

DEALING WITH THE LEPROSY OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

Last Sunday we interrupted our series in Leviticus to meditate on the Christmas theme. But now we return to it to look into the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of this great book. In the present section we are seeing that God has provided standards and guidelines by which we may avoid the pitfalls, the traps, and the snares of life, with all the consequent heartbreak and hurt and remorse that these can bring.

I was with my family and relatives up in the snow over the holidays. My nephew and I were sitting by the fire one day. I asked him, "You're fourteen now, aren't you? How does it feel?" He said, "Well, you know, I wish I could go back and live it all over again, and do it right this time." I sympathized with him. Anyone who feels that way at fourteen is going to feel it a lot more at forty-one or fifty-one. But this is why God has given us this very practical section. It is in order that we might understand how to handle life. I have talked with several people in the past few weeks who were involved in deeply hurtful experiences. In studying through this passage I have been struck by the fact that each of them could have avoided these disasters had they known and understood the principles in these chapters. So let's look at them together.

You remember that in Chapter 11, which introduced this section, we saw God's concern for what his people ate. We saw that there was both clean and unclean food, harmless food and harmful food. Though this had an application in the physical realm regarding which animals the Israelites could eat, and though some of it was for health purposes, nevertheless the primary reason for these distinctions is to teach us how to choose food for the soul -- the concepts and ideas which we accept and by which we live, by which we take on our characteristics of personality and temperament.

Now we come to a passage which deals with afflictions and diseases and, in the spiritual realm, with what these do to us in our relationships with others and between ourselves and God. Here we will find that many modern sanitary procedures are anticipated by the rules and laws laid down by Moses for the people of God. If these had been followed through the course of the centuries, many outbreaks of plague and epidemic would have been avoided -- and still could be. For instance, included here is the necessity for periodic inspection of sick people to see how they are progressing and to enable the early detection of serious diseases. Also prescribed here is enforced rest for someone who is sick, and quarantine for infectious and contagious diseases. All of this was given by God to his people thousands of years before modern medicine ever began these practices. That is how advanced and up-to-date the Bible is.

But we would surely miss the import of these provisions if we take them to apply only to the matter of physical health. The primary reason for them is that they are symbolic of the afflictions and diseases of the soul, of the irritating and hurtful things that we feel and say and do to one another. We need to know whether these things are merely the harmless manifestations of a passing moment or whether they are something more serious, something deeply embedded which will cause trouble all our lives. This passage is given in order that we might understand this.

It is all introduced with a short chapter on childbirth:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying; she shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days." {Lev 12:1-5 RSV}

That is a strangely appropriate text for this day after Christmas, for we are celebrating a childbirth -- the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem. And in fact, that Baby came into the world to deal with the very problem which made this chapter necessary. God is not against childbirth, nor against babies. Nor is human birth essentially an inherently unclean event. That is not what this chapter teaches. There is nothing wrong with birth, nor with sex and all that accompanies it. The Bible makes that clear.

But these requirements were given to the people of God in order that we might remember a most basic and fundamental fact: that since the fall of Adam every human being born into this world is born into a fallen race. There is no way by which man in his natural condition is ever going to be able to solve, in any permanent way at all, the basic, fundamental problems of human relationships. No way. We are born into a condition that is tainted and twisted. Someone has thrown a monkey wrench into the human machinery, right at the very beginning, and it simply doesn't operate as God intended. God impresses this upon his people by this restriction, this reminder that something connected with birth is unclean. The fact that a mother was unclean for a week after the birth of a male child (two weeks for a female child), and that she had to go through another thirty-three days of purifying after that, provided an opportunity for her and her whole family to be reminded forcefully that the baby was born with a tainted nature.

It is very important that this be brought before us because it makes a difference in the way a child is trained. If you think, as many are taught today, that babies are born absolutely innocent you will raise your child in quite a different way than if you believe the truth about them. They need guidance and training and help in handling this twisted nature. The world, of course, forgets about this principle. They want to pretend that babies are innocent and that if you just leave them alone and give them opportunity to express themselves they will grow into whole, fulfilled persons. That destructive philosophy has caused chaos in our educational system and in society beyond. So God teaches his people right from the beginning that there is a problem here which must be handled and cannot be ignored.

