

Numbers Chapter 12

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Preacher: Peter Robinson

[0 : 0 0] from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, Numbers and chapter 12. Numbers and chapter 12, if you've got one of the Red Church Bibles, then that's page 148, page 148.

Just while you're turning there, mind you that God's people are on their journey through the wilderness from Egypt where the Lord rescued them and saved them from slavery and on their way to the promised land, to Canaan, the land that God had said to Abraham hundreds of years, four or five hundred years earlier, I'm going to give this to your family, to your children as a place for them to live. And God had given lots of instruction and direction about worship and so on. And of course God had appointed Moses to be that leader of that group of people, probably two million people or so. So chapter 12 and verse 1.

Miriam and Aaron, that was the brother and sister of Moses, remember that, began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife. He had married a Cushite. Cush was basically where modern Ethiopia is today.

Okay. Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, they asked. Hasn't he also spoken through us? And the Lord heard this. Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, come out to the tent of meeting all three of you. So the three of them went out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud. He stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, listen to my words. When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions.

I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles. He sees the form of the Lord.

[2 : 2 3] Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? The anger of the Lord burned against them and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous. It became as white as snow. Aaron turned towards her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease. And he said to Moses, please, my Lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we've so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away.

So Moses cried out to the Lord, please God, heal her. The Lord replied to Moses, if her father had spat in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days. After that, she can be brought back. So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days.

The people did not move on till she was brought back. After that, the people left Hazaroth and camped in the desert of Paran. Well, we'll see what God has to say to us from his word in a moment.

So Numbers and chapter 12. Numbers and chapter 12. And the past few weeks when we've looked at numbers, we've seen that things have been going really, really well. Things were going very encouragingly. The people were on their move. The Lord had given them so many blessings and directions. And then, sadly, we looked, didn't we, in chapter 11, how they began to complain.

Begin to complain. They weren't English. They were Israelites. They were still good complainers. Don't take this personally, but I don't want to offend you when I say, I hope I'm not being critical, but I must, I hope you don't think I'm being rude.

[4 : 34] Have you had those sort of things said to you? Have you said those sort of things to other people as you began a sentence with them? Unfortunately, when a person begins in that way, you can be pretty certain that you will take what they say personally, that it will offend you, and it is almost certainly a criticism. And sadly, although perhaps they're hoping to disguise it, they are being rude, insensitive, thoughtless, discouraging.

It may, of course, be that there's some truth in what they have to say by way of criticism of yourself. But often it misses the very vital element of love. When Paul was writing to the Christians at Ephesus, he reminds them of the importance of speaking the truth in love so that we will grow.

The very opposite of that, as somebody has once noticed, is those who love to speak the truth. There was some truth in what Miriam and Aaron had to say concerning their brother Moses.

Verse 2, has the Lord spoken only through Moses, they asked? Hasn't he also spoken through us? And indeed, it was true that God spoke, not just through Moses, but through other prophets, as God himself says later on when he calls them to appear before him.

Verse 6, when there's a prophet among you, the Lord reveal myself to them in visions. I speak to them in dreams. That's really all that we find in the Old Testament of the great prophets and the smaller prophets and the people of God.

[6 : 23] God's speaking through others apart from Moses. And there was even some truth that God had spoken through us, Moses and Aaron.

They had positions within the Lord's service. Remember right back in Exodus in chapter 15, when the people had been brought through the Red Sea, that amazing miracle of God, it was Miriam who sang and led them in song, sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted.

Aaron was the chief high priest. And so he too was one through whom God spoke. But their words and criticisms of Moses were not motivated by their concern that God's word should be heard.

Their words were not motivated by a love for their brother Moses or a concern that perhaps he was overburdened with the work that he had to do and that perhaps they could help him and encourage and share him, share his ministry.

In fact, the trigger for their complaining was something entirely different. You notice that in verse 1. Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite.

[7 : 37] As I said, a Cushite was somebody from Ethiopia, somebody who would have been almost certainly black. Now, this person, this Cushite wife, almost certainly could not have been Zipporah.

We know of Zipporah, Moses' wife, but she was from Midian. That was nowhere near Cush. And Moses had been married to her for 40 years, so they had plenty of time to moan about her before now.

This is probably someone else, someone that he's only recently married. We know nothing more about it than what we read here. Perhaps Zipporah, his wife, had died and he remarried.

