

Dealing with Sin in the Congregation (Numbers 15)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. The Israelites are in the Wilderness. After Moses sent out the twelve spies to explore the Promised Land, the people rebelled against Moses and against the Lord, and wanted to return to Egypt.
- b. As a result, the Lord sentenced the entire community to continue their journey for 40 years, one year for every day the spies had been on their trip to explore Canaan.
- c. Of that first generation, of those over the age of 20 (from the first census, as recorded at the beginning of **Numbers**), only Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land at the end of the 40 years. All the others would die in the desert, but their children would enter Canaan.
- d. As we have discussed several times in this series of messages, the 40-year period of Israel in the Wilderness is a pattern or map of the Christian life. This is alluded to in **1 Corinthians 10** and at least two other places in the New Testament.
 - i. Crossing through the water of the Red Sea = baptism
 - ii. Pillar of cloud and fire that led the people out of Egypt and throughout their journey = Holy Spirit
 - iii. Rock from which people drank = Christ
 - iv. Trials and temptations they faced = those we face in the Christian life
 - v. Joshua and Caleb = those who remain faithful to the end of the journey and inherit the promised reward
 - vi. The entire community in the Wilderness = the church
 1. The Greek word (ekklesia / ἐκκλησία) is translated “church” in several places in the New Testament. This is the same word that is used in the LXX and in the New Testament in referring to Israel (the assembly or congregation in the Wilderness). Some examples follow.

- a. In **Deuteronomy 4:10** (LXX, OSB): “concerning the day you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly....”
- b. Similarly, the same word is used in the LXX in **Deuteronomy 9:10, 18:15**, etc.: “in the day of the assembly”.
- c. Stephen used the same term in the New Testament, in his speech to the Sanhedrin, when referring to Moses.
 - i. “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt....” (**Acts 7:38–39**, NKJV)
- d. This is the same word used when Jesus told Peter, “on this rock I will build my church” (**Matthew 16:18**).
- e. Also used when Jesus teaches about addressing sin within the group of those who will be following Him, the church:
 - i. Read **Matthew 18:15-17**.
 - ii. “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (**Matthew 18:17**, NKJV)
- e. **Question:** If the congregation of the Israelites in the Wilderness represents the church, what have we learned thus far about the church?
 - i. The church may be headed in the right direction, guided by the Spirit, yet many of the people can be in bad shape spiritually.
 - ii. Even though everyone has been baptized, there is still a recurring problem with sin.
 - 1. We have seen in **Exodus** and **Numbers** problems with idolatry, complaining, and repeatedly rebelling against the Lord and disobeying His commands.
 - 2. We will see even more of that in the rest of **Numbers**.

- iii. Many of those who are in the church will not make it to the Promised Land. Not everyone who is currently in the church will receive the promised inheritance.
 - 1. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 10:11** that what happened to most of the Israelites in the Wilderness (dying because of their sins and not making it to the Promised Land) should serve as a warning for us Christians.
- iv. We should not be shocked if we see sin in the church, *extending even to the very top ranks*. Consider examples of leaders among the “congregation/assembly/church” who sinned and fell in the Wilderness:
 - 1. Aaron, the high priest and brother of God, the spokesman for the Lord and for Moses, was the one who asked the people for earrings and, from them, fashioned the idolatrous golden calf. (**Exodus 32**)
 - 2. Aaron and Miriam were jealous of Moses and spoke badly about him. (**Numbers 12**)
 - 3. Nadab and Abihu, who were two of the four sons of Aaron, priests serving before the altar, sinned grievously to the point where the Lord struck them dead. (**Leviticus 10**)
 - 4. The twelve spies sent out by Moses were leaders from among each of the twelve tribes. Ten of them ended up being unfaithful, spreading a bad report among the people that led to a widespread rebellion against the Lord. (**Numbers 13**)
 - 5. We will see even more examples of leaders in the ‘church/assembly’ getting involved in serious sins, as we continue in **Numbers**.
 - a. *Even Moses* ends up being disqualified, for striking the rock in disobedience to the Lord’s command (**Numbers 20:8-13**).
- f. Lessons for us:
 - i. There will be sin in the church, even going to the very top leadership.
 - ii. The church will not be perfect. We will not be able to come up with any system that keeps Satan completely sealed out.
- g. Here in New England, no one is shocked when it snows in the winter. While it does not snow all the time, we expect it. Therefore, we prepare for it

(gloves, coats, shovels, sand, salt, good car tires, scrapers, flashlights, candles, batteries, wiper fluid, etc.).

