

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES A FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

Numbers 5:1-31

INTRODUCTION

Leaders usually give stirring and inspirational speeches when they are preparing their people for some great endeavor. Whether it is the commander of an army preparing his men for some great battle or the coach preparing his team for the big game or a president preparing his country to respond to some national emergency, leaders seek to motivate their people for the struggle that is coming. In the book of Numbers, God has gathered the nation of Israel on the plains of Mt. Sinai and is preparing them for a great endeavor; to march across the desert of the Sinai Peninsula so that they can conquer the Land of Canaan. He has appointed military leaders and arranged them into a fighting unit. He has explained to them how the Levites and priests are to guard the tent of meeting so that he can safely dwell in their midst. He has given instructions on how they are to march and carry that tent safely from place to place. So what does Yahweh, the leader of this vast army say to them as they get ready for this march and battle? (Note the three times Yahweh speaks to the people.)

He tells them to put all the unclean people outside the camp, what they are to do when they realize they are guilty of sinning against their neighbor and what jealous husbands should do. This is not a stirring, motivational speech such as Aragorn gave to the armies of Gondor before the gates of Mordor or Winston Churchill gave to England during WWII. We are going to see this happen time and again throughout the story of Israel's wilderness journey, in the midst of the story of their travels God inserts these apparently irrelevant instructions regarding religious minutia. The reason for these instructions is because the purpose of Israel is not simply to be an army on the march but to be a people who learn to travel with the Holy God in their midst. The most important thing that is happening in this story is not the conquest of the land of Canaan but the fact that the Holy God has made them his people and has come to live with them.

We have recognized that this story of the Holy God dwelling in the midst of the people of Israel as they travel through the wilderness as God's army in order to enter into the Promised Land is our story. It is the story of the church of Jesus marching through the wilderness that is this world with God in our midst in order that we might win the new heavens and the new earth to live with our God forever. What we find in chapter 5 of Numbers is a description of how we are to live as his faithful people, now that he has made us his church and come to live in our midst. While we are a people who have been saved by God's grace, yet we are a people still beset by sin. This chapter describes for us how we are to deal with the fact of sin in the camp. How are we, as a group to handle the various ways that sin expresses itself among us in view of the fact that we are a people set apart to God, with God himself dwelling among us? These instructions tell us how to live as God's faithful church in view of the fact that sin is still among us.

MAIN POINT

God creates his church and calls us to live as his faithful people by...

I. Excluding unclean professing Christians (vv. 1-4)

The first thing that God tells the saved, counted, arranged, guarded and prepared to travel people of Israel to do is to exclude from the camp every Israelite who is unclean either because they have an infectious skin disease or they have an emission of blood or other bodily fluid or they have had contact with a dead person. This includes both men and women. The reason for their exclusion is that their uncleanness can be spread, can defile the entire camp. God lives in the midst of that camp and thus if the uncleanness is permitted to spread and the entire camp becomes defiled then God will not be able to dwell in their midst, he will abandon them or destroy them. Their existence as God's people depends upon their putting all of these unclean members of Israel outside of their camp.

The ritual uncleanness that causes defilement in the Law of Moses is used in the NT as a symbol of the impurity caused by moral failure. Jesus himself in a confrontation with the religious leaders who criticized his disciples for not following all the detailed rules for being cleansed from ritual uncleanness says that uncleanness, being unfit for God does not happen because you eat certain kinds of food or because you fail to wash your hands in the right way but you are unclean in God's sight because of the evil you do that comes from within you. He says in Mark 7:20-23, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." The rest of the NT confirms this teaching of Jesus, that the ritual uncleanness of the OT was a symbol of the true uncleanness before God caused by our sin. Paul says in Ephesians 5:3, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality or of uncleanness or of greed..." In Galatians 5:19 he includes uncleanness in his list of "works of the flesh" which will exclude you from the kingdom of God. In 1 Thessalonians 4, after explaining that it is God's will that we avoid sexual immorality he says, "For God did not call us to be unclean but to live a holy life." Paul insists in Ephesians 5:5, "For of this you can be sure: no immoral or unclean or greedy person... has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

