

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Numbers 25:1-9 “A Strategy to Defeat Us, & What to Do about It”

Intro. In our story today Israel was camping Acacia Grove just east of the Jordan River, and just across from the Promised Land. They had recently won important military victories (ch. 21), and now they were poised to begin to take possession of the Promised Land. They were certainly able to do so as long as God was with them.

However, God’s people will always face enemies, who will oppose us. Even so, as we saw last week, King Balak tried to get the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. That didn’t work, because God only allowed him to bless Israel. So in our text of Scripture today, the enemies of God came up with another strategy to bring defeat to the people of God. In the short run it seemed effective, but steps were taken to prevent this from being a total disaster.

I am speaking to a gathering of the people of God. He has called us to follow Him, and make disciples of all nations. Together with other churches, we are to reach our community for Christ. Five years from now the percentage of true believers in Christ should be greater, not less. God is more than willing and able to grant us victory. He promised us the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). All we need is faith to appropriate this power. 1 John 5:4 says, “this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

However, you can be sure that we will face modern-day enemies who want to push back the kingdom of God, and expand the kingdom of darkness. They love sin, and they hate the light (John 3:19). Where possible they will use the power of government to silence us, at least out in public. But they have another strategy to defeat us. It’s a strategy as old as the story of our text today. I’m afraid that most churches and denominations have been weakened through this strategy.

This morning I hope to show you from this text of Scripture what that strategy is, and how we can defend ourselves from it, that we may be strong in the Lord. Now here’s the main truth from our text today:

I. SATAN’S STRATEGY IS TO DEFEAT US BY CORRUPTING US

The devil knows that if he can get God’s people to turn from the Lord and turn to sin, we will be powerless for God. We will be much easier to defeat. Notice how our story today illustrates this strategy of corruption. In the last of v.1 we read, “and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab.” They actually committed immorality and adultery with these women. On top of that, v.3 says, “So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor...” In that region it was rather common for a people to call their local deity “Baal,” which means “Lord.” “Peor” was a mountain peak in Moab. So this was a Moabite deity. They went from pledging loyalty to the Lord God, and worshipping Him alone, to worshipping a Moabite deity.

How could such thing happen? V.2 gives us the answer. Notice first of all:

A. He Uses Attractive Temptations – King Balak, evidently with the consent of the Moabite & Midianite leaders (v.15b), sent their attractive women on a mission. They probably came into the camp of Israel wearing seductive dress. They fixed up their hair, & put on plenty of makeup. Many of the men certainly looked their way when they came into the camp. They immediately became interested. Once they caught their eye, they could speak with lips that dripped with honey, so to

speak. V.2 says, “They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods....” The Hebrew word translated “invited,” means to call out. Various groups of these women may have called out to the men of Israel and said something like, “Come on, boys, there’s going to be a special sacrifice over in Moab. There will be plenty of great roasted meat to eat, & we would love for you to come join us.” It is likely that wine would have been served as well. Of course, the men were not only tempted by food & drink, but also by some new female companionship. These were powerful tools against the rigidity of the Mosaic Law. They probably knew that more was in store for them than just female companionship. You see, Baalism was one of the pagan fertility religions of that day. In honor of Baal women would actually prostitute themselves as part of their worship!

How many fish would you catch if all you did was throw out a line with a bare hook? You would fish a very long time before you accidentally hooked the fish. No, we know what fishermen do. They bait their hook with something attractive. Well, a number of Israelites swallowed the bait without apparent resistance. Like sheep led to the slaughter, they followed them to the place of their pagan sacrificial rituals. These women were happy to carry out their duty to their god and their country for the express purpose of corrupting the men of Israel.

Satan has been using food & sexual temptation almost from the very beginning. He knows that the way to a man’s heart has always been through his eyes, his stomach, & his desire for intimate pleasure. The devil has learned that the best way to bring down the church is not through a frontal attack, but by getting into the church, and using worldly & sensual temptations to destroy our witness. So we must always be on our guard regarding these temptations. May our passionate love for God be greater than any lust for worldly pleasures.

Especially within the past 50 years the world has new ways to corrupt the spiritual lives of Christians & their children. TV used to be spiritually safe for all viewers, but not any more. Movies are full of immorality and others sins. The devil uses the music industry to corrupt people. And now, a man can be on the Internet, and a modern day Moabite temptress can gain access to your husband if you don’t have protections installed.

Satan not only uses attractive temptations, but furthermore:

B. He Uses Social Pressure - I believe the Moabites sent a significant number of women into the camp of Israel. With one voice they invited them to their party. They befriended them. They probably flattered them for their recent heroics on the battlefield. The women also used social pressure to draw them into their trap. Then, as the men responded to their invitation, the Israelites themselves put social pressure on those who hesitated to accept the invitation. Before it was over, tens of thousands had succumbed to the social pressure, and went with the women to the pagan feast. When they arrived for the feast, the Israelite guests would have been in the minority of a large group of Baal worshipers. As everyone else participated in the pagan rituals, which included bowing down to pagan idol, the Israelites felt compelled to do the same. In Ex. 34:15 God warned of this very problem of being invited to a pagan sacrifice, with the result that they sacrifice to their gods and play the harlot with their gods.