- i. Yet in many churches, people are shocked when sin is discovered, even among those in high positions or who are impressive on the outside. This happens in all church groups, not only among the members, but in top leadership.
- ii. This does not just happen in 'other churches', those that have a 'less perfect theology' than the one we might be in. It happens everywhere, in all kinds of churches.
 1. Consider the churches founded by the apostles, in places like Corinth (**1 Corinthians**) and Thyatira (**Revelation 2**).
 2. In their letters, the apostles repeatedly warn us about this. Consider the warnings Paul gave to the elders of the church in Ephesus, in his farewell address to them (**Acts 20**).
 - a. Paul said: "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." (**Acts 20:30-31**, NKJV)
 3. **Question:** Do we really think that we can do a better job of keeping Satan's influence out of our churches than the apostles and their disciples did?
- h. There will be sin in the church. It will lead to the downfall of prominent leaders as well as members. Many will not make it.
 - i. Therefore, we should not be shocked, and our faith in Jesus should not be shaken, when we see these things happen!
 - i. **Question:** How do we prepare ourselves in advance, and what do we do in a moment of crisis when a 'blizzard' of sin assaults the church or its leaders?

II. Different Levels of Sin

- a. Overview of **Numbers 15:1-21**.
 - i. Specific rules for various types of offerings.
- b. Read **Numbers 15:22-31**.
 - i. The Lord makes a distinction between "involuntary" sin and deliberate, intentional sin.

1. One is considered much worse than the other, in the eyes of God.
- ii. The punishment is much more severe when the people are fully aware of a sin committed by them (or by someone among them) versus someone in their midst sinning without their knowledge.
 1. Not all sin is viewed the same by the Lord. Some sins are more serious than others.
 2. God will deal with people differently, depending on their sin and their level of awareness.
 3. If someone in the congregation sins and the people are not aware of it, the people can offer an animal sacrifice.
 4. However, the one who deliberately, arrogantly sins will be destroyed.
 - a. Show no partiality (in how the resident alien is treated, versus a Jewish man or woman).
 - b. People are all to be treated the same before the Lord.
- iii. This reminds me of something Jesus said regarding how He will treat His servants upon His return. The degree of punishment that will be given out to sinners will depend on their prior level of awareness.
 1. Read **Luke 12:42-48**.
 - a. The one who knows His master's will and does not do it (deliberately disobedient) will be beaten with many (stripes/blows).
 - b. The one who did not know yet does bad things also will be punished, but less severely.
 - c. Not all sin is the same, and the punishment will be related to the knowledge and willfulness of the sinner.
 - d. Perhaps this is why those who teach will face a more severe judgment.
 - i. Those who teach know better; they have absolutely no excuse.
 - ii. In addition to bearing more responsibility, they also would be hypocrites, not doing what they know they should.

iii. This is perhaps the hardest (and scariest) thing about being a serious student and teacher of the Bible. Absolutely no excuses, and facing a more severe punishment if we deliberately disobey God.

1. May we have many brothers who are willing to aspire and obtain a place of knowing the Scriptures very well, despite the challenge of facing a greater judgment!

III. Dealing with Sin in the Community

a. Read **Numbers 15:32-36**.

b. Storyline.

i. Someone is found gathering firewood on the Sabbath (Saturday).

1. This may strike some as an extreme punishment (death by public stoning) that is out of proportion with the relatively minor infraction committed (picking up some firewood on the wrong day).

