

Deuteronomy 24:8-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-24/deuteronomy-248-9/>

The first topic related to the section generally flavored by the ninth commandment is concerned with leprosy. Moses encourages the Israelites to listen to the instructions of the Levitical priests regarding skin diseases (including leprosy). He illustrates the issue by referring to the case of Miriam, Moses's sister.

The ninth commandment is: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). This is another aspect of the basic principle underlying the last five of the Ten Commandments, which is to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus identified this as the second greatest commandment (Mark 12:31). To lie to someone is to denigrate their worth.

In the Old Testament, skin diseases were not only a health concern but also a symbol of judgment. To avoid getting such diseases, Moses told the Israelites to *be careful against an infection of leprosy* (v. 8). The word *leprosy* (Heb. "šāra'at") might not be the same as what is currently called leprosy (Hansen's disease). It might refer to a variety of skin diseases such as psoriasis, etc. (Leviticus 13).

The way the Israelites could guard themselves against such diseases was to *diligently observe and do according to all that the Levitical priests teach* them. The *Levitical priests* were charged with maintaining the tabernacle and serving the Suzerain (Ruler) LORD, offering sacrifices to Him and making atonement for themselves and for the Israelite community (Deuteronomy 10:8; 2 Chronicles 29:11; Ezekiel 44:15).

They had been instructed by Moses concerning their duties in and around the tabernacle during the Exodus. So, when it came to dealing with a skin disease, the Israelites were to respect the authority of the priests and obey what Moses had *commanded them*. Whatever the priests said, the people were to *be careful to do*. Moses seems to allude to the instructions recorded in Leviticus 13, which covers laws concerning leprosy.

This was a warning against the people trying to treat their skin disease themselves or consult with a pagan priest for treatment. They were to go only to the *Levitical priests* who served the LORD and diligently obey them.

Moses explains a connection between leprosy and false witness by telling the people *to remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way as they came out of Egypt* (v. 9). The incident with Miriam is recorded in Numbers 12. There, Miriam (Moses' sister) and Aaron (Moses' brother) spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman that he had married (Numbers 12:1-15).

Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses's authority as the only spokesman of the LORD, in an apparent attempt to equate themselves to his level of authority by demoting Moses. They misrepresented Moses's position of authority. What they said was partially true, because God did speak to Aaron (Leviticus 10:8; Numbers 18:8) and Miriam was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20). But they twisted this fact to make an untrue assertion that their authority was equal to that of Moses. They did so because of a personal grudge against Moses for marrying the Cushitic woman.

They were not thinking about the best interest of the nation, they were taking justice into their own hands, and twisting the truth to do so. By application, this appears that God requires that the truth be told in full context.

The LORD became angry at this attempt to reduce Moses' authority through misleading statements. He struck Miriam with a case of leprosy so intense that she became "as white as snow" (Numbers 12:10). The Israelites were to *remember* this incident which they witnessed on their way as *they came out of Egypt*.

The Israelites needed to remember that bearing false witness was something that displeased God greatly. He illustrated His displeasure by striking the prophetess Miriam with the onset of a leprosy-like skin disease. This rendered her unclean, and she was taken outside of the camp. Israel was to *diligently observe and do according to all that the Levitical priests* taught them. God speaks what is true. Following God's ways leads us into the truth, and the truth sets us free (John 8:31-32).

The only way to be healed and restored to the covenant community after contracting a skin disease was to strictly obey the priests who had been

instructed by Moses (Leviticus 13-14), who in turn had received these instructions from the LORD. Miriam served as a cautionary tale as to what can transpire when we follow our own ways, twisting reality in order to take justice into our own hands. By obeying the *Levitical priests* in the matter of skin diseases, it likely conditions the heart to obey God in other ways as well.

The skin disease could be a picture of sin. When we confess sin, and choose to return to God and walk in His ways, He promises to cleanse us of sin, similar to this instruction with respect to *leprosy* (1 John 1:9).

Biblical Text:

⁸Be careful against an infection of leprosy, that you diligently observe and do according to all that the Levitical priests teach you; as I have commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. ⁹Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt.