

"Holiness"

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[0 : 00] Good to see you all this morning. Happy Father's Day to all of you. Let me invite you to turn with me to Numbers chapter 16. We are continuing through our summer sermon series in the book of Numbers, and today we're looking at all of chapter 16. That's page 116 or 117 in the Pew Bibles.

And as we come to God's Word, let me begin with a word of prayer for us. Father, we do ask for your Spirit to come now and help us to not just understand your Word with our minds, but truly to have it shape our desires and our commitments, Lord, at a deeper heart level.

Lord, we want to not just be hearers of your Word, but doers. And Lord, we know that this deep heart transformation comes only as you, by your Spirit, help us to see our Savior Christ, our Lord Jesus, more richly and more fully. So do just that as we come to this rich passage, this rich book of Numbers. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, let me begin by reading the first 15 verses of Numbers chapter 16. Now, Korah, the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, Korah's rebellion. Now, at first, this seems to be just another story in Numbers about the people grumbling against the leadership of Moses. At this point in Numbers, you think, man, are they going to grumble about anything else, right? But, you know, when we take a closer look, we see that this rebellion, this chapter, it's really about something more vital. Well, chapter 16 and 17 and 18 of Numbers, which is really the center of this book, they take up the theme of the priesthood. And what was the priesthood all about? Well, the priesthood was all about how sinful people could draw near to a holy God.

[2 : 26] And so, the question that really runs throughout this passage at the deepest level is, can we approach God on our own terms? Or must we submit ourselves to approaching God on His terms?

Well, let's take a closer look and see how that comes out in this passage. First, notice in verses 9 and 10 what Korah is really after when he raises this complaint and raises this rebellion. What he's really after is the priesthood. Now, as a Levite, Korah had been assigned, along with the rest of his tribe, a very important role in the care and in the service of the tabernacle. The Levites, you'll remember, were set apart of all the other tribes to serve the Lord and to serve the people of God by keeping and tending the tabernacle. And Korah's clan, Korah's clan, which was the Kohathites, the children of Kohath, they were even responsible for moving the most holy things into the holy places of the tabernacle when it was set up. They had the unique role given from the Lord to intercede in this way for the people. But Korah wanted that role for himself. And we can speculate why. You know, perhaps

Korah wanted the priesthood because he thought it would bring him more privilege or more power or more human praise, not just carrying the ark, but going in and being the one who offered the sacrifice before the ark. You know, too often people seek leadership for these reasons, for privilege, for power, for human praise. And the New Testament is very clear that we should watch out for so-called leaders like that.

Beware, the New Testament will say again and again, beware the leader who wants to lead, but who doesn't want to serve. Leaders in the church, leaders in the people of God should be first and foremost willing servants, willing to set up the chairs and make the coffee if need be.

Nothing at the end of the New Testament will actually name Korah by name as an example of what to beware of in the church. Beware the so-called leader that stirs up dissension and disunity. Beware the so-called leader that seems to listen intently to people's complaints only to manipulate it for his own gain.

[5 : 18] Jesus spoke a blessing upon whom? Upon the peacemakers. Paul writes that we should make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That's what a real leader

looks like.

But last, notice how Korah makes his case in verse 3. He says to Moses and Aaron, he says, you've gone too far, for all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them.

Why then do you, Moses and Aaron, exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord? Now, of course, there is a sense in which some of what Korah is saying is true.

God had indeed chosen and set apart the people for himself. In that sense, the entire congregation was holy unto the Lord, and God had indeed been dwelling in their midst. The Lord was among them.

In fact, at the end of chapter 15, right before this passage, that's exactly what the instructions about the tassels on the garments was all about. It was to remind the people to keep the commandments of God. It was to remind them to be set apart, to be holy, because the Lord was indeed in their midst.

[6 : 38] But here's a hallmark of a false teacher. They take something that's true, and they use it to justify something that's false.

Korah's conclusion was that anyone should be able to be a priest because the congregation was holy, that anyone should be able to do what the priest can do. But that was wrong. Yes, God had set apart the whole people for himself. Yes, they were a holy nation and a royal priesthood, as Exodus 19.6 says.

But that doesn't mean that they could then approach God on their own terms. God had appointed very specific means whereby they could draw near. And under the old covenant, he had chosen one particular family for that particular role and no one else.

And this brings us to the real heart of the passage. Yes, Korah is an example of a so-called leader to watch out for and to avoid, but the real question that Korah raises is, can we approach God on our own terms?

