

"Purity"

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Happy Fourth of July weekend to you all. We are continuing our series in Numbers today, so would you turn with me to Numbers chapter 19.

! Numbers 19. That's page 119 in the Pew Bibles or page 120 in the newer editions. Well, as we approach our passage today, I wonder, have you ever considered how hard it is to keep things clean? No sooner have you cleaned all the dishes in the sink than yet another meal rolls around and suddenly the kitchen is full once again of pots and pans and plates and silverware that need to be cleaned. It seems like an endless task, right? And it's not just the dishes. The laundry always piles up. The carpets always need to be vacuumed. And the garage, how is it that a space we don't even live in, is in constant need of cleaning, right? I ran across this quote while preparing this week. Apparently, when his wife was away from home, the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote, the washing of dishes does seem to me the most absurd and unsatisfactory business that I ever undertook. Only someone who's a novelist could write that about doing dishes, right? He goes on, he says, if when once washed, they would remain clean forever and ever, which they ought in all reason to do, considering how much trouble it is, then there would be less occasion to grumble. But no sooner is it done than it requires to be done again. On the whole, I have come to the resolution not to use more than one dish at each meal. There you go. So if you hate doing dishes, you're in good company with Nathaniel Hawthorne, it is hard to keep things clean. Now, if that's true in the simple and straightforward areas of our life, like household chores, how much more true is it in our moral and our spiritual lives? It's hard to get clean, isn't it? We make mistakes and we hurt one another, or we make intentional decisions that undermine our best principles. You know, we carry the stains of our being wronged and our wronging one another, and we realize that deep down there's a kind of selfishness in us that just wants to have its own way. And so we subtly bend and manipulate things to get our own way. All that's true horizontally, but it's even more so true vertically.

The stains of sin really begin to show when we look at ourselves in relationship to God. It is in God that we live and move and have our being. Every good and perfect gift comes down from Him, the source of all good, the Father of lights, as James says. But how often do we fail to thank God and fail to love God? We live as if God were just there to meet my needs when I need Him to.

And this means that we carry within us the burden of an unclean conscience. We try to ignore or minimize it, but it always seems to be there.

[3:27] It's hard to keep things clean. And this brings us to our passage today, Numbers 19, because Numbers 19 is all about purification. It's all about getting clean.

And this chapter is going to point us to three things. It's first going to point us to our need for cleansing. Second, it's going to point us to God's provision for our cleansing. And then third, we're going to spend some time thinking about how to live as people who've been made clean.

So our need for cleansing and God's provision for cleansing, and then how to live as those who've been made clean. So let's consider first our need for cleansing. I want to pick up in the middle of chapter 19 in verse 11. Verse 11 of chapter 19. Let's pick up there. God says to Moses and Aaron, whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself defiles the tabernacle of the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from Israel because the water for impurity was not thrown on him.

He shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him. This is the law. When someone dies in a tent, everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean seven days, and

every open vessel that has no cover fastened on it is unclean. Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword or who died naturally or touches a human bone or a grave shall be unclean seven days. For the unclean, they shall take some ashes of the burnt sin offering and fresh water shall be added in a vessel. Then a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and all the furnishings and on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone or the slain or the dead or the grave. And the clean person shall sprinkle it on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day. Thus, on the seventh day, he shall cleanse him.

He shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean. If a man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord, because the water for impurity has not been thrown on him. He is unclean. And it shall be a statute forever for them. The one who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and the one who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening. And whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and whoever touches it shall be unclean until evening. Okay, so, under the Mosaic law, under the Old Covenant, contact with dead bodies made someone unclean.

