

Fixing Damage from Financial Abuse

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Leviticus

The book of Leviticus contains regulations for Israel's sacrificial system. We should not assume that this material is empty liturgy irrelevant to the world of work. Instead, we must look at the way the people of Israel coped with their collective problems in order to explore how we, as people in Christ, may cope with ours.

The purpose of sacrifice in Leviticus was not merely to remedy occasional lapses of purity. The Hebrew verb for "offering" a sacrifice means literally to "bring (it) near." Bringing a sacrifice near to the sanctuary brought the worshipper near to God. The worshipper's individual degree of misbehavior was not the main issue. The pollution caused by impurity was a consequence for the entire community. The guilty community included both the few people who had sinned and the silent majority that had allowed the wicked to flourish in their midst. The people as a whole bore collective responsibility for corrupting society and thus giving God legitimate reason to leave his sanctuary.

The guilt offering (also known as the reparation offering) is particularly relevant to the world of work. According to Leviticus 6:2-3, God required offerings whenever a person deceived another about a deposit, committed robbery or fraud, lied about lost property that had been found, or swore

falsely. The guilt offering was not a fine imposed by a court of law, but a reparation offered by perpetrators who got away with the offense, but who then later felt guilty.

Such sins would often have been committed in the context of commerce or other work. The guilt offering calls for the remorseful sinner to return what was wrongfully taken plus 20 percent. Only after settling the matter financially on a human level may the sinner receive forgiveness from God by presenting an animal to the priest for sacrifice.

Israel's sacrificial guidelines offers several lessons for us today on fixing the damage from financial abuse.

The first is that mere apology is not enough to right the wrong. Neither is full restoration of what was taken. Something akin to today's concept of punitive damages must be added. But with guilt offerings—unlike court-ordered punitive damages—offenders willingly take on a share of the harm themselves.

Going above and beyond mere restoration to do all that is required to right a wrong is not only good for the person offended, it is also good for the offender. The guilt offering recognized the torment that seizes the conscience of someone who becomes aware of their crime and its damaging effects on another person. It provides a way for the guilty party to deal fully with the matter, bringing closure and peace. This process expresses God's mercy to both the victim and the perpetrator. For the guilty party, their guilt need not fester or erupt into more serious offenses.

For the victim, or his or her family, it extinguishes the need to take matters into their own hands and seek vengeful restitution.

Nothing in Jesus' atoning work on the cross releases the people of God today from the need for making restitution. Jesus taught his disciples, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

The guilt offering is a potent reminder that God does not exercise his right of forgiveness at the expense of people harmed by our misdeeds. He does not offer us psychological release from our guilt as a cheap substitute for making right the damage and hurt we have caused. If we have abused others financially, drawing near to God requires a sacrifice.