

Bearing the Name

Leviticus 24:10-23

We've come together this morning as fellow "Christians." That's not just a creative religious label. We are bearing someone's name – the name of Christ, or Jesus. Jesus is our God, our Savior, the one we believe in and depend on, the one we worship, and that's why we're here this morning. As Christ's followers, we bear his name and carry it into the world. We are "Christians." And this morning as we look into the text we have to study we're going to ask ourselves: How well am I doing that? How well am I bearing the name of Jesus? How important is that? If I call myself a "Christian" and people get an idea of who Jesus is by watching me, how well am I doing in bringing honor to his name?

We come back to the book of Leviticus this morning, getting close to the end of this book and this series, and the passage we're going to look at today talks about the importance of bearing the name. There are only two stories in the book of Leviticus and this is one of them. The book is mostly about the rules and regulations that God gave to Moses to establish a framework for life and worship in the new covenant community of Israel. But in the midst of these, the writer takes a break to relay two stories about important things that happened. Both stories are sobering because both involve people being put to death.

We looked at the first story several weeks ago where two of Aaron's sons, who were the priests of Israel, disobeyed God and went into the Holy of Holies to offer incense which they were commanded not to do, and God struck them down with holy fire and killed them on the spot. We're going to look at the second story today which has some similarities.

This last section of Leviticus has included laws and regulations about being a people set apart to Yahweh – being holy as he is holy. We also saw a new calendar and pattern of living in Leviticus 23 with 6 days of work and one mandatory day of rest called Sabbath along with 6 more annual feasts where the people would assemble to meet with Yahweh in a special way. That brings us to chapter 24 which contains the story we're going to look at today. I want to read the story, explain it a little bit, and compare it with how we might apply it to our lives today.

Read Leviticus 24:10-12.

Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, ¹¹ and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. ¹² And they put him in custody, till the will of the Lord should be clear to them.

We're given a few details in these verses about what happened – two men got in a fight. One of them had an Egyptian father and an Israelite mother, which is important because that means he was one of the “mixed multitude” that left Egypt and not a pure Israelite, and that had implications for where he lived in the community. His mother was from the tribe of Dan, which is also important because Israel was a tribal community and the people set up the camp based on tribe and clan. You lived with your tribe in that culture and that's just the way it was.

It says he “went out among the people of Israel,” which gives a clue that he was in an area not designated for him. The Pulpit Commentary states that *“he did not confine himself to his own part of the encampment, where the mixed multitude lived, but he intruded into the part set aside for pure Israelites.”* It also says that *“According to Jewish tradition, the cause of quarrel was a claim set up by the man to encamp in the Danite quarters, on the ground that his mother was a Danite - a claim which he insisted on enforcing, although the judges gave a decision against him.”*

So it seems this man was angry about the regulations that confined him to a certain area of the camp and when he went and tried to live among his mother's tribe, he was confronted and got into a fight. The text doesn't say all of this, but that's what the clues and Jewish tradition point to.

Now the fight wasn't the most serious part. The most serious part was that at some point when all this was going on, he pronounced the Name of Yahweh in a blasphemous way and cursed. It's uncertain exactly what he said, but the Hebrew words indicate that he treated Yahweh's name with contempt – the opposite of honoring it as holy. He reviled the Name, likely due to his anger. He was probably angry with the tribal regulations, angry that he couldn't live where he wanted to live, and angry with the God behind all of it. So in the midst of this fight, he cursed the name of Yahweh.

And the Israelites who heard him and witnessed the fight didn't know what to do. They knew it was a serious offense, so they held him in custody, and then they brought the matter to the attention of Moses, that he might inquire of the Lord.

Read Leviticus 24:13-16.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁴“Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. ¹⁵And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. ¹⁶Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

So this is a very sobering story. This man was to be put to death by stoning. All those who heard him were to lay their hands on his head – very similar to what happened on the Day of Atonement where the High Priest laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat and transferred the sins of Israel upon it before sending it out to the wilderness to die. And that's similar to what's happening here. It's as if those who heard this man curse the name of Yahweh were corrupted even by just hearing what he said and they were to transfer that defilement upon his head before stoning him to death outside the camp. This was Yahweh's judgment for anyone who cursed his name.