[6:20] But in what sense were they rendered unclean? Well, in the Old Testament, clean and unclean were...you might think of them as sort of ritual statuses. They were sort of symbolic categories that determined whether you were able to worship at the tabernacle or, in some instances, even able...even to remain a member of the community. And certain things could render you symbolically or ritually clean or unclean. Certain skin diseases, certain foods that you ate, some of these things would render you unclean for a certain amount of time. And one of those things, as we see here, that would render you unclean is contact with dead bodies. Now, why, right? That's the first question we ask is, why did that render someone ritually unclean? Why did that give them the status of unclean that they had to sort of fix to become kind of clean again? Well, you know, a lot of commentators have sort of reflected on these clean and unclean laws. Some have pointed them to maybe their ways of distinguishing the Israelites from the pagan nations around them. Maybe they were just hygienic rules, and there's some truth in all of those. But I think here, with this contact with the dead, I think the deep underlying reason that it rendered you unclean in the Old Covenant was because in the Bible, death is connected with sin. Contact with the dead body was ritually defiling because it meant you had come into very explicit contact with the realm and power of sin. Now, that's not to say that people who accidentally walked across a grave or people who stayed at home caring for a dying loved one were breaking God's moral law. They weren't sinning in that case. They weren't doing something wrong. Rather, just exposure to death, coming into contact with death, meant coming into exposure to the ultimate manifestation of sin's power and reign in a fallen world. And that contact with sin and death needed to be appropriately acknowledged and addressed. Why? Because sin is serious.

It's the problem, really, under all of our human problems. Sin is what separates us from God and from one another. As this passage says more than one time, right? Did you catch that? Someone who deliberately chooses to remain in an unclean state and not go through the purification rituals, someone who deliberately remains in an unclean state is cut off from the tabernacle. That is, they can't go to worship God, and at the most extreme case, they're cut off from the people themselves. To say, to say to the people that sin is the biggest problem. It's what separates us from God and from one another. Okay, now, what do we do with these sorts of instructions from the Old Testament? What do we do with them today, right? Well, are we supposed to follow them every jot and tittle? Well, it's important to remember when reading anything in the Bible that the Bible is a narrative. It's a story. It's a true story, of course, but it is an unfolding narrative. So rather than read these Old Testament laws and instructions today and say, well, that seems pretty primitive and archaic. We've kind of grown beyond all that, I guess the Bible's irrelevant. Instead, we should ask this question. How does this episode, how does this connect to the story, how does this thread of being clean and unclean, where does that thread lead in the narrative? And when you read the Bible that way, you start to see that these rules about being clean and unclean, these ritual statuses, these symbolic categories that you can fall in and out of, these rules about being clean and unclean were meant to make a bigger point about our condition as human beings. You see, the ritual clean and unclean laws were there to teach God's people something.

They were there to teach us about our need for an even deeper cleansing. They were there to teach us that our human problem wasn't really about avoiding certain diseases or even avoiding death, that that's not our biggest problem. No, they were there to teach us that there was a deeper cleansing that we need.

[11 : 26] At one point in His ministry, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees because He doesn't force His disciples, Jesus doesn't force His disciples to follow all the clean and unclean traditions that had built up in the intertestamental period, in the period between the Old and the New Testament. All these traditions had grown up, kind of expanding these clean and unclean laws about hand washing and how to clean your plates and cobs.

All of it was an attempt to avoid ritual uncleanness, right? And the Pharisees come to Jesus and say, why don't you follow those? And Jesus in Mark 7 says this, He says, Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled?

And then Mark adds, Jesus thus declared all foods clean. But then listen to what Jesus says. And Jesus said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. Do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying that the cleanliness codes were meant to teach us a deeper lesson about our hearts. If it was hard to stay clean in a fallen world, ritually and symbolically, how much harder to stay clean from the heart?

[13 : 16] Think about it. If mere exposure to death meant that we needed to be ritually cleansed, how much more the exposure in our own hearts to sin itself? Think about it.

Think about it. That's what God's law was trying to teach the people. God in His kindness was teaching us. And friends, the truth is, is that all of our man-made codes about cleansing are nothing compared to the greater issue of being cleansed of sin before God.

And just like our exposure to death is unavoidable, at some point we will all come into contact with it. So our need for heart cleansing, for soul cleansing is unavoidable. We all need it.

But how do we get it? What will actually clean the spots on our souls? What will cleanse our conscience and allow us to come to God unafraid and unashamed?

