

SICK GARMENTS AND DISEASED HOUSES

by Ray C. Stedman

We start a new year together this Sunday, a year which stretches before us with all its possibilities yet unfulfilled, and with all the demands it will make upon us. A new year always means that new decisions must be made. Life seems to be made up of decisions. Have you noticed that they are getting more difficult as we go along?

It used to be that when I got dressed for a meeting all I had to do was to reach in my closet, pull out a white shirt, and put it on. Now I have to debate with myself between the blue one and the gold one and the yellow one and the striped one, and then choose the right tie to go with it and decide which socks to wear. It takes a lot longer to get dressed these days. Life is getting more complicated all the time!

In making decisions it helps to have guidelines. Fashion experts try to give guidelines, which helps a little -- but not much, because they keep changing. But as we go through life, God, as a heavenly Father, is concerned about our needs, and he gives us reliable guidelines. How grateful we can be in this new year that we have such a provision for the future which lies ahead, unknown and unexplored. That is what this book of Leviticus is about. We have been studying a section in it in which God sets forth guidelines for his people to help them avoid the traps and the snares to which they would otherwise succumb, both physically and spiritually, in their journey.

You remember that God regulated the choice of food for the people of Israel so that they would avoid injurious food from unclean animals and would eat only that which would be healthful for them. And you recall how, in the infinite wisdom of God, this has its counterpart in the spiritual life. We can be greatly helped and guided by transferring the admonitions given here into the spiritual realm. Last week we looked in Chapters 12 and 13 at the guidelines God gave his people regarding leprous diseases, sores and infections of the skin, describing how they were to distinguish between the harmful and the relatively harmless. Once again this was of physical benefit to them, but also it was even more helpful as a picture of the diseases of the soul and the spirit, the burning attitudes of resentment, bitterness, envy, and jealousy, these leprous sores which can come into our life and which need to be cleared out. We saw how practical were the instructions God gave us as to how to recognize these and deal with them.

Now we come to a passage which is a continuation of the whole subject of leprosy. Beginning with Verse 47 of Chapter 13 we learn of leprosy in garments:

"When there is a leprous disease in a garment, whether a woolen or a linen garment, in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, if the disease shows greenish or reddish in the garment, whether in warp or woof or in skin or in anything made of skin, it is a leprous disease and shall be shown to the priest." {Lev 13:47-49 RSV}

Obviously, here again "leprosy" means far more than merely the human disease we know today as Hansen's disease. As we saw last time, it is a general term which includes many infectious and contagious diseases. Here it is extended to include certain molds and mildews and fungal growths which could attach themselves to garments. These could be either harmful or harmless. They could be contagious and spread to infect the whole camp. Thus they had to be recognized early and dealt with. Or they could be merely harmless spots or stains which could be removed without destroying the garment involved.

As we apply this to the level of life on which we live today -- the spiritual, the social, the emotional level of our life -- we need to determine what it is that garments represent. In our last study together we saw that the leprosy which infected an individual was a picture of the attitude of our heart, the disposition of our character, the temperament with which we approach life. But here the leprosy infects something which is somewhat

outside of us, but yet is connected to us. Garments are always used in Scripture as a picture of character, especially as expressed in behavior. Earlier in this book we looked at the garments of the high priest, which were a revelation of the way our great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, is equipped to deal with our problems. His garments reveal his character. Garments are used this way all through Scripture and are associated closely with the individual who wears them. It is interesting that we still identify ourselves with our garments. Have you noticed that when someone pays you a compliment about your dress or your suit you are pleased by it? You take it as a reference to you as a person and you apply the compliment to yourself. That is because we are closely identified with our garments. Also, we change our garments frequently. We use different garments for the various roles we play in life. You don't play football in a tuxedo. You don't go skiing in a party dress. You use garments suitable for what you are doing.