It is very instructive that it is the people of God upon whom God impresses this principle. You would think that they, of all people, ought to be the ones to recognize and remember it. And yet, in my experience, it is God's people especially who need to be reminded of this today. We tend somehow almost to assume that our children will be exempt from this principle, will be born without sin -- because we are Christians. We are amazed when they start to behave just like the neighbors' children. We get so wrapped up in these little ones and think they are so cute and so intelligent and precocious, so like us, that we forget that they have a tainted nature, a twist somewhere in their personalities which means that all of their will power is centered on themselves and that they need to have help in handling that problem. It is not that they need to be despised or treated as though they were pariahs. We are all afflicted by the same problem. But it is simply the point of wisdom to recognize that children have that kind of a nature and that they require discipline and love and instruction to handle it. If we ignore that, then that nature will inevitably lead them astray and into disaster somewhere down the line. So God makes this very plain right at the outset by declaring that there was a week of uncleanness.

The circumcision of the male baby was another reminder that something needs to be removed from the life inherited from Adam. Then the thirty-three days of purification followed. Again, this was doubled in the case of a female child. It is not easy to know exactly why. Surely the purification period was partly a humanitarian consideration. The mother was relieved from certain obligations to work around the house in recognition of the need for mothers to have a few days off, at least, after they had a baby. But the longer period after the birth of a girl is probably a reminder of the fact that evil did enter the race through the weakness of a woman who yielded to the temptation of the enemy. Now, the race fell in Adam, the man, not in Eve. But the temptation came through the woman and it was through that source that sin entered the race.

Finally, all this is cleared up and settled by means of a sacrifice. Again God is teaching that a death must come in. Life is at stake, and blood and death must intervene. And so, beginning with Verse 6, we read:

"And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the door of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering." {Lev 12:6 RSV}

And in Verse 8,

"And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean." {Lev 12:8 RSV}

The sacrifice cleanses. It is so beautiful to see in the New Testament how Mary and Joseph followed this procedure to the very letter. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, sinless though he was, untainted with that original touch of Adamic sin which all of us inherit, nevertheless God, putting him in the place of guilty humanity, saw to it that they carried through these laws of Moses. So Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. Interestingly enough, doctors tell us that the eighth day is the first day that the baby's blood contains enough blood-clotting elements to make such an operation safe. In fact, the available clotting factors skyrocket on the eighth day to a level higher than normal, then rapidly level off to normal. So we find that the eighth day is the safest of all. And on the eighth day the Lord Jesus was circumcised. Then after thirty-three days Mary and Joseph went up to the Temple to offer the sacrifices for purification. You remember that they were so poor they couldn't afford a lamb. So they brought the two turtledoves as an offering of purification.

Chapter 13 is lengthy and we will not try to cover it all today. It deals with the problem of diseases and afflictions which come upon the body. It is linked with chapter 12, suggesting that this taint, this Adamic twist, this tendency which the Bible calls "the flesh," this perverse individualism within us which causes us to insist upon the right to run our own lives and do as we please, this ego around which we want everything to revolve and which you can observe in a baby -- this is not removed by regeneration. When you are born again by faith in Christ the flesh is still there. And a Christian still can and does sin. Many people seem to forget that fact and expect instant perfection from Christians, either in themselves or in others. But that is not possible. So we need help in dealing with this problem. The flesh needs to be recognized for what it is and controlled. And that isn't easy.

Temperaments can be different. One can be quiet and placid, another fiery and explosive. There is nothing wrong with those differences. God made people to be different. He didn't make us all to be cool and dispassionate. Some of us are made to be more volatile and to react more quickly to stimuli. And that is not wrong. But there are displays of temperament which are wrong. There is an anger which is bad and wrong and sinful, just as there is an anger which is good and righteous. There is a pride that is right and beautiful, but there is a pride which is terribly damaging and injurious and wrong. There is a love of self which is perfectly right. It is a reflection of the fact that we are made in the image of God. In Jesus' summary of the Law the second commandment is, "Love your neighbor as yourself," {Matt 22:39}. So there must be a proper kind of self-love. But there is a love of self which is awful and destructive, terribly selfish and self-centered and ruinous to everyone around. How do you tell the difference?

Well, that is what this chapter is for. It begins this way:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests, and the priest shall examine the diseased spot on the skin of his body; and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of the body, it is a leprous disease; when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days; and the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall set him up seven days more; and the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased spot is dim and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean. But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest; and the priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy." {Lev 13:1-9 RSV}

The overriding purpose of this chapter is to enable the detection of leprosy. When the Bible uses this term, it is not merely referring to the disease that we call "leprosy" today, Hansen's disease, which is a horrible and loathsome malady causing disfigurement and loss of facial features and other parts of the body. That is included in the term, but the Hebrew word translated "leprosy" here also includes other contagious and infectious skin diseases. They all were recognized to be dangerous and damaging, a serious threat not only to the individual but to the whole people, the whole camp of Israel, and so they were to be detected. The process of detection was prolonged and careful inspection. The priest was to look at the symptoms, then shut the diseased person up for seven days, examine him again, and shut him up for another seven days. At the end of that time he could determine whether it was leprosy or something less serious.

