

A Lesson the Holiness of God

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One thing stands out very clearly in the books of Moses. It is that God, in dealing with man fallen, used tangible and visible, means to bring out His intrinsic holiness and His abhorrence of evil, with His judgment upon it. At the same time He indicated ways and means whereby men might be delivered and reconciled, and right relations be established or restored; and whereby God might righteously bless them, rule over them, and dwell among them, according to His own heart

While all persons and nations are involved in the fall of Adam, and have a common heritage of sin, the ceremonies and ordinances appointed of God for the people of Israel are particularly important in respect of this necessary holiness.

Numbers 5: 1-4 is a case in point. The whole of this particular chapter indeed, we may say, makes it clear that His holy eye was upon His people, and that neither defilement nor trespass nor unfaithfulness could be overlooked.

Let us consider the position in which He stood with them.

God redeemed Israel from Egypt and its dominion and first brought them to Himself in the wilderness of Sinai Then secondly, He brought them into possession of their promised blessing in the land of Canaan.

Now while in the wilderness as a redeemed people, all their supplies were from God, their movements were directed by God, and their entire civil and religious arrangements, order and organisation, were of God. The Tabernacle in all its beauty in their midst was in every detail and appointment of His design. The camp in its perfect order was pitched or struck as He might indicate by the Pillar of cloud and of fire. The tribes were not a disorderly horde, nor did they evolve out of their own minds a better system as time went on; they took their positions from the first in the way He prescribed. What was to be allowed was clearly defined; what was not allowed because of His holiness and glory was equally clearly stated. The whole code of laws was framed to remind the people that they were nationally God's people; and the question was ever to be asked in every matter, "Is this commended of God? Is it comely in God's sight and consistent with His presence and glory?"

The Tabernacle then having been constructed* (as in Exodus), instructions too having been given for priests and Levites, offerings, festivals, and for the practical conduct of the people of Israel from day to day (as in Leviticus and Numbers); and the whole system having been acknowledged by the visible presence of the glory of God (see Exodus 40: 34, 8); we come to this reminder in Numbers 5, that the presence of God must challenge the condition of those He has chosen to be near Him.

{*With all its suggestions for us of Christ, Christ's work, Christ's glory, Christ's people, and of our relations to God in the Spirit.}

Heaven is God's dwelling place, as Solomon said, and nothing that defiles can be allowed there. Hence, in connection with that which represents heaven's rule on earth, there must be the exclusion of defilement also. The word is, "Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, and everyone that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead, both male and female shall ye putout, without the camp shall ye put them, that they defile not their camps in the midst of which I dwell."

Notice, that in one sense God regards the camp as one complete whole; hence all His people

were to be concerned about putting out the leper, etc Actually according to Num. 2, there were five camps, namely, of Judah, of Reuben, of Ephraim, and of Dan; and that of Levi in the middle surrounding the tabernacle. The individual leper would have defiled his own camp, but that in its turn would have defiled the whole nation where God dwelt, hence it was not enough that he should be put out of his own camp, he must be put outside of them all. No such thing was possible as that a man put out of one section according to the word of Jehovah could be welcomed or even tolerated in another section. There were differences in the tribes, and each had a place peculiarly its own; but there was no difference in their relations to the holiness of God; all were tested by it and regulated according to it. What a solemn lesson was taught to the whole camp then, as well as to the individual who became defiled! How blessed, indeed, the privilege of being near to God; yet how solemn the responsibility of the place of nearness and communion.

Briefly then we consider

(1) THE LEPER.

(2) THE PERSON WITH AN ISSUE.

(3) ONE DEFILED BY THE DEAD.