Well, this brings us to the next thing that Numbers 19 points us to. It not only points us to our need for cleansing, but it also points us to God's provision.

[14 : 53] It is a sin offering.

It is a sin offering.

Okay. And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening. And this shall be a perpetual statute for the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them.

Okay. Okay. So God commands the priests to perform a special sacrifice outside the camp. And this sacrifice is meant to be burned up.

They're supposed to burn it all up completely. And then those ashes can be gathered and they can be used then for the ritual cleansing that we already read about in verses 17 and 18.

[15 : 58] Remember those? It says, for the unclean, they shall take some of the ashes of the burnt sin offering, fresh water shall be added in a vessel, and a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and all the furnishings on the persons who were there and on whoever touched the bone or the slain or the dead of the grave.

So that was the kind of process. That was the ritual. Now, I want to make three observations about this sacrifice and about this cleansing that God provides here.

First observation. Notice in the instructions and in the practice how the color red is emphasized again and again, right? It's a red heifer.

That is, it's that reddish-brown hue of a cow, right? And it's meant to be what? This red heifer is meant to be burned up with what? With cedar wood. And, you know, if you've ever seen cedar, it has a sort of reddish hue to it, doesn't it?

And what else are they supposed to throw into the fire? They're also supposed to throw in scarlet cloth, which is also red. And they're also supposed to throw in hyssop. Well, hyssop wasn't red, actually. But that was the instrument to do the ritual cleansing.

[17:00] They would take a stalk of hyssop, which had this sort of flowery, leafy end that could hold moisture, and they would dip it in the water. Sometimes they would even dip it in blood, and they would sprinkle it as part of the ritual. So all that goes into the fire. This red thing with hyssop that's meant to be applied to other people, right?

Now, why that kind of threefold redness? Interesting. Interesting. Most Jewish and Christian scholars of numbers agree that this was a way to emphasize the blood of the sacrifice.

In other words, it was to say it's the blood that affected the cleansing. The resulting ashes, of course, from the fire would all be black, right?

But there was this threefold reminder going into it that it was the blood of the sacrifice that God wanted to highlight. Why? Well, because the shedding of blood meant that the penalty of death was being paid.

Remember, the wages of sin, the just penalty for sin, is death. And the sacrifice, the sacrifice that just shed its blood in death, would then be a substitute for the worshiper, for the one to whom it was applied.

[18:19] In other words, that sacrifice died, shed its blood in penalty, so that the worshiper did not have to. Which is all to say that this cleansing that God provides is through a substitutionary sacrifice.

That the sacrifice is bearing something and paying something so that, and in the place of, the worshiper, so that they don't have to. That's the first observation.

Second observation is this. The priests who go about the job of making these ashes for cleansing, and then administering the ashes for cleansing, what happens to them?

Did you notice? They themselves become unclean in the process. After doing all this stuff that God tells them to do, they have to then go wash their clothes and bathe themselves and wait outside the camp until evening.

They have sort of this one-day uncleanness that sticks to them. And so you see what's happening in this ritual. There's an exchange happening.

[19:30] There's an exchange happening in the cleansing that God provides. In order for the person to become clean, the priest has to become unclean.

They have to exchange places, as it were, for a time being. The priest takes on some of that uncleanness and goes outside the camp so that the person can become clean and go back inside the camp.

There's an exchange. Here's the third observation. This cleansing that God provides is very generously offered.

Do you remember the context of Numbers 19? What has just happened in the story of Numbers? It was Korah's rebellion, right? And what happened in Korah's rebellion?

Thousands of people died. That meant that thousands of families in the Israelite camp had suddenly been rendered unclean. Now, how could cleansing be provided for so many people all at once?

[20:34] Would they all have to bring a kind of costly sacrifice to the tabernacle? How long would that take? How many of them could even afford it? They're wandering through the wilderness. But the cleansing, you see, you see the cleansing that God provides, it's not just for the rich and for the affluent and the haves.