All of this has its counterpart in our own spiritual lives. This passage is talking to us about the afflictions and diseases of the spirit, the hurtful attitudes we have, the burning resentments, the feelings of anger and upset we go through, and the grudges we carry around in our hearts toward one another. These are to be detected because they can be very dangerous, and the process is to expose them to a priest. Remember, now, that in the New Testament pattern all believers are priests together. So here we have a picture of what at Peninsula Bible Church we like to call "body life," the ministry of believers one to another, helping each other to see what is inside.

You see, we are all blind to ourselves. In my own eyes I am a very genial, gracious, inoffensive person. I get along with everybody and have the warmest feelings toward everyone. I don't know why it is, but they don't always seem to see me the same way. My own family tells me that there are times when I am not that way at all. I find myself very blind to my own failings. And we all have these blind spots. We rarely detect these things ourselves. That is why we need each other. And so the Israelite was instructed, when he had a manifestation of disease, to bring it to a priest and let the priest look at it.

The procedure the priest used was not that of impulsive judgment. He didn't just snap his fingers and say, "Oh, I know what you have: You've got measles -- or mosquito bites -- or leprosy." He watched the development of the case for seven days (that is the number of perfection) until he understood the nature of it, and only then did he make his pronouncement. All this is so instructive in the way we are to handle one another and to help one another in spiritual matters.

But what the priest was especially concerned about was to detect leprosy.

There were four characteristics of leprosy, and each was very important and instructive. If we read on a little farther we will have them all before us. The priests looked for these manifestations. If the afflicted person had them it was leprosy; if he did not have any one of these then it was a relatively harmless illness. If we read on a little farther we will have them all before us:

"When a man is afflicted with leprosy, he shall be brought to the priest; and the priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white swelling in the skin, which has turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh in the swelling, it is a chronic leprosy in the skin of his body, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean; he shall not shut him up, for he is unclean." {Lev 13:9-11 RSV}

The priest's procedure was first to examine any spot that was in the skin, any kind of outbreak or eruption, in order to see what it was. It could be just a harmless pimple, but it might be something more serious. Anyone with an outbreak brought it to the priest, just as we are to bring to one another these spiritual and soulish or emotional eruptions that we have within.

What the priest looked for in a suspected leprous disease was first whether the hair in the spot had turned white. White hair, as you well know, is always a sign of imminent and approaching death -- relatively speaking.

I went to a barber last week. As he was cutting my hair I noticed, falling down on the floor around me, this white hair! I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. I couldn't believe that a young man like me could have hair that white. But I finally had to acknowledge the truth.

White hair is always a sign that the aging process is at work. "When the snow appears on the mountains, winter is at hand." And thus it was with leprosy. If the hair turned white it was a sign that death was at work. There are certain emotional reactions and attitudes we have which can be merely the matter of a moment -- or they can be a sign that death is at work, that something harmful is going on. That was the first symptom he looked for.

The second was that if the spot was deeper than the skin it was leprous. If it was more than superficial, if it was a more profound matter than a merely temporary pimple, then it was serious. Carried over into the spiritual realm this refers, of course, to that which is more than just the manifestation of a passing mood, a minor irritation of spirit. It is something which is more permanent, more characteristic of the individual, a prolonged attitude of irritability, of temper, impatience, bitterness, or resentment. These kinds of spots in the spiritual life are serious illnesses -- they are leprous.

A third mark of leprosy was the presence of raw flesh. If, as the priest examined the symptom, it was beginning to heal then he wasn't particularly disturbed. But if raw flesh was present which didn't heal, then, of course, it was regarded as leprous. Raw flesh is flesh that is obvious, flesh that is patent, blatant, open.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians we have a description of what raw flesh looks like. It is plainly and easily recognized. In Galatians 5:19 Paul says, "Now the works of the flesh are plain." Here they are: If immorality is present it is obviously of the flesh -- it is leprous -- or impurity, or licentiousness. All of these have to do with sexual sin. Idolatry -- the worship of something other than God. Sorcery, or witchcraft. Enmity. Strife. Jealousy. Anger. Selfishness. Dissension. Party spirit --breaking up into little factions and warring cliques. Envy. Drunkenness, carousing, and the like. These, Paul says, are raw flesh -- flesh in its obvious form -- it is leprous, and, therefore, very dangerous.

