

# A holy people

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[ 0 : 00 ] His work is perfect and all his ways are just. Well, we've been reading some of his laws and you may be thinking that all his ways are just! Or you may be wondering a bit and thinking this seems a bit old fashioned and a bit strange.

Well, I'm hoping this evening I can convince you that indeed his ways are just and that actually this material, far from being 3,000 years up to date, is just what we need to hear now.

So we are looking at these first 10 chapters of the book of Numbers, which take place about a year after the Israelites have left Egypt.

And they are in the Sinai Desert, to the south of Canaan and their eventual destination. It's up on the map there.

And most of these first 10 chapters are about the preparations for the march. We looked at the order of march and the camp and the like last week.

[ 1 : 08 ] We'll be going on to look at the dedication of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, and the Passover, which of course was remembering leaving Egypt.

And then there's the stuff about the silver trumpets and what to do when the trumpet is blown. We were thinking about trumpets this morning, but trumpets go right back to the silver trumpets were blown when it was time for the march to start.

But in between this description of what went on during those 20 days, we have this little passage of laws, of words spoken, presumably because that's where they came chronologically.

Possibly, I suppose, that the writer thought this was just the right place to put them. But either way, they're here for a reason. There is something that needed to be said before we could move on with the dedication of the tabernacle and before we could move on with the march.

There are things that they need to know. And of course, these two chapters, this discussion concludes with those very well-known words, which we call the Aaronic blessing.

[ 2 : 32 ] But of course, as with any passage of scripture, it's very dangerous to take them out of context because this blessing doesn't just apply to anybody.

It applies to those who are a separated holy people. And so before the march to the promised land can begin in earnest, the purity of God's people must be established.

And so there are some words spoken. All these passages divided up by these headings where it says, The Lord said to Moses, The first one, it says, Command the Israelites.

And then three times he says, Speak to the Israelites. And then the last time, he says, Speak to Aaron. But even that is really addressed to the Israelites because he's telling Aaron, as priest, how to bless the Israelites.

And these phrases, the Lord said to Moses, break up the text. And essentially, there are two kinds of unholiness considered here.

[ 3 : 45 ] There is what one might call ritual uncleanness and faithfulness. Sorry, faithlessness. But there is a much overlap between the two. And this section on adultery seems a little out of place until one realizes that it actually draws on both these ideas.

The ideas that adultery makes one richly unclean, but also involves faithlessness, oath-breaking. So I suggest that's why that particular one is here.

Let me just point out something else that, again, is repeated lots of times, that these laws are to apply both to men and women. There's no suggestion here that women are spiritually insignificant. perhaps we would have done better to have read it from the New New International Version, which tends to take out all these references to he and his, because these laws are to apply both to men and women.

And that, again, is repeated. So how does the text work? Well, it's fairly obviously divided into these five sections. It starts by saying the Lord said to Moses, so we need to ask the question, well, what did the Lord have to say?

[ 5 : 06 ] And he has something to say on these five topics. The first one is about ritual uncleanness. The second one is about restitution for wrongdoing.

Those are quite short. And then we have two longer sections. This first one on, I say on adultery, although when you dig into it, you find it's a bit more complex than that, actually.

But let's say for the moment on adultery. And then in chapter six, there's this stuff on religious vows. And then, of course, we get, at the end, we do get the blessing.

And it's worth looking at each of these in a bit of detail. We won't be able to go through all of them in great detail. I thought we'd be here till midnight, but we'll look at least in some detail at each of them.

I'm not going to say so much about chapter six of the Nazarite pound, but I will say a little bit about it. So as I said, one can look at these passages with a prejudiced view, expecting some sort of semi-barbarian desert law.

[ 6 : 15 ] And you can easily read that into these passages. There are things that seem a little bit strange to us, certainly. But if you look closely, you realize that what you've actually got here is some really quite progressive-minded legislation.

And the central theme of this is that of taking responsibility for one's own actions, of being a separated people. Being a separated people is something that you need to be actively involved in. So let's look on a bit. So first of all, we have these few verses at the beginning on what one might call witchal uncleanness.

And it's worth remembering that the Hebrews had escaped from Egypt. And Egypt was a culture that was rather obsessed with death. You know, they built all these big elaborate tombs and the like.

They even celebrated it in a sense. But these words are here to remind us that in fact, death is a curse. That's what it says. I am in, the Lord says, I am in the camp.

[ 7 : 24 ] And in a sense, death has to be excluded from the camp. Death is the very antithesis of the Lord who gives life. And notice, it doesn't actually matter who it was who's died.

The deceased might have been a man or woman of great holiness. But the corpse is still unclean. Perhaps you might say there's no suggestion here of keeping relics of...

The corpse is unclean even however holy the person was who has died. Contact with a corpse is contact with the curse of Eden when it says you will surely die.

Death is in the camp and yet it must be banished from it. But of course, you can't actually do that. People still die in the camp.

But of course, this is a purely symbolic separation. There's no suggestion here that the corpse should not be given a proper burial or that in caring for the dead there is any moral failure rather than the reverse.

[ 8 : 36 ] But death points to Eden's curse and in that sense it's unclean. And similarly, any bleeding or disease that leads to the discharge of bodily fluids is a reminder of that curse.

It's a reminder of decay and it's unclean. If you touch a dead body you're unclean. but there was one who touched dead bodies and there was one who touched lepers and those who had skin diseases where the Pharisees and the teachers and the priests would not.

What was the difference? well if we if the Israelites touched a corpse then that made the person who did it unclean.

But Jesus could touch the dead without being unclean. Why is that? Well that's because he was the one who had the right to revoke the curse.

The one who could bring life from death. So let's move on. I want to point out that each of these has a gospel application and that's one of them.

[ 10 : 00 ] Jesus is the one who can touch the dead without making himself unclean but can bring the dead to life. Amen.

Yes. So what about this business of restitution? Here I guess it's more a statement of principle than actual legislation. The key verse, the central verse is say to the Israelites verses 6 and 7 any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty and must confess the sin they've committed.

They must make full restitution for his wrong they have done add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they've wronged. So let's just point out a few issues here.

First of all notice that wrongdoing wronging another person a fellow Israelite is unfaithfulness to the Lord. Secondly that both repentance and confession is required and all these laws are meant to bring people to confession to confess their sins and acknowledge that they've done something wrong.

and thirdly that if practicable repentance is not just a matter of words but should involve restitution.

[ 11 : 27 ] So the underlying idea as I said is that of taking moral responsibility for one's own actions. The very thing that people are so loath to do nowadays.

It's always somebody else's fault nowadays isn't it? It's not just getting found out that's the issue. The confession and acknowledgement of guilt matters.

Not just in words but also in actions. It's in that act that healing is found. It's in that act that there's not only restitution for the victim but in a sense redemption for the perpetrator making right what is wrong for the victim but also making right what is wrong in the heart of the perpetrator.

And yet we see that paying the blood price alone is not enough to remove guilt before God. There still has to be a sacrifice of atonement. We see that in verse 8.

There still has to be a death to make atonement. So while it is right if we repent of our sins we should do everything we can to make them right when we can do so.

[ 12 : 47 ] That's what's being said here. Yet that is not enough to remove the guilt of unfaithfulness to the Lord. There must be a death. But thank the Lord there was a death.

Not just a dead sheep but one who could really make atonement for the sins of the people. So now we have this rather longer passage on adultery.

Excuse me a second. It's rather more specific than the other topics in this group.

It deals as it does with a quite particular issue. Why is it here at this point? Well perhaps because the marriage relationship is central to any healthy society.

Unfaithfulness and jealousy both break relationships down. And again 531 we must take responsibility each must take responsibility for one's own actions.

[ 14 : 06 ] It's not somebody else's fault. But still what are we to make of this? And I will spend a bit more time on this one because it does look a bit strange at first.

Is this some magical mumbo jumbo concerned with the suppression of women? Is it something reminiscent of medieval witch trials?

when we read it we can easily react in that way can't we? But I would suggest that says more about our own prejudice than what the text actually says. Because a closer reading reveals something rather different.

In fact what we have here is legislation for the avoidance of domestic abuse. And that's a remarkable thing in itself.

We note that the marriage relationship is not exempt from the law. It only took Western law about 3,000 years to catch up with that. And there are even perhaps those today who say the law shouldn't interfere in the family.

