

Three Areas of Law Designed by God to Protect His People

Numbers 5

Numbers 5:1-10 - *“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ² “Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, everyone who has a discharge, and whoever becomes defiled by a corpse. ³ You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell.” ⁴ And the children of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD spoke to Moses, so the children of Israel did.*

⁵ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁶ “Speak to the children of Israel: ‘When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the LORD, and that person is guilty, ⁷ then he shall confess the sin which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give it to the one he has wronged. ⁸ But if the man has no relative to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for the wrong must go to the LORD for the priest, in addition to the ram of the atonement with which atonement is made for him. ⁹ Every offering of all the holy things of the children of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. ¹⁰ And every man’s holy things shall be his; whatever any man gives the priest shall be his.’”

Background Notes

At this point in the book of Numbers, God is giving further instructions about the Law, the Tabernacle, and their travels. In Numbers 5 we have three areas of the Law given by God to protect His people: protection for the health of the camp, protection for injured of the camp, and protection for the women of the camp.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Law of Separation protected the health of the camp.

In verses 1-4 we see that people who were ceremonially unclean were to be separated from the camp. They were quarantined, so that they would not infect the rest of the people. People who had leprosy, or a bodily discharge, or people who had touched the dead were considered unclean, and for obvious reasons they were quarantined for specified lengths of time. Remember, the people of Israel didn’t have the knowledge of microorganisms and contagion and hygiene that we have today.

All these regulations about physical bodily holiness were linked to, and symbolized, the spiritual holiness of the covenant community. *“You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell”*(v3).

The spiritual lesson for believers today is clear. God is holy, and He dwells in the midst of His people. The Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Church is the body of Christ, so local churches must exercise discipline when there is sin in the fellowship. Unconfessed sin infects and defiles the body of Christ, so sin must be judged -- even to the point of separation, or excommunication. In 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul told the members of the Corinthian church to separate themselves from a believer who was involved in immorality. He was to be put out of the fellowship in order to maintain the spiritual health and purity of the body of Christ.

This important spiritual truth is illustrated in the Law of Separation that protected the health of the camp of Israel.

2. The Law of Recompense protected the injured of the camp.

In verses 5-10, we read about the Law of Recompense. Under the Old Testament Law, if you wronged another person, you had to confess your sin and bring a male sheep as a trespass offering before the Lord. You also had to make full restitution, and add an additional 20% to the full value! If you robbed your neighbor, for example, or injured a person in some way, the recompense for that injury would be worked out in such a way that the loss would be paid back in full, **plus** an additional 20%! (See Leviticus 5 & 6 for further details.)

If the injured or offended party was no longer living, or had no close relatives to whom restitution could be made, then the full amount plus 20% would go to the Lord, by giving it to the priest.

The lesson for us in the Law of Recompense is obvious. When we wrong someone so that they suffer loss, we should make **full restitution**. It's not enough just to say, "I'm sorry." If we lose something that didn't belong to us, or break something that we borrowed, we should (at the very least) make full restitution -- and maybe we should add 20% more to be sure that we cover all losses!

Furthermore, we should not delay in correcting the situation. In Acts 24:16 the apostle Paul said, *“...I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.”* Paul practiced the biblical principle that is taught in this law, and we should practice the biblical principle that's taught in this law.

The Law of Recompense protected the injured of the camp.

3. The Law of Jealousy protected the women of the camp.

Numbers 5:11-31 - *“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘If any man’s wife goes astray and behaves unfaithfully toward him, ¹³ and a man lies with her carnally, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and it is concealed that she has defiled herself, and there was no witness against her, nor was she caught— ¹⁴ if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him and he becomes jealous of his wife, who has defiled herself; or if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him and he becomes jealous of his wife, although she has not defiled herself— ¹⁵ then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. He shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, because it is a grain offering of jealousy, an offering for remembering, for bringing iniquity to remembrance.*

¹⁶ ‘And the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the LORD. ¹⁷ The priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸ Then the priest shall stand the woman before the LORD, uncover the woman’s head, and put the offering for remembering in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that brings a curse. ¹⁹ And the priest shall put her under oath, and say to the woman, “If no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray to uncleanness while under your husband’s authority, be free from this bitter water that brings a curse. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while under your husband’s authority, and if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has lain with you”— ²¹ then the priest shall put the woman under the oath of the curse, and he shall say to the woman—“the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh rot and your belly swell; ²² and may this water that causes the curse go into your stomach, and make your belly swell and your thigh rot.” Then the woman shall say, “Amen, so be it.”

