

Sunday 9th June 2024

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[0 : 00] Morning everybody. They've let me loose again. So we're looking at numbers five and six today which to me sounds like a bit like an episode of Sesame Street doesn't it brought you by the numbers five and six although it's as we've just read perhaps slightly more tricky.

! This is week two in our series about numbers. Johann last week introduced us to numbers and set the scene for us. Just a quick recap of where we're up to.

So the people of Israel they were slaves in Egypt. God rescued them. A picture of salvation. They came to the Red Sea. They crossed through the water which is a picture of baptism.

And then numbers. The book of numbers is the story of the wilderness years which is a picture of Christian life before we reach the promised land.

And God gave the Israelites various laws and commandments. So there's the Ten Commandments. But there were also other instructions and rules about how to set up camp and how to live together.

[1 : 21] So that's what we're up to so far. Now this man here is Ivan Krylov. I'm sure you'll recognize him. He was a writer. He used to write poems and fables and stories.

And he wrote a fable in 1814 called The Inquisitive Man. So a fable is a story with a sort of moral in it. Slightly an ironic title given that it was called The Inquisitive Man.

Because it tells the tale of a man who goes to a museum. And he notices all sorts of things in the museum. But he fails to notice the most important and the biggest display in the museum.

Which is an elephant. Which would be unusual, wouldn't it? Given the size of elephants. So today we get the phrase, the elephant in the room, from this particular story.

Which has developed over time. But it comes to mean today a situation or a question or a problem or some sort of controversial issue.

[2 : 34] Which is obvious to everyone. But somehow ends up being ignored. But the point is it will not go away and really needs addressing.

So is there an elephant in Numbers 5 and 6? I guess you could think of the whole two books being, you know, it's about purity and being pure in today's society.

Is that an elephant? But in particular there's the passage in Numbers 5 verses 11 to 31. Did you, some of you may have read it beforehand.

Did you read it beforehand? Or when it was being read just now by Becky or something by Richard. We stopped, didn't we, at verse 22. But did it so sort of capture you that you kind of read on to the end of the chapter?

Or perhaps now you're having a look at it now. I've told you it's an elephant in the room. So this particular passage, Numbers 5, 11 to 31, is often quoted by people who want to make the Bible seem irrelevant.

[3 : 38] Or outdated. Or even just, you know, plain wrong. Which made me think, thanks very much, Johan, for giving it to me to preach on. And he's not even here.

So I guess there are three possible ways to deal with this, the elephant. The first way, I guess, is we could just ignore it. A bit like the inquisitive man in the story who just pretended it wasn't there.

We could just say, this is just too hard. And actually there are much more important matters that we should deal with. It all seems very negative. Does it really matter anyway?

Let's just skip to the good bit, shall we? However, if we do that, it remains an elephant. I guess the other way we could deal with it is try and sort of explain it away.

Sort of justify why it was written. Perhaps use some clever language, some highfalutin words. Bamboozle ourselves with some theological terminology.

[4 : 40] That might sound superficially convincing if we sort of talk around it. But never really get to grips with it. And I guess it would remain an elephant. Or the third way would be to deal with it,

attempt to deal with it.

To tackle the issue and think, what does this really mean? To examine God's word. And in fact, for me to try and persuade you that this, in fact, is progressive.

And equitable. And fair. And just. And balanced. So we could ignore it. Unsatisfactory explain it away. Or examine it carefully.

So should we skip to the good bit? No. We're going to have a look at what this verse says. So there are three things I wanted to cover this morning.

The elephant in the room. Then we are going to move on to Yahweh's blessing. Thanks, Tash, for praying. You mentioned the name Yahweh when you prayed there. That's a particular name of God.

[5 : 39] It talks about his holiness and purity. And then finally, we're going to come back and think, what does that mean for purity today? So first of all, let's think about this elephant in the room, this part of chapter five.

I'm going to focus on this particular section. But hopefully it will help us to think about the rest of the two chapters as well. So when you read it, did it make you shudder?

