

# Phinehas - Priest of Obedience

by Art Katz

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*The sermon explores the biblical account of Phinehas as a model of obedience and zeal in the face of societal normalization of sin.*

**Duration:** 1:01:06

**Scripture:** Numbers 25:1-5, Psalm 106:24-25, Psalm 106:28-29

**Topics:** "Phinehas"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on a passage from the book of Numbers in the Bible. They raise questions about the conduct of Moses and the Israelites when they engaged in immoral practices with the Moabite women and their sacrifices. The speaker also highlights the commentary in the New Revised Standard version that describes the man and woman as married, rather than fornicating. They emphasize the importance of taking immediate action against evil and not allowing it to corrupt the moral life of a community. The sermon concludes with a prayer for deep instruction and guidance in facing similar challenges in the present age.

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## Transcript

Well, this is this week's U.S. News & World Report, an article by one of their staff on the right to be ordinary. It's called The Last Word, it's the last page in their magazine, and the ordinary that she's talking about are ordinary lesbians and gays, that they have a right, that lesbianism and homosexuality is ordinary, and it should not be treated or be observed in any way as being out of sync or evoking any kind of response than we would with someone who is a vegetarian or likes marbles or likes to play poker rather than go fishing, that it's as ordinary as any other aspect. So what are you making all the big deal about? And I hope to fit this into the context of Chapter 25 of Numbers, where Israel began to fornicate with the Moabite women.

But just to quote a few statements, the image of the gay community has changed to one of ordinary people searching for the ordinary ideal, commitment, love, privacy, work, family, people who, just like heterosexuals, are a good deal more than simply what they do in bed. In other words, what they do in bed, what form of sodomy they practice is really irrelevant. It's just their preference.

And like everybody else, they're ordinary. Except for that, they are ordinary, and they want the same kind of satisfaction and acknowledgement that anyone else does. So don't focus on them in any undue way, that they should be deprived of the right.

It's interesting, in the same magazine from England that describes the persecution of the church in Indonesia, is an article of two wealthy gay men who, through process of fertilization, some woman became a donor, the man summoned, she conceived twins. And the twins, one has gone to the one man, and went to another, both gays. And now they're taking these children, they are the parents, legally, into the church, the Anglican church, where they have been sprinkled, and baptized, and are going through the children's programs.

In other words, this abnormality is becoming ordinary, and they're being factored in to the same mode of life and religion as anyone else. And so don't make a fuss about it. So it became a stir in England, and the Anglican priests or pastors finally decided in favor of taking the children of these gay men in, as being legitimate and deserving the same acknowledgement as other children.

It opens up questions of an unusual kind, because formerly homosexuality was a closet thing that people hid. Now it's not only become open, but it's become brazen, and demands the same recognition and equality, more so than other lifestyles, that it's a normative lifestyle, it's just another preference. But it raises moral and ethical questions with which the world and the churches have not had to contend before.

What do you do with these who seek to be recognized as ordinary, who are practicing something that the Bible condemns as abomination? What do you do with their children? So she's going to bat for them. The old familiar sores about why discrimination, even revulsion and hatred are justified, had begun to fall away. What remains is largely inchoate or biblical.

You know, it helps to be literate. Inchoate, I-N-C-H-O-A-T-E, means a jumble of words and confusion. And she said, this opposition becomes inchoate, it's just a blah-blah, a verbal opposition, or it's biblical.

Here's, oh, you guys, watch this. This is an article in National Magazine, and now she's moving into an area where she's bringing in biblical opposition to homosexuality and linking it with other kinds of opposition that they call homophobic, a fear of homosexuality, that the thing that is extraordinary is not homosexuality, it's the reaction against it. That's the problem.

Homosexuality is ordinary. It's the reaction of this inchoate, verbal opposition, and that which is those who find their arguments out of the Bible, that is the problem. So this is going to begin to bring the church and the faith into an increasing place of censure, because it is the square peg in the round hole.

It is not going along with the trend. It lacks compassion. It is denying to these people an opportunity to be ordinary, because after all, they're searching for the ordinary ideal, commitment, love, privacy, work, and family that everybody else seeks.

So why make them an exception? Because you have a biblical perspective that is inchoate, that is a jumble of confused position. Then she writes in parenthesis, Notice the interested parties, colon. I already have that verse from Leviticus, have received it many times, don't send it again.