Young people, unless you are socially isolated from unbelievers, you will be invited to a late-night, or overnight party. If it’s like most parties today, there will be alcohol & drugs present. If you go, you will face tremendous peer pressure to go along with everyone else, & get high, & engage in a number of other sinful activities. It’s the same old trick of the devil that he has been using for thousands of years.

Now let’s see another surprising way Satan will attempt to corrupt us:

C. He Uses Religious Leaders – Yes, Satan even uses religious leaders to corrupt the people of God. Just because a man or woman wears a clerical collar, or has a seminary degree, does not

mean they are serving God. The apostle Paul said, “And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness...” (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Even so, in our story today Satan used the religious leaders of Baal to tempt the people to participate in idolatry, & other sins.

But I have someone else in mind. I’m talking about Balaam. We talked about him last week. At the end of chapter 24 we read that “Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place...” We might suppose that that would be the last we would hear of Balaam. It certainly should have been. But unfortunately it wasn’t. Though he is not mentioned in chapter 25, we know from other Scriptures that he was involved in the seduction of Israel. Look over in Numbers 31:16, “Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD.” There we see that what the women of Moab & Midian did was through the counsel of Balaam. You see, he was a greedy man & he sure wanted the rewards that king Balak was offering him. And so Balaam came up with a scheme that would accomplish what king Balak wanted. Though Balaam himself could not curse Israel, he came back to the king & suggested another way to bring a curse upon Israel. You see, sin brings a curse. So he suggested that they use Moabite women to seduce the Israelites into worshipping Baal, and it worked! So a so-called prophet of God became a tool of Satan to corrupt & destroy the people of God. He taught the Moabites that they should infiltrate Israel, and introduce idolatry to them to turn them away from God. Balaam knew that if he could get Israel to fellowship with godless people, they would be dragged into idolatry and fornication. As a result, Israel’s sins accomplished what all of Balaam’s enchantments could not do.

Do you realize that this same kind of thing was beginning to corrupt the early church? Jesus said in Revelation 2:14: “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.” Our Lord tells us in Revelation that the same doctrine of Balaam gets into the church, and is in the church today.

My viewpoint is that the enemy can’t hurt God’s people or God’s work or God’s church from the outside. The church has never been hurt from the outside. Read the book of Acts & church history and you will see that persecution from the outside has never really hurt the church. Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

So after 3 centuries of persecution, Satan tried a different strategy. Around the 4th century A.D. the Roman Empire befriended the church, and the world came into the church like a flood. Little by little the church became corrupted by prosperity and the infiltration of pagan religion.

Listen, the doctrine of Balaam is still a danger today. Satan still has his ministers who seek worldly wealth & approval, & who condone worldly & sinful behavior, at least by their silence. Jude warned of them when he said in Jude 1:11, “Woe to them! For they have ... run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit...” When there is a direct connection between the size of one’s ministry, & personal income, there is tremendous danger for corrupting the minister, who in turn will corrupt the people of God.

Now how can we protect ourselves from this effective strategy of Satan? Well notice with me another truth of our text:

II. WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

If we are going to avoid the temptations of the world, we need to keep in mind the fate of the fish that went for the bait. You see, there is a universal law of the universe. Every cause has an effect. Sin has consequences. You reap what you sow. So note the consequences of sin that we see here in our story today. First:

A. The Anger of the Lord Was Aroused –In v.3 we read, “So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.” I believe this was the anger of jealousy, & righteous indignation. You see, God declared Himself to be a jealous God when He gave His 10 Commandments. God has a rightful zeal to protect the exclusive intimacy of His relationship with us.

Men, women, wouldn't you be jealous if your spouse joined themselves to someone else?

Whenever we love sin or the things of the world, and ignore God, then you can be sure that the anger of the Lord will still be aroused. Even so, James warned in James 4:4, “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

B. Twenty-Four Thousand Died – In v.5 we read, “So Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor.’ In v.9 we see the result of that execution order, “And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.” The body count of 24,000, an average of 2,000 from each of the twelve tribes, is the highest ever suffered by the Israelites during their long and painful passage from Egypt to Canaan.

Here we see that sin leads to death. Sometimes sin can lead to an immediate death, as in this story. At other times sin will lead to an earlier death. Worst of all, if you don't receive forgiveness for your sins, it will lead to eternal death.

C. The Offenders Were to Be Exposed – Notice what the Lord said to Moses in v.4, “Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” Only the leaders of this spiritual rebellion were so punished. To “hang up” the men who had joined themselves to Baal-Peor “before the Lord out in the sun,” was for the purpose that the anger of God might turn away from Israel. In the instance before us, however, the idolaters were not impaled or crucified alive, but, as we may see from the Hebrew word, they were first of all put to death, and then impaled upon a stake or tree, so that the impaling was only an aggravation of the capital punishment, like the burning in Lev. 20:14 and the hanging in Deut. 21:22.¹ Those who had sinned openly were to be judged openly. It would serve as a visible & graphic warning to those who would be tempted to commit the same sin. After all, in the ancient Near East, it was an appalling disgrace to be denied a timely, decent burial (e.g., Isa. 14:19-20). This command of Moses to the judges was not carried out, however, because the matter took a different turn.