Perhaps she had returned with her father back to her homeland in Midian. We just don't know. But for Miriam, this marriage was an opportunity to find fault in Moses as God's servant.

Clearly, it's not really the real issue, is it? It's not the real problem. It's just something that she is able to pick at because underneath there's something more. It's a red herring, really, when she moans about his wife, suggesting in some way that being married to her made him unfit to be God's leader anymore.

[8 : 55] And it is Miriam who's the ringleader. I think we need to recognize that, though Aaron's included. We know Aaron was a bit of a, if I can put it this way, a bit of a drip. He was easily influenced, wasn't he, by other people.

Remember the events at the Golden Calf and things like that. All the people made me do it. He wasn't really a very strong man in that sense. And we know that Miriam was certainly the ringleader as far as God was concerned because later on God only punishes her for this sin, not Aaron as well.

Now we don't know whether Aaron and Miriam had spoken to Moses and brought their concerns and complaints to him.

It seems unlikely that they did, but we know that the Lord heard them. Verse 2, and the Lord heard this. Behind his back they were saying these sort of things. Behind his back they were pulling him apart.

They were criticizing him. They were criticizing his choice of wife. They were making all sorts of complaints and God heard them. And so God, we're told, calls all three of them, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, three members of this family, and to appear before him.

[10 : 08] He affirms Moses as his servant. Notice what he said there quite wonderfully of Moses in verse 7. This is not true of my servant Moses. He's faithful in all my house.

With him I speak face to face. Why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? But also God punishes Miriam for this attitude, this criticism, this complaining, this murmuring.

We'll see why he does that so later on. And she is afflicted with this skin disease. Now as sure many of you know it wasn't simply leprosy as we understand leprosy.

It could be any sort of skin complaint and disease. And she is banished from the camp. She's banished from the community of God's people for seven days. So it's really just a family squabble, isn't it?

Families are like that, aren't they? Your family is, isn't it? Well, mine certainly is. I don't know any family that isn't like that. Families. Goodness me, what's the saying? You can choose your friends but you can't choose your family.

[11 : 18] It's a bit like that in church as well, isn't it? But no, it's not just a family squabble. It's not just a bit of tittle-tattle. It's not just a bit of gossip about Moses' family.

It's something very, very serious. And it's something that God has given to us in his record of his dealings with his people. Because his dealings with his people then are as his dealings with his people now.

We are God's people. And he deals with us. And so we need to learn and recognize, dear friends, the very first thing I think that comes out of here, and I'm sure you've picked it up as we were reading through it.

You see the danger of jealousy. Jealousy. Jealousy. Jealousy. The danger of jealousy. I think that's fair to say. That's the root problem here, isn't it? Miriam and Aaron are jealous of Moses.

They were jealous of his position as God's appointed spokesman, God's appointed leader of these people. They wanted a slice of the glory, the authority, the action, the position, or whatever it may be.

[12 : 24] They were jealous. Why can't we be looked up to like Moses was? Why can't we be the spokesman for the Lord as Moses is? Don't we find, dear friends, that we too have envy in our hearts?

Haven't you found yourself jealous of somebody else? It doesn't have to be somebody necessarily in the church. It can be all sorts of reasons. All sorts of envies.

Envy of somebody who's got more money. Envy of somebody who's better looking. Envy of somebody who's got a better job. Or even envy of someone who's got a better looking wife or husband or whatever it may be.

Envy will cause us, dear friends, to look for faults in the life of others. If we're jealous of people, then we will find ways to pull them down a bit.

Because their life seems so good. We've got to find a way to somehow feel better about ourselves. To lift ourselves. And so this envy finds criticism simply in Moses' wife.

[13 : 37] Jealousy and envy will find the tiniest thing to pull somebody down for. To criticize somebody for. Or look at the clothes that they wear.

Haven't they got any fashion sense? Why can't they speak proper Whitby? Instead of that southern slang that they come up with.

What dreadful music they listen to. It's just a noise, isn't it? These are small things. But they become opportunities for us to criticize.

Because actually behind it is something far more dangerous. An envy. A jealousy. A seeking to exalt ourselves. Perhaps to something that they have.

The Apostle Paul was not a man without enemies. Even within the church who liked to criticize him. Here he tells us in 2 Corinthians 10 what they say. Some say of Paul, his letters are weighty and forceful.

