

Hold the Raisins

Based on Numbers 6:1–21 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (6)

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” — Matthew 16:24

SERMON SUMMARY

We can all picture someone with absolute, total dedication to something bigger than themselves — willing to pay any cost, make any sacrifice, reorient their whole life around a single pursuit. Jiro Ono, turning 101 this month, began making sushi at age seven and has honed the same craft every day for over seventy years, giving up hobbies and family time to chase an artisan's perfection. Diana Nyad tried and failed again and again to swim the 110 miles from Havana to Key West — through storms, jellyfish, and sharks — until, at sixty-four, she swam fifty-three hours straight and made it. If people will bend their whole lives around raw fish or open-ocean swimming, what dedication will we give in pursuit of the God of the universe? That is the question Numbers 6 presses on us.

The Space In Between

The fall series has been walking through the first ten chapters of Numbers — Israel camped at Sinai, delivered from Egypt but not yet in the promised land, learning how to live with God in the in-between. We live there too, between the cross and the consummation, between our deliverance given and our deliverance realized. The central problem was named last week in chapter 5:3 — a holy God has come to dwell in the center of an unholy people. How can those two coexist? Last week's answer was to separate FROM sin. This week is the other side of the coin: to be separated TO him, through the vow of the Nazarite.

The Vow of Separation: Four Marks

The word “Nazarite” comes from the Hebrew *nazar*, to separate. A Nazarite is simply a separated, consecrated, dedicated one — and the vow has four striking features. It is of divine origin (“The Lord said to Moses”) — God's own idea for drawing near. It is universal (“if a man OR woman”) — open to every Israelite regardless of tribe, age, or gender, unlike the priesthood. It is voluntary — everything in Numbers up to now has been conscripted (be counted, camp here, carry this), but this is pure free will. And it is a vow of separation, giving ordinary Israelites a share in the holiness that had belonged to the priests alone.

Numbers 6:2 *If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the Lord as a Nazirite ...*

Separate From Three Things

The vow was lived out by abstaining from three things otherwise reserved for priests. First, wine — and anything from the grapevine — because you don't approach the presence of God clouded, because fermentation hints at decay before the living God, and because it means trading a lesser joy for a greater one. Second, the razor: letting the hair grow long as a public, living symbol of handing God the reins of one's life. Third, contact with death — so sacred that even the funeral of a father, mother, brother, or sister had to be missed. Only the high priest was held to a standard that strict. A Nazarite was, for a time, as holy as the high priest.

Why Take the Vow?

Why would anyone take it on? The text doesn't say, which leaves us leaning on the rest of Scripture. Perhaps out of gratitude, when a simple thanksgiving offering wouldn't be enough. Perhaps out of guilt, as a sign of remorse a guilt offering couldn't carry. Perhaps out of need — a sick child, an uncertain future, a deep longing — coming to God in absolute dependence, not to bargain but to say, “I need you more than I need the thing I'm

asking for.” Or perhaps out of sheer hunger for God himself. Whatever the why, the how is clear: radical, wholehearted separation.

Hold the Raisins

God doesn't just say no wine — no grape juice, no grapes, not even a raisin. “Hold the raisins.” It is the dried-up, shriveled, seemingly trivial thing that tests where the heart really is. Yet this is not monasticism: the Nazarite still worked, married, raised children, and ate with others — separation TO God, not separation FROM life. Nor was it rare or merely ancient. Joseph is called by that same root; Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist were all Nazarites; even Paul took the vow (Acts 18:18) and paid for four other men to complete theirs (Acts 21). So the wrong question is “How close to the line can I get?” The right question is “Are there raisins in my life?” — the small, dried-up things, far from the obvious sins, that quietly reveal a heart not fully given to God.

A Mirror to Israel — and to Us

The Nazarites were meant to be a mirror to Israel, their unkempt hair a walking reminder that all of God's people are called to be set apart. But tragically, in Amos, God laments: “I raised up Nazarites from among your youths ... but you made the Nazarites drink wine.” Instead of the dedicated calling the community up, the community dragged the dedicated down. The pointed question for us: when our young people pursue God wholeheartedly, do we model a better way — or wave it off (“don't be so perfectionistic, have another donut”)? We would never tell our kids to skip half their ball games, yet we treat worship, catechism, and youth group as optional. We will reorient an entire family's life around a sports season, but balk when faith asks the same. One pastor told of a missionary who drank every other cup of tea without sugar — a tiny recurring reminder that his life was called beyond his own comfort.

