

Exegetical Notes, Numbers 5:1-10
“Separation and Restitution”

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Numbers 5:1-10

Verse 1-4

YHWH said to Moses, “Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body. Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.” The Israelites did this; they sent them outside the camp. They did just as YHWH had instructed Moses.

- See Leviticus 13-18.
- Partly, these laws were written to protect the Israelites from spreading infection. They lacked the knowledge of infectious diseases that we have today. Living 3 million people strong in a tightly compact camp without good means of sanitation meant that they were highly susceptible to infections. Thus, there was a need to be extremely careful.
- But infectious disease was also a metaphor for sin. Thus, these laws paint a picture of how Israel needed to deal with the infectious power of sin. Once it began to grow, it would spread its ruin from person to person until the whole nation was injured by it. When Israel tolerated sin in her midst, this pattern happened again and again. So the infected party needed to be put outside the camp to protect all the others from the power of the disease or of sin.
- Even though this law may have caused hardship to someone they loved, Israel did exactly what God told her to do. They were fully obedient to the word of the Lord.

Verse 5-7

YHWH said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to YHWH, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged.’”

- For one Israelite to perform a deliberate wrong of any kind to hurt another Israelite is a sin against God himself. To fail to acknowledge bad behavior which hurts another member of the community under this understanding would be unthinkable.
- So, if an Israelite hurt another, he must apologize by paying a fine equal to the value lost in the hurting plus one fifth more.

Verse 8

“But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to YHWH and must be given to the priest, along with the ram with which atonement is made for him.”

- If restitution cannot be made to the injured party, or his family, it must be made to the priest. Restitution must be paid in every case

Verse 9-10

“All the sacred contributions the Israelites bring to a priest belong to him. Each man's sacred gifts are his own, but what he gives to the priest will belong to the priest.”

- Once an offering is given, it cannot be reclaimed for it no longer belongs to the giver but to the one to whom it has been given. You cannot make an offering and then ask for it back. After it is given it belongs to the Lord.

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