At first reading, it seems really unjust, doesn't it, this passage? Have you ever heard of medieval witch ducking? Which is when suspected witches underwent something called trial by ordeal.

So a trial by ordeal was when someone suspected of being a witch, they were tied to a chair and then thrown into water or held underwater. Now, if they drowned, the good news was that they were innocent.

They were dead, but they were innocent. Now, if they survived or floated, the bad news was that they were guilty. Good news was they were alive, I guess, until they were then killed for being a witch.

[6 : 48] And at first reading, is there something in this passage that reminds us of that way of thinking and acting? Do you sometimes think, what is this doing in the Bible? I guess particularly as today, we regard ourselves as being quite sophisticated, don't we, as society?

Part of an enlightened society. Surely we're above this sort of barbarism. What's described here appears really basic and cruel.

However, I think it's important to think about what life was like during the time that we read about in Numbers. So, in general, societies were patriarchal.

In other words, men were in charge, very patriarchal societies. So, when a man said that he wanted a divorce, it just happened. And women were regarded as being the property of men.

So, that was how society was viewed. Men were under the same law as women when it came to things like adultery. It was regarded as being wrong for both sexes. However, men didn't need protection at that time.

[7 : 54] And it was also culturally equivalent to what was going on in other nations at the time and over time. So, Roman law, Babylonian law, Mesopotamian law.

So, that's sort of what's now Iran-Iraq. And also, Indian law also had similar traditions of trial by ordeal for people who committed adultery or even suspected adultery.

And is it still a modern occurrence? Well, unfortunately, it is. So, honour killings still exist today. So, there's all that kind of context and baggage that we might have when we come to this passage.

So, I thought what it would be good is to just look about what it actually says to help us deal with what our initial response was. So, I think here, when we look at this passage, there are three really important principles for this in Numbers 5, 11 to the end of the chapter.

So, the first is that it is safe. The second is that it is actually a controlled process. And then the third thing is that these regulations are actually meaningful.

[9 : 02] They're not just arbitrary. So, let's just step through it in a little bit more detail. So, first of all, verses 11 to 14, that describes who is involved and what are the circumstances.

So, it says that if a man suspects his wife of sleeping with another man but can't prove it, and the husband is jealous because he suspects his wife of committing adultery.

Or, it says, if he is jealous even if his wife hasn't had sex with someone else. So, the husband here is guilty of jealousy whether the wife is guilty or not of adultery.

So, who'd have guessed it that men were in the wrong all the time? I can't believe I just said that.

So, that's verses 11 to 14. Who's involved? Then verse 15, who do they go to?

They go to the priest. And that's important. So, it's not a judge because what's happening here is a moral or a spiritual issue, not a legal issue. It's also important they go to a judge.

[10:07] This is not going to one man or a crowd of men seeking their own retribution or justice. It's going to the priest. And they also have to take flour, which we read earlier, which is the offering for jealousy for the man.

So, the attention is also drawn to the wrongdoing of the man. It's not focused just on the woman in this passage. Then verses 16 to 22.

This section explains about the process that's going on. Here we see it's a very controlled process. There's no mystery or surprises.

And the priest conducts the proceedings, which is important. But note also that it is before God. So, it's not the men or the priest or a frenzied crowd deciding on on-the-spot punishment.

Then if the woman is innocent, no harm comes to her. If the woman is guilty, then what it describes here is that she can't go on to have children.

[11:11] Now, this is important because it's the exact opposite of trial by ordeal. So, in trial by ordeal, the sort of witch thing that I mentioned earlier or other trials, the innocent come to harm.

Here, in the ordeal, if the people are innocent, there's no harm that comes to the woman. And then in verse 22, it describes how all this is done under an oath, which the woman has to agree to.

So, there's even a form of consent here, that the woman understands what's going on, and people say amen to the process. Then the rest of the chapter, verses 23 to 31, that tells us exactly what happens just as being previously explained by the priest.

So, the grain is offered, and the husband and wife are together in this, because the wife holds the jealousy offering in her hands. So, all through this, there is a meaningful symbolism.