The best response to all that suspiciously selective scripture is a goof letter to Dr. Laura Schlesinger making the rounds on internet. Laura Schlesinger is a Jewish woman who is unsaved but moral and believes in the Ten Commandments and in the Old Testament. And she's a popular talk show person and speaks against homosexuality and evil and directs people to righteousness according to the word from a Jewish perspective, not a believing perspective.

So someone has, she of course has occasion, many of her sponsors have dropped her because of the protest that has been engineered by groups that oppose this woman. So she's in a lonely place and someone on the internet has circulated this kind of thing that this woman in the article is now going to report. But first she said, don't bother me with Leviticus.

I've got that already. You said that to me before. Don't tell me that it's an abomination.

I've read that. So someone has pricked this Dr. Laura Schlesinger with these kinds of questions. Leviticus 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us.

A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans but not to Canadians. Can you clarify? You understand what this is? This is an internet thing circulating as a wise-alecky reprimand to this Laura Schlesinger who's quoting from scripture. Oh, are you quoting from scripture? Homosexuality is an abomination? Well, how about slavery? The Old Testament condones slavery and you can make slaves of surrounding nations.

Well, can we choose Mexicans and ignore Canadians? It's a wise-alecky retort but it's sinister. That's why I'm taking the pains to read this. This is like something at the beginning, inchoate.

It's having its early formation but this is going to increase. You know how the Jews were put into ovens? Because 10 years or 12 years earlier in the newspapers as Hitler was first coming to power there were cartoons showing Jews with beaked noses and victimizing blonde Aryan women or carrying money bags with dollar signs on it or Deutschmark signs. There was already a slow, subtle and insidious campaign to deprecate or to dishonor or to raise questions about Jews.

It began through cartoons, through a reference in the editorial column to something like this that is now being directed against the church was then directed against Jews but 10 years after that those who were first held up to ridicule became objects to put into gas ovens. It's the exact same process that begins first with wise-alecky allusions and incriminating and suggestive digs and finally becomes to a place where society is itself willing to condone the annihilation of that same people. We stand in a place now as the church very much like the place that Jews occupied in Germany in about 1932 and the gas ovens opened up within a decade of that.

It doesn't take long to begin to poison and to corrupt and to infiltrate a national consciousness where you begin to look at the people who are being ridiculed as not only just an object of humor but then scorn, then repulsion, then rejection, then annihilation. We should have learned from that. Maybe this is what the Lord is wanting.

How is this persecution of the church going to come? Where we will be wholesale butchered as they are now in Indonesia and saints will not be safe in any place by the insidious corruption of the public mind that is already taking place not in some sleazy magazine but U.S. News & World Report, probably the most respectable of magazines owned by a Jew. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states that he should be put to death.

Am I morally obligated to kill him myself? A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination, according to Leviticus 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this? So this is wise-alecky, impertinent uses of Old Testament scripture that have no validity now that were God's governance of a theocratic society to say, well, how can you pull from those

scriptures a condemnation of homosexuality when we no longer practice slavery and no longer do this and no longer kill for violating the Sabbath? Don't give us this inchoate biblical arguments of a people who just want to be treated as ordinary.

But if they're treated as ordinary and their life preference is not a sin but another ordinary alternative, what we do is to lose the whole moral issue of righteousness in the world. It becomes a banality. It becomes the banality of evil so that Eichmann, when he comes to trial, I didn't do anything wrong.

I was just following orders. Evil had become a commonplace and this is the way it takes place. By blunting the word of God so that we no longer are grieved or affected, it becomes ordinary.

According to the same magazine I received yesterday, they assessed that 10% of the English population is already homosexual. How they came to such a statistic, I don't know. It was a survey and a study made by some pro-homosexual sociological organization.

So now 10% of all TV programs, radio programs, news articles have to have homosexual characters in the soap operas, in the dramas, on the talk shows. If they're 10% in the population, they deserve a one-tenth representation in all aspects of British culture in the schools, in the classroom, in teachers, in places of society. They should not be discriminated against.

So let me just finish this. If there are good laughs, can full equality be far behind? In other words, this is a laughing matter. To quote the scriptures is a good laugh.

Sure there is still plenty of prejudice, even the civil unions in Vermont are only a second-rate kind of marriage. There are still too many gay bias murders, too many committed by young men who feel threatened by the very notion of homosexuality. That's one of the saddest things about the decision of Boy Scouts that sends a clear message to those who most need to learn tolerance that homophobia is acceptable, natural, even praiseworthy.

You know the whole issue with the Boy Scout movement? It reached the Supreme Court. Do the Boy Scouts have the right to prohibit homosexual Boy Scout leaders? And the Supreme Court decided in favor of their organization. That is contrary to what that organization represents.

So she's saying that's a setback, that it teaches the Boy Scouts that it is justifiable in being prejudiced against gay Boy Scout leaders when they should be learning equality. And then what about the President of the United States? Because he's automatically made the honorary head of the Boy Scouts of America. Will you refuse the job in light of the organization's exclusion of gay men? It's almost tangible the ways in which ordinary people who happen to be gay have become unremarkable.

This summer the attention of the entire nation focused on a game show whose desert island participants needed to be physically competent and hugely canny or wise. The guy who won Survivor was a gay man. His sexuality was a subordinate clause.

He was swamped with endorsement offers and interview requests. And now he is one of those milk ads. Big deal.

Ho hum. Yawn. In other words, even a homosexual has won the most prized Survivor thing on TV.

I don't even know what that is. And so what are you making a big issue about? These are ordinary people and why should they suffer any kind of discrimination when the only thing that distinguishes them and what they are is a good deal more than simply what they do in bed. I don't know if you are affected by this as I am, but this is sinister.

The subtlety of this article, the playing down of the moral issue that has its foundation in the word of God as being laughable and the use of the word ordinary, that these are ordinary people, that we ought to look upon them as vegetarians or anyone else who has a little different point in lifestyle. There is a whole blunting of the issue of evil and it makes evil banal. And that prepares the way for the elimination of those who oppose what is ordinary and still have their strange biblically centered ridiculous and laughable view because the Bible condones slavery.

So what are you going to do? Are you going to kill somebody if they violate the Sabbath? The Bible says you should do it. See how the whole faith is coming itself under greater condemnation than homosexuality. Okay, now to Numbers chapter 25 because here is an episode in the life of Israel where evil became ordinary.

It became banal and God then was required to act with severity even to bring a plague upon the people that was stopped only by one man's righteous indignation at the violation of God's honor. Not Moses but the son of a priest who observed the Israelite bringing the Midianite woman into his tent and fornicating with her before the whole of the camp of Israel. In other words, the practice of Israelites fornicating with Moabite women was already such a commonplace had already become so ordinary that this man now took it one step further and brought it right into the camp of God itself.

And that's where the action takes place. But reading from the beginning of chapter 25, while Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These women invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

It doesn't have an echo of Adam and Eve who ate. They found something that was attractive, they were induced or seduced, they ate. But what did they eat? They ate that which was sacrificed to pagan gods, which is to say like taking an unholy communion that celebrates another deity.

It bonds you to that god. And this is Israel, the chosen people that are called to sanctify the name of God. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor.

Baal is the pagan god. And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel. The Lord said to Moses, take all the chiefs of the people and impale them in the sun before the Lord in order that the fierce anger of the Lord might turn away from Israel.

And Moses said to the judges of Israel, each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, into his tent in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The commentary says they were weeping because the plague had already begun.

They were weeping and agonizing before God that it might be stayed. And while they were weeping for the plague that had already come by the fornication outside the camp, this man comes into the camp with the very act. When Phineas, son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, the priest, saw it, he got up and left the

congregation taking a spear in his hand.

He went after the Israelite man into the tent and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless, those that died by the plague were 24,000.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Phineas, son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore, I say, I hereby grant him my covenant of peace that shall be for him and for his descendants after him, a covenant of perpetual priesthood because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Israelites. The name of the slain Israelite man who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri, son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites.

The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cosby, daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian. The Lord said to Moses, harass the Midianites and defeat them for they have harassed you by the trickery which they have deceived you in the affair of Peor and in the affair of Cosby, the daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister. She was killed on the day of the plague that resulted from Peor.

So what do you think of this episode? Again, it's as compact as the scriptures always are. I don't know how long they were encamped in that place, but anything that strikes you as odd, anything that catches your attention in this text, any question that it raises for you, as, for example, the conduct of Moses? Where was Moses when Israel was fornicating with the Moabite women and eating their sacrifices and bonding themselves to that God? How long was that practice going on before this Israelite came into the camp with this woman? And when he did come in, why was it not Moses who took the direct action? Why was it someone who was not even authorized, who took it upon himself not to delay a moment and to root the cancer out? He rose up and took the spear and did it. And that this was pleasing in God's sight is shown by the blessing of covenant that God makes with this one man and his descendants thereafter throughout all their posterity a special covenant of peace because he stayed the plague by directly taking the action in zeal for my sake.