It's not something, this cleansing that God provides, it's not something that's scarce or limited to just a few. It's not something that expires or might run out. No, God actually makes a way to provide cleansing, to provide a cleansing that's available to all who need it.

Those ashes can be taken out and mixed with water, and the priest can perform the necessary ritual anywhere, with anyone, even in the middle of the wilderness.

So, you see, this cleansing that God provides is generously offered. But again, the Bible is a story. How does this sacrifice of a red heifer for ritual purification, how does that theme begin to unfold in the ongoing story of Scripture? Well, it becomes clear, doesn't it?

[21:57] Just as the cleansing that we need is deeper than outward physical cleansing, outward ritual cleansing, so the cleansing that God provides for our need is more permanent and more powerful than this outward ritual sacrifice.

In fact, God Himself would come and be the sacrifice that cleansed not just our bodies but our souls.

He would come and provide a cleansing for our conscience, you see. In Jesus Christ, God took human flesh and became the perfect sacrifice and the perfect priest.

As Hebrews 9 said that we read earlier, You see, friends, Jesus provides.

God provides the true and the greater cleansing. Everything that we see in this provision of cleansing in Numbers 19 is fulfilled in Jesus. He was, after all, the ultimate substitute, was He not? [23:30] Why? Because He was fully human and fully God, He could be that substitute. As true human, as true man, He could stand in our place. And as true God, He could render a perfect sacrifice without spot or blemish.

His blood shed on the cross, His substitutionary death for us in our place is completely sufficient. All the penalty for sin, all the stain of sin has been completely washed away for those who trust in Him. And His sacrifice, it wasn't just a substitute. It was the ultimate exchange, you see. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, For our sake, God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

There's the ultimate exchange, friends. Jesus became sin for us, our sin, so that in Him we might become righteousness, His righteousness, God's righteousness.

You see, the exchange is our sin for His righteousness. He became unclean with all of our sin so that we can become clean with all of His righteousness.

[24:45] And this cleansing that Jesus provides is also generously given. It's generously offered to all who repent and believe.

The truth is, friends, we can't make ourselves clean. We can't. We can't ease our guilty consciences on our own, but Jesus can. And His cleansing is given to all who stop trying to cleanse themselves and trust in His cleansing blood, His cleansing work.

That old hymn says it well. It says, Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. Could my zeal? No respite, no. Could my tears forever flow?

All that for sin could not atone. It couldn't cleanse. Then what does the hymn say? Thou must save, and thou alone. And friends, here's the good news.

Jesus delights to save and to cleanse all who come to Him. This cleansing is not limited to the rich and the famous.

[25:57] It's not scarce or in danger of running out. It's sufficient for all and everyone who comes in faith. And just think, if the ashes of the heifer provided a temporary external cleansing, just think of how deep and how lasting, how eternally lasting is the work of Christ's own blood shed for you.

One writer I ran across this week said, It's sort of like the difference between instant coffee and the real thing. You know, the ashes of a heifer could be mixed with water, right?

Like instant coffee. And then it could provide some temporary relief. And now if you've ever had instant coffee, you know how temporary that relief is. It's very dissatisfying, right? Even the supposedly good stuff from Starbucks, you still pour it in the hot water and you're like, this is gross, right?

Ah. But once you hold a real cup of coffee in your hands, maybe iced coffee, right, on a morning like this, that's the stuff.

You know, most of us try instant coffee to try to ease our burdened souls. We want to erase the spots.

[27:07] We want to cleanse our conscience. But it doesn't work. We try to minimize the things that we've done. We try to say it's not that bad. We try to just forget about it. We try to distract ourselves.

You know, but those temporary instant coffee-like strategies, they can't really make us clean. But Jesus can, and He does.

So you can come to Him. Listen to how Paul describes this cleansing in Titus 3, 3 through 7. He says, He says, You see, friends, the cleansing work of His justifying grace, of His Holy Spirit, regenerating you, giving you new spiritual life. That is open for all who believe. Look at the list that Paul says.

