

Numbers 15:22-41

Repentance restores our souls before a Holy God.

Last Sunday, one of you brought a labyrinth game to Common Table and Ewen brought it home. Little metal marble that falls through holes unless you are skilled enough to make it to the end, racking up points along the way.

He was playing it and exclaimed, “this is the farthest I have made it without accidentally cheating!” Gave me a laugh and he explained that the marble might jump ahead without action by the player, so it was a mistake but a bit of gaming the system if you claimed the score.

Glad to report that Ewen’s ingrained honor and knowledge of what is right and just led him to recognize the unearned advantage!

This made me think of other games, especially those we were playing for the first time and didn’t fully understand the rules. In learning to play you might unintentionally violate the rules, get ahead, by mistake.

In the Shradar home there is grace for that.

But this exchange also reminded me of a time I cheated intentionally. We were playing Monopoly “House Divided” where you wrack up states and gain political power. I won the White House by stealing Texas!

Sure I was teaching the kids how corrupt politics is! But I was cheating, defiant, knowing the rules and ignoring them.

They still don’t trust me to this day!

I quickly came clean - repenting for my cheating... but the memory lingers.

Where the world, our flesh, and the devil say “just go ahead and get yours, cheat, lie, steal, oppress, harm...” There is another way that invites us to come clean and to be made clean.

We see it on display and pointed to in our text today.

Context: We are in the midst of a series of chapters highlighting rebellion. The people's disobedience to God's way.

- Refusal to go into the land.
- Rejection of leaders.
- Grumbling about provision.
- All while hinting that going back to slavery would be better.

These verses and the rules found here are part of the flow of the larger story of God's people in the wilderness and they must be read as so. Alone, what transpires can be a little jarring, but in light of the whole story, we see a gracious God who forgives and calls his people to remember his way. Repentance and remembering.

Repentance

The chapter already outlined sacrifices to be made in the future, when they entered the land. How they were to be presented to the Lord. Fellowship offerings, expressing the commitment to the covenant, a generous giving back of what would be received.

Now God speaks of sin offerings. Sacrifices that would expiate, remove the sin from the people. Granting forgiveness.

“If you sin by mistake..!”

If as a community you fail to keep any of the command the Lord gave to Moses, done unintentionally without the community knowing about it, then the whole congregation, corporately, was to offer a burnt offering plus “one make goat as a sin offering.”

Individuals who sinned unintentionally would bring a female goat as an offering.

Communicating again the guidelines given in Leviticus 4:1-5:19, unintentional sins of the congregation, of leaders, priests, and individuals. (Failing to give

testimony when you witnessed something, touching something unclean by accident or without knowing it.)

Not realizing the actions were violating the law, when they felt the guilt of it, they came in repentance with this offering.

Numbers 15:25 “And the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the people of Israel, and **they shall be forgiven**, because it was a mistake, and they have brought their offering, a food offering to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD for their mistake.” (ESV)

Atonement has taken place, and the relationship with God is restored.

What does this indicate for us?

Sin is serious.

Disobedience, here by God’s people, is not taken lightly and requires action to be made right. Applies to all of humanity, disregarding God.

Designed for relationship with our Creator, our souls yearn for it but we continue to get in the way of it by thinking we are God.

Because He is holy. So unique and others, sin can not remain in his presence.

“Neither the writer nor the reader of these words is qualified to appreciate the holiness of God. Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds to allow the sweet waters of truth that will heal our great sickness to flow in. We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of.

God’s holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable... Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard.” –A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*.

He is the standard we are supposed to conform to. And his people are meant to model this for all of humanity. When we refuse to follow his way, to see him as God, we sin.

We are swimming in a culture that doesn't like to talk about sin. It might make us uncomfortable! Flourishing might actually be found in embracing discomfort.

Duane having spine surgery. Had a degenerative condition that would eventually lead to the lose of the use of his right leg. So he had surgery to fix the crushed discs and pin the bones in place. Certainly painful, uncomfortable, but left alone it would have been worse.

“Until we deal with God as he really is, we cannot begin to enter a relationship with him. Paradoxically, the more we deal with God as he really is, the more we find that he is exactly the God whom we need. After all, he is the one who created us in the first place with just such a relationship in mind.” ID

Sin is serious, it gets in the way of relationship... but it can be repaired with the shedding of blood. Painting a picture of its severity, from the garden blood is shed to cover and remove sin. Blood shed to dress Adam and Eve, and here instruction for sin offerings.

This account also indicates to us that *God is merciful and gracious.*

Here he has given the people the opportunity to repent and receive atonement. Leviticus says when the people “realize their guilt” they are to come to make things right. Repentance. Metanoia, changing of our minds, realizing the wrong and turning from it. A paradigm shift, life a different way, His way.

Before our text, it was the promise of a land that remained for the people, grace, and the mercy of sacrifice, given a way to stay in relationship.

But this text also shows us that Yaheweh is a *God of justice.*

“‘But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. 31 Because they have despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them.’” 15:30-31 NIV

With a high hand, in rejection and defiance to God's law. No guilt. Unrepentant.

“In the textual backdrop of Israel's rejection of God and the promised land, the matter of willful defiance of God's word is raised. When a person acted defiantly in breaking the covenant relationship, that person blasphemed the Lord and defamed his righteous reputation. The penalty was either capital punishment or permanent banishment from the community of faith.”

Then comes the immediate example of such disobedience. The Sabbathbreaker is executed.

Gathering sticks in violation of the Sabbath when no work was to be done, when you were not to light a fire, and this man is preparing for a fire.

Killed. They knew he was to be “cut off” but didn't know the method and the Lord told them to stone him outside the camp. And they did.