The fourth mark of leprosy was that it spread. That is, in the spiritual realm, it affects others within the body of believers. A bitter spirit can be as contagious as smallpox. A rebellious attitude can spread like an epidemic and turn everybody against each other and against the Lord's authority. If this occurs, then the one who began it is obviously afflicted with a leprous disease and is unclean in God's sight. The disease is dangerous and harmful to the individual and to the body of Christ in which he lives.

In the light of all this, the provision given in Verses 12-17 is seemingly strange. We read:

"And if the leprosy breaks out in the skin, so that the leprosy covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, then the priest shall make an examination, and if the leprosy has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; it has all turned white, and he is clean. But when raw flesh appears on him, he shall be unclean. And the priest shall examine the raw flesh, and pronounce him unclean; raw flesh is unclean, for it is leprosy. " [There is no kidding about it, no way to cover it over. If it is any of those things listed in Galatians 5 it is obviously the flesh, and it is leprous.] But if the raw flesh turns again and is changed to white, then he shall come to the priest, and the priest shall examine him, and if the disease has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce the diseased person clean; he is clean." {Lev 13:12-17 RSV}

In Luke 17 there is the account of ten lepers who came to Jesus and asked for help. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests, according to the Law of Moses. As they went their leprosy turned white and they knew that they were cleansed. This is a beautiful picture for us of how to handle leprosy. When what had been leprous turned white, then, even though the whole body was covered from head to foot, the priest pronounced the person clean. The turning of the leprosy to white meant that the evil of it was arrested, that its action was stopped, and that the person was cleansed.

Transferring this to the spiritual realm, this means that the evil in question has been brought under the judgment of the word of God and that we have been cleansed. This, of course, means that the evil has been faced and has been named for what it is, as God sees it, and that we have repented of it. All the defenses that we have tried to build around it to protect it have been taken down and we have realized that it is wrong and

have admitted it. Then God can cleanse us from it and it goes out of our life. The scars may remain. Perhaps we will see them for the rest of our life, and others may see them too. But there is no need to fear any longer; the action of the evil has been arrested. What a beautiful picture this is of First John 1:9: If we confess our sins, admit them, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What a gracious provision this is!

But in order for God's grace to be effective we must stop being defensive about our sins, stop excusing them. You know how easy it is to excuse them. We say, "Oh, I can't help it. Our whole family has been like this for generations. It's just because we're Irish. There's no way I can stop it -- that's just the way I am. Don't expect me to change." All these excuses are fences that we are building around our leprous disease to protect it and to keep it and persist in it. It is that desire to hang onto these hurtful, injurious attitudes which marks the fallen, Adamic nature within us. Isn't it strange that we cling so tenaciously to these things which hurt us so badly, and hurt the ones we love. We hate to give them up. The pride of our hearts is such that we resist every attempt to help us, and we are critical and cold and spiteful and hateful in response to those who try to point them out to us. What a revelation this is of the fact that this kind of leprosy is working in our lives.

We won't take time to read the rest of the chapter. You can study it at your leisure. In it we find that the same kind of examination must be made of several different categories of afflictions and diseases, and the same basic treatment administered. There were boils that could be either transitory or leprous, and burns that were either harmful or harmless. There were itches that needed to be examined to determine what was causing them. And there were scabs, called "tetter" in Verse 39. This is a general term for diseases like psoriasis and eczema and others that form scabs over areas of skin. All of these needed to be examined and diagnosed.

If we venture to interpret them we can see, by the nature of these categories, what their counterparts are in the spiritual realm:

Boils are always painful infections which finally come to a head. They represent the crises of our attitudes and of our disposition within. We have all had the experience of having someone say something to us and finding that we resent it and that the resentment begins to fester within us. It keeps growing and growing, and though we try to put it away it keeps coming back and finally comes to a head, blows up in a crisis. That is a boil. It can be relatively harmless. It can be merely the result of momentary pressure on us and easily relieved by an explanation. Or it can be something very serious like deep-seated bitterness or a grudge carried against someone else. Remember that the letter to the Hebrews warns us that we are not to let any "root of bitterness springing up" {Heb 12:15 KJV} to trouble us, lest many be defiled thereby .

