

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ

January 20, 2019

To Adult Teachers:

January 20, we will study Numbers 5:1-21 Discussion questions are:

1. When you are outside your home, what kinds of precautions do you take to avoid germs and potential infection? What kinds of things do you do to make sure you don't transmit your germs to others?
2. What reasons for the instructions in verses 1-4 might we understand more fully that the ancient Israelites to whom they were originally given?
3. To what kinds of wrongdoing do you think verses 5-7 refer? In what ways are the instructions given here good for the offender? For the one wronged? For the entire community?
4. Verses 12-15 outline a procedure for exposing what is often the most secret of secret sins. Why was it important to have this sin exposed? What questions do you have about the procedure that was used to expose this sin?
5. Can you think of stories in the Bible that tell of secret sins being committed? (Note to teacher: consider Achan's sin at Jericho [Joshua 7], David's cover-up of his adultery with Bathsheba [2 Samuel 11], and Ananias and Sapphira lying to the apostles [Acts 5].) What were the consequences of these secret sins to the persons who committed them? To the entire community of faith?
6. What kinds of accountability relationships or structures can you think of that could help prevent a Christian from drifting into secret sin? Why do you think some people are resistant to entering into accountability relationships?

Sermon: *Purity Matters*

Numbers 5:1-21

It was several years ago that I became aware of a phrase that was popular among students heading to Cancun for Spring Break: "What happens in Cancun stays in Cancun." My immediate reaction: there's a lie of Satan that is so ridiculous that only an immature kid would fall for it. Does anyone other than an ignoramus really believe that an STD you picked up is going to stay in Cancun, or that the producers of *Girls Gone Wild* are only going to market the video you appeared on only in Cancun? Or that relationships damaged while in a drunken stupor will magically be healed once the plane lifts off from the Cancun airport?

Imagine my shock when I saw a tourism ad which had swiped this phrase and applied it to Las Vegas! And from what I've read, it's been one of the most effective ad slogans ever for tourism in Vegas. Evidently, people really do believe—or they really do *want* to believe—that there is a place we can go and break all boundaries of decent behavior and then leave the consequences behind.

But regardless of what people believe, it doesn't change the fact that this is a lie straight from the depths of hell. The reality is that our actions—even our private, secret actions—have consequences to ourselves, our families, and our communities.

1. The book of Numbers shows us a community of God's people and the public consequences of private wrongdoing. Chapter 5 is devoted to the idea that the community is to be pure. It gives three examples of impurity that can harm the whole community, followed by remedies for each. The first example is one that we can understand well. *Read* Numbers 5:1-4. The first impurity that can harm the community: infectious diseases. Anyone with a condition that could be infectious was quarantined outside the camp. My grandson sneezing at playscape and explaining, "I'm really sick." I quickly explained that he had allergies, but thought later it would have been fun to have said, "Yes, he is quite ill, but don't worry. You can't catch what he has, because he got it in Vegas, and you know what they say." Allowing someone with an infectious disease to run loose in public endangers the whole community.
2. If you understand the concept when it comes to contagious diseases, then you are ready to consider a couple of other things that can be just as dangerous to the whole community. In fact, they can cause more harm than an uncontained Ebola outbreak. We read about one in Numbers 5:5-7. The impurity here is wronging others or harming them through dishonesty or cheating. How we treat each other is not a private matter. The remedy: restitution must be made. Make it right! Note that when we wrong a brother, we are unfaithful to the Lord. We are a community that belongs to the Lord. We eat at a common table. We belong to each other. If we cheat each other financially, the consequences affect the whole community. If we wrong another through idle talk, gossip, or slander (or even careless remarks in social media), we endanger the whole community, and it's not a private matter; it's a matter of community concern. Again, the point is easy to understand. And it's a point echoed by Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24. When we become aware that we've harmed another, it's not acceptable to let it slide and say, "oh well." Can't come to the table until it's been addressed.
3. That leads us to the final example in Numbers 5, which is a strange little section of Scripture. It starts our innocently enough. *Read* Numbers 5:12-15. The danger is suspicion of marital infidelity. If a husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful and it's true, harmful consequences to family and broader community. If husband suspects unfaithfulness, but it's not true, damaging consequences to wife, to marriage and family, and to broader community. So the remedy involves going to the priest, who will determine whether or not marital unfaithfulness has taken place. Here is where it gets weird. The method for determining whether or not the wife is guilty of adultery: Mix holy water with dust from the tabernacle floor. Write the curses of guilt on a scroll, then wash off the ink into the mixture. Woman drinks it and if guilty, she becomes violently ill with a wasting disease and her abdomen swells. If not guilty, no ill effects. What do we do with this? Did it work? If the Bible is inspired, it did. You could expect that it would take intervention from God to bring about a guilty verdict. A mixture of water, dust, and ink might not taste too good and it might give you a tummy ache, but to get violently ill from it would be extraordinary. This is one of those occasions where we're thankful we can say, "well that was under the Old Law and it doesn't apply to us anymore." Yes, but... a deeper message is there that still applies.
4. We've added another threat to the community: secret sin. Even if we succeed in keeping our secret sin a secret, that sin still does damage to the community of faith. You may recall an incident later in Israel's history when they were soundly defeated in battle by an inferior force because there was secret sin in the camp. Your "secret" sins may well be the cause of God removing his had of protection from the whole community.
 - a. Secret sin damages you. We tend to think of secret sins as victimless crimes. The longer we keep the secret, the more we feel we got away with it and that no one got hurt. But sin damages us, changes us, and not for the better.
 - b. Secret sin damages your family. Your husband may not know about your affair, but he still suffers as a result, because the affair—and the constant lying to cover it up—have changed *you* and at some level he knows things aren't right. Your kids may never discover your secret stash of

pornography (or they may have already and not know how to say anything about it), but it has changed you—your attitudes about women in general and especially how you treat the mother of your kids—and those warped views are having a powerful negative impact on your kids' lives.

- c. Secret sin damages your church family. I've seen times when the whole church was stuck in neutral, only to discover later that a leader was having an affair, or was embroiled in some sin that he or she thought was secret. What happens in your—so called—"personal" life—anger, ugliness, unkindness and lack of respect—affects the whole community of God's people. That's why it's important for a church in the wilderness to return to a thoroughgoing emphasis on purity. We want out of the wilderness! That's why you find instructions in the NT written to the whole church that say things like (*Read*) Ephesians 5:3-4, 6.
5. So how do we protect the community of faith from secret sin? How do we discern when there is sin in the camp? Mix baptism water with dust from the floor and ink from our inkjet printer? Don't be silly. But I do know this: secret sin is never a secret from God. He has the ability to , I pray regularly for any sin that is blocking the work of the Spirit to be exposed—not because I get a kick out of seeing people publicly shamed, but so that they can receive healing and forgiveness. Because Satan works in the dark, exposure of secret sin is a good thing.
- a. And I'm challenging you to pray the same prayer. Pray for any secret sin to be exposed. It's a dangerous prayer, because it might be your secret sin that winds up being exposed! Prayers of leaders, gift of discernment. Joe Beam meeting with man suspected of adultery.
 - b. Repent of any hidden sins of your own. Chuck I.: "I thought I'd repent now and avoid the Sunday rush."
 - c. Better: make yourself accountable. Personally, before God. To your family, to a trusted brother or sister in Christ, as part of a Life group or other prayer and accountability group. And make discussion of mutual accountability part of any interview with any ministry candidates, and an ongoing part of leadership. (Vic and me and "Number 16.")

Bottom line: purity matters. Our secret sins may never be known, but the harm they do is very public. Let's make a commitment to be a pure community.