

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.
For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

Paul is simply taking the principles of Numbers 1-6
and applying them to the church
in the light of who Christ is and what Christ has done.

In Numbers 1-4 we heard about the arrangement of the wilderness camp,
and the census of Israel, and the census of the Levites.

In Numbers 5-6 we hear about matters of holiness.

But as I pointed out last time,
these chapters are all tied together with the repeated phrase,
“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying...”

As we have seen,
the wilderness camp is arranged with the tabernacle at the center,
the clans of the Levites surrounding, guarding and protecting the holy place,
and the 12 tribes of Israel around the Levites.

The Levites were taken in the place of the firstborn.
The priests do not *replace* Israel – they *represent* Israel.
The actions and intentions of the priest do not replace Israel’s actions and intentions.
Rather, the priest *represents* Israel.

Israel was called to be a priestly nation – and the priesthood was to be a model of this.
In the same way that the priests represented Israel,
Israel was to represent the nations

Just as the tabernacle was there to protect the holy place –
so also the Levitical circle was to protect the tabernacle –
and the camp of Israel was to protect the Levites ...

Now in chapters 5-6 we zero in on some of the particular details of Israel’s role.

David Stubbs describes this well:

“Israel’s moral vision is formed around the contrasts between holy and common,
clean and unclean (5:1-4), sin and righteousness (5:5-10),
faithfulness and unfaithfulness (5:11-31),

and zealous dedication to God and apostasy (6:1-21).
In addition, the Israelites understand themselves to be part of a history
in which God is moving all creation toward blessing and shalom (6:22-27),
a state in which all the impurity, defilement, and sin
that has infected the created order is cleansed.
Each of these laws touches on one aspect of this larger composite moral vision.”
(Stubbs, 51-52).

Will Israel maintain the holiness of the camp –
keeping the boundaries between clean and unclean?
Will Israel “keep faith” with God – and each other?
And, for that matter, can we trust God to deal with problems?

And as we go through this text,
I want you to keep Paul’s image of the church as God’s temple firmly in view.
You *are* God’s holy temple!

1. “Outside the Camp”: Alienation and Restoration of Creation (v1-4)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous^[a] or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. ³ You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.” ⁴ And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

In verses 1-4, the LORD commands Israel to put outside the camp three groups of people:

- 1) those who are leprous
- 2) those who have a discharge
- 3) those who have had contact with the dead

What’s going on here?

Leviticus deals in more detail with these cases (particularly chapters 13-15 and 19).
But we can summarize it pretty quickly here.

First, what does it mean to be put “outside the camp”?

To be outside the camp does not mean that you are cut off from Israel.

Most people would be unclean from time to time.

Everyone would probably spend some time “outside the camp.”

Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness.

You might not have a skin disease during that time –

but you would probably have some sort of discharge,

and you would almost certainly come in contact with the dead at some point.

So at all times there would have been a rather large group of people

“outside the camp.”

If you imagine the Israelite camp –
there would have been the inner circle of Levites around the tabernacle –
then the main circle of Israel around the Levites –
and then another circle: those who were “outside the camp.”

This is not a moral judgment against them.

Their problem is not moral – but physical.

They are unclean.

So, *why* are these people put outside the camp?

The simple way of saying it is that “uncleanness is related to death,
and death involves the breakdown of natural order and patterns.” (Stubbs, 54)

The word for “leprous” can include pretty much any skin disease.

The concern is not for “contagion” in the modern sense of “contagious diseases.”

The concern is entirely outward.

A person with a skin disease is outwardly damaged.

The point focuses on the outward wholeness of Israel.

Because of sin, the whole of creation has been affected.

What God created whole and complete

has now been subjected to futility and alienation.

God’s purpose for Israel is that Israel is supposed to be

the place where wholeness and proper function are restored.

Skin diseases are a visible blot on that wholeness.

Therefore, those who are visibly damaged must be placed outside the camp.

Likewise, those who have had a discharge have “malfunctioned.”

If you are a man – your seed is for your wife.

The proper function of the seed is to impregnate her.

So any other sort of discharge is irregular and renders you unclean.

If you are a woman – your monthly discharge signals that you are not pregnant.

The potential life that was there is no more.

Now, remember, there is nothing *sinful* about being unclean!

The point is simply that in a broken world, we do not function properly.

Not all of the consequences of sin are themselves sinful!

But the result of “malfunction” is that you are alienated from the community.

The third category are those who have come in contact with the dead.

Death is the ultimate malfunction.
God did create us for death.
 He created us for life.
When someone dies, it falls to his nearest kin to bury him.
All who come in contact with his corpse are contaminated by death.

And so they are rendered unclean and must go outside the camp.

It's not enough to say that this is "ritual impurity."
 This cuts them off not only from the ceremonies of worship –
 it places them outside the community entirely.
 This is *communal* impurity.

