

Punishment and Reward Numbers 25:6-18

Slide 1

Last week, in Numbers 25:1-5, the Israelites accepted an invitation to dine with the Moabites, and thus they became participants in sexual and religious harlotry.

Because of this, God commanded Moses to publicly execute all the leaders of the nation.

But, up to this time, not so much as one person had been put to death, so God took action by means of a plague.

Today's events happened during the time this plague was taking its toll among the Israelites; thousands were dying.

That's why "*the whole community of the Israelites*" were assembled near the entrance to the tent of meeting weeping because of the plague caused by their sin, and the outburst of divine displeasure that it had produced.

Then, in the midst of this prayer meeting, an Israelite boldly brought a Midianite woman home.

Numbers 25:6, "*Then an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting.*"

The Bible doesn't mention his family disapproving his actions, or of any of them seeking to stop what was taking place, therefore His family became partners in this crime.

Slide 2

I want to pause for a moment to reflect upon the family's passive acceptance of what this man has did.

This omission wasn't a trivial detail because there's an important observation we need to understand.

Look down a few verses to Numbers 25:14-15. Here's some important information was given about this man's family and that of his girlfriend.

Numbers 25:14-15, *"The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Kozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family."*

Did you understand what was just read? The parents of this young man and woman were both leaders.

The man's father was the son of a Simeonite leader, Salu. The woman's father was Zur, one of the Midianite leaders who was later killed by the Israelites.

Now, these leaders didn't commit this specific sin, but their children did. This explains why God commanded Moses to put all the leaders to death in Numbers 25:4.

Zimri had chosen to disobey God's commands and was in the act of committing spiritual and physical immorality. His family was watching it happen, without raising so much as a word of protest.

But not only did Zimri's family watch what was happening, but he walked her *"right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel."*

There, at the tent of meeting, stood virtually all of Israel's leaders; yet when they saw what was happening, they didn't do anything either.

Which raises an important principle: The sins which leaders knowingly choose to condone or to tolerate become sins for which the leaders are also responsible.

This is continually evidenced in Scripture. Eli was responsible for tolerating the sins of his sons. Samuel was responsible for what his sons did.

Jacob was too passive in dealing with the violation of his daughter and the revenge brought about by his sons. David was passive in dealing with the sin of Amnon which led to even more violence.

No wonder the Israelites were admonished, as parents, to deal with their disobedient children. Paul even sets this qualification down for church leaders in 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 3:2-5, "Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"

It's sad that, in the church today, there are parents who choose to cling to their children rather than rebuke or discipline them.

It seems their commitment to their children is greater than their commitment to God and to His Word.

Often, parents seek to sanctify their action by calling it “*unconditional love*.” Why do we think that the New Testament texts, which call for church discipline, excludes the members of our family?

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Now, among the many who looked on, as this Israelite blatantly disregarded God’s Law, was a priest named Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, who was the son of Aaron.

Eleazar knew, as all Israel should have known, that God had forbidden such immorality and idolatry.

Exodus 34:12-16, “Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. “Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.”

As a priest, Phinehas knew how precise God’s Law governing Israel’s worship was.

He also knew that those who practiced this kind of immorality were to be put to death. He didn’t need a special revelation from God. God’s will was clear.

So, filled with zeal for God, Phinehas stood up in the middle of the assembly, in the sight of all, took a spear in hand and went after Zimri and his girlfriend.

Numbers 25:7-8, *“When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman’s stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped.”*

It appears that by the time he reached the tent they were already engaged in sexual sin, and so, with one thrust of his spear, he put both the man and the woman to death.

With this act of religious zeal, Phinehas not only put an end to the sin of these two people, he also brought an end to the plague which God had brought upon Israel.

What no one else was willing to do, Phinehas did. He’s the only one who lifted a hand against this terrible sin which threatened the existence of the nation. The action of this one man saved Israel.

In one sense Phinehas was foreshadowing the coming of Jesus and His atoning work at Calvary.

