

Title: Fit for purpose - Numbers 6v1-21

Purpose: To

INTRODUCTION

Athletics in the spotlight

If you've been watching the news this past week you may know that the recently retired Paula Radcliffe, the current women's world record holder for the marathon has added her own comments on the whole doping controversy.

Commenting on the mounting suspicion at her amazing world record run, set back at the London Marathon in 2003 of 2 hours 15 minutes 25 seconds - she said:

"The whole point is you go through your career, you look back and say, '**That was the best I could do**, '...
...If you take a short cut, you can't say that. You can't look yourself in the mirror and say that was **the absolute best you were capable of.**'"

If there was a secret to her success, it was not that of performance enhancing drugs, but simply the fact:

- that she was totally dedicated to what she did
- that she was set apart for running
- that she was, at the plainest level "**FIT FOR PURPOSE**"

This morning

This morning as we come to Numbers chapter 6 - we come to **a set of men & women who were just as "totally dedicated" as Paula Radcliffe** and who were equally, **at a spiritual level - "FIT FOR PURPOSE"**.

I wonder whether this morning whether sins are dragging you back, whether you are suffering from multiple spiritual injuries that are dogging your progress and which make you less than "**FIT FOR PURPOSE**".

Outlining chapter 6 & its context

Now just before we launch into the passage that was read for us - let me take just a moment to outline where we come to in Chapter 6 - it is that part which has to deal with Chapter 5 context

There is a bit of context that we need to be aware of in tackling Numbers 6 and that is that the section really begins at Chapter 5 and hence we are really picking up part 2.

Q. So what is this whole section about - Numbers 5&6?

Well in a word it is all to do with **PURITY** or **HOLINESS** and between the 2 chapters we have **5 sections in total** and they might initially all look somewhat disconnected - but they all begin in the very same way which is: "The LORD said to Moses" and Verse 3 of Numbers 5 gives us an important clue as to the overriding concern - where we read:

(Verse 3) "**...so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.**"

The arrangement of the Israelite camp, now that the tabernacle had been constructed, was a little bit like an archery bulls-eye. You had the outer ring which comprised the 12 tribes in a set order - and then you had an inner ring which comprised the various clans of the Levites - and then right in the middle you had the tabernacle itself where God chose to dwell among His people.

A KEYWORD for Numbers 6

Now if you were looking for a **KEYWORD** for this section we are looking at - (which is Numbers 6 verses 1 to 21) - then you would have to choose the word **SEPARATE** or **SEPARATION**.

If you were reading the Old KJV (or Authorized Version AV as it is sometimes called) then **these words would come no less than 16 TIMES** - that's no too far off once every verse!

And I want to simply divide up the verses under three headings:

#1 then:

1] Separation "To The LORD"

The scene is set in Verse 2 which reads:

"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, **a vow of separation** to the LORD as a Nazirite,..."

And the word in the Hebrew text (where we in English have "separate" OR "separation") is "**NAZIR**" from which we get their name **NAZIRITES** - and ***no* that is *not* people who come from Nazareth!** - that is somewhat NT and is where Jesus himself grew up and was why he was called a Nazarene (so I just in case anyone was going to be labouring under any false ideas - I thought it best we just get that out the way).

Without any doubt the DESCRIPTION of these Nazirites and their special vow is "**as INTERESTING as it is DIFFERENT**":

- **FIRSTLY** - this is something UNIQUE - it is called a "SPECIAL VOW", there really is nothing quite like it anywhere else in all the OT provisions and clearly, taking the nature of a vow - it is something to be taken various seriously.
- **SECONDLY** - this is something that is PRIMARILY DIRECTED - "To The LORD" - this is what it is all about at the end of the day.

Have you ever said to yourself, when life was getting all a bit too much - "I wonder what it would be like if I took up orders - if I was a MONK in a monastery or a NUN in a convent?"

We do need to be clear on this point because it is easy for things we do to get misdirected from the outset and we perhaps don't realise that something we are doing is actually - if it were to be inspected closely - ***not*** something devoted or directed "To The LORD".

In that case the truth would be that you are becoming a MONK or a NUN just so that you can step off the fast paced world. You would be doing it precisely for yourself.

