

On Defilement

Numbers 5:1–10

We live in a world under a curse because of Adam’s sin. One of the effects of the fall is disease. As Christians, we long for the day when faith will be sight, when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes, and there will be no more death, sorrow or crying—when our ascended Lord will make all things new. But in the meantime we pray for God’s blessing, knowing that he promises to bless those who obey him and seek his glory. He promises: “If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put *none of the diseases* on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who *heals* you” (Ex. 15:26).

Yet sometimes the LORD permits even those who look to him in faith to experience bad health—even chronic conditions. The apostle Paul experienced a “*thorn in the flesh*” that greatly troubled him. Three times he earnestly prayed to the Lord that he would remove it, but it still did not go away. Three times the Lord reassured him: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in *weakness*.” Paul did not despair. Rather, taught by the Holy Spirit of God, he declared, “Therefore *most gladly* I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in *infirmities*, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am *weak*, then I am strong.”¹ Such was the work of the Spirit in a heart that was fully yielded to him.

If being a Christian meant that one would always experience perfect health, then people would line up to become Christians. They would come to Christ, not out of love for him who gave his life for sinners, but for what they could get out of him. Becoming a Christian would become an economic transaction: I confess Christ, so I can have excellent health. But God wants us to love him for *who he is*, not for what we can get out of him.

In our text this morning we read: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every *leper*, everyone who has a *discharge*, and whoever becomes *defiled* by a corpse. You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which *I dwell*.’ And the children of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD spoke to Moses, so the children of Israel did.”

Here were people who were suffering physically, such as those with leprosy, a term for various dreaded skin diseases. I’m sure many of them, like Paul, had prayed for physical healing, but they continued to suffer. Others had bodily

¹ 2 Cor. 12:9–10

discharges in their intimate parts. Still others had touched a corpse, such as those who had had to carry out a dead body for burial. Because of these conditions, they could not stay in their tents with their families and tribes. They must be excluded from the holy people for a time. This law applied not only to Israel as they traveled through the wilderness; it would also apply later, as they inhabited cities and towns in the land of Israel. The purpose was that they “may not *defile* their camps,” in the midst of which our holy God would dwell. God was teaching them a lesson: that they were a holy people, for God himself dwelt in their midst. Calvin explains: “all the habitations of His elect people were parts of His sanctuary, which it was a shame to defile with any pollution.”² Remember the divinely-appointed arrangement of their encampment: the tabernacle or tent of meeting was in the center, surrounded by the families of the Levites, who protected it from any incursion, whether deliberate or unintentional, even from the other tribes of Israel. Three tribes encamped on every side—on the south, west, north and east. The total number of Israelites would have been about three million people, and God was in the center. But Israel was God’s holy people, and those who had a condition that prevented them from worshipping at the tabernacle must be excluded from the camp entirely—at least for a time, until their condition was remedied, and they could return.

This taught the people of Israel (to paraphrase Calvin) that those who are defiled *cannot* serve God appropriately. Rather, their very presence with the people of God in worship pollutes what is otherwise holy. Their presence could not be tolerated in the holy congregation, lest their infection spread to others.³ This is why whether to receive the Lord’s supper or refrain from taking it is not a matter left up to the worshiper alone, at his own discretion. The elders serving Communion are duty-bound to serve the elements only to those who are qualified—to those who have professed Christ and are submitting in the Lord to their ordained officers.

When the church gathers for the Lord’s supper, it is our duty as worshipers to *examine* ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup⁴; otherwise, we partake unworthily, not discerning the Lord’s body—and eat and drink *damnation* to ourselves. If we have an unresolved matter with any other brother or sister in Christ, we are to resolve it before partaking of the Lord’s supper; otherwise, the blessing that we hope to gain from observing the ordinance will turn into a curse. God is a God of holiness, and he has not changed. We are to be holy, as *he* is holy. Unless we are clothed with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, our worship is

² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, at Num. 5:2 (Logos Bible Software).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 1 Cor. 11:28

in vain. God's worship is a serious matter, and is not to be entered into lightly or carelessly.