As Phinehas acted in his zeal for the Lord by putting this couple to death, Jesus revealed His zeal by cleansing the temple.

By his actions, Phinehas atoned for the sins of Israel and propitiated the righteous anger of God.

As a result of his zealous act, God made a *“covenant of peace”* with Phinehas and his descendants assuring them of a permanent priestly role.

Later, this expression, *“covenant of peace,”* would refer to the salvation which would be accomplished through the coming of the Messiah.

Because of Phinehas' zealous act, God made a "covenant of peace" with him and with his descendants which suggests that Israel would be blessed through Phinehas

It further illustrates the fact that while we're under the curse, our one chance at having peace with God is to be one of the descendants of Jesus Christ, who made peace with God for us.

Isaiah 53:5, *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."*

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There're two blessings here, the plague on Israel was terminated, and a blessing was pronounced upon Phinehas and his descendants.

There's also a curse, and this curse was upon the enemies of God, those who sought the downfall of Israel.

For a brief period of time, it looked as though Balaam had succeeded. The nation had been seduced and had fallen into spiritual harlotry. God's wrath had been provoked, and thus He sent a plague upon Israel.

But, thanks to the zealous action of one man, the nation was spared. Balaam had not succeeded in turning God's blessing to a curse. Instead, God spared His people through the action of one righteous man.

Verses 17 and 18 sets the scene for the rest of the Book of Numbers. Because the Moabites and the Midianites had cursed God's people rather than bless them, they brought a curse upon themselves.

Numbers 25:16-18, *“The LORD said to Moses, “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them. They treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident involving their sister Kozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of that incident.”*

God commanded Moses to see to it that the Midianites, along with Balaam, were destroyed for their treachery as we see in Numbers 31.

Numbers 31:8, *“Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba—the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword.”*

Let me emphasize something that Numbers 25 does not require or justify. Numbers 25 does not rationalize violence in seeking justice in the name of God.

No one should read this passage and conclude that they are justified in bombing abortion clinics, in shooting abortionists, or performing other acts of terrorism in the name of God.

Israel in those days was a theocracy, and God was their king. God had ordered *“capital punishment”* on those who had willfully broken His law. Phinehas was acting under divine orders.

Today, God has ordained human government as the means by which justice is handed down. Let us beware of finding any sanction in this passage for lawlessness or vigilante justice.

But, this text does have much to teach us about leadership.

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Israel fell into sin, and God called for the death of all of its leaders. Why? It's because the leaders weren't doing their job, part of which was to remove evil from the nation.

These leaders were guilty, and worthy of death for knowing about sin and doing nothing about it.

How much greater their sin if they were actually practicing this same sin, and by so doing, encouraging others to do so as well?

It's distressing that a significant number of Americans brush aside the immorality of its leaders, i.e. "I don't care about his personal life, I only care about the economy."

We see no connection between the morality of leadership and the task of leadership.

Little wonder is it that a leader, who practices immorality, will also seek to protect their friends who practice immorality as the Bible defines it.

As we leave our leaders in office and then re-elect them, so the Israelites refused to remove their leaders from office, even though God ordered not only their removal, but their execution.

Those who lead must be men of character and men of courage. No wonder Paul placed so much emphasis on the character of those who lead in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Leaders are not only to be men of character, but they must also be men who truly lead, men who take action when it's required.

Phinehas teaches us that leadership isn't just a matter of holding an office. Leadership isn't just instructing or commanding others to act as they should.

Phinehas could have commanded, "*What this couple is doing is sin. Now one of you go over there and kill them!*"

The simple fact was that all the nation knew it was wrong, and no one was willing to act, even though they knew what they were supposed to do.

The sin of this young Israelite was deliberate. The sin of the nation was in remaining passive, even though they knew how they were to respond to this sin.

Phinehas was a leader because he was willing to stand alone, and to act alone, when no one else was willing to do what was right. His zealous and courageous action enhanced his leadership role.