[14 : 42] But in person he's unimpressive. And he's speaking amounts to nothing. You can imagine, can't you? It's Paul. He writes these incredible letters.

Have you met Paul? He's a wimp. He doesn't. He's only 4 foot 10. And he's got a lisp. And a limp. There's nothing about him.

And he just talks rubbish. You can see, can't you? How that jealousy comes in. And that critical spirit comes in.

What really lies at the heart, dear friends, of your criticism of another person. Well, it lies at the heart of your criticism of another believer. Think about this situation with Moses as the spokesman of God.

Do you discount the preaching of God's word from one particular preacher because you perceive a fault in them? Or actually is your rejection of the ministry they bring because you don't want to hear what God is saying through them?

[15 : 49] Is there a deeper issue in your heart? Is there a deeper problem than actually you reveal by the criticisms you bring?

There's a danger. And we'll see that here. In jealousy. Secondly, as well, we see the desirability of humility.

The desirability of humility in verse 3. Now Moses, we're told, there's someone on the side, isn't it, from the story. Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.

Humility is not really a big thing today, is it? You don't often say, wow, that politician, he's so humble, has to be admired. It's quite the opposite, isn't it?

Men and women want to be admired, not for humility, but for power, for influence, for wealth, etc., etc. But God counts humility a desirable thing in his people.

[16 : 52] We don't hear of Moses taking exception, do we, to these things that his critics had to say against him. We don't find Moses himself going and saying, how dare you speak to me in that way?

How dare you criticize me? He left his character and he left his justification to God. That's very much a Christ-like quality, isn't it?

Peter, when he writes his first letter, says something similar about the way that Jesus responded to those who attacked him and criticized and judged him.

He says this in chapter 2. When they hurled their insults at Jesus, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

He looked to God for his justification. He didn't seek to justify himself. He didn't leap to his own defense. Neither did Moses. But so often we do that.

[17 : 58] Humility is not to think of yourself as unimportant. A humble person is not somebody who keeps saying, I'm awful, I'm terrible, I'm useless, I'm no good for anyone. That's not humility, dear friends.

That's a broken spirit. Humility is not concerned about what people think of me.

But neither, as some people have said, neither is humility not to think of yourself at all. I don't think that's humility at all. See, Jesus spoke regularly about himself.

He spoke about his own character. He spoke about his own qualities. He thought about his own thoughts about what he thought of himself. Remember Matthew 11, 29. I am gentle and humble of heart, said Jesus.

Now, Jesus, of course, was perfect and sinless. But again, he was able to say, I am humble and I am gentle. To recognize in ourselves who we are in Christ is humility.

[18 : 57] Humility is to view ourselves as the Lord describes us in his word. And so in God's word we're told that we are children of God. To think of yourself as a child of God, a child of the king.

Remember Billy Bray, the Cornish tin miner. He used to walk down the street and put his foot down and say glory. The next foot down say hallelujah. And he'd say people, I am the son of the king.

He had nothing. He had two pennies to rub together. Humility is to think of ourselves as God sees us. So when God's word tells of you, dear friends, Christian friends, that you are a chosen people.

A royal priesthood, a holy nation. God's special possession. To think of yourself in that way is humility. Because it's to think of yourself as God thinks of you. And of course there's no pride there, is there?

To call yourself a son of God. To call yourself a child of the king. To think of yourself as God's special possession. Is all because of his grace. It's not because of anything in you or me that makes us special.

[20 : 04] It's because of his special love. And his mercy. And his grace. We haven't earned that place. We don't deserve that. We know that in our hearts we are sinners. And lawbreakers.

And deserving of God's anger. God in his mercy and grace has transformed. And changed our position. The desirability of humility.

Moses knew who he was. Confident of who he was in the Lord. To be confident in the Lord is not pride. And so at the same it's true.

Of any position within the church. Any ministry that we have within the church. When Paul talked about his apostleship. And talked about the position that he had as God's servant. To take the gospel to the Gentiles.

In 1 Corinthians 15 he says. By the grace of God. I am what I am. I haven't attained this position. By my learning or my education. Or my brilliance or my godliness.

[21 : 09] It's by God's grace. Humility is a blessed and happy gift. It's a place of contentment.