Our text speaks specifically of those who have sinned against another person. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 5: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel: "When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess the sin which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give it to the one he has wronged. But if the man has no relative to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for the wrong must go to the LORD for the priest, in addition to the ram of the atonement with which atonement is made for him. Every offering of all the holy things of the children of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. And every man's holy things shall be his; whatever any man gives the priest shall be his.'"""

Two commandments are in view here: the fifth commandment, which requires "the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals,"⁵ and particularly the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," which, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, "forbids not only outright theft and robbery . . . but . . . also . . . all evil tricks and schemes designed to get our neighbor's goods for ourselves, whether by force or means that appear legitimate, such as inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God."⁶

If we have cheated a neighbor out of what is lawfully his by any means whatsoever, it is our duty to restore what we have fraudulently or wrongfully taken for ourselves. We ought to repay what we have stolen and make restitution out of the best of our own goods. Furthermore, we are to add a fifth part to what we owe him, to compensate him for having been deprived of his property.

For example, if I steal one of my neighbor's books and spill coffee all over it, I should not only replace the book with a new one, but also throw in an extra book that he would enjoy. If I borrow his sports equipment and ruin it, I should buy him some new equipment and throw in some cash or a gym membership as well. We should never profit from a theft. We should be sorry for our crime, restore what we stolen, and add extra value besides. The victim of the theft should in the end be further ahead than before I stole his goods.

As it says in Leviticus, the thief "shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing which he has extorted, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 64, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

⁶ Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 110, <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>

its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering.”⁷ The trespass offering is fulfilled in Christ, who died, “the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.”⁸ Under the Gospel we no longer bring an animal sacrifice; but an appropriate New Testament counterpart might be to confess what we have done before the church and testify publicly how thankful we are for the work of Christ, who bore our guilt on our behalf—perhaps also giving an extra gift to the church for the work of missions, to take the gospel to others.

The point of our text in Numbers 5 is that *sin brings guilt and defilement*: because I *sin*, I am *guilty*, and need to seek the forgiveness of the person I sinned against, as well as the God of heaven, who is the ultimate victim of my crime, since it detracts from his glory. My villainy also defiles *me*—it leaves me soiled, befouled, tainted—just as leprosy or a bodily discharge defiles the body.

Numbers 35:33 makes this clear: “So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are: *for blood it defileth the land*: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.” Here is a statement of a general principle: “blood it defileth the land.” Sin defiles, it befouls, it renders the sinner dirty in the sight of a holy God. This Numbers 35 reference speaks of bloodshed—murder—but the principle applies to other sins.

The New Testament picks up this idea as well. Jesus said, “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this *defiles* a man” (Matt. 15:11). Here is a reference to sins of speech—lying, cursing, defaming. What comes out of the mouth *defiles* a man; it renders the person with the foul mouth unfit to worship God. It must be *confessed*, it must be *forgiven*, it must be *washed away* by the blood of him who cleanses his people from all sin.

The principle that sin defiles is expressed at the very end of the Bible as well, where it speaks of the holy city, the New Jerusalem: “But there shall by no means enter it *anything that defiles*, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev. 21). The message is clear: *sin defiles the sinner*. God is holy, and I am sinful. Unless my sins are washed away by the precious blood of Christ, and I am clothed with his perfect righteousness as a free gift, I cannot enter the holy city, the New Jerusalem—heaven itself. But by rights I should not enter the earthly company of God’s people either, for I am defiled by my sin. The church is specifically called “the Jerusalem that is above”: “But *Jerusalem which is above* is free, which is the mother of us all.”⁹

The writer to the Hebrews says that those who have come to Christ “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an

⁷ Lev. 6:4–5

⁸ 1 Pet. 3:18

⁹ Gal. 4:26

innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:22–23): not “will come” someday, but “have come”—past tense.¹⁰ But remember! “There shall by no means enter it anything that *defiles*.” The only way to get into the church militant here on earth or the church triumphant in heaven is to have the defilement of your sins washed away by the blood of Christ. *Sin brings guilt and defilement to the sinner*. And “what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!” Amen!