2. This directly violated the Fourth Commandment, which the Lord spoke in the hearing of all the people at Mount Sinai. That had been delivered when the Lord descended on the mountain in a dark cloud with thunder and lightening, accompanied with the sound of a trumpet (and the people were terrified!).

a. Read **Exodus 20:8-11**.

b. These instructions are very clear. While some might have questions regarding how to precisely define 'work', a person collecting firewood would clearly be 'over the line'.

ii. People see this and do the right thing. They know there is a problem and report this to Moses.

iii. Moses then follows the direct instruction of the Lord. The man is publicly stoned. He is executed by and before all the people.

c. Many will struggle with this story.

i. Many are repulsed by stories like this, seeing 'the God of the Old Testament' calling for people to be killed. They also can struggle with the mode of execution, stoning the guilty person.

- ii. **Questions:** What would have happened if the people who saw the sin just looked the other way, or made excuses for the man? What if they observed the sin, but were simply *enablers*?
- iii. **Question:** What are the kinds of excuses they *could have made* for themselves, to *not* bring this violation of the Law to Moses' attention?
 - 1. Too busy, don't want to be judgmental, this is a 'nice guy', just one mistake, having a bad day, etc.
- iv. **Question:** Why did Moses execute the man in such a public, graphic manner?
 - 1. Why didn't Moses say, "I know how the Lord is...He is patient, longsuffering, slow to anger, forgiving sins and transgressions etc... so I think I should just give him a 'pass' this time." (based on his encounter with the Lord in **Exodus 34:6-7a**)
 - 2. What if "the most humble (or meekest) man on the face of the earth" (**Numbers 12:3** was, instead, the greatest *enabler* on the face of the earth?
 - 3. Did he not understand the grace of God? That God is patient, longsuffering and forgiving?
 - a. No, it was God who told him to have the man stoned.
 - b. Moses *was not* more loving and merciful than God!
- v. **Questions:** Why was the man who collected wood on the Sabbath stoned? What would have happened if he was just rebuked or given a stern warning instead? If he had to be executed, why did they have to do so in such a public, graphic way?
 - 1. This story provides a lesson to all (including to us today) on the *serious consequences of deliberate sin*, and how God views this.
 - 2. Recall the incredibly sobering warnings of Jesus regarding the serious consequences of sin.
 - a. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
 - b. "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it

off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where “Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.” (**Mark 9:42–44**, NKJV)

- c. A related side comment, especially for fathers of young children:
 - i. It is critical to teach your children at an early age to obey their parents, and that there will be consequences if they do not. That will help them appreciate, from an early age, that the Lord will expect them to obey Him and His commands.
 - ii. Parents who excuse away bad behavior in their children, or enable their sin, are setting them up for severe spiritual problems later in life!

3. Read **1 Corinthians 5:1-8**.

- a. Sin, like yeast, will spread and destroy the lives of many in the church, if leaders neglect to deal firmly with it.
 - i. “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that *a little leaven leavens the whole lump*? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (**1 Corinthians 5:6–8**, NKJV)
 - ii. If the yeast or leaven of sin is not removed, it will spread through the entire church, and many more will become defiled.
 - iii. Similarly, if Moses did not provide strong discipline of the Lord to the Sabbath-breaker, the rest of the assembly would have been emboldened to disregard the commands of God, and thereby many more would have been destroyed.