Burns are injuries caused by circumstances outside of ourselves. We don't plan on them and yet we experience them. We can be burned emotionally. Many of us have used that very expression when we've gotten into some difficulty. We say, "I've learned my lesson! I got burned too badly on that one." These emotional problems need to be examined as to whether they are leprous or not, harmful or merely passing.

Itches are continuing irritations which never go away, seemingly are always there bothering us. Scabs are crusty infections, partially hidden or covered. Their nature is often difficult to determine, and some of the covering must be removed before we can be helped.

All of this is zeroing in on one great question: Are your leprous spots being judged? Are they being dealt with openly in the light of the Word of God? Are they being brought to the One who can heal leprosy with a touch? Or are they being protected, covered over, hidden to avoid examination? Your moods, your disposition, your temperamental outbursts, your displays of anger or depression -- what about them? This is the question that God is asking. Leprosy is a terrible affliction. It will wreck and ruin your own relationship with God and with one another, so God is very concerned about this.

There is a bit of reassurance in Verses 40-42, at least for some of us who are thinning on top:

"If a man's hair has fallen from his head, he is bald but he is clean. And if a man's hair has fallen from his forehead and temples, he has baldness of the forehead but he is clean. [That helps, doesn't it?] But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a

reddish-white diseased spot, it is leprosy breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead." {Lev 13:40-42 RSV}

Even baldness doesn't save you. Even an open life, obvious to everyone, can still have leprosy spots in it and therefore need to be examined. And leprosy must be dealt with.

Otherwise it results in a terrible judgment which is described for us now in Verses 45-47. This is the treatment which an uncured leper must undergo, and with this we will close:

"The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp." {Lev 13:45-47 RSV}

You know how common this was in the New Testament -- lepers outside the towns, living alone in caves, or with other lepers, going about with their upper lip covered, dressed in rags, and calling out "Unclean" -- just exactly as the Law of Moses commanded. What is the purpose of this? Once again God is teaching us according to symbol. What was carried out on the physical level, according to the Law of Moses, is a picture of what God allows to come to pass in the life of an individual who refuses to deal with his leprosy condition. These issues cannot be avoided. This is what will happen, as taught by these symbols.

First of all, there are torn clothes. As we have seen many times through the Scriptures, clothes are a picture of behavior, of the outward actions of an individual. Torn clothes mean behavior which has no sense, no unity. It is impulsive and unpredictable behavior. This becomes the inevitable result for someone who allows leprosy spots in his life to go unjudged and unhealed. The first manifestation is a poorly integrated personality.

The second is loose hair. In Scripture, hair is always given as a mark of beauty. A woman's hair, especially, is regarded as her crown of glory. Loose hair, then, is beauty disarrayed, beauty lost. The potential is still there, but the inherent beauty of the personality is lost, is no longer beautiful but has become repulsive.

Then they are to cry, "Unclean, unclean." This is a vivid picture of what happens in the case of unjudged soul-leprosy. There is a self-annunciation of uncleanness. You don't have to tell people; the individual himself is constantly telegraphing to others what he is like. This is what today we'd call "bad vibes." He is always giving out certain indications which are telling people, "I'm a disturbed person. I have an inner unrest of spirit." Something about the impatient tone of his voice, the sharpness and harshness with which he speaks or deals with others is communicating the information: "Unclean, unclean." Other people pick up the vibes and avoid him with obvious revulsion.

And so, the final result, if you are in such a condition, is that you dwell alone, a social outcast, wanting to get close to people, but unable to do so, longing for human companionship and love, reaching out but finding yourself turned off, rejected. That is the result -- inevitably, relentlessly -- of the failure to judge leprosy.

We are coming now to the end of the year and this is the time when traditionally we take a look at our lives. We can take a long look at what is going on in our own lives and at how we can help one another. What a good time this is, in the light of this chapter, to face our leprosy attitudes and feelings, our selfish motivations and our broken relationships with others, and to bring them to the One who can heal us. With just the touch of his word he can arrest the action of our evil and turn our leprosy white and set us free.

Prayer:

Our Father, how often through the course of this year we have injured one another by our leprosy conditions. And yet how stubbornly we have clung to them and refused to call them what you call them, have defended and protected and excused them. We are all guilty of this, Lord. Not one of us is free of this condition. But we don't want to be guilty of spreading it. And we don't want to have to endure the results of it in our lives. Lord, we know that you want your people to be clean and to walk in victory. So, by the faithfulness of your Spirit,

please judge the leprosy of our lives and, touching it, heal it, as we bow before you, Lord Jesus. In your name we pray, Amen.

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