

Cleansing

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Preacher: Ricky Njoto

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Please turn your Bibles back to Numbers chapter 19.! After many judgments, two chapters before this, in chapter 17, the Israelites finally realized that they could die if they continued to disrespect God's holiness.

And now that the idea of death became more real to them, the question became, what would happen if someone died? In chapter 5, God had already said that if someone touched a dead person, they would become unclean and would have to be taken out of the camp.

We have talked about this, because God is clean and holy, and He dwells at the center of the camp, and He wants the people to be clean and holy, and so everyone who is unclean needs to stay out of the camp.

Not because God would have become unclean otherwise, but to protect the unclean people so that they might not die.

And now, after so many people have died in the previous chapters, and God had warned them that the entire first generation of Israel would have to die before they could reach the promised land, because they rebelled against Him, then that's a lot of people dying.

[2 : 0 0] Right? And in light of that, that's a lot of people potentially being taken out of the camp, because of the deaths around them.

How would they be able to come back into the camp? And that's where Numbers 19 comes in. Numbers 19 is one of those chapters in the Bible that, at first glance, feels distant.

It's about a ritual of cleansing for those people who have been declared unclean, so that they might come back into the camp. And religious rituals usually feel strange to our modern ears.

But as we consider the details, we'll see that underneath all the ritual is something that speaks to the deep condition of every human being, even now.

So, let's take a look. In verse 1 to 10, the beginning of the ritual is outlined. And here we see that all of the elements of the ritual are symbols of purity or cleanliness.

[3 : 1 5] So, first, there's the red heifer, which is a red female cow that has never born a calf before.

So, pure. And additionally, the heifer has to be perfect, unblemished, and has never been under a yoke, has never worked before.

This is a symbol of purity. And then, second, there's the priest who has to do the ritual. And we know that priests in the Old Testament are those who have been declared to be clean and holy. And in addition to that, it seems that there are two other people who are to assist him, to assist the priest with the ritual, and they, too, must be clean.

And then, third, the priest uses cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool.

[4 : 1 9] Now, these are all symbols of purity, because previously, in Leviticus 14, these three elements are used as tools for ceremonial cleansing. When they wanted to purify someone, they used the hyssop, and they took the cedar wood and the scarlet wool as symbols of cleansing.

But what's strange here, in our chapter, in Numbers 19, is that all these symbols of purity are not used as tools for cleansing. Like in Leviticus 14, they're used for burning.

They're to be thrown into the fire. So, along with the red heifer, these three symbols are to be burnt outside of the camp. Now, that's a bit strange.

Why would these pure things or symbols of purity be burnt outside of the camp? This is a strange ritual. And the way the ritual is done is that one of the clean assistants will burn the heifer in front of the priest.

But then, that person becomes unclean. The man who burns it, in verse 8, will be unclean until evening. And then, the priest must throw the three elements of purity into the fire.

[5 : 44] And then, he becomes unclean until the evening. This is so strange. Now, these people don't touch anything unclean. All they touch in this ritual are symbols of purity.

And they're doing this ritual of cleansing. This is for cleansing people. And yet, by doing it, they become unclean. So weird.

And then, after all the elements are burnt up, the other clean person who assists the priest must gather up the ashes and put them in a clean container.

It's a lot of ashes, right? It's a whole cow along with the wood and the other things. But then, that person who gathers the ashes becomes unclean.

What's the meaning of this? This is so strange. Now, we'll address the strangeness a bit later because the ritual doesn't stop here. It's interrupted in the next verse, in verse 11.

[6 : 50] And then, it continues in verse 17. But here, at least, we can see that human purity or cleanliness is very fragile for them.

Isn't it? The priest who's declared, already declared by God, to be holy and clean, and the clean assistants can become unclean just like that. And they have to wait until evening to be clean again. The status of purity and cleanliness for them is very fragile. Even if they're very careful not to touch anything unclean, by doing this ritual, they become unclean.

And this fragility is highlighted further in the next verses. In verse 11 to 16, God tells them several ways in which someone can become unclean.

Now, bear in mind that these are in addition to the reasons that have been outlined in chapter 5. So, in chapter 5, people can become unclean if they have skin diseases or if they have bodily discharges.

