

Gleanings from Leviticus, Number Two

Leviticus 5:7 (NRSV)

But if you cannot afford a sheep, you shall bring to the LORD, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and other for a burnt offering.

Leviticus 5:11 (NRSV)

But if you cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, you shall bring as your offering for the sin that you have committed one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a sin offering; you shall not put oil on it or lay frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering.

These two verses easily get lost in the thicket of regulations for the offering of sacrifices, but I think they belong to an important theme of Leviticus: the poor are not to be exploited, shamed, or excluded. People are to be treated with respect, and extra measures are to be taken to preserve the dignity of the humble, using the word “humble” here to refer, not only to an attitude or state of mind, but also to an economic and social condition.

Yahweh (the LORD) does not wish to humiliate the poor or impose difficult stipulations upon them. The sin offering is not about cost in any absolute terms. These provisions for the poor are not forgiveness on the cheap, as it might appear to the relatively well-to-do reader. God needs a lamb or goat no more than God needs a pigeon or a handful of flour. What God wants is a genuine turning of the person toward God’s covenant love and mercy. Psalm 50 puts it this way:

"Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.
Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
I will not accept a bull from your house,
or goats from your folds.
For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.
"If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
{Or [make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God]}

and pay your vows to the Most High.
Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." (verse 7-15, NRSV)

Yahweh God cares much more about the offering's meaning to the person making it than its appearance to others or its value to the priest. For obvious reasons, priests of lesser integrity preferred the more expensive animal offerings because they kept the edible meat. Hosea condemns such priests: "They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity." (Hosea 4:8) Selling forgiveness and peace of mind has long been lucrative business.

But the main point I take from these two verses is the integrity of the poor person, which is not to be violated by society or what we would call religion. The poor are to be included on equal terms with the wealthier. Before Yahweh, a person is a person, and no one is to be shamed for lack of wealth, prestige, or power.

How far we have *not* come! To be poor is both expensive and humiliating. Food generally costs more in poor neighborhoods, since pricing is determined by competition among supermarkets. Credit is expensive for those of lesser means. When we lived in Pennsylvania, I noticed that an extra fee was added to the purchase of a car for anyone who had to take a loan. Rents often rise with welfare or government subsidy or with the power to crowd people into an apartment. Even items that seem cheaper break or wear out more quickly and so must be replaced more often. It is expensive to be poor.

Poor people also grow accustomed to standing in line or being told to sit and wait, not always politely. In a society fixated on wealth, acquisition, consumption of goods, and pride in rich appearance (from status homes, cars, clothing, vacations, and even spouses to "bling"), it seems to be regarded as shameful and, in some sense, even sinful to be poor.

As we progress through Leviticus, we will find various ways in which the dignity of the poor person is to be honored and maintained. What I see emerging from the pages of Leviticus, a book devoted mainly to rules and regulations, is a powerful mandate to treat people with respect and, surprisingly, to take special care to show no disrespect to the poor. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and the whole people of Israel makes this requirement.

The New Testament Letter of James says this:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor.
(James 2:1-6a, NRSV)

And in the Gospel of Luke, we read of Jesus' presentation in the Temple by his parents:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22-24, NRSV)