

What does it mean to “be holy”?

When we talk about “holiness” or “sanctification”

we invariably start talking about what we *do*.

But the idea of holiness isn’t really about what we *do*.

It’s about who we are.

The word simply means “to be set apart” or “consecrated.”

Both the law of the Nazirite and the Aaronic blessing are all about holiness.

The blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 is undoubtedly the most famous passage from Numbers.

I am fairly certain that you have heard it more often than any other verses from Numbers (since I use it as the benediction most evening services).

It is often referred to as the “priestly blessing” or the “Aaronic benediction.”

What is it doing here?

In chapter 7 we will go back in time

to “the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle.”

In Num 1-4 we heard about the arrangement of the camp in the 2<sup>nd</sup> month.

Numbers 7 and 9 will all deal with matters back in the first month

twelve days of offerings in Numbers 7,

followed by the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month –

namely, *Passover* in Numbers 9.

In between these two episodes from the first month

is the consecration of the Levites (which would have happened in the 2<sup>nd</sup> month).

I mention this now in order to highlight the fact

that the placement of the Aaronic benediction here in chapter 6 is striking!

It might seem to fit better in the priestly and Levitical doings in chapters 7-9.

But instead it serves as the 13<sup>th</sup> saying to open the book of Numbers.

Eight times in chapters 1-4 we heard, “and the LORD spoke to Moses.”

Now five times in chapters 5-6 we hear, “and the LORD spoke to Moses.”

Even as there are 13 tribes (the twelve tribes plus Levi) in the war camp,

so also there are thirteen times that “the LORD spoke to Moses.”

This last one highlights something that is unique to Aaron.

Only Aaron and his sons may bless Israel.

And yet, through this blessing, all Israel becomes a blessing to the nations.

In other words, we see in Numbers 6 how an “ordinary Israelite”

can participate in the Levitical calling to mediate God’s blessings to the community –

and further can truly become a blessing to the nations.

We saw last time that *everyone* in Israel would have become unclean at some or other – and so therefore *everyone* would wind up going “outside the camp” for a while.

God’s purpose is pretty clear:

he wants his people to understand what it feels like to be “outside the camp.”

He is setting Israel up for what will happen when Jesus comes.

Because when Jesus comes, Jesus will go “outside the camp” to be crucified and bear the sins of the world.

In chapter 5, we heard about uncleanness – breaking faith – and the spirit of jealousy.

In other words, we heard about all the things that can go wrong in the church.

But here in Numbers 6, we hear about the things that can go *right*.

Chapters 1-2 laid out the wilderness camp,

and how the people of Israel were to be arranged as the holy people.

Chapters 3-4 then focused on the Levites,

and how the Levites were set apart as the “inner circle” (literally) of the holy people.

If the Levites displace the firstborn in the service of the holy things, then what happens to the rest of Israel?

How can the “ordinary” Israelite participate in the holiness of the priests?

As we look at the law of the Nazirite

it may be useful to hear a couple of NT references:

in Acts 18:18 we hear that while Paul was in Cenchrae, “he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.”

Then, in Acts 21:24, Paul goes to the temple with four fellow Christians who were under a vow and had to cut their hair.

And he purified himself along with them and paid their expenses – which included paying for the sacrifices prescribed in Numbers 6.

In other words, Paul and the rest of the apostles thought that it was fine for Jewish Christians, at least, to observe something like a Nazirite vow.

That’s why I’ve titled this section:

“The Law of the Nazirite – the Quest for Holiness.”

## **1. The Law of the Nazirite – the Quest for Holiness (v1-21)**

### **a. The Nazirite Vow (v1-12)**

If you just think of holiness in terms of “ethics” – then you will miss the point of holiness!

Holiness is not just about being a good person.

You can be a good person and still be unholy.

There are lots of ethically “good” people out there who do not care a whit for holiness.

If the point is simply “being good,”  
then there would be no place for the law of the Nazirite.  
Because the Nazirite is not committing himself to “being good” or “obeying God.”  
Rather, the Nazirite is committing himself to *holiness* –  
to *separating himself* to the LORD.

The word “Nazirite” is connected both to the verb, “*nazar*” – “to consecrate”  
(used for the consecration of the priests, of the Levites, of the tabernacle,  
and all the holy things);  
It is also connected to the noun, “*nezer*” – “ordination/consecration” –  
also used of the priests, Levites, tabernacle, etc.

The priests were consecrated for life – they were ordained to lifetime service.  
The Nazirite is consecrated for a particular time – or, for a particular service.

And there are three things that characterize this separation:  
separation from all products of the grapevine,  
separation from razors,  
and separation from dead bodies.

The last one is the most obvious – so let’s start with verses 6-8

### iii) Separation from Death (v6-8)

<sup>6</sup> “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. <sup>7</sup> Not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister, if they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head. <sup>8</sup> All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD.

Ordinarily, you were expected to care for the bodies of your close relatives when they died.  
Your parents and your siblings were especially your responsibility.  
*Only the high priest* was exempted from this.

In Leviticus 21:10, the high priest is ordered to avoid *all* dead bodies.

(Other priests could care for the bodies of their parents or siblings –  
but *not* the high priest!)

The high priest is holy – set apart from death to God.

He may not make himself unclean for *any* reason.

And while *other* priests were allowed to make themselves unclean for close family,  
the Nazirite may not.

Because the Nazirite shares in a holiness that is otherwise unique to the high priest!

And holiness is about being set apart to God – consecrated to him.  
Consecrated to do what?

Nothing.

The priests were consecrated for the service of the holy things – the sacrifices – they were set apart to bless Israel.

What is the Nazirite consecrated for?

The Nazirite is consecrated in order to be set apart to the LORD.

There is nothing in this chapter (or elsewhere)

that suggests that there were any particular duties for the Nazirite.

When Paul and other Christians in Acts take similar vows,

there is no reference to specific tasks or duties that accompany the vow.

Then why would you take a Nazirite vow?

Because you want to be holy.

And holiness is *not* about *doing* anything!

Holiness is about *being* separate to God.

Now, obviously, a holy person should not be doing bad and wicked things (that would be an awful picture!),

but you cannot become holy by doing things.

You can only become holy by *being* separated to God.

Think about what Jesus says after calling people to follow him:

one man says, “let me first go and bury my father,”

and Jesus said, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead.

But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60)

Any Jew would hear echoes of the Nazirite vow –

the call of discipleship is a call to consecration – a call to be set apart – to be entirely devoted to Jesus.

Of course, Jesus is *not* saying that the literal Nazirite vow is binding on all Christians!

Jesus is not saying that Christians should leave dead bodies lying around!

Rather, Jesus is saying that we should be entirely separated *to him* – and to his kingdom.

Perhaps this helps us understand the first two separations.

#### **i) Separation from All Grape Products (v1-4)**

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite,<sup>[a]</sup> to separate himself to the LORD, <sup>3</sup> he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried.*

*<sup>4</sup> All the days of his separation<sup>[b]</sup> he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins.*

#### **ii) Separation from Razors (v5)**

<sup>5</sup> “All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long.

Family is a good thing.

You should (ordinarily) take care of the dead bodies of family!

Likewise wine, vinegar, grapes, haircuts – are good things!

You should (ordinarily) partake of wine, vinegar, and grapes.

And you should (ordinarily) get haircuts from time to time!

But from time to time it is useful to abstain from *good things* for the sake of something better.

Let’s think about how this works.

Abstaining from contact with dead bodies is the central thing.

This is the thing that makes you most like the high priest –

and it is the thing that verse 9 suggests is what defiles the Nazirite.

Abstaining from wine, vinegar, and grapes is an outward sign, a sort of fast –

but one that is not necessarily visible to others.

Abstaining from razors, on the other hand, is an outward sign that quickly becomes very obvious.

Who’s the guy with the long, shaggy hair?

Oh, he’s a Nazirite – he is separated to the LORD.

Verses 9-12 then explain how the Nazirite can be defiled:

#### **iv) Contact with Death Defiles the Separation (v9-12)**

<sup>9</sup> “And if any man dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it. <sup>10</sup> On the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the priest to the entrance of the tent of meeting, <sup>11</sup> and the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the dead body. And he shall consecrate his head that same day <sup>12</sup> and separate himself to the LORD for the days of his separation and bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering. But the previous period shall be void, because his separation was defiled.

The Nazirite is supposed to separate himself from grape products –

but the text never says that eating a grape will defile his consecrated head;

likewise, he is supposed to separate himself from razors –

but it doesn't say that getting a haircut will defile his consecrated head.  
(It's possible – but we should be careful not to *assume* this).

