

Curious.

God has just told them that they will wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

God has just told them that because of the unbelief,

they may *not* enter the Promised Land.

Indeed, when they disregarded God’s word, and tried to enter the land anyway,

they were defeated and routed by the Canaanites and Amalekites.

And here are the first words that God says to Israel after this:

“When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you...”

Over the last few weeks we have looked at the “grumblings” in the wilderness.

These central chapters of the book of Numbers

contrast Israel’s grumbling in the wilderness (what is)

with God’s prescriptions for life in the land (what should be).

After all, the *book* of Numbers was not written for Israel *in the wilderness*.

The *book* of Numbers was written for Israel *in the land*.

As Israel recounts the history of the rebellion in the wilderness,

Israel should reflect on what is the *proper* response to the word of God.

And the result is a book that provides both a warning to Israel against grumbling,

together with the proper response – faithful obedience to the LORD.

So, if you would avoid the rebellion and grumbling of Numbers 13-14,

then pay attention to Numbers 15 – because here God shows us the way of life.

And Numbers 15 provides us with a glimpse at the connection between “cult” and culture –

between worship and the day-to-day ideas, practices – “webs of meaning” –

that we construct.

Our passage tonight is structured by a threefold use of the phrase,

“The LORD spoke to Moses” (v1, v17, v37).

The passage starts with a discussion of the centrality of worship –

verses 1-16 give the basic rule for how Israel to bring their offerings to the LORD;

and while our worship has changed in many ways,

the basic principles remain intact.

Then verses 17-36 focus on the application of those principles in two situations:

1) the first part of the dough,

2) and then, at the heart of the passage, the question of “unintentional” sins.

And finally, verses 37-41 encourage Israel to develop cultural practices

that will reinforce the way of life that God has commanded.

1. Life Before God: the Basic Rule for Offerings (v1-16)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you,

In Lev. 1-7, the LORD gave Moses the rules for how the *priests* were to conduct the offerings, but now the LORD addresses the people.

But it’s important for us to note something.

The text of Numbers 15 does not say *when* God told Moses this.

15:32 says that it was “while the people of Israel were in the wilderness” that they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.

The point is not *when* God said this –

the point is that these rules about sacrifices are especially fitting in the context of Israel’s rebellion.

In Exodus 34, immediately after Israel’s rebellion at Sinai, the LORD commanded Moses to start building the tabernacle.

So now, immediately after Israel’s rebellion at Kadesh, we have the LORD’s command regarding proper worship.

³ *and you offer to the LORD from the herd or from the flock a food offering^[a] or a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts, to make a pleasing aroma to the LORD,*

As we have seen before, the burnt offering is the declaration that we are here to worship God – the burnt offerings declare that we belong entirely to God.

We often use the word “sacrifice” indiscriminately to refer to all the animal offerings, but throughout the OT, the word sacrifice *usually* refers to a particular offering – namely, the peace offering.

And the sacrifice of the peace offering is a joyful declaration that we now have peace with God – *shalom* has come to God’s people.

Verses 4-10 then describe the grain offerings and drink offerings that should accompany the burnt offering and the sacrifice (the vow offering or peace offering).

⁴ *then he who brings his offering shall offer to the LORD a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah^[b] of fine flour, mixed with a quarter of a hin^[c] of oil; ⁵ and you shall offer with the burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb. ⁶ Or for a ram, you shall offer for a grain offering two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a third of a hin of oil. ⁷ And for the drink offering you shall offer a third of a hin of wine, a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ⁸ And when you offer a bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or for*

peace offerings to the LORD,⁹ then one shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three tenths of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with half a hin of oil.¹⁰ And you shall offer for the drink offering half a hin of wine, as a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

Think about how this works –

there are grain offerings and drink offerings that accompany the offerings of Israel.

Israel has just rejected the land – with all its bounty.

Now God says, when you come into the land – with all its bounty –

bring to me the bounty of the land:

but not the *raw* bounty!

God does not say to bring him grain, olives, and grapes!

Rather, bring him “fine flour” (the grain must be ground)

and this is flour mixed with oil (pressed from the olives)

and bring him wine (fermented from the grapes).

Indeed, even the animals that you bring the LORD are *domestic* animals.

Each of the offerings that Israel brings to the LORD

is an offering that takes the raw material,

adds the labor and skill of humanity,

and offers to God the finest of our labors:

the best animals, the finest flour, oil, and wine.

As you were grinding your grain, as you were pressing your olives,

as you were treading your grapes, and as you were birthing your sheep,

you would think – this is what I will offer to the LORD my God.

Undoubtedly it feels a bit different in a modern economy,

because you are not bringing a spreadsheet or a computer program to offer to God!

We haven’t yet received a dissertation in the offering plates!

But as we talk about the relationship between “cult” and “culture”

it is worth noting that the relationship is reciprocal:

the fruits and products of human culture

are at the center of what God requires in worship.

But also notice this:

God does not call for Israel to bring him *everything* in their culture!

There are no vegetables here – nor other products,

like garments or tools or handicrafts.

This is the point of *sacraments*.
God selects certain things and makes them holy.

In the NT, Christ ordained two sacraments:

baptism – in which the washing of *water*
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit
signifies and seals our ingrafting into Christ;
and the Lord’s Supper – in which our partaking of *bread and wine*
is a participation in the body and blood of Christ.

¹¹ *“Thus it shall be done for each bull or ram, or for each lamb or young goat. ¹² As many as you offer, so shall you do with each one, as many as there are. ¹³ Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in offering a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ¹⁴ And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he shall do as you do. ¹⁵ For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. ¹⁶ One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”*

Verses 11-16 then explain that these rules apply not only to native Israelites,
but also to the stranger who is sojourning with you.

“You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD.”

This is a regular provision of the law –
which suggests that this was something that Israel struggled with!
After all, laws only exist because of problems!

As we have seen in Numbers 11-12, Israel has already encountered trouble over sojourners.

The “rabble” in 11:4 (the “mixed multitude” that came up with them from Egypt)
was the occasion for Israel’s first rebellion

And in 12:1, Miriam and Aaron grumbled because Moses married a Cushite.

So even in the wilderness, Israel was struggling with the question of how “foreigners”
related to God’s “holy people.”

And Moses answers:

“you and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD.”
After all, God’s promise to Abraham was that through Abraham
all nations would be blessed.

Behind verses 11-16 is the profound principle of God’s hospitality.

God welcomed us – while we were strangers!

God has taken aliens and strangers and brought us into his home – into his family –
and he treats us as fellow heirs with his only-begotten Son!

If this is how God has treated us – then how ought we to treat others?
We should not have one standard for those who are “like us”
and another standard for those who are “not.”
We should treat the stranger just like we treat one another!

And while this is *primarily* focused at the church –
Christians must have the same mentality in our civil life as well!
After all, our cultural practices must be rooted in our worship practices.

I think of pastor Ken Smith,
who invited a lesbian Literature professor into his home,
and treated her with great kindness –
because he saw that the hospitality of God towards us,
means that we should treat the stranger just like we treat one another!

2. Special Circumstances (v17-36)

Verses 17-36 then launch the second section of our chapter –
as God applies these principles of worship in two specific ways.

a. The Contribution of the First Portion to God (v17-21)

¹⁷ *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ¹⁸ *“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land to which I bring you ¹⁹ and when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a contribution to the LORD. ²⁰ Of the first of your dough you shall present a loaf as a contribution; like a contribution from the threshing floor, so shall you present it. ²¹ Some of the first of your dough you shall give to the LORD as a contribution throughout your generations.*

First, in verses 17-21, God says again “when you come into the land to which I bring you” –
again highlighting that *this* is the way that Israel *should have* responded at Kadesh –
and that this is the way that Israel should respond throughout their generations.

When you eat the bread of the land, you shall present a contribution to the LORD –
by presenting the first loaf from your dough to the LORD.

Now, there has been some debate about how to do this.

Were they supposed to bring this to the tabernacle?

Probably not.

The language here is vague – probably for a reason!

In Deuteronomy 12, Moses explains that Israel may eat meat in their towns –
so long as they slaughter the animal

in a way that is reminiscent of the liturgical offering.

In the same way, here, Moses says that when they eat bread

they should present the first part of the dough to the LORD.

It’s highly unlikely that every Israelite was required to go to the sanctuary

every time they wanted to make bread!
The rabbis understood this to mean
that you should throw the first part of the dough into the fire.

There are many ways that this principle gets expressed throughout the scriptures.
But the fundamental point is that the *first* part of our labor belongs to God.
It's easy to apply this to our wages today –
we should set aside the *first part* of our wages for God!
But if that's all we do, then we are missing the point!

The principle of firstfruits pervaded Israelite life.
Over and over again – in all sorts of ways – the first part belongs to God.
Usually, this will have some benefit for others –
as the firstfruits went to the priests
(or to the prophets as in the days of Elijah and Elisha!)
But sometimes, as here, the first portion was burned in the fire.

We need to remember that we are not pragmatists –
we are not utilitarians!
We are not first and foremost about making this a better world.
We are first and foremost about the holiness of God's name!