[7 : 58] And here, in this chapter, the reasons for uncleanliness are all related to death. So, they become unclean by touching a dead human body, by entering or being in a tent where someone has died, by touching a human bone, oh, sorry, by touching a human bone or a grave.

And if they do any of these things, they're unclean for seven days and they must be cleansed with water, the water of cleansing, on the third and seventh days.

Now, you might think, this makes medical sense. You know, if you touch a dead person, you might carry the disease that has caused the person to be dead. So, you get quarantined.

But I think it's more than that. This is talking about spiritual cleanliness. Death is unclean because death is the opposite of God who is life and who is the source of life.

And that's why the wages of sin is death. Because if we rebel and choose life without God, then we choose the opposite of God, which is death.

[9 : 23] And in that framework of thinking, to touch death, is to touch something that is opposite to the nature of God and therefore the person needs to stay out of the camp where God is.

again, so that the unclean person would not die. But, can you imagine having to live like this?

Imagine if your relative who lives in the same tent with you sadly dies and you went to bury them and you not only have to deal with your grief, you're now unclean too and you're banished from the camp for seven days.

And then you do the ritual and you come back seven days later and then the next day you might find yourself with a bodily discharge which happens from time to time. And then you get banished again.

You do the ritual again. And then once you're back, maybe God tells Moses to attack another nation and there during the battle you touch another dead person. And then you become unclean again.

[10 : 42] Can you imagine having to live like that? All these highlight the fragility of human purity and cleanliness. Right?

The Israelites were called to be the holy people of God to be pure to be clean. But it must have been so frustrating for them.

Because they would have found themselves unable to keep themselves clean all the time. Even the priests could not do it. It's impossible.

And yet, friends, this struggle, this longing to attain the clean and pure status is not unique to them. It's a human reflex.

Humanity has always been obsessed with cleansing themselves. Even today as well, some people might try to reach the clean and pure status through religious means.

[11 : 45] In Hinduism, in India, they bathe in the Ganges River to attain spiritual purity. In Islam, they do a ritual called the wudu, washing themselves before praying in a mosque.

Some other people might try to reach that cleansed or clean status by non-religious means. We can see people today, secular people today, trying to appease some secular god by attaining some kind of purer, higher, secular status.

Some people might worship self-achievement. It's a modern god. And so they cleanse themselves by decluttering their minds, cleansing bad habits.

It's all over social media. or their modern god might be people's acceptance. So they cleanse themselves to reach that by they cleanse themselves of uncool influences or uncool people in their lives.

Some people might worship their bodies and so they detox their bodies. all of this is just human impulse.

[13:15] We all long for that pure and higher status to appease our gods, whatever that might look like in our minds. But instead of trying to appease the true god, we try to appease false gods and we try to achieve it through our own rituals, our own effort, our own self-cleansing.

And even though some of those things might be okay to do, detoxing our bodies, that's okay to do. But if our goal is to appease our gods, whatever the gods might be, it never works.

After we try over and over again, we might realize that the uncleanliness doesn't just exist around us or in our physical bodies, but inside our souls.

Our minds and our hearts are filthy. So if we read this passage and we go, oh, it must have been so frustrating for them.

Well, isn't it frustrating for us too? Aren't we sometimes frustrated with life precisely because of this reason? Because we can't appease our gods through our own cleansing rituals.

[14:35] We can't achieve self-achievement or self-image or people's acceptance through cleansing ourselves. We're frustrated. Like the Israelites, every time we try to attain that pure and clean status, we realize that it's impossible.

And so the question becomes, if all human attempts fail, how could God's appointed way succeed? How could this ritual with a red heifer, cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool succeed?

It's a weird ritual. We think that our means of reaching the cleansed status are logical.

This is illogical, isn't it? how could this succeed? Well, we read on to finish the description of the ritual.

In the last few verses, we read that if there's someone who is unclean, this is how the ritual is done. A clean person must go out of the camp, grab some of the ashes that have been prepared earlier, put those ashes in a jar, and pour clean water into it.

[16:01] And then, he shall sprinkle it onto anything that is unclean. So the person who is unclean, the tent, the furnishings, and after being sprinkled on the third and seventh days, the unclean people are declared clean, they can bathe, and they can come back into the camp.

Now, that's God's appointed way of cleansing in the Old Testament. But why should it work? Our human attempts at reaching pure and holy status don't work.

Why should this work? I think the key to why it works is in that strange paradox that we have highlighted earlier.

