

Articles by Harold St. John

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The Camp of the Saints

Numbers 5-6

In the early chapters of the book of Numbers, the author has invited his readers to consider three classes in the camp of Israel. The warrior enrolled at twenty years of age, the Levite enlisted at twenty-five, and the priest's service opened on his attaining his thirtieth year. Each of these has its counterpart in Christianity. There are still many good soldiers of Jesus Christ who take their share of hardness in the ministry of the gospel; many shepherds who labor in the Word and doctrine; and here and there we meet priestly souls who give themselves to a ministry of ceaseless praise, intercession, and worship.

In the Old Testament, the persons were distinct and not allowed to trespass on the service of one another, but in the present, every saint is called to discharge the functions of all. Yet in actual practice, we tend to develop one special line of service and offer it as our contribution to the welfare of the Church.

Moses has often been called the "father of preventive medicine," and it is certainly remarkable to find these careful precautions against infection in writings so remote from our times. Even today many in the world are far behind the hygienic system of the Pentateuch in matters dealing with personal cleanliness and the spread of disease.

The cases selected as illustrations are leprosy, hemorrhage, and contact with a corpse. The scourge of leprosy still remains more or less a mystery to science, but spiritual leprosy has eaten deeply into the texture of

the writer's system, and none of his readers are unconscious of its workings in their own lives.

The Hebrew word *tsara*, translated

55 times in the Old Testament "leper," "leprous," or "leprosy," is derived from a root which means "to strike" and was viewed by the Jews as a stroke of God. Indeed, the widely held rabbinic belief that Messiah would be a leper was based on Isaiah 53:4 -- "smitten of God."

Both Jewish and Christian expositors have recognized that leprosy represents sin in its mysterious workings and hideous manifestations. One famous rabbi remarks, "If a man considers this, he will be humbled and ashamed because of his sin. Every sin is a leprosy, a spot upon the soul."

The apostle Paul describes an outbreak of moral leprosy among the church at Corinth and shows, when the thing is certain and the sinner unrepentant, that only expulsion from the camp will meet the demands of divine holiness and safety for the saints.

The second case cited is that of "an issue" where the life of the sufferer is slowly being drained away and where the work of many physicians has been in vain (see Mk. 5:36). In these cases the discipline was far less severe than with leprosy and merely involved exclusion from the camp until sundown, in minor cases, or for a week in more acute ones.

An outbreak of passion might easily suspend happy fellowship for a limited season, but as soon as the "clothes are washed," that is, when the action of the Word is welcomed and the sin judged, there may be immediate recovery and restoration.

The wise man tells us that he who rules his spirit is better than he who takes a city. His father David could do the latter, but neither the son nor the father was able to govern themselves. This problem of self-control is one of the hardest and loneliest which we have to face.

The hardest battles ever fought,

The greatest victories won

Are fought with never a comrade near,

And never a shot or gun.

It may be a battle with terrible pain,

Or a struggle with mind or soul,

But God, who is watching His soldiers, knows

The names on His honor roll.

The third evil which unfitted its victim from the fellowship of the camp was known as "defilement by the dead." This subject is one of the main topics of the book and is dealt with in six important passages: 5:2; 6:9; 9:6; 9:10; ch. 19; and 31:19. We find what answers to "the camp" in the Christian assembly of our times and the direct teaching of the New Testament fully agree with the shadows of the law. There can be no allowance of open sin, no room for lawless self-indulgence, nor can the purity of the fellowship be compromised by deliberate association with known evil.

If we allow things that are unsuited to that holy Presence which indwells the church, then we shall find, to our grief and shame, that the glory will slowly and unwillingly leave the threshold of the Temple (see Ezek. 10:4; 11:23 and Rev. 2:5) and Ichabod will be graven on the walls of our house.

It is important to note that defilement could only be transmitted by one who had direct contact with a corpse: his touch defiled all that was in his tent and also those who sought to apply "the water of purification," but there is no hint that the uncleanness could be handed on to a third party.

The theory of second-hand defilement is a false and malignant heresy and its applications have wrought endless havoc among Christian people. The idea is untrue to Scripture, false to the facts of life and experience, and is condemned by the witness of nature and the findings of science.

After considering the cleanness of the camp, the writer turns to the important matter of honesty in our relations toward others. Neglecting this lesson has worked incalculable havoc among God's people, and it behooves us to face frankly the provisions which Jehovah made then, and still insists on today.

The case of a personal trespass is supposed and there are three stages in the recovery of the offender. First, he must make full confession of the wrong done. Then an adequate restitution must be offered, and lastly a "ram of the atonement" would serve as a recognition both of the inward state that made such a sin possible and as a reminder of the death of Christ by which the stain was effaced.

It will be noticed that four parties were involved: God, the priest, the sinner, and the one whose rights had been violated. In like manner every dispute or trespass among brethren will take into account the character of God, the spiritual man who can deal with the matter (Gal. 6:1),

and then the two opposing brethren. (See the same four parties in Mt. 18:15-20.)

The Lord Jesus again and again referred to these discords among brethren and yet we must all sadly own that we have not heeded His words. We find that the "churches of the saints" are distressed and often riven asunder because of some strife between two or more Christians which remains unsettled for years.

In the Royal Proclamation recorded in Matthew 5, we find one searching passage in which the King reveals His will in the following terms: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Note that the Lord suggests that the worshipper's conscience will be acutely sensitive as he approaches the holy courts. This will be appreciated by every thoughtful mind, for there is nothing like the Cross to awaken the memories of past weakness and failure.

It is when the offerer has led his lamb up to the priest that he remembers that his brother has something against him, so tying up the animal, he leaves it and hurries through the city to his brother's home, and there insists on a reconciliation before returning to carry out the ritual.

In such a case, as a matter of mere geography, one would seem to be travelling away from the altar, but in fact one is approaching all the eternal values of the symbol; as so often in life, the long way round is really the nearest way home.

I expect most of us remember some hour in "life's little day" when we found ourselves suddenly arraigned before the "eyes of His glory" and we were pierced with an arrow of conviction as to some act of dishonor. We shall never forget what a crucifixion of our pride it cost us to unload our breasts of all the unclean stuff, but equally we shall always remember the cleansing sense of relief that followed.

There is a tendency in us all to brush aside these claims of our Lord Jesus and to say they are "Jewish," or we imagine that we can dispense with obedience in one matter because of "costly and higher service" in some other direction.

We need to learn that our professed loyalty to Christ is always tested in little things. For many a Christian in the days of Domitian's persecution the casting of a handful of incense upon a brazier before an idol altar seemed a little thing, and yet the great gates of life swing upon frail hinges such as these. The Lord give us to listen to Moses and to Christ.