All of us are involved in certain roles in life. Most of us are citizens of this country, and that fact makes certain demands upon us. We act differently as a public citizen than we do in private at home. At home we have various roles. Some of us are fathers, some are mothers, some are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. We relate to each other in different ways in these various roles. In our jobs some of us are carpenters, some are teachers, some are lawyers, some are housewives. All these occupations make various demands on us. Oftentimes we associate particular garments with these roles.

Garments therefore, as used in Scripture, are a beautiful symbol of our relationships with others -- our friendships, our associations, our contacts with the ones with whom we have to do -- and of the roles which we play in life, and the character and attitudes we bring to those associations, particularly as regards our behavior. Now, what this Scripture is teaching us is the possibility that this area of our life can be infected with leprous disease. Certain practices and attitudes, certain aspects of our relationships with one another can have spots in them which are dangerous. Certain practices or habits we may fall into with another person can be destructive.

A relationship may be beautiful except for one area, one attitude that we hold -- perhaps some dangerous, lurking, hidden resentment that we bear toward an individual and which comes out in our relationship. God wants us to deal with these leprosy spots that appear in our relationships. He sets forth for us in this passage how to do it. They require the same sort of treatment as did leprosy in our individual lives. For instance, we read in Verse 50:

"And the priest shall examine the disease, and shut up that which has the disease for seven days; then he shall examine the disease on the seventh day." {Lev 13:50-51a RSV}

Notice that the same patient investigation is required as in the case of a spot in the individual himself. There is to be no hasty, impulsive judgment. How many times we offend this way! We see a person in a relationship with someone else and we are prone to be so critical and to leap to unwarranted conclusions. We don't take time to examine the relationship awhile, to think it through, to investigate before we come to a judgment. On the other hand, how frequently we err in the opposite direction in our own relationships, because of our emotional involvement. We enjoy a relationship that we have with somebody so much that we are defensive if anybody questions anything about it. We don't want to examine it and are immediately offended if anybody else does, and we won't listen to them at all. But the word of God calls for an investigation when something is brought to our attention which is possibly hurtful or dangerous in a relationship. It is to be shut up for seven days (the number of perfection). That is, it is to be examined until you understand it thoroughly and know what you're doing. That is the first step.

Second, if the disease spreads, the garment must be destroyed, Verse 52:

"If the disease has spread in the garment, in warp or woof, or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, the disease is a malignant leprosy; it is unclean. And he shall burn the garment, whether diseased in warp or woof, woolen or linen, or anything of skin, for it is a malignant leprosy; it shall be burned in the fire." {Lev 13:51b-52 RSV}

If a relationship has something harmful about it which is beginning to spread to and infect others, or if it is taking over such great areas of our life and is getting us so involved that we neglect our responsibilities in our

other relationships, then drastic action must be taken. We all know how this can come about. We can get inordinately tied up with someone so that they begin to occupy all our time, and other people with legitimate demands upon us are slighted. If this is the situation, the relationship is dangerous and needs to be ended. A garment infected in this way must be destroyed, must be burned. This passage teaches us that it is better that this be done than that our life become totally unbalanced.

But notice Verses 53-55:

"And if the priest examines, and the disease has not spread in the garment in warp or woof or in anything of skin [it is present, but hasn't spread so as to affect others], then the priest shall command that they wash the thing in which is the disease, and he shall shut it up seven days more; and the priest shall examine the diseased thing after it has been washed. And if the diseased spot has not changed color, though the disease has not spread, it is unclean; you shall burn it in the fire, whether the leprous spot is on the back or on the front." {Lev 13:53-55 RSV}