- b. The discipline is imposed upon a sinner to bring him or her to repentance, and hopefully to save the person's soul in the end.
- 4. Similarly, in the story of the Israelite men committing fornication with Moabite women, the plague of death is stopped only when Phinehas strikes down the sinning couple. (**Numbers 25**)
- 5. Exposing and dealing with serious sin versus hiding it.
 - a. **Question:** What do most churches (regardless of whether the church is Roman Catholic, Protestant, Anabaptist or other) do when they discover sin among their leaders?
 - b. **Answer (Almost Without Exception):** They cover up the sin and hide it from their members (instead of exposing it)!
 - i. Unfortunately, most religious "shepherds" are like the bad shepherds who are rebuked by the Lord in **Ezekiel 34**. They look out for themselves (and perhaps for the other shepherds), instead of looking out for the sheep.
 - ii. This is what happened in Boston with the Roman Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal.
 - iii. As Jesus said, the good shepherd is one who will *lay down his life for the sheep* (**John 10:11**).
 - c. **Example:** Recent lawsuits alleging sexual sins against minors were filed against one church fellowship I was once a member of, as well as another church I am familiar with.
 - i. The allegations of sexual abuse of minors certainly is tragic.
 - ii. However, in some ways, the efforts of the church leaders to cover up the crime and protect the perpetrators were *even worse*, in the eyes of many.
 - d. Most churches hide the sins of their leaders, rather than expose them, for multiple reasons (all of them bad). They don't want to be transparent, often out of fear that

they will end up losing members or money (contributions). Typical rationales for hiding the sins of church leaders include:

- i. "But people will *lose their faith* if the truth comes out!"
- ii. Acknowledging the truth would smash the illusion that "*all* the Christians in our church, especially our impressive leaders, are loving and righteous people."
 - 1. Evangelistic outreach on the basis of inviting people into a warm, loving, 'perfect' community of supportive friends is building on a false foundation. That was not how the faith was spread in the beginning by the apostles.
 - 2. Satan is real, and there are evil people out there, unfortunately, even in churches. We need to face the truth and address problems we have been warned about in the manner that the Scriptures direct us.
 - 3. A church built with no solid foundation will not last when storms hit.
- e. The Biblical solution to the problem: expose the sin.
 - i. The general outline for handling sin in the congregation is similar to the approach we saw in the firewood story in **Numbers 15**, namely:
 - 1. Those who first observe serious sin on the part of a church member need to report it to responsible, spiritual leaders (and not 'look the other way' or make excuses).
 - 2. The leaders need to follow the instructions in the New Testament regarding how to address specific sins within the church.
 - 3. No excuses, no 'enabling sin'. No partiality, either.

ii. Read **1 Timothy 5:17-20**.

1. This passage (the part where it says we should rebuke elders publicly when they sin) is almost never taught in churches today, for obvious reasons.
2. The instructions here are challenging, but quite clear.
3. Let's teach this approach, practice it in our fellowship, and advocate for it wherever we go.

iii. When we see sin in the church, we need to address it exactly as the Bible tells us to. That includes what it says in:

1. **Matthew 5** (settling matters quickly);
2. **Matthew 18** (going directly to the person first, then bringing others in, before bringing them before the entire church);
3. **1 Corinthians 5** (putting out of the church those who are unrepentant and involved in serious sin); and
4. **1 Timothy 5** (elders to be charged by at least two witnesses, with public rebuke before the church if they are guilty).
5. Follow all of these Scriptural directives *without partiality* (regardless of prominent or not, wealthy or poor, leaders or not).
6. What really destroys churches is when church leaders start playing favorites and do not handle sin as the Bible directs. People see the hypocrisy and partiality and want nothing to do with the church!

iv. **Questions:**

1. How many church scandals would have been minimized or eliminated if churches

simply followed these clear Scriptural directives?

2. How do you think the people responded after the guy gets stoned for working on the Sabbath?
 3. How would other church elders respond if one elder is rebuked before the entire church?
- f. Sunlight, bringing the darkness of sin into the light, is the best disinfectant!
- i. As Jesus said: “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” **(John 3:19–21, NKJV)**
 - ii. Mold grows on two or three sides of the exterior of my home. However, it does not grow on the south side, because that side is *in the sun all day long*, and sunlight kills mold!
 - iii. In my profession of environmental engineering, one of the most effective ways to disinfect water to kill germs is by using *ultraviolet (UV) light*. For that, we immerse special lightbulbs in the flow. These lightbulbs are designed to produce a large amount of UV radiation (similar to that in natural sunlight).
 - iv. Likewise, exposing the sin of leaders (and the threat to do so) can keep our church leaders out of sin, and put the fear of God into the rest of the church, as well!