

When Zimri Strolls – Numbers 25:1-15

I. INTRODUCTION – [Read vs. 1-3]

A. ODD

1. Psychologists have classified a new disease among children – “Oppositional Defiant Disorder” or “ODD” for short. ^[1]
 2. Some of the symptoms are . . .
 - requent temper tantrums
 - xcessive arguing with adults
 - Deliberate attempts to annoy people
 - Active defiance and refusal to comply with the direction of adults
 - eing touchy and easily annoyed
 3. It’s estimated that as many as 15% of school age children are ODD - I mean, *have* ODD
 4. Before the psychologists elevated this kind of behavior to the level of a disease, we had another name for it. It wasn’t O-D-D, it was B-R-A-T!
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B. All of Us

1. Oppositional Defiant Disorder - while there may be 15% of kids who exhibit this kind of defiance, the fact is, *all of us* have within us a *kind* of ODD, an “oddness” in some area of our lives that rises up to defy our progress in holiness.
2. It’s a struggle we’ve dealt with for a long time, a stubborn sin we keep stumbling in.
3. This passage from Numbers 25 gives us a wonderful lesson in how to overcome in the battle with entrenched sin.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-5

¹Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. ²They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.

1. This takes place after the 40 years Israel spent going in circles in the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula.
2. They are now ready to enter the Promised Land.
 - a. the entire generation of adults who had left Egypt has died off.
 - b. a new generation has risen who’d been *born free*; raised in the harsh conditions of the desert.
 - c. they were a tough lot and ready to go into Canaan to take possession of that which their parents had been too timid and fearful to lay hold of.
3. They were camped on the eastern side of the Jordan River, on the northern border of the region of Moab.

4. This is where the story gets interesting. You see, the King of Moab, a guy named Balak knew about Israel and was scared to death!
 - a. he'd heard how 40 years before, the God of Israel had brought low the mighty Egyptians in the plagues & at the Red Sea.
 - b. more recently he'd received reports of their conquest of two kingdoms just north of him.
 - c. as he sees Israel now camped on his northern border, he concludes Moab must be the next region they intend on attacking.
 - d. so Balak sent for a well-known prophet named Balaam.
 - 1) Balak thought Balaam could put a hex, a curse on Israel.
 - 2) now, we don't know much about Balaam's background, how he came to gain the reputation as a prophet, but chs. 22-24 show us God *did* use him in that role.
 - 3) he tried his best to convince King Balak that he had no power to curse the people of Israel.
 - 4) as a prophet, all he could do was speak forth the mind and word of God. He couldn't tell God what to do – only make known what God *would do*.
 - 5) well, Balak was slow catching on & 3 times took Balaam to a lofty vantage point overlooking the camp of Israel so he could put a curse on them.
 - 6) all 3 times, Balaam could only speak forth blessing because that was God's intention toward Israel.
5. The last verse of ch. 24 makes it look like that's the end of the story, but it wasn't.
6. Balaam was a *greedy* man who lusted after the hefty reward Balak was offering him if he would just do the job he'd been hired for – to bring a curse on Israel.
 - a. it's in the NT that we find some additional information about Balaam.
 - b. in 2 Peter 2:15 Peter reveals the motivation of false teachers & prophets when he says . . .

They have forsaken the right way & gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.
 - c. greed moved Balaam to give Balak a little piece of advice.
 - d. he knew Israel's blessing by God was dependent on her *obedience* to Him. To be blessed, she needed to *abide in the place of blessing*.
 - e. if Israel *strayed* into disobedience, then God's judgment would fall.
 - f. while no one could curse the people of God *directly* they would curse *themselves* through disobedience.
 - g. so Balaam counseled King Balak on how to encourage Israel's slide into rebellion.
 - h. what he counseled is spelled out in Rev. 2:14 where Jesus says to the church at Pergamos . . .

I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine [teaching] of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, & to commit sexual immorality.

7. Balaam's strategy was this – he told Balak to gather the prettiest women of Moab along with their allies the Midianites & have them enter the camp of Israel to seduce the men.
8. Once the men were hooked, the women would then suggest they join them in the worship of Baal, a ritual which was both sensual & immoral.
9. Balaam knew when the people of Israel began to practice idolatry, God's judgment would be swift.
10. The plan worked as we see here in v. 3.
 - a. God's anger was stirred against the people, manifest as a plague.
 - b. with this judgment, God gave to Moses a means by which it could be stayed

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4Then the LORD said to Moses, "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." **5**So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor."

11. God told Moses to instruct the leaders of the nation to immediately execute everyone who'd committed idolatry.
12. As we read on, we find the leaders were *reluctant* to carry out these instructions.
13. Because of that, a terrible thing happened.

B. Vs. 6, 14-15

6And 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.

1. There was a group of people who were crushed with grief over what was happening.
 - a. they knew the plague that was killing hundreds was the judgment of God.
 - b. they were broken over the sin the idolaters were committing and how their sin was harming others.
 - c. so they gathered at the tabernacle to repent and pray, seeking God for forgiveness.
 - d. these were genuine tears of conviction and repentance.
2. But right in the middle of their time of corporate repentance, a guy came strolling by holding the hand of one of the Midianite hussies.
3. Look on down to v. 14 –

14Now the name of the Israelite who was killed, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father's house among the Simeonites. **15**And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi the daughter of Zur; he was head of the people of a father's house in Midian.

- a. the man, Zimri, was a leader of the tribe of Simeon.
 - b. Cozbi, the woman was well-known among her own people.
4. So right there, as Moses and the rest were earnestly seeking the Lord, along

- comes these two, making it clear that they intend to engage in immorality.
5. This is a bold and defiant act of rebellion, not just against Moses' authority but against God's command. As a leader, Zimri ought to have been resisting such sin; instead he's publicly promoting it.
 6. We can well imagine the shock and surprise that registered on the faces of those at the tabernacle.
 7. But there was one who did more than just shake his head in disbelief at Zimri's bold defiance; one who said, "Okay, we can't let this go! God's told us what to do, and if no one else will do it, I will."

C. Vs. 7-13

⁷Now 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; ⁸and 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. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. ⁹And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

1. Phinehas, the son of the Eleazar the high priest, grabbed a spear and followed Zimri to his tent.
2. Entering in, he found the two already locked in a lovers tangle and stuck it to them.
3. I guess you could say that they got the point of Phinehas' righteous anger.
4. This brought an immediate end to the plague. God then commended Phinehas .

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹¹"Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal.

¹²Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; ¹³and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.'"

6. God rewarded Phinehas with the promise of carrying on the line of the high priest of Israel.

D. Application

1. This story teaches us an crucial lesson.
2. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:11 that all that happened to Israel in their journey from Egypt to Canaan is an example to us.
3. This specific story is highlighted as teaching us about *our* journey of faith in Christ.
4. So what is it we're to learn? Should we take this as a cue that we ought to line up errant Christians and shoot them?
 - a. no! Jesus taught us how to deal with those who call themselves Christians but who refuse to walk in obedience to Christ in Matthew 18, and execution was not the way.

- b. for a closer look at how we deal with errant believers you might want to pick up a copy of the study on church discipline in the bookstore.
 - c. what this story gives us, is not a paradigm for dealing with sin *in others*, but in *ourselves*!
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5. The Christian life is one of continual growth.
 - a. perfection is not something we arrive at after 10 or 20 years of walking with the Lord.
 - b. perfection is a goal we ought always to move closer toward but won't attain until the day we step from this world into heaven.
 - c. as long as we are in these *Colemans*, these tents, these bodies of mortal flesh, we will struggle with sin.
 6. Now, the majority of sins we deal with as believers are things which the simple process of spiritual growth overcomes.
 - a. as we walk with the Lord, the Spirit convicts us of something, we repent, and in a relatively short time, the thing falls away.
 - b. we're at church and listening to the Word of God being taught, or it's during our devotions, or at a home group, maybe listening to the radio, and some passage of scripture will reveal something we had no idea was a sin.
 - c. we feel that gentle conviction of the Spirit about the need to change;
 - 1) a behavior we need to put down,
 - 2) an attitude that's unrighteous,
 - 3) some habit we discover that displeases the Lord.
 - d. we repent, pray, and within weeks, the thing has fallen away like so much dead skin washed down the drain of our shower.
 7. The fact is, this is the way it is with *most* sins; they're just dealt with in the process of normal spiritual growth and maturity.
 8. But then there are those sins that are stubborn, persistent, and perennial.
 - a. they don't go away. No, they hang around and trouble us, not for weeks or months, but for years!
 - b. for generations, Christians have referred to these as "besetting sins."
 - c. they're actions & attitudes that have set themselves to defiantly oppose our progress in Christ.
 9. All of us have them.
 10. Classically, Christians have struggled with things like -
 - Pride
 - Greed
 - Lust
 - Sensuality
 - Bitterness & Unforgiveness
 11. These are the *root sins*, but they manifest themselves in countless way -
 - Drunkenness
 - Sexual Immorality
 - Over-indulgence
 - Theft