In this ritual, the symbols of purity are taken outside of the camp as if they're unclean. The clean people who do the ritual become unclean.

And even here in the last few verses as well, both the person who sprinkles the water and the person who touches it become unclean.

[17:17] The same water that makes the unclean people clean also makes the clean people unclean. It's a great paradox of the ritual, and yet it should remind us of the greatest paradox in the Bible or in the human history.

The cross of Jesus, the symbol of curse that saves us. This whole ritual should point us to the cross of Jesus.

He is the truly pure and unblemished one. He is God himself. He is not just a symbol of purity, he is purity itself. And yet, what happened to him?

Hebrews 13, Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

The red heifer only worked because it pointed to Jesus, whose sacrifice truly works.

And so our New Testament reading from Hebrews 9 says, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer are sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean. Sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

[18 : 39] How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God.

This ritual in Numbers 19 only worked outwardly because it pointed to the sacrifice of the Son of God, which truly works from the inside out.

Not only to cleanse the body, but also the inner consciences. And now this ritual makes sense. Of course the symbols of purity have to be burnt outside of the camp, even though they are pure, because that's what Jesus did when he sacrificed himself outside of the city gate.

Of course the symbols of purity made those who participated in the ritual unclean, because that's what Jesus did. Jesus became unclean.

He became a curse when he bore our curse on the cross. Of course the water of cleansing made the unclean people clean, but it made the clean man who sprinkled it unclean, because Jesus, the cleanest of all, became unclean so that we, the unclean people, become clean.

[20 : 12] without seeing the cross of Jesus, this ritual in Numbers 19 wouldn't make sense at all. This ritual worked only because it pointed towards what God himself would do in the person of Jesus.

Thank God for that. God will do in the So how do we apply this passage? Only through Jesus, whose sacrifice truly works.

And so the first application can be, if you belong to Jesus, you can rest in what has been finished. You don't need to do this ritual anymore.

We don't need to come to church bringing a red heifer. water. You don't have to, if you follow Jesus, you don't have to bathe in the Ganges river or do the voodoo.

You don't have to keep scrubbing your conscience with guilt or good works. you don't have to perform the modern rituals of cleansing your self-image anymore.

[21 : 26] You don't have to fight so hard to be accepted by people anymore because you know that in Jesus, God is seeing you as unblemished. He accepts you fully.

Do you rest in that? Do you truly believe that the blood of Jesus has cleansed you once and for all? Or do you still try to appease your false gods through your own cleansing rituals, whatever they might look like?

We have been cleansed. God is pleased with us because of what Jesus has done. Let's rest in that. God is going to do it. But also, second application, our walk in the path towards holiness is still ongoing. Even though Jesus has given us that status, unchanging status of unblemished without our having to do anything, but the Holy Spirit gives us the ability and the willingness to do something, to grow towards purity and holiness.

We call that sanctification. And that process doesn't stop until we get to the new creation. And so, in our daily lives, let's resist the temptation to go back to our unclean sins.

[23 : 04] Martin Luther, a church reformer from the 16th century, had a motto that he would say when he felt tempted by the devil.

He would say, I am baptized. And the legend says that he would throw his pen or whatever that he used to write onto the wall.

So, if you go to Germany to see his desk, there's all kinds of dents on the wall. So, I am baptized, meaning I belong to Jesus.

I have been marked. I have been cleansed. I cannot play around with the filthy things anymore. Can we do that? What is the filth that still clings onto us?

And when temptation comes for us to go back to that filth, can we remind ourselves, like Martin Luther, that we have been cleansed with the blood of Jesus once and for all.

[24 : 13] We cannot go back. Now, some of us might need to focus on that first application, to rest in Jesus' finished work.

Some others might need to focus on the second application, to fight harder, to run the race, to be more and more like Christ. But in both of these applications, our hope is the same.

It lies not in ourselves, not in our cleanliness, but only in the blood of Jesus. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that through this chapter, through this Bible text, you have reminded us of the need to be pure, to be cleansed, but we also thank you that you have given us your son, Jesus, in whose sacrifice we are cleansed.

And help us, Lord, with the power of your Holy Spirit to grow in our holiness day by day, to be more and more like Jesus. In the name of Jesus, whose sacrifice is sufficient for us, we pray.
[25 : 34] Amen.