

CONSECRATED CLEANSING

EXODUS 19:10-14

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A number of years ago I received a special honor. I was invited to offer the opening prayer for the Senate of the United States of America. It was one of the most memorable occasions in my life, and Sherry and I prepared accordingly. We drove up to Washington D.C. one day in advance. We carefully followed all of the instructions that we had received from the Chaplain's Office of the Senate. We dressed appropriately in our best outfits. We presented our credentials for admission to the Capitol and to the chamber of the Senate in that building. We focused our attention on the proceedings that were taking place all around us when we arrived early that morning, and when it came time for me to pray, I offered the prayer that I had prepared weeks in advance. As I stood before that gathering of senators and their aides and staff members, and all of those seated in the gallery above the Senate chamber, I was deeply humbled by the realization that I had been given the privilege of ushering these men and women into the very presence of the Lord.

Moses may have felt the same way as he came down from the mountain to tell the Israelites that in three days they would be meeting with the Lord, and that there were some things that they needed to do in order to be properly prepared for that meeting. In fact, these instructions had come from the Lord Himself as recorded in Exodus 19:10-14. Let's take a look at them together. They can be summed up in two words, cleansing and consecration.

First of all, Moses told the people to cleanse their garments. Their journey to the Mountain of God had been a difficult and dusty affair. Both they and all of their clothing needed a good cleaning. As they approached the mountain to meet with the Lord, they would be stepping onto holy ground. And just as Moses had been told to take off his sandals, they needed to remove from themselves anything that would diminish their appearance as they stood before the Lord. They needed to be fresh and clean and purified for their meeting with God. Showing up in dirty, unkempt apparel would not be acceptable to a holy God who expected the best from His people. So the wash tubs and wash basins came out and the people went to scrubbing, a practice that became a prescribed part of their relationship with the Lord as indicated in the book of Leviticus. The Israelites were instructed to wash their clothing and themselves when dealing with any number of issues including contact with those who were ill or touching the remains of an animal that had died. In other words, the Israelites were to be the kind of people who were known for their cleanliness, traits that we still honor today, especially in terms of health care.

But that's not all. They were not only to be clean when they appeared before the Lord. They were to also be consecrated. What exactly does this mean? What were they supposed to do? The word itself means to be set aside, to be separated from that which is a part of everyday life. In terms of the people of Israel, it probably meant at least two things. First of all, don't go near the mountain out of a sense of curiosity to see what's up there. If you go up the mountain before you are summoned by the sound of God's trumpet, you will have committed a grave offense that is punishable by death. Don't do it. Second, you must abstain from those kinds of things that represent your normal way of life, including even your affection for one another. This is a holy time and you shouldn't allow anything to

distract you from what is to take place in two days. You're going to be meeting with the Lord Almighty, and you must not let anything take your focus off of Him and what you are about to experience in His presence.

Now, what if anything does this passage of Scripture have to say to you and me, especially when we gather together on Sunday mornings to worship the Lord? First off, I think it's a reminder that we too need to be cleansed before we step into God's presence. I can't help but wonder if the proverbial Saturday night bath is a reflection of that desire to be clean before the Lord. Likewise, when I was child, we always wore our best when we went to church. I know that sometimes people dressed up to impress one another, but really I think it was more than that. We wanted to look our best when we stepped into God's presence, even if that meant a freshly washed pair of bib overalls and a white shirt. But I believe being cleansed goes far beyond our outward appearance. I think it has more to do with what's inside of our hearts, the spiritual condition of our lives. Jesus made mention of this when he talked about the religious leaders of His day and time. He said that on the outside they looked pretty good, like white washed tombs, but that on the inside they were filled with dead men's bones, all kinds of sin and corruption (Matthew 23:27). In other words, they needed the kind of cleansing that King David was talking about when he said, "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me"(Psalm 51:7).

And I believe that is what we need as well. It's called repentance. If we want to enter into God's presence, we need to be thoroughly cleansed. That's what John the Baptist was talking about when he was baptizing people in the Jordan River. It was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Being immersed in the river was symbolic of what was happening in their spiritual lives. They were asking God to forgive them. They were turning away from their sins, that which they knew was displeasing to the Lord, and asking Him to cleanse them inwardly even as John was baptizing them outwardly.

Years ago I read a book called *The Key to Triumphant Living*. It was written by a pastor by the name of Jack Taylor. It described the spiritual renewal that took place in his life and in the life of his congregation. And it all started with repentance. He was at a low place in his life in life, spiritually bankrupt as a person and as a pastor trying to lead his congregation. He went to meet with a retired missionary named Bertha Smith. After describing his situation, she told him, "Take a sheet of paper and write down every unconfessed sin in your life." He thought to himself that won't take too long. Two and half sheets later he was still writing, and that became the first step in his spiritual journey back to God, a journey that ended when the Holy Spirit came to reside in his life as a permanent resident, guiding, sustaining, and filling him with a renewed sense of purpose and joy. As Jack Taylor says himself in his book, "Because of His nature and the nature of sin, God cannot tolerate sin in any form. His holiness precludes the possibility that He can put up even with one little sin."

So before the people of Israel could encounter God's presence they needed to be cleansed, and the same is true for you and me. The confession of sin is essential if we want to meet with God, if we want to experience His forgiveness, if we want to be filled and blessed by His Spirit. That's the promise of 1 John 1:9 which declares, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Therefore, if we want to be prepared to meet the Lord, the first thing we need to do is to repent, to confess our sins, so that we can be cleansed of all of our filthiness.

The second thing that this passage of Scripture tells us is that we need to be consecrated before we step into God's presence, and that's especially true when we gather for worship. We need to focus on who He is and what He desires for us to be and

do. Let's be honest, how often have we arrived at church with no sense whatsoever of preparing ourselves to spend time with the Lord. We have arrived distracted by a thousand other things. We're thinking about what we're going to do that afternoon, where we're going to have lunch, which of our favorite teams will be playing football. And to make matters worse, I have known of some people who went to church to do business. As one man honestly admitted, "Going to church is a great place to meet people and to make contacts for future business opportunities." In other words, God had little or nothing to do with his interest in going to church. It was nothing more than another way to do a little personal advertising.

That, I believe, is what Paul was talking about when he issued this stern condemnation in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, he wrote, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!" Then after describing what the Lord's Supper was supposed to commemorate, he went on to warn them about partaking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy, unconsecrated manner. In verses 28 to 30 he stated, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." In other words, spending time in the presence of the Lord is a serious matter that should not be taken lightly. It is a solemn occasion which requires that we turn away from the things of this world, especially those things that are sinful and unbecoming for Christians, and focus our attention upon the One who has redeemed us in Christ Jesus.

So there you have it, cleansing and consecration, the two hallmarks that are essential if we are to experience the presence of the Lord when we meet with Him. That's what one young man shared with his pastor. He said, "I was so distressed by my guilt and unworthiness that I decided not to partake of the Lord's Supper. However, while I was washing my hands this morning getting ready to come to church, it seemed as if the Lord was speaking to me. He said, 'Cannot I, in my blood, wash your soul as easily as you wash your hands?' So I am here this morning to partake of Communion with great joy." He had discovered, as, indeed, we must all discover that cleansing and consecration are essential to our walk with the Lord, and that these two things can best be accomplished when God does the scrubbing. Or as the psalmist declared, "Purge with hyssop and I will be clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow."