

"IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE"

October 29, 1989

TEXT: Leviticus 22:20 "Whatever has a defect you shall not offer; for it will not be accepted for you."

Today's scripture came from one of the least read books in the Bible. And, from this morning's passage, I think you can see why. It has no narrative to speak of, no great devotional passages, no miracles, no beautiful poetry. Instead, it is a collection of rituals and laws, many of which even our Jewish friends no longer observe. One might even be tempted --as some of the early Christians were-- to leave Leviticus out of our Bible altogether.

But, whenever I find myself thinking that way, I am brought up short by something Jesus said. In Matthew, chapter five, verse seventeen, he said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am come not to destroy but to fulfill." And I ask myself, can it be that even in the rituals and laws of Leviticus, there is an embryo of something important. Something that was fulfilled by Christ and which he calls us to fulfill in this, his Church. I believe there is. For, in that myriad of rituals and laws we find some of the best stewardship concepts you will find anywhere.

Yes, that's right. For some of you your worst fears have been realized. This is a Stewardship sermon. And there is at least a part of me that does not want to preach it any more than some of you want to hear it. Not because I find the concept of stewardship disagreeable. Far from it. But because none of us likes having to say something others do not want to hear. And it did not take thirty years in the ministry for me to discover that many people do not want their minister to talk about money. So, I am not going to. Talk about money, that is. I am going to talk about stewardship, which is something very different.

First of all, when we talk about money, we usually think of budgets and about what constitutes "our share." Stewardship, on the other hand is not concerned with budgets at all. Instead, it is an attitude, a way of life predicated on the belief that we owe God something. Some of the rituals in the book of Leviticus may have been voluntary, like the thank-offering for special blessings and sacrifices made by those who were asking God for something. But most of them were not. The tithe, the grain offering, the fruit offering, the sacrifice for the first-born male, these were all mandatory. Strictly

speaking, they were not considered offerings at all. They were payments of debt.

It is not really all that different today. Every month I, too, make certain ritual sacrifices. One is to gods of the bank which holds the mortgage on my house. Others are to the gods of the electric company, the gas company, and the telephone company. Still another placates the gods of the bank that loaned the money for my car. And these are not voluntary either. To make sure that I perform these sacrifices, the high priests of these gods send me a reminder every month. And they do not say, "We hope you had a good month. If so, won't you please send a little something to us."

No, these gods tell me exactly what I owe, when they expect me to pay, and what my penalty will be if I happen to be late. And that is pretty much the way the people of Leviticus looked at their sacrifices. As payments on their debt to God --for the gift of life, for material blessings, and for that sustaining power which keeps us, and our world, going day by day. The only difference is that God did not send out bills or take them to court if they failed to pay. But it was a debt just the same.

Leviticus 27:30 puts it this way, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord." So Billy Graham once said, "One of the greatest sins in America is the fact that we are robbing God of that which rightfully belongs to Him. When we don't tithe, we shirk a just debt . . . Not until we have given a tenth do we actually begin making an offering to the Lord."

For most of us that may sound like pretty strong language. We Congregationalists do not talk very much about tithes. If some of us had our way we would not talk about them at all. We are like the Scotsman who was approached by a woman collecting for charity. She gave him a little card which said, "Charity Fair --Give Till It Hurts." As the Scotsman handed back the card, he wiped a tear from his eye and said, "Lassie, the very thought of it hurts."

Now I do not want to get bogged down in specifics, like what per cent is right or whether it should be before or after taxes, or whether it should include only what we give to the church or all our charitable giving. That is far too legalistic. And, besides, like good Congregationalists, you are going to make those decisions for yourselves. The important thing is that I owe God for my warm, comfortable house, just as much as I owe the bank and the utility companies. And, by the way, my bank at least gets more than ten percent.

That is the basic concept of stewardship. Another, higher one which builds upon the first is gratitude. Gratitude to God for what He has done for us. Do you remember how the Ten Commandments are introduced in the book of Exodus? "I am the

Lord, thy God, who hath brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." One reason for obeying those commandments is gratitude for blessings already received. And does it not stand to reason that the more God has blessed us, the more grateful we should be? Unfortunately, it seems to be the other way around. A recent Gallup poll indicates that the larger our income, the smaller per centage we Americans give to church and charity. How different from Jesus' statement that "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." (Luke 12:48)

But, as I said, I am not just talking about money. I am talking about stewardship. And stewardship has to do with all of life. For we owe God more than money. We owe Him our obedience. We owe Him service. We owe a portion of what we have. And we owe it to Him to use what we keep for ourselves in ways that honor him. Both in what we give and in what we use, we owe God our very best.

Of course, it would not happen today, but, in Old Testament times, there were those who were tempted to cheat. To give God only what they could easily afford. Since their wealth was in their flocks and herds, when it was time to make a sacrifice they would give God crippled, blemished, or otherwise devalued animals. Let God have what we can not use anyway. But we read in this morning's scripture lesson, "Whatever has a defect you shall not offer; for it will not be accepted for you." We owe it to God to send the very best.

Today of course we no longer worship God through animal sacrifice. But the lessons of Leviticus are just as true as ever. We, too, owe God something. We owe it because God has already blessed us beyond measure. We owe Him obedience; we owe Him service; we owe Him substance. And we owe Him our very best, which means off the top.

In our house the very first check we write each month is to the church. When we pay God first, there always seems to be enough for what we need. But we learned a long time ago that if we paid the other bills first, there never seemed to be much left for God. We offer God our first fruits --in time as well as money-- and we offer it willingly and joyously. Because we owe it to Him, because we are grateful for His love and for His blessings, and because we also owe it to ourselves.

We owe it to ourselves in order to fulfill our own personhood. Ernest Hemingway used to give things away at the start of a new year. He did so to prove that he owned them, for he said that if he could not give them away, he did not own them, they owned him. And he lamented that we spend so much attention on things that cannot feel or love instead of lavishing our care on people who can feel our affection and respond to it. If I am to be a real person, a true child of God, and not the slave of the things I claim to own, then I owe it to myself as well as to

God to give the very best that I have --to Him and to my brothers and sisters in Christ.

We in this Church are seekers after excellence. We demand it in the things we buy, in the places we eat, things to which we give our allegiance. And we give our best at work, in sports, in everything we do. Can we not work for that same kind of excellence in what we do for God?