Now, before we go on, I want you to think about modern society.
 Because modern society also has a concept of the "unclean" –
 those who are alienated from the community,
 not because of sin – but because of brokenness –
 because of "improper function."

Think of mental illness.
 The mentally ill make up a disproportionate share of the homeless.
 100 years ago we put the mentally ill in institutions –
 we kept them "outside the camp."
 Before that it was the blind, the deaf, and the mute.

The advantage of Israel's system was that in Israel
 everyone wound up "unclean" from time to time!
 Everyone would spend some time "outside the camp."

But now, we have arranged our society so that some people are perpetually "outside the camp,"
 with no realistic hope of ever being restored to the community.

Now, in Numbers 5, there is no discussion of how these people could be restored.
 But that's because Leviticus has already explained this.
 Numbers 5 *assumes* that you understand the procedure for restoration (in Lev 13 and 15).

Verse 3 then highlights the central reason for maintaining the purity of the camp:
3 *You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp,
 that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.*"

God dwells in the camp.
 Uncleanness defiles the camp.
 God is holy – and nothing unclean can come into his presence.
 Uncleanness is inconsistent with the presence of God.

(Deuteronomy 23:9-14 will talk about how excrement must be taken outside the camp and buried).

God's purpose in Israel is to show a properly functioning humanity.

And if God is going to dwell in the midst of a properly functioning humanity, then nothing unclean – nothing corrupt – can be found there.

Of course, the story of Israel is a story of corruption and decay.

Israel's uncleanness means that God cannot dwell in their midst.

We tend to think that if sin is dealt with, then everything is fine.

But that's not true.

If it was just a matter of forgiving sin,

God could have simply declared it, "I forgive you."

But our problem is that because of sin,

corruption has taken root in humanity –

and, for that matter, corruption and decay have taken root in all creation.

That is why it was necessary for the Son of God to come in the flesh.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And Jesus directly encounters all this uncleanness.

In Mark 1:44-45, he touches lepers.

In Mark 5:25-34, he touches a woman who suffered hemorrhages for 12 years.

In Mark 5, he also touches a corpse!

In all of OT history, when someone touched the unclean

the uncleanness contaminated the clean.

But when Jesus touches the unclean, they become clean!

Such was the power of the holiness radiating from Jesus!

Jesus is portrayed as a walking tabernacle – a living temple –

he is the place where earth and heaven meet.

He is the place where the unclean are restored to fellowship with God and man.

And that means that the *church* needs to be characterized by this holiness.

The church is the place where Christ's holiness cleanses the unclean.

And that's why Paul is so emphatic in his warning to those who harm the church.

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

Those who harm the church will fall under God's judgment.

2. “Restitution of Wrongs”: Alienation and Restoration with God and Neighbor (v5-10)

⁵ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁶ “Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, ⁷ he shall confess his sin that he has committed.^[b] And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong. ⁸ But if the man has no next of kin to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to the LORD for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made for him. ⁹ And every contribution, all the holy donations of the people of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. ¹⁰ Each one shall keep his holy donations: whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his.”

Verses 5-10 then deal with the “restitution of wrongs.”

This refers to *moral* failings –

“breaking faith with the LORD.”

And the guilty shall make restitution for the wrong –

paying 120% to the one who was wronged.

Notice that the assumption here is that most of the ways in which we break faith with God have an ill effect on others as well.

The word used here is the word used for the “guilt offering” in Leviticus 5.

Some think that this is odd, because the guilt offering was to be offered for transgressions regarding “holy things.”

Numbers 5, however, seems to have ordinary transgressions against others.

But David Stubbs points out that there is a clear logic in Numbers 5.

God is a holy God.

Therefore God’s people are a holy people.

“it is the holy people who are being desecrated,
necessitating the need for the guilt offering.” (58)

If you mistreat God’s people, then you are mistreating the God who dwells in their midst.

If you have wronged someone,

you need to make it right (which involves *more*).

If you have stolen from them – you need to restore it (and more).

If you have spoken ill of them – you need to restore their good name (and more).

How does this work?

If you have sinned against someone,

then repentance means that you need to not only *undo* what you have done,
but you also need to do more.

So, if you stole \$20, it is not enough to repay \$20.

You should repay *more* than \$20.

Your sin tended to impoverish this person,
and so your repentance should result in his enrichment.

[I've often thought that if our justice system took this approach,
it would probably be a significant deterrent to theft.]

In the same way, if your sin was gossip and slander –
then your repentance should result not merely in acknowledging your guilt,
but it should also have the effect of restoring *and improving* their reputation.

When I have sinned against my wife by ignoring and neglecting her,
it is not enough for me simply to start paying attention to her;
I need to demonstrate my repentance by going above and beyond the “normal.”

After all, as the LORD says to Moses:
these sins do not just offend others –
they are “breaking faith with the LORD.”
Restoration to fellowship with God and man
requires that we make restitution for our wrongs.

