children and grandchildren so much, we display that affection through picture taking, collecting, and displaying. Why shouldn't we demonstrate how much we value and love the mission of God's church in the same way?

Activity: Affirm the gifts of your church by creating a photo montage of those gifts in action. Label the pictures with a few words about the gift they exemplify. This activity can be done as an individual project but will be much more enjoyable as a group activity. Ask your pastor if you can put this montage on display in your church lobby or fellowship center.

Further Study: “God’s plan in the tithing system is beautiful in its simplicity and equality. All may take hold of it in faith and courage, for it is divine in its origin. In it are combined simplicity and utility, and it does not require depth of learning to understand and execute it. All may feel that they can act a part in carrying forward the precious work of salvation. Every man, woman, and youth may become a treasurer for the Lord, and may be an agent to meet the demands upon the treasury. . . .

“Great objects are accomplished by this system. If one and all would accept it, each would be made a vigilant and faithful treasurer for God; and there would be no want of means with which to carry forward the great work of sounding the last message of warning to the world.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 223.

Discussion Questions:

1 What are some of the issues regarding tithe in the church today? Why is tithing so important, not just for the function of the church but for the spiritual well-being of the one who tithes?

2 Go back over Thursday’s lesson on the red heifer. Dwell on what it tells us about Christ’s death and ministry in our behalf. What does it tell us about our need to be cleansed from sin? What has Christ done that enables us to have victory over sin?

3 Think about your home. Are there things there that you need to cleanse, things that could be defiling it? Books, DVDs, music, magazines, whatever? What are they, and why should you get rid of them?

4 What are ways that we can help others, especially the young people in our church, use their God-given talents for the Lord? That is, how can we help steer folk, who do have gifts, in the right direction of using those gifts for the right purposes? What is our obligation to help them?

Summary: Because of Korah’s rebellion and desire to hold the office of a priest, God instructed Moses (for the people) in regard to the distinction between the priests and the Levites. The priesthood was a gift from God; the Levites were a gift to the priesthood. Both were supported by a tithing plan. With the ashes of a red heifer mixed with water, the Lord provided for a special ritual cleansing, which signified the grace of God in cleansing a person from the stain of sin.