So we have a very serious pronouncement of judgment and as the story goes on, it's as if Yahweh knew there might be struggles with the severity of it, so he gives Moses the judicial standard by which he pronounces judgment.

Read Leviticus 24:17-23.

“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. ¹⁸Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. ¹⁹If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. ²¹Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. ²²You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God.” ²³So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the Lord commanded Moses.

What we see happening here is Yahweh lays down a standard for judgment, and particularly for penalty or punishment. And that standard was that the punishment should fit the crime. It should not be more or less; it should be fitting. When someone murders another human being, they too shall be put to death. But when someone kills someone else's animal, they shouldn't be put to death for it – that would be too excessive – they should replace the animal. If someone injures someone in a fight, that same injury should be inflicted upon that person. This was the rule for the people of Israel. This was justice, and was the standard by which God pronounced judgment upon the man who cursed his name.

So to curse the name of Yahweh was equivalent to murder and the man must be put to death. One commentator pointed out that Yahweh was the one who saved them from Egypt. He was the one who provided food and water for their survival through the wilderness. He was the one who formed a covenant with them so that they would bear his Name in the world and reveal him to the nations. They were a kingdom of priests and a holy nation – that was their very purpose for existence and why he saved them. He was also the one who was protecting them from their enemies. He would go before them in battle. He would bring them into their new home in the Promised Land and drive out the wicked inhabitants before them. He was their very life – their everything.

So for this man to curse him was to curse the one who saved him and gave him life. He was cutting off the branch he was sitting on and doing the very opposite of what God saved him to do. He was cursing and dishonoring the Name that he was supposed to bear and bring honor to.

That's the story, and when I look at what God did for this man and the purpose for which he did it, I see a lot of similarities to our lives today as Christians. God has saved us from bondage to sin and brought us into a new way of life by entering into a covenant with us. We now bear his name – we are “Christians” and as such, we are his representatives here on earth. One of the basic responsibilities we have is to bear the Name of Christ well so that we bring honor to him. Our conduct should be honorable before everyone so that whether people agree with us or not, we will glorify the name of Jesus.

How well are you bearing the name of Christ? How well are you bringing honor to him? In this story, the man directly violated his purpose and responsibility

by cursing the name of God – so we should first ask ourselves, do we curse the name of Jesus? I heard a friend of mine who's not a committed Christian blurt out the name of Jesus in his frustration the other day and it just seemed so inappropriate to me. So unfitting. Why use the name of Jesus Christ that brings such blessing as a curse word?

I steer as far away from that as possible, even with popular slang words. I don't want to have anything to do with that, partly because I don't want to bring dishonor to his name, but partly because of how precious the name of Jesus is to me. How could I ever treat his name like a curse word?

But there are many other ways that we can bring dishonor to the Name we bear and these are places where I need to be careful. My speech matters. My behavior matters. My attitude matters. Does my speech, behavior, and attitude bring honor to the name of Jesus? Even when I'm angry? Even when I'm suffering and things aren't going my way? When people look at my life as a Christian, does it point them to Jesus in a positive way? Or do I dishonor him?

Bearing the name of Jesus is a holy calling and it may be something that as you look at your life, you realize you've been doing it very poorly. You haven't been a good representative. After hearing a story about a man who was stoned for the same thing, we can feel the weight of judgment. It is good to feel conviction and remorse for our sins, but that needs to lead us to repentance where we can see the hope we have in the gospel. Jesus died and has already paid the penalty for our sins, even the sins that bring dishonor to his name. He will forgive you and me when we blow it, if we will humble ourselves before him in confession and repentance. The price has already been paid and forgiveness and reconciliation secured.

So if you're feeling conviction this morning, Christ invites you to come to him where you will find forgiveness, restoration, and hope. Let's rejoice in him as we now turn to celebrate communion together.