This form of justice foreshadowed what would happen to Christ. The Romans would hang the bodies of condemned men on crosses to bring shame upon them, & warn others not to violate Roman law. As a result, Jesus died shamefully upon a cross, which the apostles at times deliberately referred to as a “tree” (Acts 5:30; 10:39). Yet He did not sin. Why, then, did He experience the same kind of punishment that the Israelites had committed? Isa. 53 says, “He was wounded for our transgressions....” He bore the punishment that *our* sins deserve. Likewise, Gal. 3:13 says, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’).” What love, that He was willing to die such a death!

¹ Similar punishment for a similar reason appears in 2 Samuel 21: Seven of King Saul's male descendants were killed (v. 9) and their bodies left exposed (vv. 6, 9, 13) "before the Lord" (cf. v. 10).

III. WE NEED TO USE OUR SPIRITUAL DEFENSES

Yes, we are in a spiritual battle. Eph. 6:10 says, “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” So how can we defend ourselves against ungodly people, and even religious leaders, who want to corrupt us?

A. Practice Biblical Separation (read 2 Cor. 6:14-17) - The best protection against temptation is to avoid it, separate oneself from it. The doctrine of separation does not mean that we do not have any kind of contact with unbelievers. We are to be the salt of the earth, & the light of the world. Therefore, we must permeate society. But when unbelievers invite us to participate in something that would be an avenue of temptation, we must not go with them or participate in any way. Or if they invite us to participate in false religion, we must not go. You say, “Oh, but they will not like us. They may talk bad about us.” Also, Paul reflects back on this incident and writes in 1 Cor. 10:8, “Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day 23,000 fell.”² And so the doctrine of Balaam is to be rejected. Don’t let the devil & unbelievers bring us to defeat in the spiritual warfare of the kingdom of God verses the kingdom of darkness.

So you need to be very careful when it comes to allow ungodly influences into your life, your family, or your church.

B. Deal with Open Sin in the Church - Notice what v.6 says, “And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” Evidently God’s justice had already been executed on thousands, with the result that many were “weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” Yet in spite of that, one man brought a Midianite woman to his tent,³ right out in the open, in the sight of Moses & others.⁴ He was shameless in his pursuit of sin.

This shameless wickedness inflamed the zeal of Phinehas, & led to two more deaths. We read in vv.7-8, “Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body.” Since one javelin went through both of them, you can imagine what they were doing in the tent. He was committing adultery with her! The Lord highly commends Phinehas for his decisive action of defending the Lord’s honor at a national crisis of apostasy involving idolatry. As a result, God grants him a covenant of peace or well-being (v.12) and of eternal priesthood (v.13).

We do not live under a theocracy today, and we cannot even think of using the sword to execute judgment on God’s people who commit such sin. But the preachers & other leaders of the church today need to speak out when God’s people are repeating the same kinds of sins. And when rebuke fails to bring about repentance, we have a duty to deal more decisively with those who can negatively influence God’s people from within, as we see in 1 Cor. 5.

² The Apostle Paul deviates from the 24,000 of Numb. 25:9, probably from a traditional interpretation of the schools of the scribes, according to which a thousand were deducted from the twenty-four thousand who perished, as being the number of those who were hanged by the judges, so that only twenty-three thousand would be killed by the plague.

³ The term for "tent" in v.8 is not the usual word *'obel* but *qubbab*, which only appears here in the Hebrew Bible. A separate, special tents in the residential area is adequately explained by the fact that the Israelite man is the son of a tribal chief (25:14).

⁴ When it says he “presented to his brethren a Midianite woman,” that is rather strong language of the public nature of this event. As we see in 22:4, 7, the Midianites were allied with the Moabites against Israel.

Now what happens when sin is allowed to spread unchecked among God's people, or in a nation? Here we see an example of the fact that people become shameless in committing their sin. Do you realize how open & shameless people have become about sin right here in America? Homosexuality is openly paraded in some cities. There is no shame, but only the opposite. Immorality is openly displayed on movie screens, & even TV sets. Shame should be a hindrance to sin, but when it becomes common for people to sin openly, & without shame, then that society has become corrupt, and is ripe for judgment.

Conclusion: We also see in Scripture an example of the wages of unrighteousness. Sin brings consequences. If you want to avoid the terrible consequences of sin, you need God's help & forgiveness. For some of you, the starting place is to repent of your sin, trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, & receive forgiveness. Then, all of us should make a commitment to live the life of the righteous. We need to avoid temptation. Don't flirt with temptation. And when you are tempted, look for the exit that God will surely provide. Will you make the commitment to live the life of the righteous? If so, you will have the opportunity to do so publicly during the invitation time.

Sources: Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), originally published by 1721; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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