In the physical world, filthy environments can serve as a breeding ground for pathogens and increase risk of disease. One website explained it this way:

Filthy surroundings can harbor bacteria, viruses and parasites that cause illness. Contaminated water sources can harbor pathogens like *E. coli* and hepatitis A, leading to severe gastrointestinal infections. Stagnant water can become a breeding site for mosquitoes, which can spread diseases such as malaria. Dust, mold, and other airborne particles can thrive in unclean spaces, leading to chronic respiratory conditions. Parasites like scabies mites can infest the skin, leading to intense itching and rashes.¹¹ This is why it is a good idea to wash hands and disinfect surfaces as a means of protecting yourself from infection.

Remember that our text from Numbers requires the quarantine of those who are diseased. Notice that the Bible prescribes the quarantining—the isolation—of the *diseased*. Anthony Fauci and the medical bureaucracy got it wrong: the quarantining and isolation of the *healthy*. It was a bald-faced power grab. Rather than urge those that were *sick* to stay home and get better, power-hungry bureaucrats told those that were *well* to stay home. They got it exactly backwards.

If you have a communicable disease and are infectious, then charity would dictate that you ought to stay home from worship. But be consistent: If disease compels you to stay home from worship, then you ought also to stay home from work, from school, from shopping, from entertainment—from everything. Call on your Christian brothers and sisters to go get the things that you need until you are better. Then return to church, offer a gift of thanksgiving to the Lord for his healing mercies, and return to work and resume normal interactions with other people.

God’s law required that the leper—the person with a highly-infectious skin disease—would walk around with his clothes torn and his head bare. He should “cover his mustache, and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”¹²—the very same word for “unclean” used in our Numbers text.

¹⁰ προσεληλύθατε (perfect passive indicative)—*perfect* is one of the four Greek past tenses (along with imperfect, aorist and pluperfect)

¹¹ <https://shunwaste.com/article/how-can-a-dirty-environment-affect-us>

¹² Ex. 15:26

But when the Lord Jesus came to earth, he *touch*ed lepers! Jesus touched lepers in Matthew 8, Mark 1, and Luke 5.¹³ He healed lepers by *touching* them, demonstrating his compassion and authority over disease.

Are you suffering from a disease or chronic condition? It is discouraging, but remember: “We know that *all things* work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” “*All things*”—no exceptions! As observed in the Heidelberg Catechism, God “will turn to my good *whatever adversity* he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.”¹⁴ “*Whatever adversity!*” If God afflicts you in body, mind or soul, if he subjects you to loss or disappointment or injustice, remember, he is wiser than you—infinately wiser! He knows the end from the beginning. Nothing takes him by surprise. He is working out all things according to the the purpose of his own will. He loves you with an everlasting love. He sent his Son to die for you. He called you into fellowship with himself. He will withhold no good from you. He has your best interest at heart. This life is short, compared to eternity. Nothing can separate you from his love. Pray for grace, like Paul, to be able to say, “I now *rejoice* in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body . . . the church.”¹⁵

As we close, consider the words of Solomon that he prayed at the dedication of the temple. Turn with me to 1 Kings 8:37ff. and read them with me. Solomon prayed: “When there is famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, *when each one knows the plague of his own heart*, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.”

Here is trouble in the land—famine, pestilence, blight, mildew, locusts, invading armies, plague, sickness. But notice the *purpose* of all these sore troubles: to show each of us *the plague of his own heart!* Whatever horrible thing is happening to us, the plague of our own *heart* is worse. *Sin brings guilt and defilement*—but happy is the man or woman, boy or girl, who is well aware of the plague of his own heart. Sin within needs to be mortified—regarded as dead. By the Spirit’s help we need to become dead to sin and alive unto God. We have to

¹³ Matt. 8:1–4, Mark 1:40–45, and Luke 5:12–16

¹⁴ Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 9, <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>

¹⁵ Col. 1:24

come to the realization that our only hope is the Cross, the Gospel, and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God, who cleanses us from the defilement of sin and credits us with the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ! Amen.