It's before a holy God, with holy water, holy dust, and holy words. The water itself might not taste very nice, describes being bitter, but it doesn't actually physically cause the infertility.

[12:23] The water is safe. It's the judgment that comes from God. So, it's a really difficult passage, isn't it, this passage?

And we have to acknowledge that. And you may well have more questions after we've been through that. It's just a shame Johan's not here to answer them for you a bit later.

But I hope you can see and maybe go away and think about it later. I certainly had a better understanding from this passage, just about maybe some of the assumptions we have, how they're not necessarily true.

Reading it is really important. But also of how seriously God takes purity. God is a holy God, and sin needs to be dealt with.

So, let's just take a step back and think about the other apparently unconnected sets of laws in these two chapters. They fall into four sort of areas, which you can see on the screen there.

[13:27] So, the first of all is in the camp, which is physical purity. Then there's purity in relationships or moral purity, chapter five.

Then there's purity in marriage or sort of home or domestic purity, which is the section we've just thought about. And then finally, there's purity in service.

That's the start of chapter six and the Nazarite vow. So, there are four elements of purity which make up these chapters. You may have spotted when it was being read, but in each of these sections, the introduction word is the same.

There's a common phrase, which is the Lord said. So, in each of those sections, the Lord said. So, like good music, when you listen to good music, introductions are really important.

They should set the tone, set the style, leave us anticipating about what comes next. So, here, they're saying, here are God's commands coming up, so get ready. The Lord said, these are things that directly came from God.

[14:29] So, these two chapters, as difficult as they are, are all about purity. Why is purity important? There's a key verse in Numbers chapter three, Numbers five, sorry.

Numbers five, verse three, get that right again, I'll say that again. Numbers chapter five, verse three, that says that God is in the camp with them. So, if God is holy and is pure and is in the camp, then the Israelites need to be pure as well.

And that's the main theme of the chapters, purity. So, what I'd like to do now is take a look at the blessing at the end of the chapter.

Then we're going to come back and think about what does this mean for purity today. So, just, I'll read those verses again at the end of the chapter. So, Numbers six, verses 22 to 27.

The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them, the Lord bless you and keep you.

[15 : 36] The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. So, they will put my name on the Israelites and I will bless them.

So, this passage is well known. Perhaps less well known is where in the Bible it's from. It's often used in liturgy and services.

So, for those of you who are from a more formal sort of worship patterns, it might be familiar to you. And as Tash mentioned in her prayer, Yahweh is another way of saying God and the Lord, but it's signaling an important aspect of God being holy and pure.

Those of you who are at church weekend away, John Risberger talked about this, particularly these verses on the Sunday. I think it's also important to think about the word blessing.

This is a blessing. It's one of those words that's perhaps been overworked and even overcooked in Christian usage to such an extent that I know some Christians don't use the word because they feel it's lost some of its meaning.

[16 : 52] For example, you know, when a small child either does something sweet or perhaps something mildly bad happens to them, some people will say, oh, bless. Well, a blessing means much more than that.

For the Jews at the time, it was a really solemn and deliberate act. It was really explicit and precise in its meaning, and people really longed to be blessed.

It wasn't like sort of wishing someone a happy birthday. In fact, it would mean sort of organizing their party and being there and making sure they had a really good time. I guess more like a best man or a bridesmaid at a wedding than a guest.

It wasn't passive. If you bless someone, it came with action and results. So a biblical blessing was really worth having. It's not just a set of nice and kind words.

One of the things I have to confess, when I read these two chapters, I thought, what is this blessing doing at the end of this sort of strange kind of instructions?

[17 : 56] So I think there are some reasons there. Let's have a look at it. It's also important to note that the blessing here is personal, but it's also corporate.

It's for the community. So just looking at some of the bits in this blessing. So verse 24 there, which says, to keep.

The Lord keep you. That word keep there means watching and guarding and protection. So it's more than just sort of keep. The same word is used in Exodus 23 when God says that he's going to send an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way.

So speaking about the wilderness time, God promises an angel to guard us. That's the same word as to keep. And then in Joshua, it says that he protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled.