You see, the heart of Korah's rebellion is just that, a desire to want to draw near to God in the way that Korah himself chooses, apart from God's appointed means.

[8 : 12] And friends, that is the very heart of human rebellion against God, that I get to choose how and on what basis I get to God. I mean, surely, right, if I'm sincere and I'm basically moral, that's enough, right? Why can't I draw near to God through my own version of spirituality? Whatever I happen to think is best. I mean, who's to say which religion is true, right? I mean, aren't they all just kind of paths leading up the same mountain?

Aren't we all just blindfolded men and women grabbing a different part of the elephant? You've got your way, I've got mine. God will just accept them all, right? So goes, I think, our very common line of thinking.

But can we, can we actually draw near to God on our own terms? You see, the problem with this line of thinking is that it fails to account for God's holiness.

It fails to account for God's holiness. Because God is not some inert goal at the top of a mountain that we can just bushwhack our way to the top.

And God is certainly not a kind of benign elephant that we can blindly grasp and grope like a baby Dumbo. God is holy.

[10 : 06] God is infinite in majesty, in power, in purity, in love. The chapter from Revelation that Nick read for us earlier is all about this.

What do we see there in Revelation 4? We see that God is not some kind of cosmic, doting grandparent, but God is the Holy One before whom all creation will and must worship.

An unmediated glimpse of the Holy and Majestic God, an unmediated glimpse of that God would not be bliss, but our utter undoing.

Like a tiny ship pushed by a growing wave into rocky cliffs thousands of feet high, dashed into oblivion, one glimpse of God's real unmediated glory would utterly wreck us.

We cannot come to God on our own terms because of who God is. And that's exactly what we see in the next part of this passage.

[11 : 39] Let's pick up in verse 16, and we'll read all the way through verse 40 and see what happens to Korah's rebellion. Moses said to Korah, Be present, you and all your company, before the Lord, you and they and Aaron tomorrow, and let every one of you take his censers and put incense on it, which was a priestly task, by the way.

God is basically saying, Okay, Korah, put yourself in the place of a priest. Let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it, and every one of you bring before the Lord his censer.

250 censers, you also, and Aaron, each a censer. So every man took his censer and put fire in them and laid incense on them, stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation. And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell on their faces and said, Oh God, the God of the spirits of all flesh shall one man sin, and you will be angry with all the congregation? And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

[12:52] Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.

So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. And Moses said, Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord.

If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.

And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods.

So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up.

[14:13] And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, to take up the censers out of the blaze.

Then scatter the fire far and wide, for they have become holy. As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before the Lord, and they became holy.

Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel. So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider who is not of the descendants of Aaron should draw near to burn incense before the Lord, lest he become like Korah and his company, as the Lord said to him through Moses.

So Korah wanted to come to God on his own terms. Dathan and Abiram joined Korah in his rebellion, and as a result, they all crashed against the rocks of God's holiness.

Korah and the rest who take censers before the Lord at the tabernacle, you would sort of put fire inside a plate and you would swing it so the incense would go up. Korah and all the rest who did so before the Lord at the tabernacle were consumed by fire.

[15:51] And the tragedy is that the sin of Korah and Dathan and Abiram doesn't just impact themselves, but their families as well. At first, we sort of recoil at passages like this, don't we?

At first, it seems unjust for family members to suffer the same fate as the heads of the households who did the rebellion, who did the rebelling. But that's the tragedy of sin, friends.

It impacts all those around us. Especially the presumptuous sin of thinking that we can handle God on our own terms in any way that we see fit.

That rebellion will impact our children. And that's why people were commanded to flee from the tents of Dathan and Abiram. And even Korah's tent, even though Korah himself was at the tabernacle with the 250, God in mercy warned them that this sin was going to impact all those around it.

But you see, that spreading impact of sin, the truth is, that's exactly how sin has worked from the very beginning. All the way back to our first parents, when our first parents sinned, we all fell under its deadly sway.

[17 : 15] Consider the original sin of Adam. Rather than listen to God and obey, Adam chose his own terms. He took the fruit God had commanded him not to take, thinking that in doing so, he could just become like God rather than approach God on God's terms.

Adam thought he could do it his own way. And that rebellion brought spiritual death, not just to Adam and Eve, but to all humanity.

You see, friends, every single human being is created in God's own image. Each one of us is full of inestimable dignity and value and worth.

