

Sexual Immorality and the Zeal of Phinehas (Numbers 25)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. We are now in the last year or two of the 40 years (or 42 years in the LXX; compare **Joshua 5:5-6**) that the Israelites would spend in the desert, before entering the Promised Land.
- b. This part of **Numbers** involves episodes in the life of Balaam, a prophet who is not Jewish.
 - i. Jesus, Peter and Jude all make mention of him and assume that those they are addressing know this story. Important warnings are given to Christians based on things in the life of Balaam. (**Revelation 2:14, 2 Peter 2:15-16** and **Jude v. 11**)
 - ii. As we discussed in the prior lesson, Balaam was someone who:
 1. When we first encounter him is good (seeks counsel from the Lord and only will follow that);
 2. However, then He turns bad in his heart on the road to Balak (where he encounters the Angel of the Lord and his donkey speaks to him);
 3. Then he repents and becomes good again, agreeing to say only what the Lord tells him to say. During that time, he speaks four oracles or prophecies, the last two of which feature significant prophecies about Jesus;
 - a. We covered that in the prior message.
 4. Then finally, he becomes very wicked and leads the Moabite women to pull the Israelite men into idolatry and immorality. (**Numbers 25** and **Numbers 31:16**)
 - a. This will be discussed in detail in the current message.
 - b. The events from this last phase of Balaam's life, which we will discuss today, are specifically referenced in two places in the New Testament, by Jesus (**Revelation 2:14**) and by Paul (**1 Corinthians 10:8**).

- c. Both Jesus and Paul assumed that those they were addressing knew the details of this story from **Numbers 25**. Let's not disappoint them!
- d. As Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10**, after alluding to the story of sexual immorality in **Numbers 25**:
 - i. "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." (**1 Corinthians 10:11**, NKJV)

II. Fornication with the Midianite Women

- a. Read **Numbers 25:1-18**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. The Midianites and Moabites were allies. Balak, son of Zippor, was the king of the Moabites. (**Numbers 22:4-7**).
 - 1. Note that the women who pulled the Israelite men into idolatry and fornication are referred to as both 'Moabite' and 'Midianite' women.
 - ii. Baal was a popular pagan god in the area of Canaan and the Middle East.
 - 1. 'Baal', a term that means 'Lord', refers to a prominent male god of the Canaanites. Some sources indicate that his consort was often *Asherah*, a pagan female goddess associated with fertility.
 - 2. The "Baal of Peor" was the local version of Baal, observed in the vicinity of Mt. Peor, east of the Jordan River.
 - 3. Worship of Baal could involve human sacrifice (burning infants to death), fornication (as in this case) or other corrupt practices.
 - iii. The Midianite (or Moabite) women enticed the Israelite men to join in their worship of Baal.
 - 1. Participating in their pagan mysteries involved venerating pagan idols, eating meat consecrated to Baal, and participating in sexual immorality with the women.
 - iv. The Lord becomes very angry with the Israelites for this sin. He tells Moses to have the leaders publicly make an example of the offenders.

1. Literally, they are to be punished “in the sun”, or as we might say, “in broad daylight”.
 2. In Bible translations based on the Masoretic Text, it says these people were to be *executed*, or *hung*.
- v. An Israelite man goes with a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and the congregation, who are weeping at the entrance to the tabernacle.
1. The Israelite man, Zimri, was the son of a ruler from the tribe of Simeon.
 2. The woman, Cozbi, was the daughter of a Midianite ruler.
- vi. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, takes a spear and goes after the two, follows them into a chamber, and thrusts the spear through both of their bodies, killing them.
1. This act by Phinehas stops the plague, in which 24,000 died.
- c. The ‘back story’: the role of Balaam.
- i. Read **Numbers 31:1-8**.
 1. The Israelites exact vengeance on the Midianites and go to war against them.
 2. The Midianites are defeated. Five kings of Midian and Balaam are slain along with the others.
 - ii. Read **Numbers 31:13-16**.
 1. Here we learn that *Balaam was the one* who advised that the Midianite women seduce the Israelite men into idolatry and sexual immorality at Peor.
 2. This is what Jesus was referring to in **Revelation 2**, when addressing the church in Pergamum:
 - a. “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of *Balaam*, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.” (**Revelation 2:14**, NKJV)

III. Idolatry: the Gateway to All Kinds of Depravity

- a. Read **Romans 1:18-33**.

- i. We worship the God who created all things.
- ii. Idolatry is worshiping created things, rather than the Creator.
- iii. It led mankind in the beginning to all forms of depravity: fornication, adultery, sexual perversion, and all other forms of moral degradation.
- iv. This is why the Lord was so angry when he saw idolatry among His people.
 - 1. It seems to me that this also was the reason that Balaam came up with the idea of undermining the Israelites by ensnaring them in sexual immorality and idolatry.
 - 2. If they gave into that sin, they would become alienated from God and could be easily defeated.
- b. Also, **Wisdom of Solomon** speaks of the foolishness and moral depravity of idolatry.
 - i. **Wisdom of Solomon chapter 13** exposes the foolishness of venerating or consulting a dead stone or piece of carved wood.
 - ii. **Wisdom of Solomon chapter 14** discusses the roots of idolatry and the evil coming from it.
 - 1. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 14:22-27**.
 - 2. Idolatry leads to murder, adultery, deceit, destruction of families, loss of knowing the difference between good and evil, and all kinds of depravity and corruption.

IV. Major Lesson for Us: the Danger of Sexual Immorality

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13**.
 - i. The point Paul is making: Christians need to make sure we run our 'spiritual race' with perseverance.
 - ii. Paul said that he needed to run in such a way as to win the prize. He said he had to "discipline my body and bring it into subjection" so that he would not be disqualified (lose his salvation).
 - iii. He then explains how the exodus journey described in the books of **Exodus** and **Numbers** was a foreshadowing of the Christian life. Most of them did not make it. Their bodies fell in the Wilderness to teach us a lesson. Let us learn from that lesson.
 - iv. Five things led to most of them dying and not reaching the Promised Land, even after they had been 'baptized' and were 'eating the

spiritual food and drinking the spiritual drink'. Those five sins that led to their being disqualified were:

1. No. 1: *Lusting after evil things*;
2. No. 2: *Becoming idolaters* (citing the incident with the golden calf, in **Exodus 32**);
3. No. 4: *Tempting Christ* (and thereby being destroyed by serpents, pointing back to the story of the bronze serpent in **Numbers 21**);
4. No. 5: *Complaining*, which the Israelites did on several occasions in **Exodus** and **Numbers**; and
5. No. 3: *Committing sexual immorality*.
 - a. "Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell;" (**1 Corinthians 10:8**, NKJV)
 - b. This mentions sexual immorality in connection with 23,000 dying in one day, which points back to the **Numbers 25** story with the Midianite women.
 - c. It says in **Numbers 25:9** that 24,000 died in that plague, while here in **1 Corinthians 10:8** it says 23,000 died "in one day".
 - i. From that, I would assume that 23,000 *died in one day*, but the total death toll (from all days) was 24,000.
 - ii. To give some perspective on that death toll:
 1. The official death toll for the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 in the U.S. (from all three sites) was 2,977 lives lost.
 - a. This motivated the U.S. to embark on the 'Global War on Terror', which led to extensive military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.
 2. The official U.S. death toll for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was 2,403 lives lost.

- a. This event motivated the U.S. to enter World War II.
- 3. Therefore, the death toll from sin with the Midianite women was 10x Pearl Harbor, or 8x the 9/11 attacks!
 - a. And this was to a much smaller nation of only about 600,000 adult men.
 - b. All to teach future generations a lesson that we should NEVER FORGET!

V. More on the Dangers of Sexual Immorality

- a. Spiritual giants who lived long before us have fallen:
 - i. David – the man “after God’s own heart” (**1 Samuel 13:14**), the author of wonderful psalms of praise and worship, who slayed Goliath. However, he fell into adultery with Bathsheba.
 - ii. Solomon – who had spiritual wisdom greater than any man, author of much of the book of **Proverbs**, and possessing great wealth and power. His downfall was his love for pagan women, who lured him into idolatry (**1 Kings 11:1-10**).
 - iii. Samson – a mighty man used by God, who had a weakness for women such as Delilah, which led to him losing his eyesight and his strength (**Judges 13-16**).
 - iv. **Proverbs 5-7**, regarding the immoral woman who leads men into sexual immorality: “those whom she slew are innumerable” (**Proverbs 7:26**).
 - v. The church in Corinth (**1 Corinthians 5**); and two of the seven churches in Asia Minor, in the book of **Revelation** (Thyatira and Pergamum, **Revelation 2**).
- b. New Testament Scriptures that address the dangers of sexual immorality include:
 - i. “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a

brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’” (**1 Corinthians 5:9–13**, NKJV)