The Deeper Turn: A Greater Nazarite

Jesus takes up this very call — “let the dead bury their own dead,” “deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me” — asking not for our hair on the altar but our whole living lives as a sacrifice, a call out of compromise and complacency. But there is a deeper turn at the end of the chapter. Imagine finishing the vow — missed parties, missed funerals, maybe starting over more than once — and coming at last to the tabernacle. Does God say, “Well done, you've earned it”? No. The finished Nazarite must bring a burnt offering, a sin offering, a fellowship offering, grain and drink offerings — nearly every sacrifice Israel knew — and if he has other vows, fulfill those too. Even after a lifetime of extraordinary holiness, a sin offering is still required before sharing a meal with the Lord. The very existence of the vow exposes our inability to meet God's standard; even our best obedience always falls short. The Nazarite is a mirror that points not to ourselves but to Someone else — a greater Nazarite who offers not a life devoid of the blood of grapes but the blood of his own body; not his hair as a symbol of life but his very life; who does not merely avoid death but goes down into it, the God of life dying on a cross. We are made holy not by our living but by his dying. And so, at the Table, unlike a Nazarite, we are told to take the cup and drink — remembering and believing that God has fulfilled in Christ the very thing our gratitude points to, our guilt longs for, and our hunger reaches toward.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

The pastor opened with Jiro the sushi master and Diana Nyad the swimmer — people who bent their whole lives around one pursuit. Who comes to mind for you when you think of total dedication? What would it look like to give that kind of devotion to growing in Christ?

2

The Nazarite vow was voluntary, universal (“man or woman,” any tribe, any age), and of divine origin. Why do you think God made this path to priest-like holiness open to everyone and freely chosen, rather than conscripted like everything else in Numbers so far?

3

God says not just no wine, but no grape juice, no grapes — not even a raisin. What is the point of forbidding something so small and shriveled? What does “hold the raisins” reveal about where our hearts really are?

4

People may have taken the vow out of gratitude, guilt, need, or hunger for God himself. Which of those four motivations do you most relate to right now, and why?

5

In Amos, God grieves that Israel “made the Nazarites drink wine” — the community pulled the dedicated down instead of being lifted up by them. Where do you see this today? When someone pursues God wholeheartedly, are we more likely to cheer them on or quietly talk them out of it?

6

The pastor contrasted how readily we reorient life around sports (fees, travel, missed family meals) with how we treat worship and discipleship as optional. Does that comparison land for you? Where might your calendar and spending reveal your true priorities?

7

Even after completing the vow, the Nazarite still had to bring a sin offering — proof that our best obedience never earns us standing with God. How does it change your motivation for dedication to know that holiness comes through Christ's dying, not our striving?

LIVING IT OUT

Take the truth of this passage out of the study and into the week. Consider these prompts across four areas of ordinary life.

In Your Inner Life

- Stop asking “how close to the line can I get?” and ask instead, “Are there raisins in my life?” Name one small, shriveled thing that quietly reveals a heart not fully given to God.
- Offer yourself afresh as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1) — not your hair on the altar, but your actual days, this week, handed over to God's control.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Look honestly at the family calendar and budget. What would it look like to let faith reorient your household the way a sports season already does?
- Treat worship, catechism, and discipleship as non-negotiable rather than optional — and talk with your kids about why they matter more than the next game.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Adopt one small, recurring “every-other-cup-of-tea” practice — a tiny, deliberate reminder through the week that your life is set on God, not on your own comfort.

- When those around you pour their lives into lesser trophies, let your joyful, dedicated pursuit of Christ quietly point them to the greater prize.

In Your Faith Community

- Be an encourager, not an Amos. When a young person or anyone seeks God wholeheartedly, cheer them on instead of waving it off as “too much.”
- Let your own visible dedication be a mirror to others — a quiet witness that all of God's people are called to be set apart.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Faith takes on flesh when we act. This week, turn the call to wholehearted consecration into one concrete, self-denying step of devotion.

Step	This Week's Challenge
1	Pray. Ask God to show you one “raisin” — a small thing you cling to — and one way he is calling you into deeper, wholehearted devotion this week.
2	Choose a practice. Pick one concrete act of self-denial or dedication (a fast, a daily Scripture time, an “every-other-cup” reminder) and commit to it for the week.
3	Reorder one thing. Move a single item in your calendar or budget to put God first in a place where something lesser has quietly taken priority.
4	Encourage the dedicated. Speak a specific word of encouragement to someone — especially a young person — who is pursuing God wholeheartedly. Be a mirror, not an Amos.
5	Come to the Table. Receive communion (or simply reflect on the cup) remembering that your holiness rests on Christ's dying, not your striving — and give thanks.

Optional Extended Challenge

Trace the Nazarite thread through Scripture this week: Samson (Judges 13), Samuel (1 Samuel 1), John the Baptist (Luke 1), and Paul (Acts 18:18; 21:17–26). Then read Hebrews 10:1–14. Notice how every vow and sacrifice points forward to the once-for-all offering of Christ — the greater Nazarite who gave not his hair but his life.

Closing Prayer Guide

Close your time together in prayer, using these movements as a guide:

- Gratitude — Thank God that holiness comes to us through Christ's dying, not our striving, and that he calls us — every one of us — to himself.
- Confession — Confess the “raisins,” the compromise and complacency, and ask God to purge the small distractions that pull your heart away from him.
- Consecration — Offer yourselves as living sacrifices, asking for hearts set firmly and fully on following Jesus.
- Community — Pray that your church would be a people who hunger for God and lift one another up in wholehearted devotion rather than drawing one another down.