

February 9, 2005
Ash Wednesday
Numbers 19:2,6,9-16,20
Pastor Ott

We See Jesus Making Us Clean

I don't know if it is this way in your household, but at our household if there is a mouse trap and there is a mouse on it either dead or alive, six of the seven people in the house will walk by it and go find that seventh person to get rid of that mouse. If the seventh person doesn't happen to be home and one of them has to take care of it, I imagine as soon as the squeals and the squeaking are over, the first thing they do is run to the sink and wash their hands real thoroughly and real vigorously.

Now why is that? I suppose nowadays we think germs. Something might come off that dead animal, right? I wonder if part of it isn't just being that close to something that is dead.

Germs might be the answer for us today. But when you stop to think about it, it hasn't been all that long, it is kind of a recent addition to our society that germs were such a great concern. An example would be about 130 years ago when they built the Transcontinental Railroad from New York out to California. One of the advertising boasts they made is it can get you from one coast to the other in a week's time--so fast you won't even have to take a bath. So in 130 years we have come a long way in our outlook on germs and hygiene and those kinds of things.

And then you consider that the words that I just read to you about washing after coming into contact with death were written by Moses some 3500 years ago. He wasn't writing about germs. He wasn't writing about hygiene. He was writing about the will of God. God's ceremonial law for ceremonial clean and unclean and how you would become unclean in the circumstance of death and what you had to do to become clean again so you could enter the tabernacle or later the temple.

You and I might read these and think, "Boy, this is just some arbitrary stuff." It doesn't make a lot of sense to us. But God doesn't write things in scripture for us that are nonsensical. God writes this because He has a reason. He has something He wanted the Israelites to see, and He has something He wants us to see. And as we consider these laws, these ceremonies, we see that they are really a prophecy about what the Savior would be like. They are laws that are a shadow--a shadow of someone who is coming. You might not be able to make out every detail of that person that was coming, but in these laws and in these ceremonies they painted a broad picture. You and I look back as we see in the New Testament and now as we consider these words, it really adds depth, it adds character, it adds richness, another dimension to our understanding of who Jesus is.

So during these weeks of Lent, we are going to be looking at some of these ceremonial laws, some of these prophecies—these prophecies of what the Savior would do. Tonight the prophecy we look at is the water of cleansing. As you peer into these

shadows, what do we see? What we see is Jesus making us clean—clean first of all from the stench of death and then clean by applying His death to us.

These ceremonial laws that we read seem outside of the norm of our experience. We would go to a grave of a relative on their birthday or on a special day and place flowers there and feel no compulsion to rush away and wash ourselves to make ourselves clean. The truth of the matter is that we don't have to—we aren't bound by these rituals. But God's Old Testament people were. If they went to grandmother's grave with flowers, they became ceremonially unclean for seven days because God wanted to teach them something about the nature of death.

Moses wrote for us, *"Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean."*

If someone died at home, that very home was unclean for that timeframe. If someone touched a bone, they would become unclean. As I said, if someone touched a grave, they became unclean. This doesn't have anything to do with germs. As I said, it is to teach something about death—about God's reaction to sin.

The whole nature of God's covenant law with the Israelites was to remind them that sin and death separate from God. Adam and Even were not created so that they would die. But they had a better plan than God's plan. They listened to the devil and they brought death into the world for everyone. If there would be no sin, there would be no death. So every death is a reminder that sin covers us. It is who we are—it is what we are by nature.

So God attached a lot of His ceremonial law and His most intense regulations about ceremonial uncleanness had to do with death, so that he would be teaching this lesson—death covers us with a stench that appalls our God who is holy. This was built into the sensitivities of God's Old Testament people. They knew this. They knew what would happen. And you think about it, as they went through life they had to come into contact with dead people, or someone who had buried someone. Then they would be unclean for seven days. So a reminder that no matter how hard we try and no matter what we do, we can't keep from sinning. We are going to sin and that is going to separate us from God. And there is nothing we can do to bring us back into the presence of God.

They needed this water of cleansing that God was giving to them so that they could come back into God's presence. That would take the stench of death away from them. You and I need the stench of death taken away from us also. You and I are born in death, because we are born in sin. We might feel healthy right now, but there is a day coming, unless Jesus returns first, when each one of us will face death. So we need it removed because it is that reminder that we are not one with God. There is something that separates us from God. There is something that makes it so we are not the way God intended.