The divine response was the “*covenant of peace*” God made with Phinehas and his descendants, but there was also a human response.

When Moses sent the Israelites to war against the Midianites, he sent Phinehas with them, along with the holy instruments and signal trumpets.

It was in this battle that the five Midianite kings were slain, along with Balaam.

In Joshua 22, a report reached the Israelites that the Reubenites, Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh had built an altar at the entrance to the land of Canaan.

The other clans assumed their brothers had turned from worshipping God to worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, so they sent a leader from each tribe of Israel, and Phinehas, to investigate.

If their brothers had turned away from worshipping God in truth, the Israelites knew that Phinehas was the man to deal with it.

When a serious moral problem arose in the tribe of Benjamin, Phinehas was a part of Israel’s dealing with it.

No wonder we read in 1 Chronicles 9:20 that *“the Lord was with him.”* Here was a leader who truly stood before his people.

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Another lesson illustrated in this chapter which I call *“sin in the camp”* because there was a great reluctance to deal with sin decisively.

Sin is like a cancer. The longer we leave it alone, the more likely it is to kill us.

The Corinthian church was reluctant to deal with a man living in sexual immorality; immorality so serious that it even shocked the Corinthians.

Paul described sin as a kind of leaven that would corrupt the whole church, and thus must be rooted out. Jesus likewise took a hard line when it came to sin and urged others to do likewise.

Matthew 18:6, *“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*

Surely our text, like many others in the Bible, warns us about being soft on sin. Today sexual sin is looked upon lightly by many who profess to be Christians, and it’s not even regarded as a sin by others.

Proverbs 5:3-5 tells us, *“For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.”*

Immorality is deadly, so we must deal with it as a deadly disease. Don’t pamper it or protect it, but root it out with all diligence. It’s a serious sin, and it’s often the gateway to a host of others.

2 Peter 2:4-10, *“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness^[b] to be held for judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority.”*

God rewards the righteous -- He rewarded Phinehas for his faithfulness.

And God punishes the wicked -- He punished the Midianites and the Moabites. He punished Balaam, and He punished those wicked Israelites who engaged in sin.

Slide 7

Conclusion

The story of Balaam reminds me of Proverbs 10:7, *“The name of the righteous is used in blessings, but the name of the wicked will rot.”*

The name “Balaam” occurs 51 times in Numbers 22-24. It occurs two times in Numbers 31. It does not occur at all in Numbers 25.

When Balaam was used of God to speak words of blessing on the nation Israel, he received a great deal of prominence.

But the minute Balaam chose to deliberately oppose Israel and bring the nation under God's wrath, Balaam disappeared.

We must remind ourselves that the events of Numbers 25 were the fruit of Balaam's labors. What a warning Balaam should be to those who ignore the Word of God and go their own sinful way.

So, the questions this morning is "*What kind of person are you?*" Are you a Phinehas, who trusted and obeyed God, and who was rewarded for his faith?

Or, are you a Balaam, who knows a great deal about God, but doesn't know God personally, and whose destiny is eternal destruction?

For three long chapters Balaam sought to change God's mind. He sought to persuade God to forsake His promise to bless Israel, and to curse them instead.

Balaam not only failed, but he ended up pronouncing blessings on Israel and cursings on their enemies.

Israel's future was safe in the hands of God. Romans 11:29 verifies this, "*For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.*"

While God wouldn't forsake His plans, purposes, and promises, fickle Israel was willing to cast God aside for a mere meal.

How quickly and easily Israel fell. If it weren't for the faithfulness of God, we would be hopeless.

It's not our faithfulness to Him which assures us of His promises, but His faithfulness to us. This should be the most comforting truth there is.

Which makes me wonder: why is it that some people find the sovereignty of God such a distressing truth?

May God grant that we, by His grace, discipline our bodies and our appetites, so that we may win the prize of His commendation, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”*