We are not bound by these OT laws –
but I would urge you to think about the ways that exercise this in our daily lives.
In the daily routines of life –
in your driving, in your cooking, in your practices at work,
how do you demonstrate that the first of all you do belongs to God?

b. Dealing with Sin (v22-36)

i. Unintentional Sins of the Congregation (v22-26)

²² “But if you sin unintentionally,^[d] and do not observe all these commandments that the LORD has spoken to Moses, ²³ all that the LORD has commanded you by Moses, from the day that the LORD gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations, ²⁴ then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, all the congregation shall offer one bull from the herd for a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the rule, and one male goat for a sin offering. 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. ²⁶ And all the congregation of the people of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger who sojourns among them, because the whole population was involved in the mistake.

Verse 22 introduces the concept of the “unintentional sin.”

Some have argued that “unintentional sins” are “sins of wandering” –
in other words, when the leaders of Israel do not properly restrain the people.
James Jordan says “that peoples’ guilt is relatively less
if their sin is a result of wandering;
that is, if no one in authority over them seeks to warn and restrain them.”
<http://www.biblicalthorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-44-the-restrainer/>

Now, it is *true* that leaders are supposed to restrain their people.
But I cannot see how that is at the center of the unintentional sin.
Unintentional sins are not primarily focused on the question
of whether the leader is properly restraining the people.
After all, Leviticus 4:22 speaks of the “unintentional sin” of the ruler.

But other people struggle with the whole concept of “unintentional” sin.
How can I sin and not know it?

After all, in 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul says,
“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.
God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability,
but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,
that you may be able to endure it.”

Properly understood, this states that you will never face a situation where you have to sin.
When you are tempted, God promises that he will always provide a way of escape.
But if this is true, then how can there be unintentional sins?!

Well, remember what Paul says:
“No *temptation* has overtaken you...”
Paul is dealing with the question of *temptation*.
You will never face a *temptation* where you are “powerless” to do the right thing.
Those who are in Christ now share in his Holy Spirit, and so we can never say,
“I couldn’t help it — the temptation was too strong!”
But that does not mean that there is no such thing as “unintentional sin.”

Think about our catechism’s definition of sin:
“Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.”

Think of the case of the stolen book.
Sometimes, when you buy a used book,
the “used” book was actually stolen from a library.
You may have purchased the book innocently enough —
but if you have purchased stolen property,
then you are unjustly possessing the book of another.

It's easy enough to remedy this *if you know the truth* —
but if you never realize that it was stolen,
then you may remain in possession of the stolen book,
and thus you have perpetuated the injustice.
You are (unwittingly) out of conformity with the law of God.

And there are lots of situations like this.

We frequently find ourselves (unwittingly) participating in injustice.
If you are a stockholder in a company/organization that practices injustice,
then you are investing in (and making money from) their injustice.
If you work for a company/organization that practices injustice,
then even if you are striving to conduct yourself justly,
you are still participating in (and benefiting from)
the corruption of the corporation.

This shouldn't surprise us.

After all, if we believe what Genesis 6 says about us —
that the inclinations of our hearts are only evil continually —
that corruption has reached every part of us —
we should not be surprised that there are “unintentional sins”
where we are not even aware of what we have done wrong.

In other words, our problem is not just that we sin against God.

Our problem is *also* that all creation and all human institutions have become corrupt.
Corruption has spread to everyone and everything.

This is a problem that the Old Testament rituals were designed to correct.

The sin and guilt offerings were designed to deal with “unintentional sins” —
and then once a year on the Day of Atonement the “scapegoat” (Lev 16)
was designed to deal with all these unintentional sins.

Hebrews 9:7 says that the high priest went into the Holy of Holies “once a year,
and not without taking blood,
which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.”

And Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus deals with this problem more effectively:

“how much more will the blood of Christ,
who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God,
purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (9:14)

Notice that our problem is not just “guilt” due to our conscious sins.

Our problem is *also* that we have become impure/blemished —
we have become corrupt.

And the blood of Jesus deals *both* with the guilt of our sin,

and with the corruption of our nature.

And this is why Peter speaks of baptism “for the forgiveness of sins”
and the “gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In Christ our legal problem is solved (we are forgiven for our sins)
and our corruption problem is solved (we are washed/cleansed from our uncleanness).

ii. Unintentional Sins of an Individual (v27-29)

²⁷ “If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering.

²⁸ And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. ²⁹ You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them.

In verses 27-29, Moses deals with the unintentional sins of individuals.

Children,

I want you to think about this.

Sometimes your parents will tell you that you need to ask for forgiveness.

You may be thinking – “But I didn’t mean it! It wasn’t intentional!”

If you have *wronged* another person,

then you may have sinned *unintentionally*.

You didn’t intend to hurt them –

but, on the other hand, you *were* being selfish, thoughtless, rude...

That is an unintentional sin.