So again, it's referring to the same wilderness years, but the word keep is used as protective. So there's something really impressive there, isn't there, about God actively keeping and guarding and guiding and protecting in this blessing.

[19 : 09] So thinking back to the other bits of numbers, God actively guarded the camp from disease by giving instructions how to keep it clean. He protected women from rough justice.

And he provided a way of God ensuring that relationships could be kept healthy. So that's one way I think it relates back to the previous verses. And in verse 25 and 26, it talks about God's face.

So not just God's presence, but a much more intimate relationship, seeing God's face. Verse 25 says that God's grace is part of the blessing.

So God provided a way for sin to be dealt with for the people of Israel. That's part of the blessing. And then verse 26 talks about God's peace.

Now the word here for peace is quite a wide-ranging word. It means both peace in a physical sense and in a spiritual sense. So there's something there about a sense of wholeness, of perfection, of contentment and fulfillment.

[20 : 21] So the rules that we've read about before covering purity were physical rules, relational rules, moral rules and spiritual rules. And God in this blessing gives a blessing of peace, which covers all those various aspects of that.

So that's how I think it relates back, which makes this blessing, I think, even more amazing, doesn't it, given what's happened before, even though often we take it out of context. And then in verse 27, it's also plural.

It's for the Israelites in total. It says, bless them. So at the heart of this, God is putting his name on his people and he's blessing them. So then, what does that mean for us?

Have a look at these verses in Hebrews chapter 13. So I'll read these. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

[21 : 37] Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others. For with such sacrifices, God is pleased. So thinking about, actually, I'll leave that verse up there.

So thinking about purity today. So Hebrews 13, that we've just read, tells us that we're to praise God and to do good and to tell others, which involves making sacrifices.

There's a verse in Romans chapter 12, which expands on that. And it tells us that we're to use our bodies as living sacrifices. So the sacrifice, therefore, is not just of lips, of hearts and minds, but of all of us.

Have you ever thought about that, that our duty is to offer our bodies as sacrifices? Now, for us, the command for purity comes after salvation and not in order to achieve it, which is different from the Israelites.

[22 : 43] We're under the new covenant. But the question still remains then, do I take purity seriously? Do you take it seriously? And do we as a community take it seriously?

And perhaps that starts to make us feel slightly uncomfortable. And if it's not making you feel uncomfortable, then let me help you make it feel a bit more uncomfortable. Because it does me.

The question really is, how are we doing on the purity front? And what can Numbers 5 and 6 tell us about purity in our lives today as we are in the wilderness?

So we could ignore it and skip to the good bit. We could try and explain it away. Or we could try and tackle purity. So I want us to go back to those four sort of areas that are in Numbers 5 and 6.

And let's think about what does that mean for us today, if we think about those areas for our life today. So first of all, physical purity. How do we treat our bodies?

[23 : 53] Do we even think that that's important? You may say, well, Jesus touched lepers. He was touched by the woman who had bleeding issues. And he touched dead bodies. So it's tempting to sort of explain it all away.

We could say, oh, the New Testament's all about spiritual, isn't it? Spiritual purity. But actually Romans 12 verse 1 says, offer your bodies as living sacrifices. And I think that there is an implication there about the physical nature of our bodies.

To offer sacrifices. And the peace, remember, that comes from the blessing is both a physical peace and a spiritual peace. So I'm not going to stand up here and give people a whole load of rules for health.

Christianity is not about being puritanical. However, we do know generally what's good for us.

Probably the more important question is, what are we doing about it? Or are we coming up with excuses about why we can't?

So physical purity. What about moral purity? What does that mean for us today? Well, I guess some challenges. How much do we actually recognize sin in our lives? How much do we actually acknowledge it?

[24 : 54] How much do we confess it? And being honest about that. I was really struck about this concept of restitution in Numbers 5 and verse 7.

So it's not just about apologizing and making good, but actually giving something extra. Now, with permission, I'm going to tell you a little story. Matt, who plays guitar, missed one of his slots to play at church.