The question is why didn't Moses take the action? Why didn't Moses authorize the action? Why didn't this son of the priest ask Moses if he might do this without even a moment's hesitation? He acts. And look at this. We're talking about Moses the servant of God the prophet and leader.

The Lord said to Moses in verse 4 take all the chiefs of the people and impale them in the sun before the Lord in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel. And Moses said to the judges of Israel which are the chiefs of the people each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the bail of Peor. Is there anything unusual about this you Bible scholars? What did God say? What did Moses do? God said impale them.

I've never heard of anything more fierce that God had ever required of a man in a place of leadership. Take the leaders of Israel. Why? Because they are responsible for the conduct of their houses.

This thing of Israelites fornicating with Moabites and eating their sacrifice and being bonded to their God is the responsibility of men who are in authority over them. The leaders of the people, the chiefs of the people, the judges of Israel have failed in their own oversight in allowing this condition to prevail. Now impale them in the sun.

Make them a public scandal. This is their reward. God's anger is now being expressed.

He's held it till now. Now this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. But what does Moses in fact do when God explicitly tells him to do that? He does not do what he's told to do.

But he acts at a lesser level. He makes a requirement, but not that which God called for. He says to these same men whom God asked him to kill and publicly exhibit, you, he said, now take those that you know are fornicating and you slay them.

Well, it's probably better than nothing. Maybe it's something that should have been done earlier. Or the warning or the threat of such a requirement should have been expressed by the man who had the authority over the entire people Israel.

But now in a late moment, too late, because now the fornication is actually coming into the camp. He's requiring something that should have been required before or threatened before. But the point is that what he's requiring, however severe, is less than and other than what God has required him to do.

In a word, Moses is defecting against the authority of God. And I wonder if that's why the people took the liberty to do what they did because the authority of Moses had declined in such a way that they were not in fear of that authority or what could be invoked by it. That there was a loss of authority over a process of time that results in Moses subverting or sublimating God's fierce requirement to something less and other than what God is actually speaking.

I'm stunned to see this in Moses. And that when the plague is stopped, it's not stopped by Moses' action. Well, Moses' requirement is by a man who acts independent of Moses because there's something in his priestly heart that cannot countenance this insult against God right in the camp.

Why didn't he turn to Moses and say, should I go and pierce them through? Maybe because he himself recognized by that time that the authority of Moses had so waned and had so been eclipsed that he didn't wait to consult with him, but a direct action was required. He was going to perform it in the name of the Lord, and he did. And God blessed and honored it.

This is a remarkable episode. And if Moses can fall away from the authority of God and mediate what God had required to be something less and not as demanding, who of us is safe? Who of us is walking with uttermost fidelity with God that whatever he says, we do? I remember years ago, Paul and Adrian, I gave Paul a book on biblical child-rearing because at that time his daughter was already problematical and they were already very indulgent parents. He gave it back to me a couple weeks later.

I said, what do you think? He said, it's too hard. I said, but it's biblical. Yeah, but it's too hard.

So he never did it. Now, 16 years later, they have a problem child. So what I'm trying to get at is the failure to be under the authority of God and his word means a loss in the authority that we have to exert, which means a loss to the authority that the body of the church should exert.

But this is a remarkable thing that took place in their wilderness. Why Moses did not act earlier is a remarkable question. Why did he allow a practice to continue that finally had its culmination in the effrontery of bringing the woman right into the camp and right into the tent before a weeping Israel and that when he puts them a spear through them they were in the act of fornication for one spear thrust got them both.

Not a moment's hesitation to go in publicly and to perform this shameful thing before the face of Moses and before the whole people of Israel shows to what degree the authority of Moses and the fear of God with that had fallen. For if the visible authority of the man declines what suffers with it is the authority of God the name of God the honor of God and that's why God honors Phineas for the zeal for my name. Do you think it's an accident that it's not just an ordinary Israelite but the head of a clan one of the leaders from a famous household of the Simeonites and that the woman herself is comparably from a high class family of the Moabites that both of these are not just ordinary rank and file people but distinguished people.

