

Church Discipline Protects God's People [Slide 1] Leviticus 13-14

One of the consequences of living with a holy God is that some people cannot be allowed to remain in the group, because their presence will potentially lead others to rebel against God. Like modern day lepers they have to be isolated until they are once more ready to live with God's people. Today we will review the laws concerning leprosy and discuss what they might teach us about God's requirements for the purity of his people.

I invite you to turn to Leviticus chapters 13-14. Leviticus is the third book in the Old Testament. I will summarize most of the content of these chapters and look at a few verses in depth.

Let's begin with the word leprosy. The Hebrew word is saarat which refers to a skin disease, but since the term is also used to describe growths on clothing and on building walls, we need to think in terms of any condition that forms scalliness or patchy growths. Leviticus 13 appears to describe a number of different types of skin diseases. Many medical people believe that Leviticus 13 does not refer to modern day leprosy or what we know as Hansen's disease because no archaeological evidence of Hansen's disease appears in Egypt before the fifth century AD and most of the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 do not match the symptoms of Hansen's disease, although some do. So, we won't concern ourselves with identifying the various conditions Leviticus 13 describes. I'll refer to them generically as leprosy.

[Slide 2] Verses 1-44 provide instructions to the priests in how to test for leprosy in the skin of a person. In verses 45-46 God prescribes a required isolation for those who had leprosy. Let's read those verses. Read.

The torn clothes, the uncovered hair, and the covered mustache are all signs of grief or mourning. They symbolized the person was in mourning over his condition. He had to cry unclean, unclean as he walked around so that no one else came into contact with him. His cry of unclean would warn them to stay away. He remained unclean until he was cured. He had to live alone outside the camp.

Verses 47-59 provided instructions to the priests to test for leprosy in garments. If the garments were infected, they had to be burned.

In Leviticus 14:1-32 the Scripture provides instructions to the priest on when he could pronounce a person cleansed of leprosy. If he was cleansed, then the person had to offer a guilt offering, a sin offering, a grain offering, and a burnt offering. Verses 33-57 provided instructions to the priests to test for leprosy in houses. If leprosy was confirmed, then the house was destroyed and burned. If you went into a house that had leprosy, you were unclean until the evening.

[Slide 3] What was the purpose of these regulations? Were they given for health reasons or did they teach some kind of spiritual truth like the dietary laws? At first glance, they seem to have some medical reason since the prescription for a leper was essentially quarantine and it sounds like the regulations concerning the burning of clothes and buildings infected with the fungus or mold or whatever it was, sounds like steps to prevent a disease outbreak. On the other hand the text keeps insisting that the reasons for the regulations were not health reasons but to prevent uncleanness. Also the leper, in addition to offering a sin offering also had to offer a guilt

offering, which suggests that he had actually done something wrong and in Leviticus 14:39 the text says that the priest made atonement to the Lord on behalf of the ex-leper.

If these regulations were intended to teach a spiritual truth about uncleanness before God, what were they teaching? It is significant that this is the only type of uncleanness that mandated permanent isolation from other people where you had to leave the camp and live outside it, the assumption being that you might pass on your uncleanness to others and make them unclean. Most of the time you were unclean until the evening, but leprosy made you unclean as long as you had the condition. This ability to transmit uncleanness from one person to another seems to be unique to these skin diseases, because you had to verbally warn people that you were unclean, presumably so they would not touch you and become unclean themselves. For example, if you touched a carcass you became unclean, but another person touching you did not become unclean. If you ate an unclean animal and then someone touched you, they did not become unclean. If you had a flow of blood or a body fluid, and then later someone touched you, they did not automatically become unclean, but apparently if you touched a leper you became unclean also.

It struck me that the laws concerning leprosy have their parallel with God's instructions to the church concerning church discipline. So I am going to suggest to you that leprosy or these skin diseases illustrate the sin of defiance which requires church discipline in the New Testament. This connection between the leprosy regulations and church discipline is not stated in the New Testament, so I will present my reasons for making the claim and you can decide whether the Biblical evidence supports the claim or not.

[Slide 4] How did leprosy regulations picture NT instructions concerning church discipline? Only leprosy required permanent removal from God's people until the condition was healed. In the church you only consider church discipline for people who will not repent or who deliberately disobey God without any intention of changing. I call that defiance. So church discipline is only mandated for defiant sin. Any other sin is forgiven once the person confesses it and turns away from it. You can have the most socially destructive sins whether they be murder, adultery, slander, embezzlement or whatever and as long as the person confesses and stops the sin, the church embraces them. But when a person is defiant to God, unwilling to acknowledge their sin and turn from it, that person is a candidate for church discipline.

A person with leprosy was removed from God's people and separated from them so they would not contaminate anyone else. The same is true with defiant sin. The person is removed from the church so that they will not encourage others to commit the same sin. We have an example of that kind of church discipline in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 where a man committed incest with his step mother. I am going to begin with Paul's instructions in verse 5 of 1 Corinthians chapter 5. Read 1 Corinthians 5:5-13.

