

# Concentric Circles of Holiness

*Numbers 5–6*

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## Introduction: Preparing to Move

We come this morning to an interesting and difficult passage. The book of Numbers opens with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, preparing to depart into the wilderness. They have been camped there for a year, and in chapters 1 through 4, they have received detailed instructions for how to organize themselves as an army, how to march, and how to transport the tabernacle. Everything is practical and makes good sense. If you jump ahead to chapter 7, you find them making final preparations, celebrating the Passover at the foot of Sinai, and then in chapter 10 they set out at last into the wilderness.

Right in the middle of these departure preparations, there are four laws that seem strangely out of place — laws that fit more comfortably in Leviticus or Deuteronomy than here in Numbers. And one of these laws is a passage that critics of the Bible regularly point to and say, “Look how awful this book is. How can anyone follow it, let alone let it have authority over their life?” That reaction is, I think, all the more reason we need to sit with this passage and take it seriously.

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## A Word About Interpretation

Before we look at the text itself, I want to say something about how we interpret the Bible, because this morning I will be taking some very large leaps of interpretation, and I want you to understand the framework behind them.

Understanding Scripture is not always clear and easy. There is a vast gap between us and the original hearers of these texts — a gap created by differences in culture, history, and language. We can narrow that gap through careful study of those very things. But I have found that alongside all the academic work, there also needs to be a certain attitude of the heart when you encounter a confusing or troubling passage. Let me share a few of those convictions.

I trust that God is good. He is good, and therefore the book that reveals him can be trusted to be good. Those passages that are difficult or troubling will, if I am patient enough to study them prayerfully, reveal that goodness.

I trust that God's word is beautiful — that it is, in fact, a masterpiece. The world wants you to think of the Bible as a loose collection of stories glued together with no apparent order. That is simply not true. The Bible is a masterpiece in how it is written, in its structure, and in its arrangement. *How* it is written often speaks just as loudly as what the text says on the surface. When something seems out of place, it is not. One of the first questions I ask myself when studying a passage is: *Why is this here?* I trust there is a purpose, and I go looking for it.

I trust that the Bible is life-giving. God's word directs our steps, gives wisdom, and deepens the soul. That means even a passage that initially means nothing to me will, if I study it and sink into it, eventually open up and feed my soul.

I trust the Bible to be relevant for my life today, even though its newest parts are nearly two thousand years old and its oldest parts three thousand. One of the things that makes it continually relevant is the nature of biblical law — specifically, that much of the law is meant to function like case law. The law says that if your ox falls into a ditch on the Sabbath, you may pull it out. But what if it is a goat? Of course you may still pull it out. The law serves as a template to be applied across a broader spectrum of life, and we are expected to make those leaps of application. This is exactly what Jesus did when accused of healing on the Sabbath — he pointed back to that very principle and said, in effect, *this is what I am doing*.

Today I will be making some of those leaps, but I am doing so from a posture of trust in the goodness, beauty, and life-giving power of God's word.

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## Four Laws, One Thread

Numbers 5 and 6 give us four laws, and the thread that ties them together is holiness. I understand holiness to mean being genuinely different from this world — set apart — and being pure with respect to sin, and being pleasing to God. As the Lord says in Leviticus 19:2:

“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, *You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*”

We are to be a holy people.

And that holiness, as these four laws unfold, can be described as a series of concentric circles — moving from the outermost ring of corporate community life inward, step by step, until we arrive at the life of the individual standing alone before God.

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## The Outer Circle: Holiness in the Community

The outermost circle is holiness at the community level. We see it in the first law:

*“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.’ And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.” (Numbers 5:1–4)*

At the corporate level, the people are commanded to be pure and holy before the Lord. If you go back to Leviticus 12 and read the fuller context of these purity laws, you also find instructions for how those put outside the camp are to be brought back in. This is not about permanent exclusion. It is about the holiness of the gathered people, because the Lord dwells in their midst.

What does this mean for us as a church today? It does not mean we close our doors to people who are in unrepentant sin or who do not yet know Jesus. Some churches practice formal excommunication, removing people from fellowship, and I disagree with that approach. How else will people come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ if the church closes its doors to them? And frankly, if we start shutting the doors on sinners, there will be no one left to unlock them on Sunday morning. All are welcome here — near and far — to come and give thanks and praise to the Lord. We can only come by his grace.

So what does it mean for us to pursue holiness as a community? I think it means a couple of things. First, we practice a communion that is open to all who have believed upon Jesus Christ, but closed to those who have not. There is a defining marker to our identity, and that marker is faith and trust in Jesus Christ. If you are someone who does not yet follow or believe in Jesus, you are genuinely welcome here, but you do not yet share in the inheritance we have in him or the fullness of that fellowship.

