

Date : 6 August 2023

Theme : The Faith journey of the new generation

Topic : Learning submission to God's authority

Passages : *Numbers 15-17*

Key Verse : *But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from the people. Because he has despised the LORD's word and broken His commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him. Numbers 15:30, 31*

Introduction

40 years had passed since the old generation left Egypt and all who had rejected God and treated Him with contempt had died. Chapter 15 is the flag down for the new generation to start their journey of faith to possess their inheritance. They would succeed where the old did not. So, God's message for them was ...*after you enter the land I am giving you as a home...Numbers 15:2, 18.*

The first lesson of faith they must learn was to know God in relation to them; they needed to learn that God is Lord – the highest authority to be submitted to and obeyed. That the refusal to submit to His authority over their lives (and ours) constitutes defiance.

Definition: Defiance is simply to oppose God's Lordship. It is treating God with contempt *Numbers 14:24-30*. Defiance is ranking oneself above God's authority as well as His appointed leader's authority. The opposite of defiance is submission. Submission is yielding to Jesus as Lord. God resists the proud but extends grace to the humble. Defiance is pride in full display.

The question we will address today is: What is it to sin in defiance?

How will a Holy God respond to acts of defiance in His people?

This issue today is complicated by the fact that our concept of God is coloured by a sentimental worldview of a God of love, one that emphasises love above His Lordship. If we accept that God is indeed holy and love, how does a holy God handle defiance among His people?

The following three episodes will help us grapple with issues of defiance to relate with who God is.

1. The defiant sabbath breaker *Numbers 15:32*

Observation: The Scenario

While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. He was brought to Moses and Aaron. It was not clear what should be done to him.

Were the Israelites taught repetitively about keeping the Sabbath and forewarned of the seriousness of breaking it?

The children of Israel were instructed, reminded and forewarned of Sabbath keeping.

- Exodus 16:5 The instruction occurred first with the gathering of double manna on Friday and the miraculous lack of spoilage when saved till Sabbath.
- Exodus 20:8-11 God included it in the 10 Commandments; the Sabbath was to be kept holy.
- Exodus 24:1-8 Moses also read the Book of the Covenant to the people which contains several admonitions to keep the Sabbath. The people publicly and solemnly promised obedience.
- Exodus 35:2-3 During those early days right after Moses came down from Sinai with his bright shining face, Moses gathered them and said to them that the Lord commanded them they may work on 6 days, no work on the seventh; disobedience would mean death. As if to give further clarification he added you shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath. Obviously, this was a point of question and it was publicly announced that this was forbidden. Kindling a fire in their dwellings somehow violated the Sabbath's intentions. (It was clear that the man who gathered sticks in Numbers 15 certainly was not uninformed).

By this time of their history, the Sabbath had been observed for 40 years.

Everyone would have known this was a violation of the 4th Commandment – which was one of the terms of their covenant with God. The Sabbath was intended to be a deliberate act of love to God ...a sign between Me and you...

...Say to the Israelites, you must observe My Sabbaths. This will be a sign between Me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people... Exodus 31:13,14

Unintentional or deliberate sin

Reading through the chapter where this episode is recorded, it is clear that the story of the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath is a chosen illustration of deliberate sin since much of *Number 15* is about unintentional vs deliberate sin. The phrase ...sins defiantly...*Numbers 15:30* carries the picture of a person lifting up his hand as an act of defiance in God's face.

Question

But how come nobody knew what to do with this man? Not even Moses! Perhaps such a violation had never been encountered. Apparently, this was the first public offense against the law of God. It was, essentially, being tested. Therefore, the severity of the punishment was to demonstrate to all of Israel that submitting to God's authority/Lordship was (still is) His condition for relationship. Moses asked the Lord what was to be done. God's answer was decisive ...*The man must die.*

Interpretation: How do you view this verdict?

Isn't this verdict out of character with the loving God we know? Where is grace?

Our worldview is coloured by a sense of justice about what is right that does not understand God's holiness.

Holiness gives high weightage to what God considers *sacred*. This is beyond good or bad.

God had clearly defined how He must be treated as LORD, that those who treat Him with contempt was sinning defiantly and would be rejected by Him.

Defiance of God is the same as rejecting Him as Lord. *Numbers 15:30*

God's solution – Tassels with a blue cord on your garments

Remember this principle when you enter the promised land. How? Weave a blue cord to the tassels of your garments. Daily the tassels would remind them.

...you will have these tassels to look at...then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God... *Numbers 15: 39-40.*

Application

Set aside a devotional time everyday where you consider how the Lordship of Christ will be acted out in the next 24 hours of your day; how you intend to practice it.

