



Numbers 5:1-4

When Gandhi was once asked what the biggest obstacle to Christian mission to India was, he replied, '*Christians*'. We may not share the observations of an unregenerate Hindu, but we feel his point. This passage speaks about the concept of holiness. It may deal with discharges and infectious skin diseases, but ceremonial purity speaks of a greater moral and spiritual purity. The word '*holy*' is not specifically mentioned in the passage but, it underlies the thinking behind the passage; see Leviticus 11:44.

Is there a passion for holiness within the church in Scotland today? By holiness we do not mean the easy stuff. It is easy to burn a fiddle, get a black suit and cut your hair (gents only). It is more difficult to have a radically different view of material things and the use of the tongue.

God wants His people to be different and that difference is expressed in cleanliness

Superbugs are not new and God was conscious of the need to keep the Israelite camp free from disease. Note the key words '*ceremonially unclean*' in v. 2. Everyday behaviour was to be in line with the holiness of God. God was present with these people and nothing was to defile His purity.

Anyone reading Numbers will realise that there is a difference between the Old Testament and the New. It is essential that people who wander into our churches are never under the impression that they have come to a synagogue. The Westminster Confession speaks of a Church '*under age*' which received several '*typical ordinances*'; they were provisional. Many of our readers will have a provisional driving licence; it will lead on to a full licence in due course, we hope. The system changes. It is the same as we move from the Old Testament to the New; the system changes, although there are elements of continuity. Jesus Christ has come, the sun is now fully out and the shadows disappear. The destination has been reached, there is now no longer a need for signposts.

The point in Numbers 5 is that God's people have to be clean, but now it's tougher! Numbers spoke of externals; Jesus speaks of internal purity.

God wants His people to be different and that difference must be both radical and foundational

Chapter 5 are words given by God at the very beginning of their journey into the wilderness. At the outset God is saying, 'get rid of the dirt'. This is the same in the New Testament; see Acts 5 and the Ananias and Saphira incident and also the immoral brother of 1 Corinthians 5. Is God harsh when He sends people away, v. 3? If you use the word 'harsh' in connection with God, you have not really understood His character. He is God; He cannot ever be harsh, He is sovereign and He sets the bar. Is the man who erects the 'No swimming' sign at the shark-infested beach harsh? In the church God requires clean instruments. The Church has the greatest influence on society when she is most different to it. In the pursuit of relevance we must never forget the cultivation of righteousness.

God wants His people to know that there is a way out as well as a way in

The most chilling words in the passage are '*send away*' v. 3. The Church is in the business of inclusion. In His ministry Jesus welcomed prostitutes, extortionists and drunks. He identified with

them in such a way that He was mistaken for them. It is clear, however, that as soon as you begin to follow Jesus you are brought into a place of holiness. The prostitute finds a chaste lover, the extortionist stops his racket, and the drunk finds sobriety. The NIV heading for 1 Corinthians 5 is clear: *'Expel the immoral brother'*. In our own society you expel the immoral brother, whether his sexuality is 'gay' or 'straight' – you don't make him a high profile leader of your most prominent church! If the disease stays in, then the whole camp will be defiled.

The unclean were sent outside the camp. Today we can go into the camp because Jesus went outside the camp for us. Sin is dangerous, so we run to the one who cleans. None of us are holy by nature, but because of Calvary there is a way in, and indeed a welcome in when we confess and cling to Christ.

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