What the NT teaches is that people who profess to be Christians but who continue to live in sin and do not confess it or fight against it will not be accepted into heaven, they are unclean. Contrary to what millions of professing Christians in the U.S. believe you are not part of God's people, your sins are not forgiven if you do not hate your sin and resist it and freely confess it. Jesus didn't die so you can go to heaven sinning with impunity. Hatred of our own sin is one of the evidences that we have been made part of God's family, we have been born again by God's Spirit. It is the responsibility of each local church to exclude from our midst all who are openly sinning and not repenting, just as it was the responsibility of the congregation of Israel to exclude those ritually unclean from their camp.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul explains to the church in Corinth how they are to exclude from their midst a man who professes to be a Christian but who is engaging in sexual immorality that is publicly known. While he draws upon a different OT symbol associated with Passover, yet conceptually he is describing exactly the same thing that we find here in Numbers 5. When a professing Christian engages in sinful behavior that is eye-witnessed by members of the congregation and when he is gently confronted by a brother in Christ and offered help to fight his sin and that sinning brother refuses to turn from the sin, then the congregation is to exclude that brother from their midst. That is what Paul says, "Purge the evil person from among you," meaning the evil professing Christian person. He says that we are to do this because, using the metaphor of yeast in bread dough, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." In other words, uncleanness will defile the whole camp, the whole church and make it unfit for God.

The other reason Paul gives for this severe action against an unrepentant professing Christian is so that he or she will feel the weight of his or her sin and turn from it and return to Christ and to his church. In other words, one of the reasons to exclude an unclean person from the midst of the church is so that they will want to be cleansed. The exclusion of unclean people in Israel was to be a temporary exclusion. Ultimately these excluded ones could come back into the camp after being cleansed through various washings and sacrifices and examinations by the priests. The language of cleansing that in the OT refers to the ritual washings and offering of animals and grain in sacrifice is used in the NT of the work of Christ in cleansing the believing sinner from their defilement. Just as the unclean person who was put out of the camp had to submit to a public cleansing process in order to re-enter the camp, so also those who have been excluded from the church for unrepentant sin must also be publicly accepted back into the church upon the condition of their turning from their sins and returning to the cleansing of Christ whose shed blood cleanses every believing sinner from all our sins.

II. Confessing our sins to God and one another (vv. 5-10)

We find in the next paragraph the more common way that we are to deal with the fact that while we are part of God's people, yet we do sin. These sins are described as acts which "break faith with the Lord." This same word is used a few verses later, in v. 12, for the act of adultery. In other words, when we sin we are betraying

our Lord. We are preferring the pleasure of someone or something else to the pleasure of belonging to God and being his child. All sin is spiritual adultery, breaking our promise to be faithful to our husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. All sin is acting as if someone or something else is more satisfying than Jesus.

However, the particular sins which God has in mind here are sins which we commit against other members of God's family. Look at vv. 7-8. The instructions for making things right with God include making things right with the person from whom we have stolen. Leviticus 6:1-5 describes in greater detail these sins against others. They include actual theft, finding lost property and then lying about it, oppression of a neighbor in any way, etc. Let me be clear: this is describing actual sins against our neighbor, not merely perceived sins. What is being described here is the fact that when we live together as God's people we are going to sin against one another and when we sin against another person we are breaking faith with our Lord, we are betraying him. So what are we supposed to do when we offend our brother in Christ?

First of all, notice that there is a lapse of time between the actual offense and our realizing that we are guilty for that offense (end of v. 6). Isn't this how it works in your life? It is not very often that I offend someone and immediately know that I did or am willing to acknowledge that I did. Most of the time, when I offend another person I either feel justified in what I did or said because of what he or she did or said to me or I am so thick headed that I don't even realize that I sinned against the other person. I'll say something to a member of my family and they will be upset and offended and I will think, "What are you upset about? I didn't do anything wrong." I'll seek to explain to them that I wasn't being malicious or hurtful in what I said. I will protest my innocence. It is only later, after I have reflected upon the interaction or they have explained to me how what I said or did affected them that I will "realize my guilt."