Jesus had to die for that sin.

And yes, you need to *repent* of that sin.

(when you think of all the unintentional sins that we have committed –
both individually and corporately, it can feel overwhelming!)

But that’s why Jesus came!

And again, in verse 29, Moses makes it clear that there is no distinction
between the stranger and the people of Israel.

Both shall be treated alike.

iii. High-Handed Sins of an Individual (v30-31)

³⁰ But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. ³¹ Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.”

Verses 30-31 then contrast unintentional sins with “high-handed sins.”

High-handed sins are when a native or a sojourner “reviles the LORD” –
and you revile the LORD when you despise the Word of the LORD,
and break his commandments.

High-handed sins are when you *know* that what you are about to do is wrong,
but you do it anyway.

The classic case of high-handed sin is found in chapters 13-14 –
Israel’s rebellion – and refusal to enter the Promised Land.

And while God pardoned his people – and did not destroy them utterly –
they were cut off, and their bodies fell in the wilderness.

The language of “cut off” *can* be “put to death” –

but it can also mean that they are “shunned” – put out of the community.

It all depends on the severity of the crime.

After all, look at the case study in verses 32-36:

iv. Case Study: the Sabbath-breaker (v32-36)

³² *While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.* ³³ *And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation.* ³⁴ *They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him.* ³⁵ *And the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.”* ³⁶ *And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the LORD commanded Moses.*

He was gathering sticks.

He hadn’t lit a fire yet – he was just gathering sticks!

But they weren’t sure what to do with him.

So they inquire of the LORD,

and the LORD says to Moses,

“The man shall be put to death;

all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” (v35)

The early fathers rightly noted that not every Sabbath-breaker was put to death.

Rather, the *first* Sabbath-breaker was executed.

John Cassian compared this case to that of Ananias and Sapphira –

suggesting that it was not that these sins are intrinsically the “worst”

“but that when these persons had been found committing a new offense,

they had to furnish a kind of example to others

of the penalty and terror of sinfulness.

Thus, from then on, whoever was tempted to do the same thing

would know that at the future judgment

he would receive the same condemnation as the others,
even if in this life his punishment was deferred.” (ACCS, 227)

And Basil the Great comments that this illustrates the point
that “stubbornness toward God is clearly condemned
not in consideration of the number or heinousness of transgressions
but in terms of a single violation of any precept whatsoever.” (ACCS, 226)

This was a high-handed sin.

God had said in Exodus 31:15,

“Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.”

That should have been sufficiently clear.

A culture that is based on God’s creating all things out of nothing in the space of six days
should prize and value the seventh day.

Both our individual practice and our corporate practice should reflect this.

That’s why we devote the Lord’s Day to the worship of our Lord!

We take the firstfruits of our time and devote it to him.

You may have noticed that I don’t emphasize the “do’s and don’ts” of the Sabbath.

Instead, I seek to emphasize the *practice* of the Sabbath –

the dedication of the whole day to the worship of God,

and the practice of holy resting – and giving rest to others.

And in this way we build and develop “Christian culture” –

in other words, practices and customs –

webs of meaning that are bound up in the gospel of Jesus.

[read:]

3. Wearing Tassels: the Case for Christian Culture (v37-41)

³⁷ *The LORD said to Moses,* ³⁸ *“Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. ³⁹ And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow^[e] after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. ⁴⁰ So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God.”*

Wearing tassels.

In other words, adding extra ornaments to your clothing that have no utility whatsoever –
except that it’s presence reminds you to be holy.

David Stubbs points out that tassels were used in the ancient world as the mark of nobility.

If all Israelites are supposed to wear tassels, then all Israelites are set apart.
And, what is more, there is to be a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.
Blue dye was expensive – and was used for royalty.
This is the same color that was used in the sanctuary of the tabernacle.
In other words, the tassels were to demonstrate that Israel is a royal priesthood –
as God had said in Exodus 19.

I am not especially fond of overly-literal applications of these sorts of things.

Today, there is a whole cottage industry that manufactures cheap trinkets and baubles
with Bible verses attached.
But this misses the point –
as Jesus will say of the Pharisees:
“They do all their deeds to be seen by others.
For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long...” (Mt 23:5)
The point is *not* to be seen as holy by others.
The point is to remember to be holy yourself!

What are the practices and customs by which we remind ourselves and one another
of our calling to be holy?

Practices and customs may vary from place to place and time to time –
as Paul points out:

“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking
but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.
So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding”
(Romans 14:19)

“Christian culture” does not mean sticking Christian slogans on pop culture.

Christian culture means the customs and practices that reflect the gospel of the kingdom –
and the worship of the King.

Christian culture means living in the midst of this age
according to the standards and values of the age to come.