Chronic dishonesty

Gossip

Laziness

Gambling

12. These are all just *symptoms* of the deeper root that has to be defeated.
 - a. most Christians fail at overcoming besetting sin because they only attack the symptom.
 - b. the *gossip* will never overcome his/her sin until he/she repents of *unforgiveness*.
 - c. the one who struggles with *pornography* will never overcome until he/she repents of *lust & sensuality*.
13. Here's what happens with besetting sin . . .
 - a. when it begins, we sense the Lord's conviction about some behavior or attitude we need to change.
 - b. at first, it seems just like other sins that we see fall away in the process of normal spiritual growth.
 - c. but it doesn't fall off – it resurfaces and we go through the process of conviction and repentance *all over again*. And again, and again.
 - d. confusion sets in; why doesn't this thing go away like the other things the Lord has given me victory over?
 - e. and how can it be that it's still here and I'm still struggling with it because I hate it!
 - f. and though I hate it, I still do it!
 - g. maybe I don't hate it – maybe I love it! Yeah, that's it, I love it and that's why I keep doing it.
 - h. then why do I want to stop it if I love it? I AM SO CONFUSED!
 - i. this I *can* say - I hate, that I love it and keep doing it.
14. With the Apostle Paul we cry out – “The good I want to do, I don't do, and that which I don't want to do, I end up doing. Please! Who will deliver me?”
15. Besetting sin becomes like Zimri in Israel.
 - a. it strolls in front of us while we're weeping tears of repentance at the altar of God,
 - b. sincere in our longing to be free, and it defies us and our desire to move forward in holiness.
 - c. it mocks us, defies, taunts and harangues us.
 - d. “Here I am,” it says! “Remember me – that sin you keep so well hidden from everyone because you're ashamed of me?”
 - 1) “I'm never going away! I defy you and your attempts to defeat me.
 - 2) you've tried to stop me dozens of times, and I'm still here.
 - 3) and look, once more I am going to have my way.
 - 4) even now I'm going to overwhelm you and drag you into sin once again.”
16. Here's what's going on – our story in Numbers gives us a handle on what's really happening with besetting sin, and gives us some practical insight in how to finally overcome it.
17. Zimri represents our *old nature*, what the NT calls the *old man*.

- a. the old man is our *identity* in Adam, that fallen person we lived in before we came to faith in Christ.
 - b. before we were born again and became new creatures in Christ, we were lost sinners.
 - c. we defined our lives, *our selves* by the world and by the race of fallen humanity.
 - d. but in Christ, we are *new* men & women.
 - e. the problem is this, the old dies reluctantly, and sometimes, it needs help. It needs to be **PUT TO DEATH!**
18. Let's back up and think about the larger picture here –
- a. Israel is about to enter the Promised Land.
 - b. the elder generation, the one that had been slaves in Egypt, *had to die off* before the new generation could enter all God had for them.
 - c. most of the elder generation died off how? *By old age* – they simply fell off in the wilderness.
 - d. while most of the elders died off simply by old age, there were a few who needed *help* dying.
 - 1) Korah, Dathan, & Abiram, were 3 who needed to be taken out, so the earth opened up and swallowed them.
 - 2) Zimri was another – and Phinehas was the agent who killed him.
19. In the same way, *most* of the sins we deal with are like the elders who died of old age; the simple process of spiritual growth will see them drop off.
20. But some sins are like Zimri – they have to be dealt with more directly, more certainly, with greater zeal.
- a. with these *besetting* sins, like Phinehas, we will need to get up from weeping tears of repentance and go after them.
 - b. we will need to take the battle to them instead of sitting back passively and wishing they'd go away.
21. Zimri is a picture of the old man, the old nature. But Zimri took the Midianite woman Cozbi by the hand and committed sin with her.
- a. Cozbi represents that worldly thing the old man clings to.
 - b. yes, Zimri is the root sin, Cozbi is the symptom.
 - c. and just as Phinehas ran both Zimri and Cozbi through with the spear, so we need to deal radically with those things that need to be put away.
22. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:29 & 30 about dealing with besetting sin -
- If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.**
- a. now, understand that Jesus is not calling for literal amputation here.
 - b. He's using exaggeration, a well-known idiom of that day to make a point –
 - c. and that point was this – sin, left unchecked, will damn you!
 - d. so do **WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO DO** to defeat it! Root it out!
23. I've known people who struggled with lust who made a commitment to never