[ 15 : 18 ] But here the law is applied to the family. in some ways though this is a special case because generally under Jewish law you were considered innocent until you were proven guilty and you had to be proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt as it says in Deuteronomy by the testimony of at least two and preferably three witnesses.

But it's I suppose characteristic of domestic disputes of one sort or another that witnesses are unlikely to be available and it says in chapter 5 verse 13 this is only to be applied if there are not witnesses.

And so what's this about? Well put yourself in the position of a married woman in this culture which was indeed 3,000 years ago and in the society of the time a married woman was in a particularly vulnerable position.

She was dependent on her husband largely for accommodation and food and indeed for her reputation among the community.

And if the relationship breaks down and if the husband becomes jealous then she could be mistreated in a variety of ways and I think this is what is meant when it talks about jealousy here.

[ 16 : 59 ] Jealousy is not just an unpleasant feeling of being betrayed. The Hebrew word *kinar* translated jealousy can mean jealousy but can also mean zeal harder.

This is partly about the husband's anger. He's angry with his wife and might well be tempted to act on that anger.

He might abuse her verbally. He might abuse her physically. He might denounce her to his neighbours which would make her a curse among her people as suggested by verse 27. He might divorce her and send her back to her father as soiled goods. And if the wife is treated so she'll have no real defence.

She will have no opportunity to assert her innocence. But this passage tells us the husband is to do none of those things. Marriage isn't slavery.

[18:10] His wife is not to be treated as his own property to dispose of as he pleases. She's a person made in the image of God and is indeed morally responsible for her own actions.

And yet the husband does have some responsibility. Look at verse 15. When they go to the priest he must provide the offering for his wife for the case to be heard by the priest who in a sense is acting as a kind of judge or lawyer in this situation.

And notice actually in verse 15 the wording is slightly ambiguous. Is this offering for his wife's guilt or is the offering for his own jealousy?

And I think perhaps it's deliberately ambiguous because that is still to be determined. But verse 31 is even more remarkable I think.

Because verse 31 let me read it to you. The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing sorry I should need to read a bit before the priest is to make a stand before the Lord and to imply this entire law to her.

[19:26] The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin. What that says is that if the husband does not bring his wife to the priest even supposing she is actually guilty he will be guilty of wrongdoing also.

His jealousy will be a sin and that's true even if she is actually guilty so surely far more so than the case that she's actually innocent. The husband is not to mistreat his wife or treat her as his personal property or to make the judgment himself rather she's entitled to the proper protection of the law and only by the husband behaving in a responsible manner is he found to be innocent.

If you look at the process itself it's also rather more illuminating than it seems at first sight.

Adultery as I've said involves both ritual impurity verse 19 and oath breaking. The Hebrew word used in verse 19 for impurity is actually derived from the same root as the word for uncleanness in verse 2.

But the word unfaithfulness Hebrew word ma'al is also repeated in verse 12 from verse 2.

[21:07] Adultery involves an abuse of trust and so the cure for it must involve both a ritual and an oath a ritual an offering for uncleanness in that sense but more importantly the oath the oath is clearly the more important part here recall that this process is only to be carried out if there are no witnesses I think that's probably important itself because I don't think this is being put forward as a sort of infallible test for a guilty wife because if it were why would they qualify it by saying only if there are no witnesses this is an oath that's what it amounts to the woman is being asked to swear her innocence on her own womanhood in a sense this process is second best from the legal point of view and is only to be applied where there are no witnesses and what does it do well it's doubtful

I'd suggest that water laced with ash has much pharmacological effect it probably doesn't do much more than increase her stress level and perhaps make her feel a bit queasy as a warning and it's exact opposite of those witch trials where allegedly they threw the suspected witch into the water and if she drowned she was innocent but still dead if she floated she was a witch and would be burnt this notice is the other way round the curse comes upon the woman only if she is actually guilty in other words the woman actually swears her innocence on the basis of her womanhood that's what it amounts to obviously among that culture to be unable to have children would have been regarded as a terrible curse curse it may refer to some sexually transmitted disease or it may be a more direct suggestion of the judgment of