2. Second line leaders in defiance of God's appointed leaders.

Observation: The Scenario:

Korah, a second line leader of his tribe of Levi, was influential for he had gained the popular support of 3 men, Dathan, Abiram and On from another tribe, the Reubenites, to support him. Together, they rallied the support of another 250 lower ranking leaders against Moses.

He presented his open issue, accusing Moses of pride and self-seeking ... *You have gone too far! The whole assembly is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD'S assembly? Numbers 16:1-3*

Using the Lord's name, Korah sounded very spiritual.

But evil men, like Korah, always have a hidden personal agenda.

Korah's true intention was to take over the prestigious role of Aaron as High Priest.

He was not satisfied with assisting Aaron, the role assigned to Levites.

To pull down the leadership of Moses and Aaron, he resorted to the worldview of democracy and rallied the popular vote. He acted as if he represented the people and fought for their interests. He proclaimed the holiness of all the people and regarded strong leadership as unnecessary. Korah misread the conditions of God's people (they were not holy and needed strong leadership) because he was not a true shepherd.

Interpretation:

Korah, an informal leader, rallied the entire nation, doing it behind Moses' back.

It was a defiance of authority - God's and His appointed leader's authority. What did God do? He showed up personally to settle the issue. God asserted His authority, thus imposing His character of support for His appointed leaders.

Moses explained to the people that Korah, with his immediate ring leaders, Dathan and Abiram, had treated the LORD with contempt. *Numbers 16:30*. That such a sin of defiance would be dealt by God. These 3 men with their possessions and those around them who did not heed the warning to move away, were all swallowed up by the earth. 250 other religious people with their censers were burnt by God's consuming fire. They saw what happened to Korah but refused to repent. Such is the hardness of defiant hearts.

God's solution – A bronze covering for the altar

To remember that God appoints His leaders and no one should be a divisive rebel like Korah.

The censers of the 250 who were burnt were hammered into a covering for the altar to be a sign to the Israelites and a memorial that only a descendant of Aaron could be a priest.

How do we remember this aspect of submission?

Korah's use of ungodly method (accusation, intimidation and gathering of a rival following) was wrong. God's appointed leaders may not be more popular than another who is influential but submission to them is the attitude that the Lord desires of His people.

Application

Popular support against God appointed leadership is viewed as defiance against God's authority and His Word. God is the highest authority and any defiance against Him displeases Him. This was the problem of the old generation they had known but may have forgotten. *Believers today commit the same sins, and the consequence are evident: divided churches, dysfunctional families, and disobedient individuals who wander from church to church but never accomplish much for the Lord. Warren W. Wiersbe*

3. A whole nation in defiance through vicarious anger *Numbers 16:41-50*

Observation

No matter how much God had done for His people, they did not learn well for they lacked spiritual discernment. All the people saw what had happened before their very eyes when God showed His judgment against their leaders who died because they had defied God's appointed leaders. Unbelievably, the very next day, the whole Israelite community rose spontaneously in vicarious anger against Moses. They accused Moses ...You have killed the Lord's people... *Numbers 16:41*. God showed up the second time.

God told Moses He would kill all of them for their defiance.

Thanks to Moses who knew God's character of holiness, he interceded on their behalf.

He sensed what was coming and instructed Aaron to take a censer to make atonement for them.

Aaron, at age 122, ran and did what he was told to do. But the plague of death had started.

Aaron stood between the living and the dead.

The new generation was saved through Moses' authority. But the first 147000 perished.

Interpretation

God is a God who is not persuaded by numbers alone. Defiance is a non-negotiable issue.

But God's mercy is activated by His covenant partners whose intercession can avert total disaster.

God's solution – Aaron's rod budded

God wanted them to remember His authority and to settle this issue of compliance with His authority and delegated authority, He implemented a third sign. It was the budding of Aaron's Rod. The rod is a sign of authority. All the tribal chiefs handed in their rods to Moses, with their rods marked, to be left in the tabernacle. The man whose rod budded miraculously with leaves and bore fruit would be the sign that God's authority was on him. Aaron's rod budded.

Application

God is a God of order. Opposition to leadership creates chaos in His church.

Such opposition can be expressed by some walking out in a huff.

We apply this principle by not gossiping, ganging up or instigating others against God's leaders.

Remember we are all seeking to enter into God appointed inheritance for us.

Unity in the church pleases the Lord ...*for there the Lord commands His blessings...Psalm 133:3*

Wilful defiance will cause us to abort our journey.