- attend a R-rated movie. What was sad was to see other Christians who *chided* them for being *prudish*.
24. I've known good solid brothers and sisters who struggled with sensuality who unplugged their TV set who were accused by other Christians as being *legalistic*.
 25. I've heard of men who have their wives cut the full page lingerie ads out of the newspaper before they read it – who've been labeled as *religious fanatics*.
 26. Why all this criticism? Friends, when Jesus says we ought to pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands, He's not saying we ought to *negotiate* with sin – He's saying we need to gut it, kill it, be *radical* in the way we deal with it.
 27. There can be no compromise with sin!
 28. I have a friend, a pastor, who's counseled too many people over the years not to know the dangers inherent in the Internet.
 - a. he's talked with too many women whose husbands are addicted to internet pornography
 - b. and too many men whose wives got caught up in a chatroom romance.
 - c. so as helpful as the internet can be with research and email and all – he won't have it in his home or office.
 - d. he doesn't have some monumental struggle with lust – no Zimri like that strolls through his life, and he wants to KEEP IT THAT WAY.
 - e. it really bothers me when other pastors rib him for not having the Internet.
 29. The Apostle Paul frequently called Christians to adopt a Phinehas mindset regarding sin.
 - a. in Ephesians 4, he says . . .

22Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, ²³and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.
 - b. in Col. 3 he says much the same thing . . .

⁸You are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.
 - c. in both of these passages, the verb tense for putting off & putting on speaks of a *definitive action* – something we do *in a moment*, that settles the issue once and for all –
 - d. just as when Phinehas grabbed the javelin and followed Zimri & Cozbi into the tent and ran them through.
 - e. that was a moment of righteous action that brought an end to the plague and secured God's favor and blessing for Phinehas.
 30. Christian – you've made a decision to follow Jesus and have placed your faith in Him.
 - a. you believe He died for your sins and rose for your justification.

- b. but have you arrived at the place *of dying to what you were*, your old man, your identity as a lost sinner in Adam.
- c. are you more like Zimri or Phinehas today?
- d. are you still hanging on to the world, is Cozbi holding your hand?
- e. or is there a spear in your hand – a settled decision that you are a new person in Christ and will kill anything that represents the old.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Romans 6:11-13

1. There is one more passage I want to read as we end –
 - a. Romans 6:11-13
 - b. we see both Zimri & Cozbi there
 - 11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin,**
 - but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**
 - c. that's Zimri
 - d. that's Phinehas
 - e. the key word here is "reckon." It means to think seriously about and add to one's outlook.
 - 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members [body parts] as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members [bodies] as instruments of righteousness to God.**
2. That's Cozbi. Once we've reckoned *ourselves* no longer sinners but saints, then we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to work that which is holy, good and pure, not that which is sin.

B. Take A Stand

1. Every one of us here has had, does have, or will struggle with besetting sin.
2. Victory over it begins when we go beyond mere tears of repentance.
3. When Zimri strolls defiantly by – let repentance manifest itself like Phinehas – grab the spear of decision and go after him!
4. Do whatever you have to do to end sin's tyranny.
5. Your friends may accuse you of taking your religion too far.
 - a. your relatives may resist you for becoming too fanatical.
 - b. even other Christian may criticize you for being legalistic.
6. But if, like Phinehas, what you're doing is battling your own besetting sin, not judging others for how they deal with theirs, then God's favor and delight rests on you as it did on Phinehas.
7. And a special place of blessing and anointing will come upon you as it did upon him.

[1] From <http://theparentingworld.com/info/html/60/62.html> retrieved on July 9, 2004