- ii. “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” (**1 Corinthians 6:18–20**, NKJV)
- iii. “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” (**1 Peter 1:13–16**, NKJV)
- iv. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul...” (**1 Peter 2:11**, NKJV)
- v. “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.” (**Hebrews 12:14–17**, NKJV)
- vi. “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” (**Hebrews 13:4**, NKJV)
- c. Temptation for sexual sin has been a tremendous struggle for God’s people from the beginning. Passages of Scripture that I have found to be helpful in overcoming temptations in this area include:
 - i. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” (**1 Corinthians 10:12–13**, NKJV)

1. God always keeps His promises to us. He promises us that *He will not let us be tempted beyond what we are able to bear*. It will not be impossible for us to overcome in this area.
 2. He will provide a way of escape. However, we need to seek and pursue those escape routes!
- ii. Let us see the sin of sexual immorality for what it is.
1. The short-term pleasure offered by sexual sin is like bait that hides a sharp hook. It looks tasty to a fish, but is deceptive, leading the fish to being caught and devoured by the fisherman (in this case, by Satan).
 - a. Let us see the bait for what it is, so that we can avoid Satan's trap!
 2. Sexual sin is spiritual slavery, in which we become enslaved by the desires of our flesh.
 - a. Jesus said: "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." (**John 8:34**, NKJV)
 - b. Regarding King Solomon, it says in **Sirach 47:19**, "But you lay down beside women and were *enslaved by your body*."
 3. Temptation in the area of sexual immorality offers the promise of a little *short-term pleasure* but at the cost of forfeiting our eternal inheritance (the sin of Esau).
 4. There is an old Christian quote about dealing with sin: "It is easier to kill the cub than the full-grown lion."
- iii. Avoid temptation. Be honest with yourself and others regarding situations that are not good for you to be in; and avoid them!
1. When we pray the Lord's prayer each day, we say: "...and do not lead us into temptation".
 - a. How hypocritical it would be to pray this and not make *every effort* to avoid situations where we will face such temptation!
 2. Consider the wise advice given in **Proverbs**, regarding the temptation of the immoral woman.
 - a. "Therefore, hear me now, my children and do not depart from the words of my mouth. Remove your way

far from her, and *do not go near the door of her house....*"
(**Proverbs 5:7-8**, NKJV)

- b. Stay away from temptation. Do not even go near its door!
 3. **Challenge:** Take stock of your life, and consider the situations that present the greatest potential temptation for you (online dangers, websites, media, work or social situations, travel, etc.).
 - a. What are you doing, and what do you need to do, to avoid these sources of temptation?
- iv. Read, memorize and meditate on Scriptures that will help you overcome temptations in this area.
 1. "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! *Your word I have hidden in my heart*, That I might not sin against You." (**Psalm 119:9-11**, NKJV)
 2. Jesus Himself responded when He was tempted by Satan: "It is written...", after which He proceeded to quote from the Scriptures. (**Matthew 4:1-10**)
 - a. Here Jesus provides a great example for us, regarding how to respond when we are being tempted by Satan.
 - b. Like Jesus, we also should respond by using "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (**Ephesians 6:17**) when facing our enemy, in our own spiritual battles.
- v. Confess sin to a trusted brother or sister.
 1. "He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy." (**Proverbs 28:13**, NKJV)
 2. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (**James 5:16**, NKJV)
 3. **Challenge:** Establish an ongoing relationship with a trusted mature spiritual brother (for men) or sister (for women), in

which you can confess your sins and be open regarding your temptations, especially in this area.

- d. Have heroes whose examples inspire you to overcome. In seeking victory over sexual temptation, my own heroes from the Bible include:
 - i. Joseph, who resisted the temptation of sexual immorality as a young single man. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, he said, "How could I sin against my master, and against the Lord?" (**Genesis 39:9**)
 - 1. When entrapped by Potiphar's wife, Joseph fled the scene, even leaving his garment behind. (**Genesis 39**)
 - 2. This is the scene I think of in connection with Paul's admonition:
 - a. "*Flee sexual immorality...*"(**1 Corinthians 6:18**, NKJV)
 - ii. Phinehas, who drove a spear through the couple involved in fornication, He demonstrated the same zeal against this sin that the Lord has. (**Numbers 25**).
 - iii. Job, who resolved to stay pure and not lust after women.
 - 1. "I have made a covenant with my eyes; Why then should I look upon a young woman?" (**Job 31:1**, NKJV)
 - 2. There are multiple reasons that the Lord provided us with eyelids. *Use them to avoid temptation!*