Rather, it says that if someone dies suddenly next to him,  
*that* is what defiles his consecrated head.

And the resulting ceremony is especially interesting!

If a Nazirite is defiled by a dead body,  
then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing;  
on the seventh day, he shall shave it,  
and then *on the eighth day*, he shall bring two pigeons  
for a sin offering and a burnt offering to make atonement for him,  
“because he sinned by reason of the dead body.”

How can he be said to have *sinned* by virtue of the fact that someone died next to him?  
Because sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.  
If you have taken a vow that you will not touch a dead body,  
and then you (accidentally) touch a dead body,  
then you are not in conformity with the law of God!  
You have sinned.

And so the Nazirite period – the period of separation – is rendered invalid.  
In other words, you'll need to start over again!

This reminds us that our problem is not *just* ethical.

Part of our problem is that *all of creation* has been affected by sin.  
Corruption has taken root in all creation,  
and as we come in contact with that corruption,  
we are defiled as well.

*Holiness* is not primarily about “doing good.”  
Holiness is about being separated to God –  
it's about participation in the powers of the age to come  
(or to use Jesus' term, participation in the *kingdom of God*).

#### **b. The Completion of the Nazirite Vow (v13-20)**

<sup>13</sup> “And this is the law for the Nazirite, when the time of his separation has been completed: he shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, <sup>14</sup> and he shall bring his gift to the LORD, one male lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin offering, and one ram without blemish as a peace offering, <sup>15</sup> and a basket of unleavened bread, loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and their grain offering and their drink offerings. <sup>16</sup> And the priest shall bring them before the LORD and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering, <sup>17</sup> and he shall offer the ram as

*a sacrifice of peace offering to the LORD, with the basket of unleavened bread. The priest shall offer also its grain offering and its drink offering.*

Verses 13-20 then describe what to do when you *successfully* complete a Nazirite vow.

Notice first, in verses 14-15,

the Nazirite must bring a burnt offering, a sin offering, and a peace offering,  
together with grain offerings and drink offerings.

Remember that the voided vow was concluded with a burnt offering and a sin offering  
of two turtledoves, or two pigeons.

(In other words, quite cheap – but also, the worshiper partakes of nothing)

Here, the offering is quite expensive:

a male lamb, an ewe lamb, a ram, and a basket of unleavened bread and wafers,  
together with grain offerings and drink offerings.

The whole burnt offering is burned in the fire.

[God alone partakes of this offering –  
reminding us that salvation belongs to the LORD]

The fat, liver, and kidneys of the sin offering is burned in the fire,  
while the meat is given to the priest;

and a handful of the grain offering and a portion of the drink offering are put on the fire,  
and the rest is given to the priest.

[reminding us that we need a mediator between us and God]

Then the fat, liver, and kidneys is burned in the fire,

while the meat is shared by the priest and the worshiper.

[showing us that through the mediation of the priest,  
we now have fellowship with God.]

All of these offerings point us to Christ.

In the burnt offering, we see our need for Christ to take the penalty of death.

In the sin offering, we see our need for a priest who can intercede for us.

In the peace offering, we see that through Christ's sacrifice,  
we now have peace with God

Now, for the Nazirite vow, there is an extra step (verses 18-20):

*<sup>18</sup> And the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. <sup>19</sup> And the priest shall take the shoulder of the ram, when it is boiled, and one unleavened loaf out of the basket and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them on the hands of the Nazirite, after he has shaved the hair of his consecration, <sup>20</sup> and the priest shall wave them for a wave offering before the LORD. They are a holy portion for the priest, together with the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed.*

The hair is burned on the altar – together with the peace offering.  
The mark that set you apart as holy –  
that designated you as a Nazirite –  
“the hair of his consecration” is now burned in the fire

*And after that the Nazirite may drink wine.*  
- as he now returns to his normal affairs.

### **c. Additional Vows (v21)**

<sup>21</sup> *“This is the law of the Nazirite. But if he vows an offering to the LORD above his Nazirite vow, as he can afford, in exact accordance with the vow that he takes, then he shall do in addition to the law of the Nazirite.”*

Verse 21 points out that the Nazirite vow is a *minimum* vow.  
If you want to do more, that’s fine.  
In other words, if you want to add additional stipulations –  
if you want to offer a larger number of animals –  
that’s fine!