God but either way the effect is that she can't have children she swears her innocence on the basis of her womanhood and notice that only there's only two things that's going to make this curse effective either a direct judgment of God or her own guilty conscience and those are the only ways that can yield a guilty verdict the woman effectively pronounces the curse on herself although the priest says the word she has to say yes amen she pronounces the curse on herself and notice that this is to settle the matter verse 28 if there's no reaction to the bitter waters her husband and the community are to accept her innocence and restore her to her position she's a morally responsible

being and both husband and wife bear responsibility for their own actions and verse 31

I think makes this point perfectly clear but still having said that I imagine it was probably a bit scary why would it be scary well Jesus made the point didn't he when he was presented when a woman who really was guilty of adultery and had been caught at it when there were witnesses the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus teacher this woman was caught in the act of adultery in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women now what do you say this is John 8 chapter 4 and 5 by the way and if you're worried about such things there is some doubt as to whether this is the right place in the manuscript but this occurs somewhere in most manuscripts so I and it certainly sounds and reads like scripture sounds very much like the sort of thing that

Jesus would say so so the Pharisees say to Jesus what do you do should we stone this woman and at first he doesn't answer but when they kept on questioning him he straightened up and said to them if any one of you is without sin let him be the first to throw a stone at her when the wife in numbers five was given the bitter waters she must have had qualms why because well perhaps she was innocent as charged but doubtless she had other stains on her conscience had she gossiped about her husband to her friends was she dissatisfied with her marriage had she been tempted to adultery even if she had avoided the act and then again what was behind her husband's jealousy was it a desire for a willing slave perhaps just there to provide sexual favours and generally pander to his every whim where there are double standards at work was the husband's jealousy and anger provoked by the knowledge that he expected his own wife to remain pure while he had no qualms at all about coveting his neighbour's wife are there double standards because the truth is that neither husband nor wife are truly innocent they all have things stains on their conscience and the trial comes with the presumption of innocence and families and societies and nations are built on the need for trust and integrity which is why we have laws about this sort of thing there must be laws that uphold trust but they're all open to that objection as in the last analysis all of us is guilty and

[ 27 : 45 ] Jesus was very keen to make that point it's only through Christ that our consciences can actually stand up to the bitter waters of God's judgment and actually that woman in John 8 was at risk because there was one person there who was without sin there was one person there who could have justifiably picked up that first stone and thrown it but he didn't do that the one person who could have condemned her to death who had a clear enough conscience to throw that first stone was the one who didn't what happened instead Jesus straightened up and asked her woman where are they it seems that all of the accusers had wandered off Jesus looked up again and there was alone with the woman where are they has no one condemned!

no one sir she said then neither do I condemn you Jesus declared go now and leave your life of sin the one person who could have condemned that woman was the person who did not but instead offered her forgiveness neither husband nor wife are really without guilt let's say just briefly look at this question of religious vows I'm not going to spend so long on this but it's worth mentioning briefly the term Nazirite comes from a Hebrew word which means separate and it refers to a vow taken for religious purposes that's why the passage talks a lot about the time of separation and so on that's essentially what the word Nazirite means one who is separate usually it was a vow taken for a restricted time but it could be for life

Samson seems to have been a lifetime Nazirite albeit not always a totally faithful one possibly Samuel possibly John the Baptist were considered as lifetime Nazirites but for most people it was an oath taken for a short time and again notice in chapter 6 verse 2 both men and women could take such a vow it wasn't restricted to men in any way actually we don't have a lot of information about the purpose of the vow or exactly what was required or exactly why people took these vows because I think that's not the main point here there were two visible marks of the Nazirite first of all an unshaven head verse 5 and secondly abstention not just from wine but in fact from any grape product verses 3 and 4 and when the vow was completed the hair was burnt verse 18 you cut off the hair that hadn't been cut up to then you burnt it and you were offered an unleavened offering and that signified the completion of the vow and after that you could drink wine verse 20 there's also a suggestion in verse 21 that sometimes there was some other financial aspect to the vow and of course that had to be fulfilled as well but the key point here is that a person's word should be binding and a vow respected so in

Ecclesiastes we find these words when you make a vow to God do not delay in fulfilling it he has no pleasure in fools fulfill your vow it is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it do not let

your mouth lead you into sin do not protest to the temple messenger my vow was a mistake why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands because once your word is given there's always a temptation isn't there to try and wriggle out of it somehow and I suggest this might be why it talks particularly about contact with a dead body here in verses 6 or 7 it might be a kind of get out of jail free card a way of avoiding the vow but that wasn't to be so surely nobody can object to burying a close relative but no if you've taken a vow you shouldn't make yourself unclean somebody else can handle the funeral arrangements the vow is more important and then he emphasised the point in verse 9 if the uncleanness happens inadvertently so you accidentally come into contact with a dead body the vow has to start again in verse 12 it doesn't release you from the!

so as I say this isn't a get out of jail free card and other ways you might find of avoiding the vow do not really avoid it and once again I think the underlying point here is that any society depends on trust and if a given word is not trustworthy how can any society and particularly a theocratic society like the ancient Israelites how can it operate and although the Nazarite vow was particularly a vow for religious purposes I think in many ways the principle should apply whatever the purpose of the vow was and in fact Jesus had a lot to say about the evil of this kind of hypocrisy didn't he he said again you have heard that it was said to the people long ago do not break your oath but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord but I tell you do not swear at all either by heaven for it's [ 33 : 51 ] God's throne or by the earth for it's his footstool or by Jerusalem for it is the city of the great king and do not swear by your head for you cannot make even one hair white or black simply let your yes be yes and your no be no anything beyond this comes from the perhaps you wondered about this swearing by your own head well I think this is probably a reference to the Nazarite practice of not shaving your hair Jesus says he's saying that really you shouldn't even need to make a vow in one sense all this stuff is a bit unnecessary because really your yes should be yes and your no!

should be no and the very fact you find a need to make a vow almost suggests that your word might not be trustworthy so yes let your yes be yes and your no be no and Jesus was well aware that even religious people will try to escape the obligation of truth because he says that to the Pharisees doesn't he woe to you blind guides Matthew 537 woe to you blind guides you surely the thing that is really sacred is the truth itself that your word should be yes or no and that you shouldn't go back on it once you make a contract there's always a lawyer around who might help you to get out of it but don't say to the temple messenger my vow!

was a mistake let your yes be yes and your no be no because unless truth is truth and unless integrity is integrity whether or not one has the ritual signed contract or whatever it is then if that is not the case how can society work at all and certainly how as the people of God can we represent the one whose very words are truth so this passage ends then with the blessing this passage is number 6 22 to 27 and these words I'm sure are familiar we've heard them many times but this blessing is put at this point after these rules laws for holy living before the consecration of the tent of meeting it's not an unconditional blessing it's a blessing for those who are God's people it's a blessing for those who live as God's people you can't just apply it to anybody it's in a sense dependent on obeying those ceremonial and relational laws that have been set out and in fact it makes the point that in one sense God's people are all Nazarites God's people are all separated to the Lord because they're the ones who bear his name verse 27 and yet how can Aaron pronounce this blessing at all surely it's impossible surely the laws just show us that each of us is guilty numbers tells us there must be a death 5-8 but it also contains hints that these are not really enough you notice that the effect of the grain offering in 5-15 is to draw attention to guilt it doesn't tell us how that guilt can be removed and yet this blessing is a blessing of grace it says the Lord will show his favour to his people how is that possible in a sense numbers doesn't answer that question it only hints it hints that the need for a death hints the need for an offering where is the true grace to be found in fact that wouldn't be revealed for more than a thousand years after the exodus there must be a sacrificial death and that death must be one who is truly pure who is truly innocent the point about that story of the woman taken in adultery of course is that there was nobody there who could say well actually I'm better than you and people really examined their consciences they found that yeah it doesn't work we are all there is no one who without sin who can cast the first stone but there is one who can proclaim words of grace there is one who can proclaim forgiveness on the basis of his own death his own sacrifice and that's the one who said to that sinful woman and

the one who says the same thing to every sinner everywhere who puts their trust in the  
[ 40 : 10 ] Lord Jesus Christ has no one condemned you neither do I condemn you go now and  
leave your life of sin these laws tell us in a sense how to leave the life of sin but they don't tell us  
how grace truly comes grace and truth come through the Lord Jesus Christ let's sing again this is a  
song about the rule of law and it takes up some of the themes of this passage that there should be  
justice that a society needs to be ruled with justice but thank you