In other words, there were spots which, if they didn't spread, were not necessarily leprous and they could be remedied by being washed. Washing, in Scripture, is always a symbol of the action of the word of God. Jesus said to his disciples, "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you," {John 15:3 KJV}. When a relationship has something questionable about it, and yet it hasn't begun to affect others nor taken over inordinate time, but is still suspicious, then bring it to the Bible and wash it with the word of God, obeying what God teaches you about it. Perhaps the Scripture warns us about some undue affection, some promiscuous activity which needs to be corrected -- the relationship as a whole is not wrong but just the spot needs to be dealt with. I have seen this happen so often with young people who, in forming a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, fall into practices that are harmful. The relationship itself isn't wrong, it just needs to be brought under the action of the word of God and washed and cleansed; then it can continue. If the washing helps, then just the spot needs to be removed, Verse 56:

"But if the priest examines, and the disease is dim after it is washed, he shall tear the spot out of the garment or the skin or the warp or woof; then if it appears again in the garment, in the warp or woof, or in anything of skin, it is spreading; you shall burn with fire that in which is the disease. But the garment, warp or woof, or anything of skin from which the disease departs when you have washed it, shall be washed a second time, and be clean." {Lev 13:56-58 RSV}

What a practical help this is in handling our relationships! Perhaps a parent has a spot in his relationship with a son or daughter. Maybe it is a weak area in which he tends to be provocative and hurtful, or judgmental or critical or carping or harsh. That relationship needs to be washed, to be subjected to the word of God. Or perhaps you have a spot in your relationship with a friend -- some habit you've indulged, or some attitude that is wrong. Your friendship needs to be washed, and the spot must be torn out and removed so that the garment, the relationship, may be preserved. How wise these words are, and how helpful! How much grief would be spared us if we would obey the tender care of God for his people, so that these ugly, defiling spots could be removed from our relationships with one another.

In Chapter 14 we move into a further development of this whole matter of handling leprosy. Here we have the cleansing of the leper, Verses 1-3:

The Lord said to Moses, "This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing He shall be brought to the priest; and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. Then, if the leprous disease is healed in the leper." [and the Lord goes on to tell us what shall be done to cleanse that leper.] {Lev 14:1-3 RSV}

Notice that the leper does not go through all the ritual which follows in order to be healed; he does it in order to be cleansed. He is already healed. Healing is something only God can do. It is a sovereign act of God which takes place in the inner life. Cleansing is the understanding of God's basis of healing by the person who is healed so that the behavior can be adjusted outwardly, afterward. That is the picture which is drawn here.

You see, you and I can't heal our leprous hearts. If there is some wrongful attitude within us, if we burn with envy or jealousy or resentment toward one another, if we are impatient and upset and angry at heart -- we seldom see these things in ourselves until God puts us into circumstances where they are brought out -- and then the only thing we can do is take them to him because we are helpless victims caught up in these dangerous attitudes. When you finally see yourself like that, then you can say, "Lord, heal me!" And God does! With a touch of his grace he changes our attitude. We stop being defensive about it and we admit it. And then, as we have seen before, the leprosy is arrested, its action is stopped, and we are healed.

But then we need cleansing. We need to understand the basis on which that inward healing occurred so that our outward behavior can now be adjusted to a new pattern. That is what is brought out here in the cleansing of the leper. There was a prescribed ritual consisting of several steps which he had to go through before he could resume a normal life. The first is given in Verses 4-5:

"... the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two living clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet stuff and hyssop; and the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water." {Lev 14:4-5 RSV}

What an unusual procedure! You can see clearly that God has thought through every single detail in order that we might learn from it certain great truths. Obviously, the basis for healing is always blood. God never heals, never blesses, never arrests the action of evil, apart from the shedding of blood. This blood of course, is a picture of the blood of the Lord Jesus. The death of Christ, which ends the old nature, the old life, is what is constantly being pictured for us in these sacrifices. God is not in the business of putting Band-Aids on cancer. He strikes at the very root of the cancer. He never deals with mere symptoms. He eliminates the whole problem. That is why God is never content merely to clear up a few symptoms in your life. He wants you to see that these problems are arising out of an evil nature which has to be ended by death -- either of the individual himself or of an innocent substitute on his behalf. There is no other way. So the shedding of the blood of this bird is a beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus and his death for us.