In all that God has done for us. And all that God is doing in us and through us. You see. Humility has no place for craving for people's approval.

It has no striving to climb the ladder of power. Or career. Humility has no place for that grief within.

When somebody gets awarded a position above us. And exalted. Humility doesn't have any of that. Because humility is absolutely delighted in who it is in Christ.

Christ. This is Moses. Because ultimately dear friends. You are who you are. I am who I am.

[22 : 11] We all are who we all are. Because of the decision of God. The decision of God. You see.

The criticism of Moses. That Aaron and Miriam bring. Ultimately is aimed not at Moses. It's ultimately aimed at God's choice of Moses.

It's ultimately aimed at God's decision to appoint Moses. Moses didn't appoint himself. As the leader of the Israelites. To take them out of Egypt. Quite the opposite. Look at what happened in Exodus chapter 2 and 3.

There he is. He's a shepherd. Bumbling around the wilderness. Aged 80. He's got no aspirations of a great career. Leading the people out of slavery. In fact when God speaks to him and says I want you to go.

He does everything he can to squirm out of that position. It's God alone who raises up men and women. To places of authority and service and ministry.

[23 : 15] I don't know why Miriam and Aaron wanted to be. And to take the place of Moses. Who in their right mind would want to lead the Israelites. They are the most awkward, difficult, complaining, moaning.

Bunch of people that could be found in the desert at that time. It was a thankless job wasn't it for poor old Moses.

Remember back in chapter 11 verse 2. The people cried out to Moses. Chapter 14 as we'll say later on. But there's more complaining.

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses. Again in verse 36 of chapter 14. So the men Moses had sent to explore the land returned. And the whole community grumbled against him.

Is that the sort of job you want? It's a bit like somebody saying. Oh I'd love to be prime minister. Are you joking? Well there's one man who obviously loves to be prime minister. But we won't go down that line. But on the whole if you're sensible.

[24 : 17] Would you really want to be the person that everybody criticizes. Everybody pulls apart. Everybody complains and moans at. The council haven't cut my grass. So it's your fault prime minister. This is the sort of thing poor Moses had to put up with.

And if you're thinking that. To attain. The position. Of an elder in the church.

Or the pastor of a church. Or some leader. Of some group. Or whatever it may be. Is something to aspire to. Dear friends. Let me ask you to think again. Listen to what.

The writer of the Hebrews has to say. About those in leadership in the church. They keep watch over you. As those who must give an account. Those who are placed in positions of leadership in the church.

Must give an account to God. About how they've carried out that service. Want that responsibility? James 3. Not many of you should presume to be teachers my brothers.

[25 : 17] Because you know that we who teach. Will be judged more strictly. Finally. I don't know about you. But I've got enough things to be judged. My own sins and failings.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not moaning about being your pastor. Quite the opposite. I'm thankful to God. For it. But anybody who is put in a position.

Of leadership or ministry. Is there because of God's doing. Not because they are good. Not because they're able. In fact. Every pastor I know.

Would say to you. I am the last person. That I would put in charge of a church. And Paul himself says. Who's sufficient? Who can do it? Nobody. And Moses couldn't do the things that he could do.

Except that God equipped him. And helped him. And God appointed him. Now church leaders are not above scrutiny. I am not above contradiction.

[26 : 16] Because every church leader is faulty. Every church leader gets it wrong. Every church leader is a sinner.

Saved by grace. Who's still working. God is working in. To transform and to change. But we must be very careful. Before we seek to accuse.

Or criticize. Someone. As they did of Moses. We must be sure that our motivation is right. And that there isn't underneath. Something else.

And that doesn't just go. For those in leadership. But especially. Paul writes to Timothy. And says. Do not entertain an accusation. Against an elder. Unless it's brought by two or three witnesses.

So the problem that Mary and Aaron had is this. It wasn't so much that they were jealous. And they were jealous of Moses. But what God heard was this. By criticizing Moses.

[27 : 14] They were saying. Lord. You've made a mistake. In appointing Moses. And you should have appointed us. You got it wrong God. You see how serious that is. You got it wrong God.

You made a mistake God. Your choice is wonky. Your way of thinking is incorrect. That's why the Lord strikes Miriam. With leprosy.

And remember. When we looked in chapter 11. About those other people. Who criticized and complained against God. They were put to death. Moses was spared that. Sorry. Miriam was spared that. When she.