When a person realizes their guilt she is to confess her sin to the person she has offended and make restitution. In Israel, in the case of actual taking of property you would need to pay back not only the value of the property taken or destroyed but also a fine of 20% of the value. If the person whom you had robbed had died you were then responsible to pay back his nearest kin (v. 8). If he had no close relative then you were responsible to pay the amount of the stolen property and the fine to the Lord by giving it to the priest (v.8). Jesus teaches this same principle in Matthew 5:23-25. Quote it. He says this in the context of explaining how our anger against others is murder. Most of the time when you are angry with someone else you do or say things that express your anger; you offend the person with whom you are angry with words of insult. Also, when you are angry and offend another person you almost always feel justified in your anger and in your actions. We rarely feel, especially right away that our anger was wrong. However, Jesus says that later, when you are engaged in the acts of worship and prayer and you realize your guilt, that your brother has something against you, then you are to go to your brother and be reconciled to him or her. You are to confess your sin to him and to make restitution. After that you are to return to God, just as we see here. Realizing the ways we have sinned against others and then asking them for forgiveness is one of the most common experiences of the true Christian. Evaluating my relationships and considering how I may have offended others and then asking to be forgiven for those ways in which I have offended is to be a regular part of my Christian life. Christians do not spend their time thinking about how others have sinned against them but how they have sinned against others. Christians do not spend their time trying to get others to say they are sorry but spend their time saying they are sorry.

However, since your sin against your brother is also a betrayal of God, you must also confess your sins to God and make things right with him as well. At the end of v. 8 the "ram of atonement with which atonement is made for him" is mentioned. This is more fully explained in Leviticus 6. God says that when you rob from your brother not only must you make restitution to him but also you must offer an animal sacrifice in the tabernacle to atone for your sin. Atonement is rooted in the fact that because of your sin you deserve God's judgment upon you. But the ram takes your place, is your substitute, that is, atones for your sin. The ram is killed and burned up instead of you. So in the act of confessing to God you are reminded that you are not forgiven of your sin because you confess but because the ram is killed in your place.

1 John 1:9 expresses this exact point. “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In this verse, why does God forgive and cleanse the confessing sinner? It is because he is faithful and just. God forgives and cleanses us, not because we confess but because he is faithful and just. What does that mean? It means that he is faithful to keep his promise to forgive all the sins of everyone who trusts in Jesus. As Jesus said when he instituted communion in reference to the cup, “...this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” God made a promise to forgive our sins because of Christ’s dying for us and he keeps that promise. But also, God forgives us because he is just. If God did not forgive those who trust in Christ, if he sent us to hell for our sins he would be unjust because our sins have already been punished in Christ. To punish us would be to punish our sins twice, which is unjust. Every person who is trusting in Jesus, who belongs to the church is regularly confessing their sins to other people and to the God who has promised to forgive us for the sake of Jesus.

III. Trusting God to expose and punish sin (vv. 11-31)

Most of the chapter is taken up with explaining what is supposed to happen if a husband is suspicious of his wife, that she has “gone astray and broken faith with him,” that is, she has committed adultery. The wife may have committed adultery or she may not have committed adultery. No human knows if she did or she didn’t. All that is known is that the husband has had a “spirit of jealousy” come over him. Verses 15-31 describe what is supposed to happen when a husband is overcome with this suspicion of his wife. Let me outline for you the procedure that was to be followed and then I will show how we are to understand what is going on here. First, the husband is to bring his wife to the tabernacle and present her to the priest with a grain offering of barley that has no oil or incense placed upon it. The priest is then to bring the woman into the courtyard of the tabernacle and have her stand in front of the tabernacle itself, the tent in which only the priests can enter and at the center of which is the Ark of the Covenant where God dwells. He places the grain offering in her hands. He then takes a clay jar, puts water in it from the basin in which the priests wash their hands and takes dust from the floor of the tabernacle which he puts in the water. He then unbinds her hair and while he holds this jar of water, which is called, “the waters of bitterness which brings the curse,” he makes her take an oath. He says to her that if she is innocent then may she be free from this water of bitterness that brings a curse but if she is guilty then the Lord will make her a curse among the people and when she drinks the water her belly will swell and her thigh will fall away. She is to respond to this oath by saying, “Amen. Amen.” In other words, may it be to me as you have said. The priest then writes the curse upon a parchment and washes the ink off into the water. He then takes a fistful of the grain offering, puts it on the fire on the bronze altar as a memorial portion, takes the rest of the grain from her to be eaten by the priests and gives her the water to drink. If the woman is guilty of adultery, then her belly will swell and her thigh will fall away: that is, she will be cursed by God. If she is innocent, nothing will happen. The last verse says that no matter what happens the husband is not guilty of wrong doing but that if the woman is guilty she will bear the consequences.