And afterwards, he immediately came up to me and apologized and was very, very genuine and said, look, I'm really sorry. I'll tell me another session and I'll play guitar for you the next time.

And then he did something that I hadn't heard for a long time. He then said, to be honest, Andy, I won't just do one slot. Give me several slots. I'll play several slots for you because I've missed it.

And that, for me, in terms of going extra, that kind of restitution, that really touched me in terms of that concept.

Perhaps that restitution is an alien concept for us. Also, while we're thinking on the theme of moral purity, the words that are used in the Bible to describe this is breaking faith in relationships.

[26 : 04] That's what moral purity is about. And that's the same words that are used when it talks about adultery. So that breaking faith. So the gravity of relationships here is the same kind of gravity and seriousness that God expects our relationships with each other.

And that's because sin affects us. It affects our relationships with each other and also our relationship with God. So I think about purity at home, the third area.

Perhaps we thought that the Ten Commandments were tough. Jesus goes even further. When he's talking about adultery, Jesus says that even thinking about adultery, having sex with someone else was like committing adultery.

It wasn't just a physical act. It's a very, very high bar that's set. And what about jealousy? As we read in the Numbers 5, there's jealousy involved there. Do we get jealous of each other's relationships?

Even if it's not a sexual thought, sometimes that could be emotional, physical, or even spiritual jealousy. If the thought there is about breaking faith. So, have I made you feel uncomfortable yet in terms of purity?

[27 : 17] Yeah. So finally, perhaps to put it in a slightly more positive context, what about purity in service? So this is the beginning of chapter 6 about the Nazarite vow.

How about a more positive approach? So the principles here are about dedication and service. It's still hard because it requires sacrifice. But the difference here is this is a choice.

This is choosing to be holy. And Numbers describes this vow as being for both men and women. In a time-limited way, choosing to make a personal service to God.

So today, this could be all sorts of things. Students on gap years, choosing to do something. Some holiday commitments. Those people whose life circumstances change, choosing to make a vow of purity.

Or maybe it's about a specific element of purity in our lives. If those other things have made us feel uncomfortable, is there something there that we're going to choose and say we're going to make a vow of purity?

[28 : 16] Or it might be a regular service in church or other areas of life. The range is vast, really, of things that we could do in a positive way. How could we make a positive choice about our commitment to purity as we journey with God in the wilderness?

So, maybe some of these are elephants in the room for you. Some of these things about purity. Purity is a really hard and challenging concept.

However, there's grace and God has blessed us. If we ever need an example of how God can forgive people and use people, just take a look at who said the blessing, which was Aaron the priest.

At the beginning of chapter 6. Now, a short time before this, he had led the people in organizing the making of the golden calf and worshiping it. Here he is in number 6, forgiven and proclaiming God's blessing.

God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. Something else I found really encouraging, thinking about this passage, was that all these commands about purity that are given to the Israelites are future-facing.

[29 : 28] So, here they are at the start of the desert journey. And God says, these rules, you're going to mess up. Here are some rules that will help you through your desert journey. So, they set out with a desire to be pure and given methods for forgiveness.

So, I think the challenge there is for us not to dwell on the past, but actually to think about today and tomorrow, how are we going to serve God? How committed are we going to be to be pure?

And that verse that I showed in Hebrews 13, there's also a really future-facing element to that verse. Another comforting thought is that when we do mess up, who is the priest that we go to when we need to confess?

And that's Jesus. And that same Jesus is the one that was put outside the camp for not being pure. So, he was separated from God because of our sin.

So, when we mess up, we go to a high priest who knows exactly what that's like and was outside the camp. So, I'll leave you with some questions. Imagine what I would be like and what you would be like if we tackle these elements of purity in our lives.

[30 : 42] Imagine what it would be like if together we lived committed Christian lives. Imagine if collectively our faces shone from being in the presence of God as it describes in the blessing.

The answer to those questions is in Psalm 67 and tells us what happens if that were true. And it says that God's ways may be known on earth, that salvation might be known among the nations, and that the people may praise you.

The answer is still asking.