- **THIRD** - this is something PERSONAL. So many of the Laws that God gave to Moses, we set at a corporate level but here these are about the INDIVIDUAL. And interestingly this was no more open to a man than it was to a woman. This is very definitely a UNISEX PROVISION.

- **FOURTH** - even though this is something PERSONAL this does not imply PRIVATE instead this is something that is designed to be very PUBLIC given that the Nazirite is going to have a very visible badge upon their heads.
- **FIFTH** - it is something that is ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY and the period set for it is also decided by the INDIVIDUAL.
- **ONE LAST THING** - and we'll pick this up in a moment - but that is to say that it is SOMETHING COSTLY. It wouldn't therefore be entered into somewhat lightly or casually.

Making it personal

Q. Have you ever challenged yourself about the level of your devotion, the level of your dedication towards the LORD?

It might be that actually - "you can't quite see why one would want to be more devoted to God" (and it is always best to be honest with ourselves).

Hopefully, as we go through, we will uncover more of the meaning and of the motivations.

So #1 Separation "To The LORD" - #2:

2] Separation "From The World"

And just to get it fixed a bit more into our minds the VARIOUS DIMENSIONS of this separation here in Numbers 6 - perhaps it just helps to start to VISUALISE these aspects:

This separation is:

- **FROM THE WORLD** - we are breaking loose from everything about this world that drags us and keep us down (show movement of hands going up from the floor)
- it is **TO THE LORD** - we are instead reaching up to the LORD - we are (as the NT puts it) fixing our eyes, our gaze on those things that are above. (show movement of hands stretching as high as possible)

Now in Verses 3 to 8 we are introduced to the 3 things that are particularly going to mark his OR her time as a Nazirite:

1) Wine, grapes, raisins

FIRSTLY, we see that there is to be a fast from all things GRAPEVINE related:

Verses 3&4 read: "he must abstain from **wine** and other **fermented drink** and must not drink **vinegar** made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink **grape juice** or eat **grapes** or **raisins**. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the **grapevine**, not even the **seeds** or **skins**."

Traditionally people have often taken these verses as a sort of advert for tee-totalism, as something of a prescription for avoiding having anything to do with wine.

But this would be a mis-application of this passage given that the same people would not be against you making use of vinegar or putting boxes of raisins in your children's lunch boxes.

Perhaps there's a couple of things that might helpfully be said about this particular abstention:

- **FIRST** that we are denying our self something that is fundamentally good in order to communicate our love, our devotion to God.

This is very much an aspect of the practise of FASTING - putting something VALID and PLEASANT on hold.

It is also an aspect of how we approach the Lord's Day - Sunday - by putting aside what the Bible in [Isaiah 58](#) calls 'Idle Things' (which are many of the valid things we do on the other 6 days) in order to gain a more deliberate focus on God.

- **A SECOND thing** relates to what the VINE seems here to symbolise:

In Scripture there are three occasions where we read of people sitting under their own vine and fig tree - the first of them is in [1 kings 4 verse 25](#) "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree."

And what it pictures is that perfectly settled situation. Everything is safe, secure and basically "sorted"!

And so here the Nazirite is a public reminder that he or she is seeking the city that is not yet. As the writer to the letter of the Hebrews puts it in that great chapter on PEOPLE OF FAITH:

"...they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

2) Their hair

**Well for VINES we have VINEDRESSERS
and for HAIR we have HAIRDRESSERS**

and this was the SECOND area where they chose to keep themselves COMPLETELY SEPARATE.

I guess if you are thinking this through - long hair for a man is perhaps somewhat unusual and unnatural (in the sense that for a woman her hair will normally and naturally grow long and look really good - for a man this is not normally the case).

So for a female Nazirite - Q. How would the uncut hair rule really work, how would it actually stand out?

Well you could say that it really didn't matter because it was between her and God (and yes that is the heart of devotion - this is where the Pharisees in the NT went wrong - they did everything precisely to be seen by men).

The problem is that [Verse 7](#) indicates that the hair was a symbol of the separation to God on their heads.

So what I suspect is that the woman would have in some way made her long hair distinctive - perhaps she would have allowed it to be worn down OR PERHAPS even to become somewhat unkempt.