The bird was put in an earthen vessel and killed over running water. An earthen vessel is a picture of the humanity of Jesus. In Second Corinthians 4 we, in our basic humanity, are said to be "earthen vessels," {2 Cor 4:7}. And running water, in Scripture, is forever a picture of the Holy Spirit, in his refreshing, life-giving quality. Remember that Jesus said "rivers of living water" will flow from the hearts of those who are filled with the Spirit {John 7:38}. So this is a picture of the Lord Jesus, in his humanity, having come where we are, and yet filled with the Spirit. And he was put to death in order that we might be cleansed. We have to understand that healing is by the shedding of blood. But that is only step one.

The second step is found in Verses 6-7:

"He shall take the living bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet stuff and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water; and he shall sprinkle it seven times upon him who is to be cleansed of leprosy; then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field." {Lev 14:6-7 RSV}

Every detail of this is beautifully significant. The cedar tree was regarded in Israel as the acme of beauty and glory. It symbolized natural beauty. Hyssop, on the other hand, was a tiny plant which grew in nooks and crannies, somewhat like moss. It was regarded as a symbol of the lowliness, the rejection, the insecurity of humanity. So here we have a picture of the natural glory and beauty of man, and, at the other end of the scale, his resemblance to the lowliest, most insignificant shrub.

Then, scarlet stuff was always a symbol of artificial glory. Kings wore scarlet. Thus, all this is a picture of everything to which man looks for security -- status, prestige, natural talents, and even the pretense of being insignificant, upon which we sometimes count to gain sympathy from others. All this is set aside. It is dipped in the blood of the bird that was killed and thus is marked, is judged by that death.

Then, along with that, the living bird was released into the heavens. This is a picture of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He died, as prefigured in the one bird, and he was released into the heavens in the other. So God is teaching by these means that the healing of our leprous relationships with others is on the basis of the death and the resurrection of Jesus, who takes away from us all dependence upon natural beauty or artificial glory, or upon anything else of the old nature, and sets us free to be new creatures in him. Doesn't that typology work out beautifully? How remarkably these Old Testament symbols teach us these great truths!

This step was followed by the personal cleansing of the applicant. This is described in Verses 8-9, which we won't take time to read. He had to wash himself, i.e., apply all this to himself, and then there was a testing period of seven days to be sure his cleansing was genuine.

Then, on the eighth day, he was to bring offerings as outlined in Verses 10-13. We won't go into these because we have dealt with them in detail before. But the order in which the four offerings had to be brought is important.

The trespass offering was first. You see, leprosy in a garment always means that we have injured somebody, or that they have injured us. A trespass has occurred, a relationship has been hurt or broken, and that needs to be dealt with first. And so the trespass offering, the Lord Jesus offered on our behalf for our trespasses, is in view.

Then came the sin offering. That goes deeper, to our very nature, and we learn from it that, in the death of Christ, God has somehow dealt with the very source of the evil within us. We don't have to follow these urges to do evil anymore. We still feel them but we are not bound to them as we once were. We are freed from the dominion of sin.

Next was the burnt offering, which recognizes the devotion of a heart which has been cleansed and is now open and accepting toward God and is dedicated to him. Finally came the meal offering, which represents the presentation of our humanity to him. All of this renders the leper now clean from his leprous disease, and even his relationships are cleansed, and so he is free to enter normal life once again.

One other requirement is listed in Verses 14-18:

"The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt [trespass] offering, and the priest shall put it on the tip of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the great toe of his right foot. [This is very precise and specific, isn't it?] Then the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it into the palm of his own left hand, and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before the Lord. And some of the oil that remains in his hand the priest shall put on the tip of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the great toe of his right foot, upon the blood of the guilt offering; and the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed. Then the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord." {Lev 14:14-18}

What does all this mean? Well, it is most significant. Blood is always a picture of guilt removed, of evil ended. And the blood is applied to remove the offense of the ear, the hand, and the foot. You see, if you have fallen into leprosy, evil within, it is because you have listened to and have followed a false philosophy. So the ear must be cleansed. Then you have manipulated and maneuvered -- that is what the hand does -- and thus you have created an offense of the hand. You have gone along with what you have heard and have begun to manipulate and maneuver others in the wrong direction. And then your feet have gone in paths they should not have followed, and so your walk needs to be cleansed.