²³ ‘Then the priest shall write these curses in a book, and he shall scrape them off into the bitter water. ²⁴ And he shall make the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her to become bitter. ²⁵ Then the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman’s hand, shall wave the offering before the LORD, and bring it to the altar; ²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the offering, as its memorial portion, burn it on the altar, and afterward make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ When he has made her drink the water, then it shall be, if she has defiled herself and behaved unfaithfully toward her husband, that the water that brings a curse will enter her and become bitter, and her belly will swell, her thigh will rot, and the woman will become a curse among her people. ²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she shall be free and may conceive children. ²⁹ ‘This is the law of jealousy, when a wife, while under her husband’s authority, goes astray and defiles herself, ³⁰ or when the spirit of jealousy comes upon a man, and he becomes jealous of his wife; then he shall stand the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall execute all this law upon her. ³¹ Then the man shall be free from iniquity, but that woman shall bear her guilt.’”

This test for marital faithfulness was known as the Law of Jealousy. If you’re reading or hearing about this law for the first time, you may be thinking that it was very unfair, and favored the man over the woman, but once you think it through, it makes more sense.

First of all, this law would have prevented outbreaks of immorality in the wilderness camp setting, such as what had happened at the time of the golden calf idolatry in Exodus 32. Furthermore, if a woman were found guilty under this law, and suffered the consequences, the guilty man would surely be pointed out and put to death under the Mosaic Law.

Even more important to understand here, however, is that this law was really a means of protection for the woman.

Through this procedure, women had a convincing way to prove their innocence publicly - so there would be no doubt or

rumors or scandals. Furthermore, this law prevented a jealous husband from beating or killing his wife if he had suspicions about her faithfulness. No, there was a legal procedure - a law was demanded - and the results would leave no doubt as to guilt or innocence. Women were protected under this law.

We have to believe that God miraculously controlled the results of this test. This was not some magical potion that the women drank. No, by drinking the words of the curses that had been written on the scroll and then scraped off into the water, the women was symbolically submitting herself to the examination of God's Word, and surely the Lord controlled the results.

Do you see the spiritual lesson for us? We need to submit to the standards of the Word of God, and let our lives be examined by Scripture. As David said in Psalm 139:23-24, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

As we "drink in" the water of God's Word, with its commands and exhortations, our lives are scrutinized and our consciences are made more sensitive to God's holy standards. It's important for us to examine ourselves in the light of God's Word -- in fact, 1 Corinthians 11:28 says that we should examine ourselves in this way before we participate in the Lord's Supper. So upon further reflection, the Law of Jealousy, which at first reading seems unfair, makes sense.

The Law of Jealousy protected the women of the camp of Israel.

Practical Application

Thank the Lord that He remembers that we are dust!

In Psalm 103:13-14 we read, *"As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust."* I think this wonderful truth is portrayed in the symbolism of the Law of Jealousy test in Numbers 5. Verse 17 says that the holy water was put into a common earthen vessel, a clay jar. This certainly reminds us of 2 Corinthians 4:7, doesn't it? *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."* The dust that was added to the water emphasizes that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return (Genesis 3:19).

When we think of ourselves as common earthen vessels, clay jars, being examined by the holy standards of God's Word, we should be very thankful that God is a gracious and merciful God! He knows our frame, and He remembers that we are dust. Thank the Lord that He remembers that we are dust!