(1) THE LEPER, as generally considered in Scripture, was one whose malady could not be subdued (2 Kings 5: 7) His condition was pitiable indeed, and every compassion might well be shown him; but his disease was contagious and defiling Sentiment might have pleaded hard for exceptions to be made to the law, but in this case in addition to the soundest sanitary reasons there was the Divine command, "every leper." Leprosy is such that, though you may do much to alleviate the trouble, trying plasters, and bandages, and ointment, giving good housing conditions, and supplying pleasure as far as possible, it is always breaking out in other places, or extending in spite of the sadness connected with it, or the care, the anxious care, that might be bestowed upon it. It is true that according to Leviticus 13, every care ought to be taken lest a boil, or local inflammation or burning, should be called leprosy, and a mere invalid suffering from a temporary disorder be hastily and wrongly excluded from intercourse with God's people and deprived of fellowship. But when leprosy is discovered and recognisable as such, there is no alternative, the leper must be excluded. As an example of the bearing of this, a man may do a thing a first time which God's saints discern to be disorderly, and yet the evidence be not clear that he is wilful, and there may rightly be patience, and the bringing of God's word to bear in love upon the case. But if the disorderly thing be repeated, becoming more and more aggravated in spite of the care taken, or if one detail be adjusted in the man's course only for the same disorder to break out again and again in other ways, it indicates an unjudged will at work, and this is leprosy. This would not be ignorance, for when a man insists on liberty to do evil, his presence among the people of God must be detriment and loss, and places them all under the discipline and governmental Judgment of God. It is not sentiment that must govern their action, however prominent or dear or able a leper may be, they are to consider that the Holy God dwells in the midst of His people, and He says, "every leper" Alas! these are days when even the platforms in the Christian profession are occupied by men who, claiming the right to be regarded as ministers of God, use the inside place to attack, or in a less open way to vitiate, the very truths upon which true Christian fellowship is based, and thus depreciate the standard of what is due to God.

(2) THE PERSON THAT HAS AN ISSUE (whether it be dysentery or any other kind of trouble), was equally an undesirable associate for sanitary reasons, and Leviticus 15 shows what strenuous care was to be exercised as to him. But — still more important for the right understanding of the purity and holiness of God — every such person was to be excluded from the camp of Israel. A

man that had an issue was one in whose case there was the expenditure of vitality in a wrong direction. Vital fluids of the body were in some way escaping, and everybody knows what terrible havoc may be wrought among huge masses of population by the non-segregation of these contagious diseases. There were, of course, sanitary and good reasons for this law; but we should ill understand it if we did not see that there is moral significance also as to what is right in the sight of God. Usually, for example, the plea is urged in these days that if a man, and as long as a man, be sincere, we ought not to interfere with his convictions. He may have a tremendous zeal, like Israel after the flesh in Paul's day (Romans 10), going about to establish his own righteousness, and not submitting to the righteousness of God! but, says sentiment, "he is in earnest, and that is all that matters" "If," say others, "we do the best we can and leave the rest, will not God accept us?" In a hundred ways we may be expending vitality, but is it only an unholy discharge which God regards as a disease? Further, under the plea of devotedness or zeal, tens thousands, even among the saints of God — more's the pity set themselves to services which are contrary to the ways and will of God revealed in Christ. So seriously does He regard every trace of this misdirected vital energy that in the type every thing that such a person touched or used was defiled in His sight, and had to be either cleansed or broken. (Lev 15: 1-12). Is it not melancholy to consider and yet sadly true, that a man — Israelite born — might yet become a danger to his fellows by an unchecked and uncontrollable flow of nature? and that instead of contributing his full quota to the prosperity, the unity, the purity, the separation of God's people, his presence everywhere contributed to distress, to defilement, to discipline from God among them?

(3) ONE DEFILED BY THE DEAD. In common with those of the Gentile nations, Israelites had their families, their relatives, their neighbours, any one of whom was liable to be stricken down by death. Of every day occurrence as death must have been, and involving the handling of the bodies of the dead, every occasion of contact with death meant defilement and consequent exclusion from the camp.