There are two famous Nazirites in the OT –  
Samson and Samuel.

Samson is called a “Nazirite to God from the womb” (Judges 13:5).  
In other words, Samson is holy.  
That doesn’t mean that Samson is a morally upstanding character.  
(He is known more for his womanizing than his good character!)  
But, as Judges 13:5 says,  
“the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb,  
and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”

The purpose of the Nazirite is to be separate to God – to be holy.  
(Yes, he *should* be morally upright as well –  
but that’s true of all God’s people!!)

In the case of Samson,  
he is a life-long Nazirite.  
There is no offering which can terminate his period of holiness.  
He will be set apart to God from his birth to his death.

His hair is a *sign* of his holiness –  
and his dalliance with Delilah results in losing his strength –  
but he is a Nazirite from birth:  
he is *holy* to God.  
Think back to the law of the Nazirite.

If a Nazirite is defiled, he has to start over.  
When Samson is defiled, he has no way to “opt out” of being a Nazirite.  
He is a Nazirite – he is holy to God – whether he likes it or not.

And so, when his hair starts to grow, his strength returns.  
That’s just who he is!

In the case of Samuel, his mother dedicates him to the LORD –  
saying “if you will give to your servant a son,  
then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life,  
and no razor shall touch his head.” (1 Sam 1:11)

Samuel is also a holy man.  
In his case, he is more of a prophet and a priest than a warrior –  
but he is dedicated to God (consecrated *like* a priest,  
even though he is of the tribe of Ephraim).

Then in Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist is described as a Nazirite:  
“he will be great before the Lord.  
And he must not drink wine or strong drink,  
and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit,  
even from his mother’s womb.” (Luke 1:15)

John the Baptist is a holy man.  
He is set apart by God – filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb.

What do you see in all of these cases?

Being set apart as a Nazirite is all about the coming of God’s kingdom.  
Our problem is not just that we do bad things.  
Our problem is that we are separated *from* God.  
The Nazirite is one who is separated *to* God  
as a sign of the coming of God’s kingdom.

And that’s why there is so much Nazirite language related to Jesus.

Samson was called a Nazirite – because he would begin to save Israel from the Philistines  
Joseph is told that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21)  
And Matthew says that Jesus lived in Nazareth  
so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled,  
‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” (Matthew 2:23)

There is no such statement among the prophets –  
unless you see a play on words between Nazareth and Nazirite.

Everything that the Nazirite stood for comes to its completion in Jesus.  
He is not only holy – set apart to God – from the womb.  
He is “from the Holy Spirit.”  
He is the beloved Son of God.

Think of how Jesus says when he institutes the Lord’s Supper –  
“I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again  
until I drink it new in the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 14:25)  
This is a sort of Nazirite vow that Jesus makes.  
(and it’s worth noting that he turns down the vinegar when he is on the cross!)  
He is holy to God.  
He is the one who comes to establish the Kingdom of God,  
and bring the blessing of God to the nations.

And that’s why the two parts of chapter 6 fit so well together.  
Because the blessing in verses 22-27 is all about the coming of God’s kingdom.

## **2. The Aaronic Blessing (v22-27)**

<sup>22</sup> *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* <sup>23</sup> *“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,*

<sup>24</sup> *The LORD bless you and keep you;*

<sup>25</sup> *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*

<sup>26</sup> *the LORD lift up his countenance<sup>[c]</sup> upon you and give you peace.*

<sup>27</sup> *“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”*

The same priests who offer the sacrifices are the ones who are to bless the people.  
Indeed, those are the two most important duties of the priests:  
offer sacrifices and bless.  
And those two duties are closely related.  
After all, it is precisely *because* of the sacrifices that they are *able* to bless the people!

The offerings deal with sin and guilt –  
both for the sins of the people,  
*and* for the corruption – the contamination – the uncleanness of the people.

And the blessing is crucial –  
because it’s not enough to have your sins forgiven!  
You need to be restored to *life* and fellowship – and the presence of God!

That has been the point of the blessing ever since Genesis 1.

God said to Adam in Genesis 1:28  
Be fruitful and multiply (the blessed of the seed)

Fill the earth and subdue it (the blessing of the land)  
Have dominion over fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens  
and every living thing on the earth (so that all the earth is blessed through Adam).