“The sinner with a high hand feels no guilt; therefore the offense is not sacrificially expiable.” The one who sins defiantly may not feel the guilt of his violation, but he is nonetheless guilty before God and man.” A gross sinner who repents is welcomed in, while others who have committed apparently much less serious crimes but have hardened their hearts against God and remained defiant are cut off forever. There is no sacrifice possible to atone for such a spirit.

I was unsettled by this. Spent the week wondering if it is too harsh, too arbitrary. Lamenting that I have to preach all of Scripture...

Why was I okay with fearfully disobedience spies being struck down but the punishment of a stick picker bothered me.

I think it is because I don't see myself as a leader of a rebellion but merely as a stick picker. Knowing what's right, still seeing no harm in pursuing what my own heart inclines towards.

Attitudes that reveal misplaced hopes. Eyes that wander. Devaluing other image-bearers. Anger.

You can label your own sticks.

But it is still defiance. Rejection of God's way, however subtle.

“Much of our sin falls either under the category of carelessness or of acts of passion. In most cases we didn't set out with the intent of saying a cruel word or hitting that annoying person or thinking proud and lustful thoughts. In one sense, “it just happened.” It was a careless act of thoughtlessness. Other sins could be characterized as “temporary spiritual insanity.” These sins flow out of the war that goes on inside us between our sinful natures and our transformed hearts. This is the conflict that Paul describes in Romans 7, where we see that we find ourselves doing what we do not want to do because of the continuing power of the sinful nature (vv. 15-17). As long as we continue to inhabit our earthly bodies we find ourselves repeatedly overpowered by our sinful natures, carried away into sin. Now none of these causes of sin release us from responsibility for our actions. We are responsible for our careless thoughts and our sins of reaction, just as we would be responsible if we drove without due care and attention or in the heat of the moment picked up a baseball bat and hit someone with it. Sin is still sin, whatever its source.” ID

Leaves me looking for a lamb to offer in the hope of atonement.

That is meant to be the result. God's justice incites us to run after his mercy.

The system, the sacrifices, even the experience of atonement is all pointing to something more. Israel is learning all of this in the wilderness so they will hunger for the Savior that is to come.

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (ESV)

And all were made for more...

“Fellowship with a holy God is only possible if our sins are atoned for, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Hebrews 9:22). In order for us to be reconciled to God, therefore, the blood of a perfect sacrifice had to be offered in our place. The sin offerings of the Old Testament were pictures preparing God's people for the cross. All of the blood of bulls and goats shed under the old covenant pointed forward to that final perfect sacrifice by which Jesus atoned once and for all for the sins of all of his people.” ID

He is the sufficient sacrifice. The invitation to life with him is “repent and believe” Turn from sin, all of it, and run to Jesus. Where atonement has been made and forgiveness is found.

Mark 1:15 “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (ESV)

His grace is now the banner we live under. Forgiven. Free. His. So we keep coming in repentance.

Luther: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

No longer offering goats, but because the lamb was slain bringing our whole selves to Jesus for the application of his grace and forgiveness.

As simple as “have mercy on me a sinner.” As profound as the paradigm of life shifting to match his way.

No longer bound to sin but raised to life with Jesus.

Romans 6:10–11 “For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. [11] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)

Numbers 15 is a piece of the story leading to real promise, perfect atonement. Life with Jesus, now and forevermore.

Given grace and a way of remembering.

Remembering

Even with atonement we are still called to obedience. A relationship with God by grace does not eliminate the need for obedience but rather forms the foundation for it.

This chapter closes with instructions for tassels as reminders of God’s commands.

15:39-40 “You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. 40Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God.” NIV

To be set apart to your God.

Worth remembering because he is the God that saves, “I am the LORD your God.”

“So the blue threads reminded the Israelites that they were “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). This meant they had to remember and do all my commandments (Num. 15:40). In particular, they had to avoid the mistake of the spies of following after your own heart (v. 39). There is a play on words with the expression to follow, for this verb (Hb. tur) means both “to spy” and “to follow,” and thus alludes to the danger found in following their own whims rather than being absolutely loyal to the divine commandments.”

In Christ we don't wear tassels, we don't need a necklace or tattoo, even though they are all fine to do.

But we do have his word. It's why we are anchored in the word. It reveals our reality and his grace. Shows us his commands for life in the kingdom, so we know how to play the game.

Greatest of all it holds the words of his gospel. The power of God for salvation for all who believe.

Jesus as our pleasing aroma to God. Welcomed in and given life in him.

With this word we have each other. To declare the grace of Christ to one another. To hold up his love for us until we see it. Preaching the gospel to ourselves and each other everyday.

Luther 45: “The highest of all God's commands is this, that we ever hold up before our eyes the image of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He must daily be to our hearts the perfect mirror, in which we behold how much God loves us

and how well, in his infinite goodness, as a faithful God, he has grandly cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. Do not let this mirror and throne of grace be torn away from before your eyes.”

It can't be innovated beyond, and it is for all of life delivering the restoration we need. It makes us human again.

1 Peter 1:13–25 “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. [14] As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, [15] but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, [16] since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” [17] And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, [18] knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, [19] but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. [20] He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you [21] who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

[22] Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, [23] since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; [24] for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
[25] but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.” (ESV)

This is our fuel to keep fighting, to die to sin, living in repentance and yielding to the Spirit's influence in our lives.

Repentance restores our souls before a Holy God.

The grace of Christ, the balm for our souls, applied in repentance.

Turn to Jesus.

Be reminded.

The game has been won, and we have been invited to play.

May we remind each other of the grace of Christ and his call to life, for his glory and our good.