When her leprosy is discovered by Aaron. He jumps to her defense. Doesn't he? Suddenly. As I said before. I think he's a weak man. Suddenly. He starts. Sort of. Trembling before Moses.

Please my Lord. Moses. Moses. Don't hold this sin against us. Which we've foolishly committed. And he gives this rather squeamish vision. Of what her leprosy must have looked like.

[28 : 16] And it's quite. Unappealing. And so he cries to Moses for help. But just one final thing then. To keep us from criticism.

To keep us from. This attitude. Which ultimately is. Not only an attitude towards. One another. But. To the Lord. Our God. We finally see the duty of prayer.

The duty of prayer. Moses was the target. Of Miriam's poisonous tongue. Wasn't he? Yet he prays for her. And he prays for her. With intensity.

Doesn't he? Look into. Listen to his prayer. In verse 13. Moses cried out to her. Please God. Help her. Or heal her. There's no vitriol. Is there in Moses? He's not going.

Ha. Serves you right. You criticize me. Now you've got what you deserve. Isn't that me and you sometimes? There's no vengeance in his heart.

[29 : 14] Even though she's had this just punishment. There's no rejoicing over it. Yeah. You've been found out. Now. You see what you get of jealousy.

No. God. His heart is one of love for his sister. Of forgiveness to his sister. And one of prayer for his sister.

God heal her. And the Lord replies to Moses. If her father had spat. In other words. If she'd been in disgrace with her parents. If she'd acted disgracefully.

Then she would have been put out of the camp. For seven days. She has acted disgracefully. So for seven days. She will be separated. From God's people.

There is a case. We see through the scriptures. Of the importance of disciplining. Of dealing with sin seriously. One of the things sadly. Within the church.

[30 : 18] Universally. That has not happened. Is that when men. Particularly. And women as well. Have been found out. Acting in very sinful and wicked ways. There has not been. That discipline.

To say this is not right. And you have no part. With God's people. It's been brushed over. Hidden under the carpet. You just can't do that dear friends.

In your life. Or in the life of the church. Because God sees. God hears. And thankfully with him. There is forgiveness. When there is repentance. There is restoration. When there is a turning away.

From sin and confession. But there still must be. Times of discipline. And correction. So that sin. Will not be allowed to spread.

And notice as well. That Miriam's sin. Was not a private matter. Miriam was confined. Outside the camp. Verse 15.

[31 : 15] For seven days. And the people. Did not move on. Till she was brought back. Her sin affected. The whole of God's people. They were on their way. To the promised land. They were.

They were on this journey. To God's. Place of blessing. And because of her sin. The whole people. Had to stop moving forward. The whole community. Were prevented. From moving on.

Her loose lips. Not just an individual. Matter of sin. She was part. Of a community. Part of a church. Part of a body. As you and I are.

And so. Though she was the one. Who was disciplined. The suffering. If I can put it that way. The consequences. Were felt throughout. The whole of the camp. If you and I.

Allow sin. Into our lives. If you and I. Allow sin. To be part of our. Relationship. With others. Then we will find. That we will not only. Bring upon ourselves. Sorrow and grief.

[32 : 12] But we shall also. Bring upon the church. Harm as well. You're not an individual. Dear Christian. You're part of this church. You're part of the body. Of Christ. We are one together.

And therefore. We are. Whatever we do. To help another. Helps us. Whatever we do. To harm another. Harms us. And surely. We see here.

That the duty of prayer. Is one of the ways. That we can be kept. From a critical. And jealous spirit. Pray for one another. If we were to pray. For one another. We would not.

Criticize one another. If we were concerned. About one another. And looking to. See God's blessing. For one another. We would not be jealous. Of one another. When the Lord answers. Our prayers.

Dear friends. From our mouths. There must flow. Fresh water.

[33 : 08] Not salt. This is what James. Has to say. And we'll. Close with his. Words. Concerning our tongues. And then I'll pray.

With the tongue. We praise our God. And Father. Father. And with it. We curse people. Who are made in God's image. Out of the same mouth. Come praise. And cursing.

Brothers and sisters. This shouldn't be. Can both fresh water. And salt water. Flow from the same spring. Brothers and sisters. Can a fig tree. Bear olives.

Or a grapevine. Bear figs. Neither can a salt spring. Produce fresh. Water.