

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ

March 31, 2019

To Adult Teachers:

March 31, we will study Numbers 9:1-14, 27:1-11, and 36:1-12. Discussion questions are:

1. Read Numbers 5:1-4 and Numbers 19:11-14. What were the regulations that applied when a person came into contact with a dead body? What other causes of uncleanness are mentioned in these passages? How are the various causes related to one another?
2. Why would contact with a dead body create a problem for someone seeking to partake of the Passover meal? If the law concerning contact with the dead were the only word on the matter, who would have been excluded from the Passover celebration?
3. Read Numbers 9:9-11. How does this provision maintain God's standard for purity while still providing grace for those who otherwise would have been excluded?
4. Read Numbers 26:4. Who was to be counted as part of this census? Who was evidently not counted? Now read Numbers 26:51-55. How was the census related to the apportionment of the land to the Israelites? Which family members "held title" to the family's property?
5. Read Numbers 27:1-7 and Numbers 36:1-7. What are the two competing concerns with regard to the inheritance of property? How did God's provisions address both concerns?
6. In Christ, we live under grace. Can grace be misunderstood or misapplied to minimize the seriousness and the consequences of sin? Can God's law be misunderstood or misapplied in a way that excludes people from the grace of God? What are some examples you seen of each? Which of these do you believe poses the greatest threat today?

Sermon: *The Letter and the Spirit*

Numbers 9:1-14 and 27:1-11

One of the most beautiful places I have visited in Greece is Delphi. A scenic town nestled high up on a mountainside overlooking a bay off the blue, blue Gulf of Corinth. It is a witness to the eternal desire of human beings to receive guidance from beyond this world. Because there in Delphi stand the ruins of an ancient temple to the god Apollo. There was a crack in the rocks here that allowed a brew of toxic gasses to escape from deep in the earth. A priestess, known as the oracle of Delphi, was seated above this fissure. She would breathe the fumes and go into an altered state of consciousness. In modern terms, we would say she got stoned. People would come to the temple, make a donation, and ask a question. The oracle would say some unintelligible things in her wasted state, which the priests would "interpret" as a message from the gods.

1. Against this backdrop, we see the God of Israel who went to great lengths to reveal himself and his will as no god had ever done before. God gave his law to his people at Mt. Sinai. He identified himself as a God who reveals his will and his purposes to his people. Their response: "God said it; I believe it; that settles it." And our response is similar. Accept the Word. We cannot overemphasize this point. God has revealed himself in this book. We accept it. It may not be politically correct; it may fly in the face of conventional wisdom. It

doesn't matter; we've settled the matter in advance: we will accept the Word of God. God said it; I believe it; that settles it.

2. But that doesn't always settle it. There are some situations we face that simply are not addressed in the Word. In Bible times, there were no feeding tubes or respirators, no genetic engineering; slavery was a thriving social institution, political freedom as we know it did not exist in very many places. Hot issues were whether or not to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, whether or not women could take off their veils in church. Reality is that we sometimes face situations that the Bible does not address directly. We understand that it teaches general principles that are timeless. But what do we do at a distance of 2000+ years to be faithful to those principles?
3. Believe it or not, it wasn't long after God gave the law on Mt. Sinai that the people began to face situations that were not directly addressed by the law.
 - a. In Numbers 9, a group of people come to Moses with a question about the Passover. The law said that anyone who touched a dead body was to be considered unclean and excluded from the camp for seven days. What if the Passover occurred during that time? Everyone was to celebrate Passover with their family, but what if you were excluded because you were unclean? Numbers 9:6-7.
 - (1) A strict reading of the law would have left both of these groups of people out of luck. If you're unclean, you must stay out of the camp, too bad; no Passover for you.
 - (2) But Moses goes to God for clarification (Numbers 9:8). His answer is that there will be a make-up date. (Numbers 9:9-11)
 - b. In chapter 27, another dilemma. The Promised land was to be divided up by families; passed down through the sons (to keep each tribe's land within that tribe). What if a family had no sons, only daughters? Five daughters of Zelophehad asked that question (Numbers 27:3-4)
 - (1) Again, a strict reading of the law would have left them out of luck. In second case, it doesn't matter if your father had no sons; women can't inherit their father's property. Period.
 - (2) As in previous instance, Moses goes to God for clarification (Numbers 27:5). The answer is that daughters can indeed inherit property when there are no sons. (Numbers 27:6-7) Restriction given nine chapters later: after inheriting, they can only marry within their tribe (Numbers 36:8)
4. From this we come to understand that the law of God was never intended to stand by itself, apart from a continuing relationship and dialogue with the God who gave it. In churches of Christ, we have been so strong on the Bible that we've sometimes forgotten this principle. The Bible is the Word of God, but it is not meant to be applied apart from an ongoing relationship with God himself. Jesus is the living Word, and we need to emphasize the importance of knowing Him. The Holy Spirit didn't just write the Bible and then retire. He is still available to us as we seek to understand and apply it. God's will cannot be known apart from an ongoing relationship with Him.
5. So what can we learn from these two incidents in Numbers?

- a. Purity is important to God. He did not compromise on his demand for holiness and purity. He upheld his purity requirement for the Passover. An unclean person was not allowed to eat the Passover with the rest of the community. And he upheld his requirement for purity in the lines of inheritance. Property was not to be passed on to people who were not of the tribe to which it originally belonged. Sometimes, people use the grace of God to justify impurity. “Yes, I know I’m behaving in ways that are morally questionable or sinful, but God’s grace will cover me.” This is insulting the Spirit of grace and Hebrews 10:29-31 offers a stern warning about that, concluding with the statement, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”
 - b. God finds a way to maintain His holiness but still include those who would otherwise be excluded. No, a person who is unclean cannot eat the Passover, but God still makes a way for that person to partake. True, land is to pass down through sons, but God makes sure that no woman will be forced into poverty simply because she has no brothers.
6. Contemporary application: we need to take a strong stand against sin, but make it easy for sinners to find acceptance and grace.
- a. Premarital pregnancy; we do not condone the behavior or pretend that no sin was involved, but we do reach out in love and support.
 - b. Abortion. We value life, but offer love, forgiveness, and full participation for those who’ve experienced an abortion.
 - c. We warn about the abuse of alcohol and other drugs; we recognize a place of service and honor for people who are battling addictions.
 - d. We acknowledge biblical teaching about homosexual behavior; we offer love, support, healing, dignity for those who struggle with same-sex attraction.
 - e. We strongly support the value of marriage and family; at the same time, we make a place for people who’ve been divorced, for single parents, for people who are “Single on Sunday.”

We do not depend on a stoned priestess spouting gobbledy-gook. We worship a God who has revealed himself to us. But the challenge for us is to involve ourselves in a continuing relationship with Him, so what we know Him and understand his purposes as they grow out of his character. God calls you not just to a knowledge of his Word, but into an ongoing relationship with Jesus the living Word.