VI. Lessons from the Incident at Baal of Peor

- a. This story is recounted in several places in Old Testament (as well as at least two places in the New Testament).
 - i. This was something the Jews remembered for generations.
- b. Examples include:
 - i. **Deuteronomy 4:3-4**
 - 1. Moses reminded the Israelites of the contrast in consequences between those who sinned at Peor, versus those who did not.
 - ii. **Joshua 22:16-17**
 - 1. Phinehas warned the 2-1/2 tribes that would settle east of the Jordan of what would happen to them if they abandoned the Lord. Also, he indicated that the after-effects of that sin were still with the people at that time.

iii. **Hosea 9:10**

1. The Israelites were reminded of their bad history of being unfaithful to the Lord, with the incident at Peor being a classic example.

iv. Read **Psalm 106:28-31** (designated **Psalm 105** in the LXX)

1. The incident at Peor was one of the examples where the people rebelled against the Lord and provoked Him to anger, *but the Lord showed his mercy* to them.

VII. Lessons from the Example of Phinehas

a. **Question:** Who was Phinehas?

- i. He was the son of Eleazar, who became high priest after his father, Aaron (**Numbers 20:25-28**). Therefore, Phinehas was a grandson of Aaron.
- ii. His two oldest uncles (Nadab and Abihu) had been priests who were struck down by God for offering unauthorized fire. (**Leviticus 10**)
- iii. He was the third high priest, following his father. The succeeding high priests all were directly descended from him. (**1 Chronicles 5:30-41**)

b. To me, Phinehas is an inspiring example of a man who dealt boldly with sin in the congregation.

- i. He was willing to deal with sin even when it involved *those who were prominent*.

1. The man involved was the son of a leader in Israel.

- ii. Phinehas embodied the important qualities of righteous indignation and zeal that we also see in the life of Jesus.

1. Examples of Jesus' zeal include:

- a. Clearing out the temple in **John 2**. There, the zeal of Jesus reminded onlookers of a prophecy in **Psalm 69**.

- i. "Then His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.'" (**John 2:17**, NKJV; quoting from **Psalm 69:9**)

- b. Rebuking the hypocritical religious leaders, for example, in **Matthew 23**.

- c. Rebuking several of the seven churches of Asia Minor, in **Revelation 2-3**.
 - i. “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent.” (**Revelation 3:19**, NKJV)
- 2. Jesus was a *true peacemaker*, and He calls us to be the same.
 - a. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.” (**Matthew 5:9**, NKJV)
 - b. Many Christians, when they think of a “*peacemaker*”, tend to think of a passive person who is non-confrontational; someone who does not offend anyone.
 - i. However, do we see that in Jesus when He was faced with serious sin in Jewish religious leaders, or in the lives of His disciples?
 - ii. Jesus treated everyone with love, but told people what they *needed to hear*. At times, that involved confronting their sin directly.
 - c. Phinehas was given the “covenant of peace” by God, a covenant that was promised to his descendants as well. He brought true peace between God and Israel, and ended the plague by courageously confronting sin in the camp.
- iii. **Challenge:** Let us be men (especially) who reflect all the characteristics of Jesus, some of which we also see in the life of Phinehas!
 - 1. Let us avoid the tendency to excuse away or cover up sin when it appears in the church, especially among leaders.
- c. God blessed Phinehas and his descendants with the priesthood for what he did in **Numbers 25**.
 - i. Consider the great, heroic men of the past.
 - 1. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 44:1-15**.
 - a. Sirach says: let us praise the honorable, heroic men who have gone before us.
 - b. Their impact goes on for generations after they have departed.