If you have wronged others,
you need to make it right to them.
You cannot say, “Well, I'll confess it to God, but I don't want to confess it to others.”
God even makes provision for Israel for how to deal with sins
where there is no one to receive the restitution!
God says that they should give it to “the LORD for the priest.”

This got horribly abused in the middle ages.
It became common to give money to the church *in place of* restitution for sin.

But the point is still valid.
If you have wronged someone,
and there is no way to make it right
(let's say the person has died without any heirs),
then you need to do *something* with that money.
You cannot keep it – it doesn't really belong to you!
And so God says to give it to *him*.

But if you are God's holy temple,
then you need to *be holy* in all your conduct.

3. “The Spirit of Jealousy”: Alienation and Restoration in Marriage (v11-31)

a. The Problem – a Jealous Husband with No Evidence (v11-15)

¹¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² “Speak to the people of Israel, If any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, ¹³ if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, ¹⁴ and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵ then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah^{cl} of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.

The question of faithfulness in marriage comes to the fore in verses 11-31.

This is a very curious passage.

It describes a situation

in which a woman is accused of adultery by her jealous husband.

And it contains the only case in which a “trial by ordeal” is mandated.

Some find this reprehensible and condemn it as mere magical thinking.

Others point out that since the law requires a miracle for the woman to be found guilty –

therefore this law has the *effect* of protecting women

from jealous husbands who have no evidence against them!

If you think about what is going on here,

the ritual consists of standard liturgical practices –

a grain offering, an oath, and a symbolic act.

(The new covenant equivalent would be that a jealous husband brings his wife to the pastor,

they pray together, she swears that she is innocent,

and then the pastor says, “if you are guilty, then may God deal with you,”

and she says, “Amen. So be it.”

And then they go home.)

b. The Solution – Let God Judge (v16-31)

¹⁶ “And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD. ¹⁷ And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸ And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. ¹⁹ Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse. ²⁰ But if you have

gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you,²¹ then' (let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman) 'the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh fall away and your body swell.²² May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, Amen.'

Numbers 5 provides a very helpful paradigm for how to handle cases with no evidence.

What do you do when an accusation is made?

Well, the first thing that you do is look for evidence.

But there are no witnesses – no evidence that supports the accusation.

So you put the case where it belongs – in God's hands.

But the husband comes back and says,

“But I know that she's been sleeping around!!”

And the pastor says,

“If so, then God will deal with it.”

I know one case where a wife suspected her husband.

But she couldn't prove it.

The church couldn't act without evidence.

So she waited – she trusted God that he would render a just judgment.

Her husband did it again – and this time there was proof!

What do you do when there is no evidence?

The church cannot decide the point of guilt or innocence.

But the church *can* take substantive action to protect the innocent.

You might be perplexed – “But who is the innocent?!”

We don't know.

If the husband in Numbers 5 is right, then his wife is an adulteress.

But if he is wrong, then she has been falsely accused.

The ritual in Numbers 5 protects the innocent wife –

but also protects the innocent husband.

²³ *“Then the priest shall write these curses in a book and wash them off into the water of bitterness.²⁴ And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain.²⁵ And the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand and shall wave the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar.²⁶ And the priest shall take a handful of the*

grain offering, as its memorial portion, and burn it on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water.²⁷ And when he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people.²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children.

²⁹ “This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, though under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself,³⁰ or when the spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife. Then he shall set the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall carry out for her all this law.³¹ The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity.”

Daniel Stubbs suggests that the language of this passage also points us to the main point of Numbers.

After all, *Israel* went astray in the wilderness.
Israel broke faith with the LORD.
And God was *jealous* of Israel's betrayal.

How many times, do you suppose, did a woman *actually* swell up with bitter pain after drinking the water of bitterness?

Possibly never.
Probably not very often.
A *little* dirt in your water was probably about the best you could hope for!

But what happened to Israel?
Precisely what Numbers 5:27 says:
*the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain,
and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away,
and the woman shall become a curse among her people.*

Deuteronomy 28:37 – “And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you away.”

Jerusalem became barren.
The people of God became a curse among the nations.

And God is like a jealous husband –
and in *this* case, he is right to be jealous!
Because his wife is cheating on him.

We are not faithful to God.

We play with other gods – we value other things more highly than him.

But how does this play out in Numbers?

In Numbers 11-21, Israel will grumble and rebel 7 times.

And yes, the wilderness generation will die in the desert –
their bodies strewn through the wilderness.

But the book of Numbers does not end with cursing and death!

The book of Numbers will end with blessing and life!

God does not deal with us as our sins deserve!

But the trial by ordeal *will* be central to God's redemptive purposes.

There will be an oath that must be taken,
a cup that must be drunk.

As Stubbs puts it, "Christ drank the cup of the ordeal,
but was proved faithful and righteous and vindicated by his resurrection." (63)

And because of this, Christ has become the Holy Place where earth and heaven meet.

He is the chief cornerstone in whom we are built together into a heavenly edifice –
a fit dwelling place for God.