And every human being has inherited a guilty status before God and a corrupt nature within ourselves. Like a computer virus that spreads to every computer in the network, there is no human who is exempt from the effects of Adam's sin.

And that means there is no approaching God and His holiness without it resulting in utter ruin. The 250 men who swung their censers that day before the tabernacle were consumed in an instant.

[18 : 41] God is not to be trifled with. How could we think that we could just saunter into God's presence?

That we could just approach God and be accepted by God on our own terms, on our own way? I mean, think about it. We would never think about entering our neighbor's house without their permission and on their own terms, right?

Of course, you wouldn't just like show up at your neighbor's house, open the door and take off your shoes and start eating the food out of their fridge. I mean, maybe you would. Maybe you have a really good relationship with your neighbor. I don't know. But no, you do it on your neighbor's terms, right?

That's how you draw near to them. But think about something even greater. What about the mayor's office? What if we were to walk, you know, a few blocks down to the green and go into the city hall and go into the city hall?

We just kind of barge into Mayor Eelker's office, put our feet up on his desk. What would happen? Well, you would most likely be escorted out by security, right? You can't approach the human mayor on your own terms.

[19 : 47] And what about the White House? Try to get into the White House on your own terms and you will certainly be arrested or worse. Friends, if that is true of our relationship with mere humans, what makes us think that we could approach God on our own terms, in our own way?

God, the consuming fire himself who is infinitely good, infinitely pure, perfectly just. And so God tells Aaron's son, Eleazar, to take all those burned censers of Korah's rebellion, to hammer them into plates, and to plate them onto the altar as a covering so that when the people came to the tabernacle to worship, they would see the covering and every time they would be reminded that they had to come to God on God's own terms or not at all.

Friend, how are you hoping to approach God, to get near to God today? I mean, after all, nearness to God, communion with God, fellowship with God, that is the very thing that we humans were created for.

We weren't created to find our meaning, our purpose, our hope, merely in the created things of this life. Do you want evidence that we weren't created to find our meaning and hope and purpose in the things of this life?

Then talk to someone who has it all. Talk to the wealthiest people, talk to the most famous people, talk to the most powerful people, and what do you find?

[21 : 39] Do you find that all those things have brought them contentment, joy, peace, awe? No.

More often than not, they will all tell you the same thing. It didn't actually make them happy. This is why songwriting is such a good gig, because you write songs, you get really famous, it doesn't actually satisfy, so then you can just write more songs about being dissatisfied and make more money.

It's a brilliant scheme, right? And yet it is evidence that this world is not what we were created to find our deepest meaning and identity in. That deep hole, that deep hunger still remains.

there's only one thing that can satisfy the human heart, and we've read about it in Revelation 4, the glory of God, our Creator, only in communion with the triune God, the triune God whom all creation praises ceaselessly, day and night, only in communion with God, will we find the true meaning of our existence.

And only in communion with the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, will we be able to actually enjoy the things of this life? Because otherwise we just try to use the things of this life to fill the God-sized hole in our hearts and it doesn't work.

[23 : 09] It doesn't Here's the truth, friends. you and I need to approach God.

We have to draw near to God, but we can't do it on our own terms. Our sin is too great, and the holiness of God is infinitely greater still.

So what's the solution? How can we actually draw near? What's the answer to our dilemma? Well, it's this, that God has appointed a way.

God has set His own terms. In His grace, God has opened a road whereby sinful humans can come to Him and not be consumed.

But there's no other road. only one leads out from Him and only one leads back to Him. And that road was signified under the Mosaic covenant that one appointed way to God was signified under the Mosaic covenant by the priesthood of Aaron.

[24 : 36] Aaron and his sons would be the means whereby the Old Testament people could have fellowship with God without being consumed by God's holiness.

Through the priesthood's intercession, God would make atonement for His people so that sinful people could dwell with a holy God. Let's read the rest of the chapter, verses 41 through 50.

But on the next day, all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, You have killed the people of the Lord. And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared.

And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Get away from the midst of this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell on their faces, and Moses said to Aaron, Take your censer and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the Lord.

The plague has begun. So Aaron took it, as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly, and behold, the plague had already begun among the people, and he put on the incense and made atonement for the people, and he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.

[26 : 10] Now those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting when the plague was stopped.

So you see, when Korah, when Korah and his company of 250 chiefs of the congregation, important, powerful, prestigious men, when they took their censers and burned incense before God, they were consumed.

But when Aaron, just Aaron, by himself, takes a censer, and when he stands between the dead and the living and makes intercession, the plague is stopped.

the just wrath of God is turned away from the sinful people, and they're saved. Notice how this episode starts.

Now the whole congregation is grumbling against them, and God again gives what is true. He says, get away from the midst of this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. You see, that's how sinful sin is.

[27 : 13] It deserves God's wrath. But Aaron, fulfilling the priestly office that God had assigned to him, stands in the midst of the people and offers up intercession on their behalf.

And God, in His grace, receives Aaron's intercession. God turns aside His wrath. He withholds His full judgment. But friends, you see, Aaron in the Old Covenant, Aaron was just a picture of the greater priest to come.

As the New Testament opens and as the story unfolds and as we see the ministry and the deeds and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we see that He was the true and the better priest.

He was the priest that Aaron and his sons were just gesturing towards, just pointing towards as a sign. You see, Jesus did stand in the midst of His sinful people and He identified with them fully.

And He didn't merely offer up incense and prayers, but He offered up His own body on the cross.

And when Jesus, our true priest, stood in the midst of His people, on that day, the wrath of God didn't turn aside.

[28 : 44] No, at the cross, the holiness of God was in full display as Jesus bore the full weight of the divine wrath our sins deserved.

But His sin, death-bearing death, this was the very plan of God. For in Jesus, we see the terms, God's terms, whereby sinful humans can now come near.

Through faith in Jesus crucified and risen, sinners can draw near to God because Jesus Christ has turned aside God's holy wrath through His self-giving death on the cross in our place.

And what's more, on the third day, this true and better high priest rose from the dead, and forty days later, He ascended to the Father's right hand, where He now intercedes forever for those who trust in Him.

You see, unlike Aaron and all of Aaron's sons down through the Old Testament age, unlike Aaron who eventually died, Jesus, our true and better high priest, always lives.

[30 : 01] And that means He always lives to make intercession for us. What He did for us will always be effective before the throne of our holy God.

So for those who approach God apart from Jesus, there is nothing but a fearful expectation of judgment. But for those who approach God through Jesus, there is actually confidence and boldness to approach God because Jesus has covered our sins and welcomed us in His name. And you see, that means if you're not a Christian, if you're here this morning and you're spiritually searching and trying to figure out what it means to be in a relationship with God, then the message of number 16 to you is this.

Repent of trying to approach God on your own terms. Admit it and turn away from it. Repent of trying to approach God on your own terms, in your own way, and accept the one and only sure way to draw near to God through what God Himself has appointed through the true and better high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

call upon Him and entrust yourself to Him and know that without a doubt in Him your sins will be forgiven. And because He lives to always intercede for you, you will have eternal favor and fellowship with God your Creator, and God will be your joy and your utmost satisfaction, because there's one who stands for you at the right hand of God.

[31 : 56] And for those of us who are trusting in Christ, then the application of number 16 is this, remember, remember that our true priest has come and that He always lives to make intercession for us and that now we can draw near with confidence to God.

Ephesians 3, 11 through 12 says that God has saved us according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom, in Jesus, we now have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him.

Do you see what the work of Jesus Christ has wrought? Now we can draw near to God, though we are sinners, and yes, God is holy, now we can draw near to God with boldness and with confidence. We don't have to find our identity and satisfaction in the things of this world. We can come to God and find it in Him, the one we were created for. We have boldness and access with confidence. It's not presumption, it's not pride like Korah, but real confidence. It's boldness even because of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ on our behalf.

[33 : 17] We see this theme throughout the New Testament, but perhaps Hebrews 10, 19 through 25 says it best. The author of Hebrews says, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain that is through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Amen, friends. Through Jesus, the way is open. We have a great priest over the house of God. We don't have to come to God on our own terms, which are failing and faulty, but God has graciously opened heaven's door through Jesus, and we can come in.

We have a great priest over the house of God, so let us draw near in faith. Let us hold fast in hope, and let us stir up one another in love.

Let us pray. Father, we do ask that You would impress upon us, Your people, again a genuine sense of Your holiness.

[34 : 57] Help us to live in awe of You, God. Help us to have a rightful reverence before You. And Lord, help us to see that in Christ, what would mean certain destruction for us, drawing near to You, our holy God, has now, Lord, become an open path where the work of Christ and the intercession of Christ has paved the way.

Lord, open our eyes to see this truth afresh. Give us confidence and boldness as we go forth this week in His name. Amen. Amen.