Second, I think we pursue community holiness by being a safe church. You see it in how we have constructed this building — no hidden hallways, no isolated rooms, everything open and visible. You see it in the background checks and training required for those who work with our children. You see it in the care our deacons take to limit the involvement of those who have shown themselves to be wolves in sheep’s clothing. There is more to say here, but I need to keep moving.

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## The Second Circle: Holiness in Our Relationships

The second law moves from the larger community to our interpersonal relationships. Numbers 5:5–10:

*“When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.”*

This command is about the relationships between people. To keep a relationship holy and pleasing to God means that if I have wronged you, I need to confess that wrong and seek to make it right. This second law is about not allowing conflict to grow and fester within the community. Sin — unrepentant, unrecognized, unconfessed, and unforgiven — creates conflict and destroys community. If you have been in a church for any length of time, you know that to be true.

To live in relationship with others in a way that is pleasing to God means cultivating a readiness to confess sin, a readiness to take responsibility, and I would add, a readiness to forgive.

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## The Third Circle: Holiness in Marriage

The third law moves from interpersonal relationships to the most intimate relationship of all — marriage. Numbers 5:11–31 is typically titled “The Test for Adultery” or sometimes “Concerning Unfaithful Wives.” What makes this passage so difficult is that it contains a trial by ordeal inflicted upon women.

A trial by ordeal is a legal proceeding in which guilt or innocence is determined not by evidence, but by the outcome of a physical ordeal. A classic example is requiring an accused person to walk barefoot across hot coals: if innocent, God will miraculously protect them from harm. We no longer practice trials by ordeal because we rightly recognize them as superstitious, deeply uncertain, and open to terrible abuse. That is exactly what makes this passage so shocking at first glance.

Let me read part of it:

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, If any man’s wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, then the man shall bring his wife to the priest...’” (Numbers 5:11–15)

What follows are the instructions for the ordeal itself. The woman is brought before the priest along with a grain offering. She is set before the Lord. The priest takes water in an earthen vessel and mixes into it dust from the tabernacle floor. The woman places her hands on the grain offering — which I think is something like placing your hand on a Bible in a courtroom, a gesture of solemn presentation before God. The priest then speaks to her, in essence: *What I hold is the cup of bitterness, the cup of curses. If you are guilty, judgment will be rendered and these curses will fall upon you. If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear from this water.* He describes the curses and asks whether she will undergo the trial knowing what they are. In verse 22, she responds:

“‘May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen, Amen.’”

The priest writes the curses on a scroll, then washes the ink into the cup of bitter water. The woman drinks. If she suffers no harm, she is innocent. If the curses fall upon her, she is guilty.

Now — remember the commitments we started with. God is good. His word is beautiful, life-giving, and relevant. Let us look for those things here.

When you compare this trial by ordeal to every other example I have encountered, there is a glaring and decisive difference. In virtually all other trials by ordeal, a miracle is required *to protect the innocent* — the accused must be shielded from drowning, or boiling water, or fire. In Numbers 5, the logic is exactly reversed. For a woman to be judged *guilty*, a miraculous act of God must occur. The cup the priest prepares contains nothing that will harm her. There is no natural mechanism for punishment here. Furthermore, a fair reading of this passage suggests that the ordeal was voluntary. The woman is not bound or coerced. She consents, she speaks her own *Amen*, and she drinks willingly.

There is also a remarkable historical footnote. In researching this passage through Jewish sources, I found that this law was effectively abolished by the religious leaders around the time of Christ — because, in their view, it never worked. Women who underwent this ordeal were consistently found innocent. They never suffered harm, and therefore were never found guilty. The rabbis eventually threw up their hands and set it aside.

So why is this trial by ordeal here? Again, consider the larger context. The people are on the move. And the pressures of that world are pressing hard on every household. Under the law of Deuteronomy 24, a man could divorce his wife without evidence — a mere suspicion of indecency was sufficient. And beyond that, a man who remained with a wife he suspected of unfaithfulness risked being told by his community — by friends, family, and religious leaders — that to stay with such a woman was to defile himself before God. The pressure to divorce would have been immense.

Given that context, this trial by ordeal begins to look very different. It was not given as a weapon against women. It was given as a way to *save a marriage*. It was a mechanism for a man to bring the matter before the Lord — not before himself, not before the community, not even before the priest for his judgment, but before the Lord himself. And in so doing, the doubt could be resolved, and both husband and wife could move forward in good conscience. This was given by a good God, as a protection for women, as a check against the hardness of men's hearts.