In verse 6 Paul warns that a little leaven, leavens the whole lump of dough. In this context he is arguing that if they did not exercise church discipline, then this man's presence and his sinful example would tempt others to sin along the same lines. The leaven of sin would spread through the whole lump of people at the church at Corinth. As I said earlier, the requirement that the leper shout "Unclean, Unclean" wherever he went, appeared to be for the purpose that others might not become unclean by coming in contact with him. One of the purposes of church discipline is to protect the church from the continuing contamination of unrepented sin. People are not tempted to sin when that sin is confessed and denounced. They are tempted to sin when someone publicly sins and appears to suffer no negative consequences for it.

In verse 11 Paul makes clear that he is speaking of isolating only those who are so-called brothers, that is they profess to be a Christian. In fact they may not truly be a Christian, but they

have claimed to be a Christian and therefore should be treated as such. If they claim to be a Christian and they continue in sinful behavior without repenting, then you are to disassociate from them. You are not to eat with them or in any other way fellowship with them. In essence, you are to remove them from the camp where they must stay as long as they are defiant in their sin.

[Slide 5] The second factor about these skin conditions is that they normally were public because they affected the skin. The instructions in 1 Corinthians 5 assume that the defiant sin is publicly known. People knew the person was immoral or covetous or an idolater or drunkard or swindler and that the person had no intention of changing their ways. It is because their defiance was public knowledge that they offered a potentially corrupting influence on the church body. Sometimes we sin defiantly, but not publicly. God knows the sin, but no one else does. Private defiant sins do not pose the same threat to the well-being of the body of believers, as do publicly defiant sins.

[Slide 6] A third parallel between the leprosy regulations and church discipline is that the process of removal of a person from the camp required the input of the leaders, specifically the priests who had to declare that the person was unclean. Your fellow Israelite could not claim you were a leper and boot you out of the camp. God established a formal process whereby the priests certified that a person had leprosy and was to be removed from the camp.

Jesus described a formal process for church discipline that included the church leaders in Matthew 18:15-18. Let's read that passage printed on your outline. Read. Note particularly verse 18 where Jesus says, "Read." Those words are repeated from Matthew 16:19 where Jesus was specifically speaking to the Apostle Peter. Telling it to the church would include both the congregation and its leaders.

In Titus 3:10-11 Paul instructs Titus to "read verses 10-11." It is not clear exactly what his rejection entailed, but it probably involved isolating this man in some way so that he could no longer stir up conflicts and disputes.

There is no place for lynch mobs or a rush to judgment in the church. Dealing with defiant sin is serious business and it calls for the utmost in wisdom and in care for the offender as well as for the church body. You are trying to weigh God's interests, the interests of the church, and the interests of the offender and therefore you want spiritually mature people involved in the decision making process. In Hebrews 13:17 the Scripture says that church leaders keep watch over the souls of the people in their church, so they should have some input in church discipline.

[Slide 7] A fourth parallel between the leprosy regulations and church discipline is that the leaders were involved in restoration. The first step in restoration was on the part of the leper who notified the priest of the change in his condition. Since the leper could not enter the camp, he would have to send a family member or friend to notify the priest of a potential healing so that the priest could come out and inspect him to see if the leprosy was gone. If the leprosy was gone then the priest pronounced him clean and offered the sacrifices to God on behalf of the leper. So, the process of reinstatement to the body included the leaders. We see Paul writing about reinstatement to the body in 2 Corinthians 2:1-8, possibly referring to the same guy who committed incest we read about in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. See what he writes to them. Read 2 Cor. 2:4-8.

Once the man had come to a godly sorrow, Paul was concerned that he might not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. He didn't want the man wandering in guilt and constant self-loathing. Instead he wanted the church to forgive and comfort the man and to reaffirm their love

for him. Here you see a leader leading the people of God to restore a person back to the fellowship of the saints, just like the priest restored the leper to the people of God.

Once a person repents, they should be fully restored. Restoration is God's heart for the defiant Christian. Significantly, when lepers approached Jesus and asked for healing, he always healed them. When people want to be healed of their sin, they should find healing in the church.

The leprosy laws made it clear that some people had to be removed from God's presence and God's people until their condition changed. I believe the closest New Testament analogy to the leprosy laws are the NT instructions concerning church discipline. People who defy God cannot be allowed to remain with God's people where they can infect others with their poisonous attitudes. That is one of the requirements a holy God places on us.

Most churches and most people will not exercise church discipline because they don't like the conflict it necessarily causes. And no one should ever be eager to exercise church discipline, but it sometimes becomes a necessity and we must be willing to follow God's instructions in the New Testament. May God preserve us from having to exercise church discipline, but may he also give us the courage, wisdom, and grace to do so if it becomes needed.