The heart of God's law is simple. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. It is not be good to the poor, be nice to each other, and make sure there is racial harmony. It's not all of these things. It is love God intensely, deeply and perfectly. The reason that is the heart of the law is because if you and I did that, we would be kind and loving to one another. There would be racial harmony. The poor would be helped and aided. We would do it without having to be told, do this or do that. We would do it because of our intense love for God. But the fact of the matter is as you and I are born into this world, our love stinks. We don't do it. We are sinful. We are corrupted. We are separated from God. It turns His stomach to see who and what we have become.

But at the same time, God is a God of love and mercy. And in that love and mercy He washes our sins away. He gives us a bath that removes the stench of death. He gives us this bath as we are baptized into Jesus Christ. That washes our sins away. He gives us that bath this evening as we come to His altar and receive His very body and blood—and our sins are taken away and removed from us and the stench is gone.

When Moses starts talking to the Israelites about clean and unclean, and as we look into it and consider it, what we see is God telling us that He has to be the one who makes us clean. And you and I rejoice because we know when we see that, we see Jesus who removes the stench of death from us.

Having said all of that, it is a beautifully true picture but still, as you look at these regulations that God lays out through Moses, it still has to seem a pretty strange ritual to us--a strange thing to go through to teach this truth to the Israelites.

Jewish tradition says King Solomon could give an explanation for almost every single one of God's laws--the ceremonial laws that govern them, the civil laws that govern them. The tradition of the rabbi says that this was one that he could not explain. I don't know if that is true or not, but it does show us that on our own, we aren't going to know a lot of these things. We need God to explain it to us. God explains it to us when He shows us that this is really a picture of Jesus. This rite shows us a shadow of Christ, because it points us to His death which removes the stench of our sin.

If you remember what we read in Numbers 19, it demanded a red heifer. The orthodox Jews, they took this to mean absolutely red—no other color anywhere. For orthodox Jews today, they have a problem. They believe that every Jew that is alive today is unclean because they come into contact with a grave or someone who has touched a dead person and they have no more ashes from a red heifer to make them purified from their sins so that they could go to temple worship. They can't reestablish temple worship, the orthodox Jews, until they can make the water of cleansing. They can't do that because they don't have a red heifer. A few years ago, there was a calf that was born, and it was all red, and they were all excited. But within a few weeks, different colors started appearing in it.

The tradition of the rabbi says that in the whole time that the Israelites lived in the land of Israel, there were only eight red heifers that went through this process. The rarity of this animal that God told them to use--that is a picture also. But they were to take this

red heifer, whenever they would have one, whenever they would find one, and take it outside the camp, slaughter it, and then the priest was to take his fingers into the blood and seven times sprinkle it towards the tabernacle or later, towards the temple. And then they were to put it on an altar onto wood and burn it—everything completely, the hide, everything. Think of how long it would take to burn completely that animal. Then they had to carefully gather all of those ashes. How many ashes would you have from something like that? They were to gather them and collect them and keep them and then whenever someone became ceremonially unclean, the priest was to take some of the ashes, mix fresh water with them, and then sprinkle it on the person on the third day and on the seventh day so then they would be able to join the community again in worshipping the Lord in the tabernacle.

What is all that ash for? What is all this going on about? As we look back at it now through Christ, we can see, can't we? Something had to die to make people clean before God--something very rare—something without blemish or defect. Can you see Christ in this--the sinless son of God? Someone who is not just rare, but someone who is unique—the only person that has ever walked on the face of this earth that was true God and true man at the same time. Through His perfect life and then through His death on the cross, you and I are covered. We are purified and the whole world is purified of sins. Then it becomes ours personally as the Spirit works faith in our hearts.

You and I are baptized into Jesus' death. We are baptized into His resurrection. It makes us clean, it washes away our sins, it takes the stench of our sin away and makes us something that has a pleasing aroma to God—our life's live to thank Him.

This is what God has done for us. This is the picture that is there in Numbers 19. The more that we can understand these Old Testament scriptures, the greater we are going to appreciate the incredible lengths that God went to. That hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus walked the face of the earth, He already laid out many of the things that He would do in these regulations. He put it there so people would know death equals becoming clean before God the death of something that was without blemish. He lays it out for us that His love for us is eternal.

When you look at this ceremonial law, you can't help but see what the Old Testament ceremony means. What do we see as we look at it? We see Jesus who makes us clean by applying His death to us.

God taught this centuries before it happened—that death would make us clean. Jesus did that for us. And we are privileged and we can rejoice and gather together to marvel at the intense love God has for His world, the intense planning that went into our way of salvation. The gospel gives us this birth into a new life. Now we live and we celebrate our Father forever.