Likewise, after the Flood in Genesis 9:7, God said to Noah:  
be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it  
(and then he established his covenant with Noah and with every living creature)

Genesis 1 and Genesis 9 make it clear that God's purposes in his blessing  
extend not only to all humanity – but to all creation!

Likewise, God calls Abram in Genesis 12:1-3,  
“Go to the land that I will show you.  
And I will make of you a great nation,  
And I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing  
I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse,  
and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”

The Abrahamic blessing now particularizes the blessing of Adam.

The promise of the Land narrows:  
no longer is it all the earth – it is one place.  
The promise of the Seed narrows:  
no longer is it all humanity – it is one family.

*But* it is through this one family in this one place  
that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

It is in this light that the priests bless Israel.

The blessing is very carefully worded.

There are three lines – each of which names the LORD.  
In Hebrew it moves from 3 words to 5 words to 7 words –  
from 15 consonants to 20 consonants to 25 consonants –  
from 12 syllables to 14 syllables to 16 syllables.  
Everything in the blessing is oriented toward the final word –  
the seventh word of the final line –  
*shalom* – peace.

The opening line forms the foundation for the other two:

<sup>24</sup> *The LORD bless you and keep you;*

The second line builds on the theme of blessing.  
The third line builds on the theme of keeping (or guarding).

<sup>25</sup> *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*

When the face of God is shining – then good things happen to God’s people –  
because when the LORD’s face shine, then he is gracious to us.

<sup>26</sup> *the LORD lift up his countenance<sup>[c]</sup> upon you and give you peace.*

Again, the Hebrew uses the word “face” –  
May the LORD lift up his face toward you –  
because when God’s face is “toward you” –  
when he is graciously disposed toward you, then you have peace –  
*shalom!*

If this is correct, and the Aaronic blessing is oriented around *grace* and *peace*,  
then perhaps we should not be surprised to hear the apostles open their letters  
with a blessing:  
“grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And through this blessing,  
God’s *shalom* comes upon Israel – and through Israel – to the nations.  
(after all, those who bless you shall be blessed)

<sup>27</sup> *“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”*

David Stubbs points out that there are numerous connections between this blessing  
and Moses’ encounter with God at Sinai.  
Moses encountered God “face-to-face” according to Ex. 33:11, 20.  
When God proclaimed his name to Moses,  
he declared himself to be “gracious” (Ex 34:6)  
and the result was that Moses’ face shone (34:29),  
and that God promised to give Israel “rest” (33:14).

It is worth noting that God’s name is repeated three times in this blessing.  
When God puts his name upon his people in the OT, it is a Trinitarian name.  
(Likewise, the famous Shema in Deuteronomy 6 repeats God’s name three times as well).  
And so Jesus will say to put the name of God on his people by  
“baptizing them in the name (singular)  
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matt 28:19)

The Aaronic blessing is all about the coming of the kingdom.  
The holy people now share in the presence and the blessing of the holy God,  
because his name rests upon them.

When I bless you at the end of each service,  
I am declaring that same blessing.  
I am not praying – I am not asking that God would do this.  
I am blessing you – I am placing the triune name of God upon you –  
the same name that was placed upon you in your baptism,  
is declared over you once again.

And with the holy name of God upon you,  
you are consecrated – you are set apart – as holy.

The point is not that you might go do stuff!  
The point is that you are holy.

*God* – the triune God – is the one who is blessing and keeping.  
He is the one who makes his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
He is the one who lifts up his face toward you and gives you peace.

The point is simply that *you are holy*.  
You are set apart to God as a people who are holy.  
You are the place where God's holy name dwells –  
where God is beginning to remake the whole of creation,  
and restore all things in Christ.  
Shalom – peace – well-being – the harmony of creation –  
has come to you in Jesus Christ.

Does that help you understand what Peter means when he says in 1 Peter 1:15  
“as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,  
since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”?

Peter says the same sort of thing when he goes on to say:  
“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,  
a people for his own possession,  
that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness  
into his marvelous light.” (2:9)

“Be holy in all your conduct” –  
in whatever it is that you do –  
in all your conduct (regardless of what area of life) –  
be holy.

It's not “be ethical” or “do good things” –  
it's “be holy” – be consecrated – be those who are separated to God –  
simply *be* those whom the name of the Triune God rests upon.