The point that I'm making about that is that the priest I keep forgetting his name Phineas did not give a rap who it was. He did not in any way equivocate or hold back whether they were probably he knew who that man was and he knew that he was a leader of a family clan but he performed the righteous judgment of God. Now in the commentary in my Bible here the commentator raises the question why wasn't Moses more firm about fornication with Moabite women? Was it because he himself was married to a Midianite that had arrived from the same stock? That he somehow was compromised by his own condescension to marrying outside of Israel and therefore could not require of Israel what he could not require for himself.

This is exactly what is happening today in society. Judges are giving lenient sentences or dismissing cases or brushing them off because they themselves are involved in compromising moral conditions that prevents them from judging others because to judge others would be to judge themselves. They're in a place of compromise and so the commentator here is suggesting the reason that Moses could not be decisive is because his own life was basically compromised and how could he require of others what he was not able to require of himself? That the only way that Phineas could act as decisively as he did was because he had no vested thing to preserve.

He was not compromised. He could act with single-eyed obedience to God the moment that he saw this violation against God's name. There was something greater than his life and that something greater was God's name and God's honor that could not be violated in the camp of Israel.

But somehow Moses was not in that condition. I wonder if those that were weeping in the camp by the tenth of the meeting were not just weeping for the unhappy condition of Israel's people and their moral failure but for the failure of Moses, the failure of authority, Moses becoming slack, unable to judge, unable to require, and even now unable to fulfill the requirement of God that they're weeping not only for the effect on the sin but the leader who's complicit, he's involved. When God says impale all the chiefs of Israel there's no exception.

They are all somehow responsible for all the nation. There's a corporate responsibility and Moses, the responsibility of Moses is the greater. You're wondering how did this begin? Why didn't Moses nip it in the bud? Didn't he realize that as long as they were encamped on that Midianite territory there was going to be the risk of alignment, of collusion with these attractive women that they would little by little bring these men into their camp, show them a more attractive lifestyle, living a high kind of culture and then inducing them to eat of their sacrifices and of course and to fornicate with them.

Why wasn't it nipped in the bud? Why wasn't the warning announced? Why wasn't there a more severe watch care from the very inception? Because once you let that slip at its commencement it has a life of its own until it becomes so formidable that it becomes uncorrectable. You've lost the authority that could bring correction and in fact you're not even able to obey God in the fullness that he now requires and someone

else is required to act and perform what should have been your duty. So I want to learn the lessons of this in an age of moral compromise but those in authority have the greater responsibility and that's why God could command Moses hang them, impale them.

They have failed in their watch care over their own families and tribes and clans. It's interesting that there's not a word of reproach for Moses himself. To modify a requirement of God is a disobedience.

I'd like to register that point. God said impale them and he said to the same men whom God was judging now you take and kill those who have fornicated with these women. It was a modification of God's requirement.

It seems to be a response to God but it's not an obedience to God. It's a modification and that I think is where we lose ground. It's not that we're totally disobedient that we don't in some measure seek to be responsive but we modify the more radical requirements of God and make it suitable and acceptable to those with whom we have to do it to ourselves.

What I'm saying here is modification is rebellion. To modify God is as much an insult to God as to disobey Him. I think that that practice is wide particularly in our family life.

God says don't withhold the rod. Well we withhold it or we find ways to justify it or they're too young yet or they'll not understand. I don't know what you know better than me but I believe that this kind of modification of the stringent requirement of God is a form of rebellion.

And a defiance of the authority of God. And we will pay the price of it and are paying the price of it as these children grow older if we have not been obedient to the stringent requirement as it is stated. So modification is man standing over what God has said in order to make it a little bit more acceptable to himself and to others but it's not a right that is our privilege.

Who are we modifying? Are we saying God is too severe? I don't like this idea of impaling men publicly in the sun. I don't know how I would have myself have obeyed that but whatever the requirement what our response to be. Moses was incapable of being that stringent.

And the that's exactly why Israel had fallen into the sin because he was incapable from the first of nipping this thing in the bud. Maybe he was already modifying. Maybe he was already making excuses.

Maybe he was saying well these people will know better. They will not go that far. I don't know what.

But when the chapter opens the evil is full blown and we know that it doesn't begin that way. It begins in a small condescension and then it becomes larger. It begins with cartoons and wise alecky editorials against Jews and it ends up ten years later putting them into ovens.

It begins with an article like this about homosexuals being ordinary and you shouldn't in any way censure them because you have a biblical view to the point where you who have the biblical view are more dangerous to society than the sodomites. Something obedience has got to be incisive and the example of that is Phineas himself. His act was incisive.

He saw the evil. It should not be tolerated a moment. He rose up and acted and my question is if we are given to condescensions and to compromise and modifications when a moment of obedience to God is required are we capable of performing it? Can we rise up? Moses himself did not rise up.

He did not rise up but another young man was yet able. These are remarkable implications from the history of Israel that I think will be appropriate for us as we are coming into a moral age now where fornication and compromise are becoming the spirit of our time. We are still enjoying this remarkable supernatural manifestation of God.

It is not as if he has faded from the scene. He is the man who is there visibly and supernaturally and yet in the face of that while the cloud of glory is over the tabernacle this man could come in to the tents of Israel and perform this fornication. If a man is capable of that in the face of the supernatural reality of God of what are we capable when we don't have that kind of visible testimony before us? And you know when you take your liberty and you wait to see if lightning is going to come down and strike you and it doesn't, hey this isn't so bad after all.

And the second time is even less bad. And the third time and the fourth until you are in to the very evil that God condemns. It is interesting that in the commentary in this new revised standard version it has three theologians, two of them are women.

And the word that they used to describe the man and the woman fornicating is that they were married. The commentary says they were married. Not that they are fornicating but that they are married.

This isn't the text, this is the commentary. So what I'm saying is that even the commentator in the use of her own word is placating or modifying what in fact is taking place. It's not a marriage that's taking place, it's a fornication of the very thing about which God warned that they should not do with the people of the land or you'll be eating their sacrifices and you'll be obeying their gods. But in using the word marry it makes it a more ordinary thing rather than a blatantly sinful thing.

You don't thrust the spear through a married couple. You can thrust the spear through a fornicating Israelite with a pagan woman. So even the way in which this is commented upon in my version shows already a kind of soft view.

Am I making a big deal out of the use of the word marry? Let me just read you the statement. Moses could hardly punish an Israelite man for marrying a Midianite woman when he had done so himself. She's looking upon their fornication as being a legitimate expression of marriage.

Where in the text is that ever indicated and where is it ever indicated that a marriage is even valid between an Israelite and a woman of the land? And so in the end Israel if this had been totally destroyed if this plague had not been stopped and even with the plague stopped a corruption is set in that finally will require the death of an entire generation whose bodies will be left behind as carcasses in the wilderness. The people whom God had chosen for himself to be a testimony to the nations have lost their distinctive. They are not a holy people unto me.

They have not set forth the benefit the blessing of obeying my commandments and my ordinances. They have done their own thing and the failure is from the leadership from the top right to the bottom except for one man yet able to act and to act decisively in the moment. If this could happen to Israel in the presence of God's column of fire and smoke in the day of what are we not capable as the church and in fact are already performing by modification by loss of authority and by the loss of the character of God in the church and the loss of his name his honor.

And that's why I think our praises are so weak. How can we praise? We're not in that place of righteousness. Phineas was a priest and I would think that his praise would be as clear and as sterling as his action.

He was not blunted in any spiritual way. He's a man of action, a man of praise. And somehow the two things go together.

If we're unable to raise a clear voice before God, I'm wondering if there's been a modification, an erosion, a loss of integrity and righteousness in moving away from the requirements of God and making our own adjustments that are somehow acceptable and workable. It's a process. This didn't happen in a day that Moses allowed the process.

Maybe it goes back to the fact that he was already himself compromised in his own life personally and therefore could not bring himself to be stringent with the people. His being kept out of the land, the penalty of dying on the other side of Jordan, I know was for his intemperate speech in Hitting the Rock, but how much is that related to already a flaw or defect of character that we're seeing here? I've seen this manifestation in parents with children where they're slack, indulgent, let the kids get away, and finally something builds up and some lesser thing triggers them and they react against the kid with a great anger and violence that is the sum of previous things that should have been attended. So there's that same phenomenon.

So this requires a diligence. If authority is to be authority, with the children, in the family, in the fellowship, it needs to be a careful diligence over everything. In the moment that it is required, we need to rise up and take the spear.

I'll put it another way, rise up so that we don't have to take a spear, that it's something to be dealt with at its inception that doesn't require so severe an act later because it had been too long an allowance. But the ability to rise up, to be pricked, to see an evil that needs to be attended now is a priestly thing. And if we have a compromising thing that blunts us from it, it becomes ordinary, or we don't want to create an issue, or we know it's going to be a troublesome thing and let it pass, there's an erosion of authority that later on will take its full toll.

There's got to be a moment-by-moment diligence. I'm so jealous over this whole area of authority that if a Moses can fail in it, who then of us is safe? Not to be deferred because the people that were required to judge are people who are heads of clans or have a distinguished family or that we will be, what's the word, partial. There may be some Joe Blow we can deal with, but this one, we defer to men according to their rank, their position, their name.

But I think that's why God indicates in the text that both the Hebrew and the Midianite women were of a distinguished identification, but that in no way for one moment deterred Phineas from exercising judgment. But it may have deterred others, and it does deter us. We are partial.

We're more prone to be severe with one and more condescending with another. But the righteousness of God ignores qualification of title, office, or honor. It acts because the name of God and the honor of God is greater than the issue of any distinction that men have in themselves.

And it may be that Moses' fear of man and his unwillingness to judge the leaders and the judges of Israel is already this condescension to men in authority because you don't have, as Phineas had, the glory of

God in his name and honor as foremost. And if Moses could fail in that, it makes me to fear for myself and for any of us who are in places of responsibility. And if you notice the way in which I dealt with that guy who came in with his bare feet, one of the slimiest, degenerate, reprobate characters, not for a moment would I allow him to remain.

The moment I spotted him, I went right, took him almost by the outside and yet he had the audacity to come in again at a later time when I was not there. But there's a decisiveness that is required. In the moment in which you recognize something to be evil, that is countenancing God, that is working against his name and his honor, if we're not decisive in that moment, it's already an erosion, it's already a modification.

There's an immediate rising up that's required. Not only for our actions toward others who are violating, but our violations of ourselves. We need to be as ruthless and as instant in our own condescensions and transgressions as we would be in finding and dealing with those that are outside of us.

And this is what a priest is. He's as careful for himself as he is for others. It doesn't say anything about the life of Phineas, but I can imagine that he was as concerned for his own walk with God and maintained it and for that reason was very alive in the moment through any violation of God's name or none.

Like this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. What? Into the camp itself of God in his name and in the very site of the pillar of his glory? No way. I don't care whether I'm misunderstood, whether it cost me my life.

This is an action that must be taken. And praise God that stopped the plague. This is what it's going to take, especially when already the atmosphere is being created that if you're indignant about unrighteousness or you have a sense of morality that's biblical, you're going to be the offense.

And to be public about that is going to bring upon your head a great reproach. Better to keep quiet, lay low, and not be the one who takes the spear. Very unusual to have a single out of man and his descendants for an eternal recognition on the basis of one single act.

But what should we learn from that? That that one single act was so dear in God's sight that he made this recognition. May it be as dear in our sight because we're going to be required to act like that as evil is going to multiply, not only in the world but in the church. To recognize and to be incisive in our identification of it and giving the attention to it that it deserves.

Whether understood or it offends or doesn't offend, there's a greater thing at stake here than offense. It's the name and honor of God and his authority and his kingdom. So all the descendants of Phineas who have this kind of priestly jealous heart also come under that covenantal blessing.

Well, just because our time is up, just to look quickly at Psalm 106, which is where I was stirred to go back to numbers because it's a history of Israel's failure in the wilderness and verse 24 says, then they despised the pleasant land having no faith in his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the voice of the Lord. Therefore he raised his hand and swore to them that he would make them fall in the wilderness and would disperse their descendants among the nations scattering them over the lands.

Then they attached themselves to the bale of Pagor and made sacrifices offered to the dead. They provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds and plague broke out among them. Then Phineas stood up and interceded and the plague was stopped and that has been reckoned to him as righteousness from

generation to generation forever.

Well, just this one observation, maybe this deserves a message in itself, but just to say that the issue goes back to their not obeying the voice of the Lord earlier and that the consequence of that was a judgment warned that they would make them fall in the wilderness and the falling in the wilderness was the sexual promiscuity and moral collapse with the daughters and sons of the Midianites. So what I'm saying is that that moral failure is not the cause but the effect. This is how they failed in the wilderness, that God said you will fall in the wilderness, but the issue is an earlier sin of failing to obey.

It was a disobedience against authority that was the cause and the effect is the moral thing that brings their downfall in the wilderness. That is to say that homosexuality is not the cause, but it may well be a disobedience against God and a vile rejection of him that makes this perversity the judgment of an already existing sin. See what I mean? It's another way of viewing divine causation.

We think that the evil is the sinful promiscuity in the wilderness. No, that's already the effect of an earlier thing that is the heart of the sin, the failure to obey God. I wrote here it's a contempt for the being of God himself and the awe and adoration which is his due.

That the decline of obedience is the statement of a collapse of respect for authority, for God, for honor, for awe, for reverence. And this is why he said this people must fall, their carcasses must fall in the wilderness. They despise the Pleasant One having no faith in his promise.

What a disrespect. But it's the same disrespect that allows a man to bring the Midianite woman right into the camp and to fornicate with her straight away. It's a disrespect to God that has had a long history and the last expression of which is this uttermost act that is vile before the face of Moses and all the people.

This is what God is judging. And this is what we need to recognize in our modification of the stringent things that God requires. It comes out of a failure to give God the respect and the awe and the reverence that it is due.

To modify God means to have a lesser view of God than what he in fact deserves. Can we see that? I'm trying to just peel this back by layer to get at the root of what it is that offended God and made their fall in the wilderness inevitable. Their moral fall was already the consequence of a judgment for failing to obey, failing to believe, failing to reverence God as God.

But the priest that stood up for that very reason in the honoring of God. So this is the thing over which we need to be jealous. It's the disrespect that assumes that God does not see, does not observe, is not aware that we can take these liberties right in front of his face as if he's not seeing, as if in fact he's not a God to see, and that we can enjoy this without any fear of repercussion or consequence as if he's not a God who's going to act.

In a word, it's the most vile rejection of God as God. It's a basic profound disrespect. That's why lying is cited so frequently in the Bible, as I've said many times in Proverbs, more than other forms of sin, because as if God is not hearing that, as if you could have the audacity to say that with your face sticking out, knowing it's a patent lie, and you can pull it off with your parents and with others, but is God not hearing it? Is he not a God who is all seeing, all hearing, all knowing, or he's not God? We have come to such a place of disrespect that we can calculatigly act as if God is not God, and that's what he judges.

That's what they did. That's what Moses allowed himself to fall into, that even when God says, impale these men, these chiefs, these leaders, well, he talks to them and says, now you go and kill those from your own clans that have fornicating with these men. God didn't say that.

Moses said that. He modified God's radical stringent requirement because he couldn't bring himself to a total obedience to the authority of God. But it wasn't just in that moment that he had failed.

His previous failures made room for that one. I'd like to end with this thought. Jesus was tempted in every point like his way and yet he said to his accusers, which of you can convict me of sin? There's one impeccable son that was infinite all the days of his life in impeccable fidelity and obedience to the Father.

There were very few messages that I've heard that have put me on my face before God. But one time Morris Sorillo preached a message in San Diego and he went down the whole list. He went from Abraham through all of the patriarchs including Moses and he showed in every case failure, fallenness, lack of obedience, compromise.

There wasn't one that stood. I went down on my face because after that roll call of giants, where do I come in? I shared their guilt. A young believer, I went down, I dissolved in tears.

There's only one righteous son. I appreciate his righteousness all the more. That charged with yet greater responsibilities than Moses never once faltered or failed.

He has become our righteousness. We can find refuge in him and in his name. Where others have failed, even in the sight of God's cloud of glory, we without that ability can remain steadfast because in him we never failed.

And his righteousness himself. Thank you, Lord. Oh, precious God.

Thank you for such a text, such an episode. This isn't a little make-believe. This isn't a little scenario plot that some man wrote.

This happened in the life of Israel. This happened to Moses. This happened to the chiefs of Israel and the rulers and the judges of Israel.

They were all compromised. They all should have been skewered on a stake. And they all allowed the degeneration and the collapse of Israel's whole moral life and it didn't take place overnight.

It took place over a process of time. But where was that those that would rise up at the beginning, at the inception who were charged with the responsibility to nip it in the bud before the whole people were corrupted and plagues had already begun. So, Lord, we're asking deep instruction, my God, for we are moving into an age of comparable evil and the Midianites are out there.

They want us to eat from their sacrifices and to be bonded to their God and they'll attract us and draw us off with their women and with seduction, with sexual promiscuity, with all the kinds of things, my God, against which we should be alerted and be held steadfast by those who are in authority and have the responsibility to see and to speak and to require those things. But, Lord, we have to say we are people who modify and we tone down and we avoid the more radical requirement and it's costing us. And so I ask, Lord, in the places that we occupy of responsibility as husbands, fathers, elders, leaders in the fellowship, in the church, that you would awaken us, my God, to it.

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