Who qualifies for this cleansing? I'll tell you who qualifies for this cleansing. The foolish, the disobedient, the ones who are slaves to passions and pleasures, who pass our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

[29:06] If that's you, and I think that's all of us, friends, then this cleansing is for you. It's open for all who believe. So if you haven't come to Christ for cleansing, what holds you back?

Believe in Him today and know the cleansing that only He can provide. Now this brings us to our last point. What does it look like? What does it look like to live as people who've been cleansed? What difference does this start to make in our lives? Well, Numbers 19 doesn't have much to say about this, but remember, the Bible is a narrative. It's a story. It's going somewhere. So where does this story of God's cleansing take us?

How does it shape how we live? Well, let me briefly mention three things. First, it means that we have freedom to confess our sins. 1 John 1, 8 and 9 says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, He's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. You see, if you know this deep soul cleansing that Jesus provides, then that means you aren't afraid anymore of honestly facing up to your own sins.

[30 : 25] When God shows you more and more of your indwelling sin, and by the Holy Spirit He will, then because of the cleansing of Christ, you have the freedom and the confidence to take those things to God in confession, confident that God will, on the basis of Christ, be faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse.

This is why we make a practice each Sunday of confessing our sins together and of hearing again a word of gospel assurance.

This is the great privilege and joy of the cleansing that we've received in Christ. We no longer need to hide or minimize or distract ourselves from our sin and our guilt. We can actually face it and deal with it without fear, and we can experience God's forgiving and cleansing grace for whatever He reveals in our lives.

Second, how do we live as those who've been made clean? Well, the New Testament is very clear that we no longer stay in our uncleanness.

Because our identity is now those who are in Christ, who have been cleansed, because His Holy Spirit now dwells in us, we have the ability and the call to live differently.

[31 : 49] We don't want to go back to our old paths of uncleanness, whether it was sexual immorality or addiction or greeting covetousness or lying and manipulating or pride in self-righteousness.

All those things describe who we used to be. But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6.11, he says, and such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you're justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

You see, you're someone different now, and we can walk in paths of holiness now that we've been made clean. And the last thing, how do we live as those who've been made clean?

Well, in the community of the gospel, in the church of Jesus Christ, we do not call unclean what God has called clean.

This was a lesson that the early church learned powerfully when God began calling Gentiles into the family of God on the same footing as the Jews, simply by grace through faith in Christ.

[33 : 04] God had to send Peter a vision three times to show him that what God calls clean is clean. And that means that today we don't divide the church on the basis of Jew and Gentile, do we?

We don't divide the church on the basis of race or ethnicity. We don't divide the church on the basis of married or single or young or old. In other words, there are no second-class citizens in the household of faith.

We are all made clean by the blood of Christ, and that makes us one. And this fact is demonstrated in the Lord's Supper. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, this cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?

And this bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? And then he says this, because there's one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. You see, that's what unifies us. The work of Christ, the blood of Christ, the body of Christ shed for us for our cleansing. We aren't cleansed and justified by our culture, our educational background, our social status.

[34 : 26] We're all equals before the cleansing work of Christ. And that means the church is a place where, maybe out in the world, people who seem to be natural enemies become friends, where our differences are all submitted to Christ and to His kingdom, and we begin to value what each brings to the body of Christ.

That's what it looks like to live as those who've been cleansed. So, brothers and sisters, as we come again to the Lord's Supper, let's rejoice again in the great and wonderful news that Christ has cleansed us.

And at the table, let's renew our commitment to confess our sins, to walk in holiness, and to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's pray together. Father, how very grateful we are for Your cleansing work. Jesus, we praise You for this.

Lord, perhaps there are some here, even this morning, who carry the burden of a stained conscience. Lord, would You grant by Your Holy Spirit eyes of faith to see Christ as Savior, as purifier, as cleanser through His blood.

[36:09] And we ask for the Holy Spirit to do His work now as we come to the table. Fan the flames of our faith, we pray. Renew us. Renew our confidence in Your cleansing power.

Renew our joy and sins forgiven. Renew our commitment to love and serve one another having been cleansed. In Your name we pray, Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Amen.