- ii. **Wisdom of Sirach 45** speaks at length about the glory of Aaron, the first high priest. It holds up the glorious clothing, jewels he wore, and the ministry of sacrifice he presided over, making atonement for his people.
- iii. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 45:23-26**.
 - 1. Phinehas was described as being the “third in glory”. (**Wisdom of Sirach 45:23**)
 - a. I assume this refers to the fact that he was the third high priest (following his grandfather Aaron and his father Eleazar).
 - 2. He showed “zeal in the fear of the Lord and stood fast when the people turned away”. (**Wisdom of Sirach 45:23**)
 - a. He was a man who feared God.
 - b. He was zealous for the Lord.
 - c. He stood fast when the people turned away.
 - i. He did not just follow the crowd.
 - ii. He was willing to stand alone, or to stand with the few who did not abandon the Lord.
 - iii. In that regard, he was like Noah, Job, Joshua, Caleb, Elijah, the prophets, etc.
 - d. He “made atonement for Israel” (I assume this refers to killing the two in sin, which stopped the plague).
 - 3. Phinehas was rewarded by God for what he did. (**Wisdom of Sirach 45:24**)
 - a. “Therefore [the Lord] established a covenant of peace with him, *to be in charge of the sanctuary....*”
 - i. I assume this refers to him inheriting the high priesthood.
 - ii. The “covenant of peace” strikes me as bringing peace between God and men, offering sacrifices for sin and prayers for the people.
 - b. “That the priesthood might be with him and his seed forever.”

- i. All the high priests to follow would be descended *from him* (who was one of the grandsons of Aaron).
- ii. This was similar to the way that all the kings of Judah would be directly descended from David.
- iii. His righteousness created a legacy that would extend for generations and centuries.

VIII. Closing Challenges

- a. Let us never forget the lesson of Baal Peor, in **Numbers 25**.
 - i. 24,000 people died in this story, which has been recorded to teach us a life-saving lesson.
 - ii. They had been on the journey, as part of the 'church', but never made it to the Promised Land, because they fell into sexual immorality.
 - iii. Paul says this is a lesson *for us*, that we must be vigilant about avoiding this sin.
 - 1. Over the years I have seen many fall to this sin, *including the man who first taught me this very lesson* from the pulpit, many years ago.
 - a. Don't be one of the casualties!
 - b. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (**1 Corinthians 10:12**)
 - 2. While it may be hard, it absolutely *will not be impossible*. Our faithful God has promised that He will not let any of us be tempted beyond what we can bear.
 - iv. Make decisions to root this out of your life and to keep it out.
 - 1. Confess your sin to a trusted brother or sister. Be open about your struggles and temptations. Be more concerned about the inside of the dish than the outside.
 - 2. Burn into your mind the Scriptures that talk about this and the stories of the heroes (like Phinehas and Joseph).
 - a. Likewise, never forget as the greats before us who fell (like David, Solomon, and Samson).
 - 3. Hold on to the fear of God. It could save you for eternity.

- b. Brothers (especially)– Strive to be numbered among the ‘*Sons of Phinehas*’.
 - i. The kingdom of God needs many men like Phinehas! Although a priest, he was not held up because he was a ‘Bible scholar’, but rather because he dealt courageously and directly with sin among God’s people.
 - ii. We are called to be members of a royal priesthood (**1 Peter 2:9**). Let us imitate the man who was perhaps the greatest priest before Jesus. He and his descendants were given the covenant of peace, the priesthood.
 - iii. Let us strive to be filled with zeal for the Lord.
 - iv. Deal directly with sin in the camp. Don’t be a conflict-avoider, a coward nor a gossip.
 - 1. The reason that *ONLY* 24,000 died (rather than many more), was because of the action of this one righteous man.
 - 2. That was a great blessing not only to the Israelite nation at the time, but also to his descendants, for multiple generations afterward.
 - 3. A sign that men are not dealing with sin directly in the church, but are being ‘conflict avoiders’ instead, is the prevalence of *gossip*!
 - a. We must address sin in the church *directly*.
 - v. Being a *man of God* does not mean just going along with the crowd, falling in line, and not ‘making waves’, even in the church.
 - 1. “The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion.” (**Proverbs 28:1**, NKJV)
 - 2. Let us strive to be spiritual lions, following the example of the ‘Lion of the tribe of Judah’ (**Revelation 5:5**).
 - vi. We are locked in a spiritual battle. We are called to be spiritual warriors. We don’t physically skewer people with spears today. However, we fight battles against the unseen forces of evil, using spiritual weapons (including truth and the Word of God).
 - vii. **A WORD OF CAUTION:** Obviously, like Jesus, our zeal needs to come out of our love for God and for other people. We certainly don’t want to be “clanging gongs”, divisive, rash, quick-to-judge, quick-to-anger, nor people who lack mercy, wisdom or a forgiving spirit.

1. In our zeal, we are still admonished to exhort older brothers *as fathers* (**1 Timothy 5:1**).
2. Let us seek to follow Jesus and embrace ALL of his characteristics, including those we see so clearly in the life of Phinehas.
3. May the kingdom of God have many more men like Phinehas!