The High Priest alone, by virtue of his office as Representative of all the people, and maintaining them all in their relations with God, was forbidden to defile himself for the dead, however near or dear (See Lev 10: 1-7). No considerations of self-pity or mourning were to be permitted for a moment to cause interruption in the service of that one on whom typically the fate of the people depended. So, surely, the cause of the saints of God never undergoes intermission in the hands of Christ, our risen and ascended High Priest (Leviticus 21: 10-12).

The ordinary priests, of Aaron's sons who offered the bread of God from day to day, were permitted by law to mourn and to be defiled by the dead, but only in the case of the death of one of their nearest relatives. God did not intend that His people should become unnatural, however spiritual they might be. Yet their service of ministering to Him in the sanctuary was of such prime importance that only on rare occasions was a priest permitted to absent himself from this holy service. And as a reminder of the holiness of that service, on the one hand, and of the taint of contact with that which spoke of sin's presence and penalty on the other, outside of the camp — as defiled by the dead — must he go (Leviticus 21: 1-9).

The Nazarite, peculiarly and utterly separated unto his God as he was, whether from his birth, or within the limit of a certain length of time if he so dedicated himself, was very seriously affected by contact with death. Even if by accident, as we say, he happened to be with a man who died suddenly, the whole of his previous period of Nazariteship was lost, and he had to recommence the days or months Or years of his separation. Meanwhile a mere expression of regret would not do, defiled by the dead, the inexorable law of defilement applied, and not till the sacrifice that removes defilement in such case had been offered could he be suitable for God's presence and company (Numbers 6: 6-12). His

place and character of separation to the lord depended upon his personal freedom from defilement.

The ordinary Israelites, male or female, were taught in the same striking way the seriousness of having anything to say to sin in its result in man. If a man died in a tent, not only did it become a house of mourning but all who were therein and all who came therein were defiled by the dead. Even in the open field too — as for instance on a field of battle — or lifting the corpse of one killed by accident, or touching a bone, or a grave, this lesson pressed itself home on the minds of the people; all were defiled by the dead in the sight of that holy God Who tabernacled in Israel's midst. A very solemn consideration is offered us in Numbers 31: 19-24 namely, that even in the exhilaration of a victorious campaign, never were the purity and holiness of God's presence to be forgotten. When the governmental judgment of God fell on the sinning nation of Midian, those who came into contact with their dead bodies were to remain outside the camp until cleansed (Numbers 19: 11-20).

Their stay outside and their forfeiture of the privileges usually enjoyed by God's people might be only temporary, as Numbers 9: 6-10 shows, since those precluded from taking the passover by their defilement in the first month were permitted, by the grace of God, to take it in the second month; but always on condition of the defilement being removed in a manner suited to the glory of God.

Finally, in Numbers 19, we have instructions as to how — when defiled by the dead — men were to be brought within the camp according to Divine holiness. The ashes of a red heifer slain and burnt were to be stored for this purpose, some of them mingled with running water, and the liquid thus obtained became a water of separation which, when sprinkled on the defiled one, met his defilement in God's own way and made his restoration to communion and privilege possible. This was the usual course; though the Nazarite (Numbers 6: 9-12) brought his defilement offering of a different order.

Leaving the conscience of the reader to be exercised as God may direct in the detailed application of these undoubtedly serious principles, it maybe possible to discover certain broad aspects of their meaning.

What makes the consideration of this subject so searching is that we have in defilement not the thought of outward sins, offences against the moral code, such as idolatry or injustice to one's neighbour, which would bring in direct and righteous penalty, but the solemn reminder of disqualification for communion with God and fellowship with His loyal people by association or contact with what defiles.

Even if as individuals we weigh this, we can see how sensitive the Holy Spirit within us must be as to our environment and associations, whether in daily life or Christian service.

But in our chapter the lesson is given more in connection with the people or assembly of God as a whole. There was diversity among them, for God speaks of "their camps." But here was unity, for "the camp" comprised them all. Administratively there were tribes, and a position, a testimony, a duty, for each and all. Religiously they were one nation in the midst of whom dwelt Jehovah, their God. And I submit to the reader that

(1) Israel was not many fellowships, but one,

(2) That the conditions of that fellowship were defined by God alone, and

(3) That God was always in their midst on the wilderness journey, so that never to the end of it could those conditions be amended or withdrawn.

On their part conformity to those conditions was imperative. Even though redeemed, no real joy, no communion with God, was possible save under those conditions which His holiness required and

which His wisdom prescribed. Whether in the east section of the camp or the west, whether in the north or the south, the rule was the same, the leper, the one with the issue, the person defiled by the dead, was excluded, and the exclusion lasted as long as the defilement lasted. Had it not been so, the defiled one would have affected the whole camp of Israel, and would have brought down the discipline of Jehovah upon them all. His presence did not simply defile the section in which they might so wrongfully permit him to stay; the whole of the people were affected by it in whichever of their parts he was found. Hence, on the one hand, the gravity of indifference anywhere; and hence, on the other hand, the folly of any section of the people of God saying or thinking that "their" fellowship is not involved in the general failure. All are involved in it, and no movement from one section of the people of God to another takes us out of the shame and grief or relieves us of the governmental judgment of God.

The question may be asked, In what way can this lesson on the holiness of God be applied for our guidance at this period of the Church's history?

It is clear that if we regard the people of God as a whole as they are to be seen on earth to day, they are deeply involved in guilt because terribly mixed up with almost every evil. The holiness which should have marked the Church as the dwelling place of God is exchanged for a state in which may be found defilement at every turn and in every shape. Not only is the simple and clear instruction of God's word for the Christian assembly set aside or ignored, but man has substituted his will and way in God's things till it is questionable whether the apostles would recognise the "Christian profession" as Christianity at all. So terribly is defilement bound up in it that he who would dream of purifying the whole is a dreamer indeed, and however reluctantly the Christian may have been to admit the crushing of all his once bright hopes, he comes to see — if taught by the Spirit and through the Word — that the governmental judgment of God will fall on Christendom as a profession on earth as surely as it fell on Israel in the flesh in days gone by. As a witness for God on earth, Christendom is doomed (1 Peter 4: 17, Jude, Rev. 3 & Rev. 17).

Yet even at the end God's word has cheered us by showing that all which is vital remains and will remain. Not a true believer will be missing in the grand "finale" when Christ comes. Further, the Holy Ghost remains with us now, and will do to the end; Christ in glory remains, accessible to all who call upon Him out of a pure heart; and the word of God is preserved to us, speaking to us as it does of the whole truth of our calling on high in Christ Jesus, and ever pointing out to us the way in which we may walk so as to have the approval of the Lord, and enjoy communion still with Divine Persons and with each other. Moreover, it assures to us that if as few as two can clear themselves of every divergent interest, and be in truth (not merely nominally, but in truth) gathered to HIS Name, His presence is assured. But if so, then the lesson of the holiness of His presence must be learned and practised, or else no group of individuals no company, but would fear to say the Lord is among them. His presence imposes conditions, and where conditions are not maintained it only means judgment. We may not couple the holy Name with independence or licence or carelessness of any kind. Let each reader then very definitely refuse to countenance that defilement in his own environment which is inconsistent with the holiness of God and look out for the company of any saint who likewise seeks grace to be free for God's will and pleasure and their joint prayer and exercise and service may be one means God will use for saving others with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Oh! let us not be of those who imagine that to come out from denominations and to repudiate a sectarian name is the same thing as being gathered to the Name of the Lord and being assured of His presence. The latter — His presence — can only be connected with the condition of being gathered to HIS Name; and that implies the self-judgment in the individual which leads to the removal of all defilement. Jehovah's presence might not be associated with defilement in the days of old; nor can the

Lord's presence be enjoyed where defilement is allowed today.