The first thing to remember is that in Israel, if people are caught in adultery they are to be killed, both men and women. Proven sexual immorality is a capital offense. But note here that even if the woman is guilty she is not killed. Her sexual organs are cursed by God, which most likely means she will become sterile, unable to bear children. This is bad but not as bad as being killed. The whole process affords women with much protection in this highly patriarchal culture. Even today in highly patriarchal cultures women are regularly killed on suspicion of sexual immorality. These killings are called “honor killings.” Therefore, the practical effect of this law is to make sure that women cannot be abused and murdered by suspicious husbands. But, the question we have is why do suspicious wives not have the same right? Are not men at least as likely to commit undetected adultery? The fact that women are not given this same right is in part due to the fact that God is not seeking to completely eliminate every vestige of sin in Israel but to control sin in Israel. For example, in the law he did not abolish slavery but sought to control it and in controlling it sowed the seeds for its eventual abolishment. In the same way he did not entirely abolish the unjust features of patriarchy but sought to protect women and control the abusive features of it. In doing this he protected women in that culture and shows that women have the right to get help from the church against abusive husbands.

But the main thing that this procedure emphasizes is the fact that the husband has nothing to do with determining the guilt or innocence of his wife and nothing to do with her punishment if she is guilty. The entire procedure places the suspected woman in the hands of God. The water is not some magic potion but a symbol of God's wrath. "This cup of bitterness which brings the curse" is the symbol of God's anger against human sin. If the woman is guilty, God's just anger will punish her but if she is not guilty then the cup will have no effect upon her because God will not punish her.

It is not only husbands that are suspicious of their wives but all of us regularly suspect others of committing undetected sins. We regularly judge both the actions and motives of others. What happens when people begin accusing others of committing sins of which they have no evidence, only a suspicion? We call that gossip and slander and nothing will more quickly destroy a community than unproven accusations. Paul was being gossiped about and slandered in the Corinthian church and this is what he said about their criticism of himself in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God." What are you supposed to do when you suspect another Christian of sinning but have no evidence? You should remember that God sees everything and he is going to perfectly execute justice in the end. It is not your job to ascertain the guilt or innocence of others and to make sure they are punished. God will take care of it. Thus we are to simply entrust others into God's hands and not gossip or slander or seek to punish them in any way. We are to confront known sin and seek to help our brother escape his sin and if he refuses our help we are to exclude him from the church. But, when sin is not witnessed and we are only suspicious, we are to trust God to do the judging and keep our mouths shut.

III. Rejoicing that Jesus drank the bitter cup for us (v. 27)

There are several things that connect this procedure for dealing with the suspicion of an adulterous wife to the bigger story of the Bible, that is, of how God relates to sinful human beings. Four things connect this procedure to that broader narrative. First, as I mentioned earlier we are to see a connection when v. 6 describes sin as breaking faith with God and the adulterous wife is described as breaking faith with her husband in v. 12. Marital infidelity stands as a symbol of the spiritual adultery we commit when we sin. Second, after Israel made the golden calf and worshipped it and then Moses came down from the mountain and confronted them, what was the first thing he did? He ground up the golden calf, put it in water and made the people drink it. Then what happened? God's judgment fell on Israel. 3000 were killed by the Levites and an unspecified number were killed by a plague that God sent. Third, the prophets regularly describe Israel as the adulterous wife of Yahweh. This is one of the most often repeated metaphors describing Israel. Fourth, God's judgment upon Israel as his adulterous wife is regularly described as God's making her drink the cup of his wrath. So at the beginning of Israel's travels with God to the Promised Land God uses the case of the adulterous wife to set a warning in front of his people as to what will happen to all who break faith with him.

Now, in the NT, when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane what does he ask God to do? He asks, if it is possible, that God will take the cup away from him. What cup? The cup of his wrath or the cup of bitter waters that brings the curse. Jesus' death on the cross is connected to the cup of God's wrath in the OT. He drank that bitter cup for us. He drank it down and his thigh fell off and his belly swelled, that is, he took upon himself God's curse against we, the adulterous wife. We are the adulterous wife but we do not experience the curse because our Lord Jesus drank down those bitter waters in our place. So we rejoice in that amazing love which moved him to go to the cross and drink down God's curse for us.

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