

11. Immorality on the Border (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 25, 31, Deut. 21:10–14, 1 Cor. 10:1–14, Rev. 2:14.

Quotes

- The essence of immorality is the tendency to make an exception of myself. *Jane Addams*
- Fear, conformity, immorality: these are heavy burdens. They drain us of creative energy. And when we are drained of creative energy, we do not create. We procreate, but we do not create. *David McCallum*
- Freedom's enemies are waste, lethargy, indifference, immorality, and the insidious attitude of something for nothing. *William Arthur Ward*
- What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like, and immorality is what they dislike. *Alfred North Whitehead*
- The essence of all immorality and sin is making ourselves the center around which we subordinate all interest. *Cecil J. Sharpe*

Questions

What is the real problem with immorality—especially when linked to religious worship? Why is this such a temptation? How does God avoid the reputation of being stern and arbitrary, a killjoy—a prude, even? Did the people give up these practices because they wanted to, or because they were forced to? What does this say to us?

Bible discussion

Since Balaam could not directly curse God's people, it seems that he was the one who suggested a different approach—to lead them into false worship. He was from Peor, and it was the Baal of Peor that was the object of this deceptive false worship. Once they'd gone down the path to sensual worship, it was easy enough to literally get into bed with the Midianites. "Local Moabite women... invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods, so the Israelites feasted with them and worshiped the gods of Moab" (Numbers 25:2, 3 NLT). The fertility aspects of this pagan worship often involved ritual sexual practices including relations with temple prostitutes.

That this was a deliberate attempt to trap and deceive is clear from verse 18: "they assaulted you with deceit and tricked you into worshiping Baal of Peor." (NLT). In Numbers 25 is the record of the follow-up: the revenge war against Midian for leading Israel into idolatry.

Comment

"If it feels good—do it!" And when you add in religion to the mix—to say that this is what God endorses—then this is a heady intoxicant indeed! "How can what feels so right be so wrong?" is the sentiment in much of popular culture—pop songs, movies, soap operas... Yet the truth is that sin kills, and it kills from within. As Jesus told his disciples, "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice,

deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” Mark 7:20-23 NIV.

We are wrong, or “unclean,” or unrighteous, not because of our outward appearance and observance of the law, but because of our rebellious internal condition. Sin is selfishness, it is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), it is loving ourselves more than loving God and His principles of truth and right.

We, like the Pharisees, can become fixated on making sure we don’t break the rules as the way of being good. But this attitude really gets in the way of what God wants to do. Striving for technical obedience while wanting to go your own way makes it hard for God to intervene and help. For the self-righteous see no need of any help. For, as Jesus said so pointedly to those who saw themselves as being righteous, he came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. The tragedy is that all of us are sinners, yet some do not recognize that fact.

God is not concerned with sin as an “offense” against Himself, but rather because he knows what sin will do—kill us. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and wants to save all his children. Of course, if we choose to go our own way in rejection of God, then our freedom-loving God will allow us our choice. But not before giving us warnings, revealing where our choice leads. When the end comes for his unrepentant rebellious children, they will die, and God will weep over each one that he loses.

God wants more than anything to remove our sinfulness. “He appeared so that he might take away our sins.” (1 John 3:5 NIV). As he dies, Jesus, who was made to be sin who knew no sin (see 2 Corinthians 5:21), is our healing, life-giving Saviour. Through the transforming power of God we are made new. So why should we want to go back to the life of sin and death? We are created anew. So why should we ever want to go back to a life of sin?

Ellen White Comments

The crime that brought the judgments of God upon Israel was that of licentiousness. The forwardness of women to entrap souls did not end at Baal-peor. Notwithstanding the punishment that followed the sinners in Israel, the same crime was repeated many times. Satan was most active in seeking to make Israel’s overthrow complete.

The licentious practice of the Hebrews accomplished for them that which all the warfare of nations and the enchantments of Balaam could not do. They became separated from their God. Their covering and protection were removed from them. God turned to be their enemy. So many of the princes and people were guilty of licentiousness that it became a national sin, for God was wroth with the whole congregation. Near the close of this earth’s history Satan will work with all his powers in the same manner and with the same temptations wherewith he tempted ancient Israel just before their entering the Land of Promise. He will lay snares for those who claim to keep the commandments of God, and who are almost on the borders of the heavenly Canaan. He will use his powers to their utmost in order to entrap souls and to take God’s professed people upon their weakest points. Those who have not brought the lower passions into subjection to the higher powers of their being, those who have allowed their minds to flow in a channel of carnal indulgence of the baser passions, Satan is determined to destroy with his temptations--to pollute their souls with licentiousness. {AH 326-7}

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