So the great teaching of this passage is that the blood of the guilt offering cleanses. When you have some spot in your life which is wrong, and you have recognized it, and its action has been stopped by the repentance of your heart, then the blood that God applies to you in the death of Jesus Christ on your behalf actually cleanses away this offense. All the instruments of evil are cleansed. Your ear, your hand, your walk have all been

cleansed. You are forgiven -- that's the point!

But that is only part of it. Then oil is to be put upon the blood. Oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. It is not enough just to put the blood on these instruments, these members of our life. They are to be yielded to the Spirit of God. The oil is put upon the ear and the thumb and the foot in order that the mind may now be devoted to hearing the things of the Spirit, and that the hand may be offered to the Spirit of God to be maneuvered and manipulated as he desires and wills, and that the walk may follow. Then the leper is ready to return to society. Do you see how instructive all of this is?

I was down at Arrowhead Springs this past week speaking to several hundred college students. A girl came up to me at the close of a meeting and said, "I want to ask you about a problem. I have a friend who is always irritating me. I feel resentful toward her. But I know that is wrong, and I keep reminding myself of the fact and dealing with it, confessing it to God. But it keeps coming back. How can I be freed from this?" I said to her, "The problem is that you are doing only part of what the Lord tells us to do. We are to judge the evil, we are to reckon our members as dead unto unrighteousness -- but we are also to turn around and make them available to God for his work. We are to offer them to him for righteous purposes. You are judging the evil of your heart's attitude toward her, but then in place of that you are not turning and loving her in the power of God." The negative is not enough. The positive is also required. We need not only the blood to arrest the action of the ear, the hand, and the foot, but we also need the oil, the Holy Spirit, who now takes over and begins to reach out in love. I said to her, "The next time you feel this resentment, try not only to judge it, but in its place to reach out to your friend in the strength of the Lord and begin to be kind and nice and loving to her, expecting God to do the work through you."

The last section of this chapter deals with leprosy in houses: Verses 33-38:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, 'There seems to be some sort of disease in my house.' Then the priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the disease, lest all that is in the house be declared unclean; and afterward the priest shall go in to see the house. And he shall examine the disease; and if the disease is in the walls of the house with greenish or reddish spots, and if it appears to be deeper than the surface, then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and shut up the house seven days." {Lev 14:33-38 RSV}

The procedure is the same, you see, for leprosy in a house. Obviously again we are dealing with mildews and molds and fungi, the kinds of things which can appear on the walls of a house. I have been in the tropics and have seen plaster walls just covered with green mold and mildew! In this passage these are regarded as possibly contagious, and they have to be investigated, patiently and carefully. What is it that corresponds to the house in our experience? You remember that in the New Testament the church is called "the house of God" {1 Tim 3:15, 1 Pet 4:17 KJV}. Now, it is not the church building. That is not where God lives. It is God's people who are the house of God. So what is in view here is an association, a group, an assembly, a gathering of Christians together. And it, too, can have a leprous infection in it. When this proves to be the case it needs to be dealt with. It must be treated, even drastically at times. Notice Verses 39-42:

"And the priest shall come again on the seventh day, and look; and if the disease has spread in the walls of the house, then the priest shall command that they take out the stones in which is the disease and throw them into an unclean place outside the city; and he shall cause the inside of the house to be scraped round about, and the plaster that they scrape off they shall pour into an unclean place outside the city; then they shall take other stones and put them in the place of those stones, and he shall take other plaster and plaster the house." {Lev 14:39-42 RSV}

The priest is to get rid of the stones that are affected.

If you want a graphic illustration in the New Testament of the carrying out of that process with regard to a

church, simply read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There he is writing to the group of Christians in Corinth, and there were certain infectious diseases running rampant through that house. There was a man in their midst, one of the stones of the house, who was living incestuously with his father's wife, his stepmother {1 Cor 5:1-5}. The situation was so bad that even the pagans around them were offended. Paul said to them, "Remove him; take him out of the place and set him aside!" Paul wrote this in love, but in utter honesty. Then he went on to reprove them for certain other wrongs which had allowed this situation to arise. That is, he scraped the plaster and removed that too. In his second letter to the Corinthians you will find that this treatment had its desired effect. The house was preserved. In fact God, in grace, restored the lost stone and it was put back into the house. The man repented of his deeds and his place in the house was preserved.

Discipline within the church is what is in view here. It must be exercised in order to arrest such contagious diseases.

But if the house remains infected the day will come when it must be destroyed. Verses 43-45:

"If the disease breaks out again in the house, after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered it, then the priest shall go and look; if the disease has spread in the house, it is a malignant leprosy in the house; it is unclean. And he shall break down the house, its stones and timber and all the plaster of the house; and he shall carry them forth out of the city to an unclean place." {Lev 14:43-45 RSV}

In the opening chapters of the book of Revelation there are seven letters from the Lord Jesus to seven churches in Asia. In each one the Lord, as the great high priest, is examining his house. And in each one he sees certain things that are wrong and need to be corrected. He gives careful directions as to what they are and he allows the churches time to take care of the problems. But in each case he says that if they fail to do so he will visit judgment upon them and the house shall be broken down and the church will cease its testimony. This is what God does with a group of Christians who allow open evil to go on unjudged in their midst. The house ultimately is broken down and thus their testimony is ended. God does it if men will not.

We won't read any more of it now, but the chapter goes on to make provision for the cleansing of a house in which leprosy has been arrested. Again it involves the birds, one killed over running water in an earthen vessel and one let loose into the heavens. The death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus is the basis upon which an assembly can be cleansed.

Finally, the chapter concludes:

"This is the law for any leprous disease: for an itch, for leprosy in a garment or in a house, and for a swelling or an eruption or a spot, to show when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the law for leprosy." {Lev 14:54-57}

How wonderful it is to see God's concern for his people, to see his tender compassion, and his desire that every spot which is dangerous or harmful be immediately examined. And if we will apply these instructions today on the level at which we live, as the people of Israel were instructed to apply them then, how marvelously God's people will be preserved from that which wrecks and ruins and ravages and destroys! How healthy we will be, how whole we will be as persons! This is why these texts are given to us -- to enable us in the most practical way to be able to distinguish that which is harmful from that which is harmless.

Now the new year lies ahead of us. And we are called, as the people of God, to begin to examine our lives carefully, and to look first to our hearts. Are there leprous attitudes there? Are there bitter spirits and resentful attitudes and injurious, lustful longings that need to be dealt with? Then we are to look at our relationships with others. Are there things which are wrong there that need to be brought to God and healed and then cleansed so that our behavior can be adjusted? And then in the house of God, the groups of Christians that we meet with, is there anything wrong there? If so, it is to be brought before God so that health can be restored to his people. For the whole theme of this book, remember, is "Be ye holy, for I am holy," {cf, Lev 20:26 KJV}. Be whole persons, for God is a whole Person.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, as we look forward to the coming months, we long to be whole people. We do not want to be stumbling and falling, nor infected with loathsome running sores which disfigure us and make us unclean and revolting to others so that we must live in solitary loneliness. We want to be whole people, fulfilled and complete and healed. We want our relationships to be proper, our homes to be healthy, and our hearts to be right before you. Lord, we ask you now to deal with us, so that we might understand these principles and apply them correctly. So with David we pray, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer," {Psa 19:14 KJV}. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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