One commentator brings out the point of the hair like this: (Raymond Brown BST):

"This aspect of the vow provided the Israelite community with visible evidence that there were people among them willing to offer themselves entirely to the LORD. (He goes on)

While they wore this 'most visible badge', everybody knew that there was somebody in the community who believed that God mattered most."

3) No funerals

The third things about the Nazirite had to do with the "No funerals rule".

Being a bit more precise - the Nazirite could under no circumstances be found in any close proximity to a dead body.

I think the connection here is really by way of the testimony that they are giving to the presence of the "LIVING GOD" in their midst. Being in the presence of death in some way muddies the waters of this testimony.

We should realise that this was probably the most costly aspect for the Nazirite because it meant that they would be excluded from saying any sort of final farewells. Imagine the situation that their Mum or Dad suddenly got sick and was at the point of dying and the Nazirite would have to walk away while all the rest of the family were gathering around.

Emphasized

We do well to notice that out of the 3 distinctive areas - it is this one - that is emphasised in Verses 9 to 12.

We learn that if a **NAZIRITE** should suddenly come into contact with death - then the whole exercise of being a Nazirite has to be completed restarted from scratch.

They have to go through a week of cleansing and then the visible symbol of their separation must be shaved off and then they start all over again from the very beginning because their SEPARATION has been CONTAMINATED.

So looking at the **NAZIRITE**, this special vow of SEPARATION - it is **Separation "To the LORD"**, it is **Separation "From the World"** - but then thirdly and lastly we have to apply it a bit more nail it down a bit more concretely - so **#3** it is:

3] Separation "For The Work"

Being a Nazirite in the OT was certainly *not* a case of:

- being a monk in a monastery
- being a nun in a convent
- OR simply being a religious hermit on a hillside!!

For we can see that this was something very PUBLIC and VISIBLE.

But the question that this passage begs is:

Q. Was the only purpose of being a Nazirite that of being essentially a VISIBLE SIGNPOST to the importance of SEPARATION and TOTAL DEDICATION?

It is curious that the passage nowhere mentions any service that they undertook - it does seem to me that this must be to prevent that aspect distracting us from the uppermost theme of SEPARATION.

Q. So how can we answer this?

Well, we do this by looking at those in the Scripture who have the marks of a Nazirite upon them (the long hair, the abstaining from the fruit of the vine etc.).

So we have two well-known Old Testament characters who were evidently life-long Nazirites:

1. **Samson** is specifically called a Nazirite (Judges 13v7)

2. **Hannah's** promise that a razor would not touch **Samuel's** head implies that **Samuel** was a Nazirite (1 Sam 1v11)

Coming into the NT we have people like **John the Baptist** and others like **the apostle Paul** who has his hair cut off in connection with a vow there in Acts 18.

So you can certainly see that:

- **being a SYMBOL** for God
- **AND doing SERVICE** for God, probably went hand in hand with the NAZIRITE vow of SEPARATION.

The Nazirites were those who set the bar high for those that were travellers, journeying forward with the LORD God in their midst - they were what you might term DEDICATED BELIEVERS and were thus, in their lives, properly FIT FOR PURPOSE.

Q. But what of us?

Let me, by way of conclusion, draw a few lines of connection through to the NT and through to ourselves:

- **FIRST** to point out that these Nazirites were EXAMPLES *but not* HEROES!

You see this because when it comes to wrapping up their period of SEPARATION - they have to bring a sin offering.

It is easy to be fooled into thinking that because these are the *crème de la crème, the real "pick of the crop"* that somehow they need less saving than we do, that they are *not* in the same boat as us anymore.

There is no other way but through the blood of Christ and looking to his finished work accomplished for all - he is the Saviour of the World - not merely the Saviour of the really needy ones.

- **SECOND** to point out that just because we are New Covenant people - just because we are POST (after) Jesus and not PRE-JESUS - that the notion that is encapsulated in **Numbers 6** has precious little relation to us beyond a sort of ANTIQUARIAN INTEREST.

Number 6 - "History lovers only need read!!"