What does this mean for us? It means we are to fight for our marriages. It means we deal with feelings of jealousy, anger, and bitterness rather than letting them grow. It means that when there is doubt or hurt, we seek the Lord and wise counsel rather than reaching for the door. If you are carrying something against your spouse and have let it grow bitter rather than bringing it to light, that bitterness is standing between you and the wholeness and holiness that God intends for your marriage.

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## **The Inner Circle: Holiness Within Ourselves**

Now we arrive at the innermost circle — the individual life before God. This is Numbers 6, the vow of the Nazirite.

“*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD...’*” (Numbers 6:1–2)

The vow involves three basic instructions: no wine, strong drink, or anything from the vine; no razor shall touch the head; and no contact with a dead body.

Remembering the principle of case law, the point is not simply to successfully observe these three rules. The point is to separate oneself entirely to the Lord. But these three rules give us real guidance on what that separation looks like in practice.

No wine or strong drink: the time of separation is not for pleasure or amusement. No razor on the head: this season is not about self-care or turning your attention inward toward yourself —

it is about turning your attention wholly toward the Lord. The purpose of the Nazirite vow was to remove all distractions in the single-minded pursuit of God. The vow typically lasted somewhere between thirty and one hundred days.

Thinking about how this applies today is genuinely convicting. Most people do, in fact, practice a kind of vow of separation from their ordinary lives. They call it vacation. And what do people do on vacation? They seek amusement, pursue pleasure, and focus on themselves. The Bible is pointing us toward something different: seasons set apart from ordinary life, not for personal leisure, but to seek the Lord and grow deeper in him.

One of the most striking details in the Nazirite legislation is that at the *conclusion* of the vow, the person is required to bring a sin offering. From chapter 6, verse 13:

“*And this is the law for the Nazirite, when the time of his separation has been completed: he shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he shall bring his gift to the LORD, one male lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin offering...*”

What this says to me is that one of the inevitable results of taking time to separate yourself to the Lord is that you begin to see yourself more clearly in the light of his holiness. You see what is wrong. You see what needs to be confessed. The sin offering at the end is not a failure of the vow — it is a sign that the vow worked. When we draw near to God, we are changed, and part of that change is the revealing of things that need to be set right. Praise the Lord.

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## **From the Outside In — and the Inside Out**

So as the people of Israel prepare to begin their journey into the wilderness, they are called to be a holy people: holy as a community, holy in their relationships, holy in their marriages, and holy within their own individual lives.

Looking at this pattern of concentric circles — from the larger community inward to the individual — I am reminded of Jesus’ constant debate with the religious leaders. They believed that holiness began at the outermost ring: keep the undesirables out, maintain the purity of the community, and everything beneath it will follow. Jesus flipped that completely around. Holiness begins with the self, the individual, and it grows outward from there.

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## Why Should We Pursue Holiness — and Why Can We?

Throughout these two chapters, the text tells us both why we *should* pursue holiness and why we *can*.

The Lord dwells in our midst. In 5:3 we are told explicitly: the Lord lives among his people. That is why holiness matters. The Lord himself is holy. In 5:6 we learn that when we break faith with another person — when we do wrong to a neighbor — we are breaking faith with the Lord. We carry his name. What the world knows of him, it learns in part through watching us.

And we are recipients of his love and grace. These last two realities are embedded in the final verses of chapter 6, in what we know as the Aaronic blessing:

“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.’” (Numbers 6:22–27)

The priestly blessing is spoken over the people precisely so that they may *be* a holy people — a people who are holy not by their own striving alone, but because of God’s love, his blessing, and his attentiveness toward them. And in being a holy people, we are a people through whom his name is made known in the world.

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## How Jesus Fulfills the Law

When the Scriptures speak of Jesus fulfilling the law, they do not mean only that he kept the law perfectly, though he did. They also mean that the judgment and curses of the law find their fulfillment in him. In the context of what we have studied today:

Jesus is the one sent outside the camp so that we might be brought near. Jesus is the one who makes restitution, paying the price that restores us to right relationship with the Father. And Jesus is the one who drinks the cup of curses.

There is one story in the New Testament whose meaning deepens considerably when read through the lens of Numbers 5. In John 4, Jesus sits at a well when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. She has had five husbands and is living with a sixth man who is not her husband. What does Jesus say to her?

“Give me a drink.” (John 4:7)

Read that request through the words of Numbers 5:24:

“And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain.”

Jesus is saying to this woman: *give me your cup of bitter water. Let me drink it.* And then he goes further. He offers her something in return:

“But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:14)

This is the gospel. Jesus takes from us the judgment, the penalty, the curses that are rightfully ours, and in return gives us his nearness to the Father and living water.

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## **At the Table**

Today we come to the Lord’s Table. As you take the bread and the cup, let this be the thought that holds you:

*He drinks our cup so that we may drink his.*