It is like quite a lot of OT things that somehow **get deeper as we crossover into the NT:**

- so for example take **TITHING** - in the OT it is a tenth - but in the NT it is eerily not prescribed as a precise amount - instead the guiding principle that is supplied in teaching to the Corinthians on this matter of **GIVING** is **2 Corinthians 8 verse 9** "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." - Jesus Himself is the guiding standard.

- take **various MORAL LAWS** such as "do not commit adultery" and Jesus says that even glancing lustfully at a woman is ADULTERY IN YOUR HEART.

Q. So what NT parallels do we have?

Well try this one: (it's one of the great CLIMAX VERSES in the book of Romans) after 11 whole chapters of Paul explaining in glorious technicolour how the gospel of Jesus Christ works - he says:

Romans 12 verses 1&2 "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices,

holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Q. I don't know if you can spot very same pattern that we've been seeing in the Nazirite Vow of Separation?

Well - #1 it involves living sacrifice which is "holy" to God - **that is in other words -> SEPARATION "TO GOD"**

Then - #2 it involves disconnection from this world's pattern, in other words -> SEPARATION "FROM THE WORLD"

And where it all ends up, #3, is doing his good, perfect and pleasing will, **in other words -> SEPARATION "TO THE WORK"**

CONCLUSION

Let me end of back with athletics and with, if you like, 3 final nails, with which to nail down the lessons of this passage for us this morning:

1. **FIRSTLY** - "**The Greatest Perk**"- perhaps you recall those 2 great gold medal wins that Mo Farrar notched up in the 5,000 and 10,000m events at London 2012 Olympics. And how, along with people like Jessica Ennis, their wins, their achievements brought a wonderful blessing on the nation.

Notice how Numbers 6 ends - it is what people call the priestly blessing, the Aaronic Blessing.

What more of a MOTIVATION do you need for total dedication to the LORD!! (So the Greatest Perk)

2. **SECONDLY** - "**The Greatest Passage**" - perhaps, even beyond the precious similarities of Romans 12, comes Hebrews 12.

See how Hebrews Chapter 12 starts out, having just been meditating on all those great people who had lived dedicated lives of faith and faithfulness, - we read:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

You can't miss echoes of the Nazirite Call here:

- "throw off everything that hinders...the sin that so easily entangles". Q. What is that if it is not SEPARATION?

- "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" Q. What is that if it is not TOTAL DEDICATION?

Maybe you say - well it's just too hard! If you're a woman you reason - "I'm not a Paula Radcliffe!", if you're a man you protest - "I'm not a Mo Farar!"

But even this passage has the key within - it points us on to

3. **THIRDLY - "The Greatest Person"** - As it says twice over - "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus", let us "Consider Him who endured such opposition...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Jesus was, without a doubt, **THE greatest person who was in the mould of a NAZIRITE:**

For of Him it was said: "Zeal for your house has consumed me" and again "I delight to do your will"!

CLOSING PRAYER

I want us to close in prayer and to give you:

- a few moments in which to reflect,
- a few moments to hold before yourself the picture of these Nazirites

powerful pictures, powerful symbols of those that chose to set themselves apart from various legitimate things for a great purpose and a greater prize **AND THE TESTIMONY OVER THEIR LIVES WAS THAT THEY WERE TRULY "FIT FOR PURPOSE"**.

- Perhaps you are quite FIT, that is in body, maybe the gym is your friend BUT SADLY you are FAT in Spirit, in Soul. You would be sadly out of breath if you had to "run for the bus" SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING.
- Q. SIN weighing you down and dragging you back?
That the blessings you would love to know seem to all be turning to ashes!
- Perhaps if you are just BLUNTLY HONEST - your life simply isn't FIT FOR PURPOSE at all.

Q. What remedy do we have?

Well this is exactly why we have **Numbers 6**, (in case you thought it was just there for HISTORICAL COMPLETENESS!!)

Take a tour of the greats, find those SPIRITUAL "Radcliffe's & Farar's".

Go to the greatest: "Fix your eyes on **Jesus**, the author and perfecter of your faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Let me end by reading the closing words - this Priestly Blessing and let the sweetness draw you in & draw you on:

Numbers 6 verses 24-26:

²⁴ The LORD bless you
and keep you;
²⁵ the LORD make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace." AMEN