

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 1 of 12

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Dear friends, today I want to call your attention once again to the book of Colossians, chapter 3, verse 5. And as always, if you are able to do so, I encourage you to open your own copy of God's Word to this passage, as well as another passage in the Old Testament that we are going to read in just a moment. But we begin today in Colossians chapter 3, at verse 5, and we read these words:

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth..." What does that mean? At this point in the Word of God we are being taught a vital principle of the Christian life. That principle is the principle of purity. The principle of holiness. We read in many places in the Scriptures that God commands believers in these words: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Let me repeat: This is a command of God. It is not optional for the Christian. But you say, "I am a sinner. I am still living in a world that is under the curse. I still have a sin nature. How can I be holy? How can I obey this commandment of God?"

Today I want to show you that we find that answer as we look at this principle of purity, this principle of holiness, in operation in the camp of the nation of Israel in the wilderness in the Old Testament.

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Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 2 of 12

---

Our studies in Colossians have taken us to many places in the Old Testament, and today I invite you to turn with me to the book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, chapter 25. Numbers chapter 25. I am going to do something I don't normally do on these broadcasts – I am going to read the entire chapter.

I want to do so because there is vital truth here for us – vital instruction about how we are to fulfill this command of God in Colossians chapter 3 verse 5 to “mortify [or put to death] your members which are on the earth” in order that we may please God. And so I hope you will follow along with me as I read Numbers chapter 25. We begin at verse 1. These are the words of God – Numbers 25, beginning at verse 1:

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

Then 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.” So Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor.”

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

---

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 3 of 12

---

tabernacle of meeting.

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. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "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.

"Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and 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.'"

Now 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. 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.

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 4 of 12

---

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Harass the Midianites, and attack them; for they harassed you with their schemes by which they seduced you in the matter of Peor and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister, who was killed in the day of the plague because of Peor."

Thus ends the reading of God's Word.

### **A Bloody Picture**

The passage we have before us today is a violent and bloody picture. When we encounter such a thing in the Word of God, often we are inclined to ask the question, "Why has God included this in His Word? Why does God consider it necessary and profitable to confront us with such things?"

The consistent answer to that question is Second Timothy 3:16 and 17 – that "all Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect [or complete], thoroughly equipped for every good work."

And so I trust that as we look into these things, even though they are not pleasant to contemplate, that the Spirit of God will ground us ever more deeply in sound doctrine; and that the Word of God will reprove us concerning the ways in which we yet displease our Lord; and that the Word of God will correct us in the ways we so very much need it; and that the Word will instruct us so that we might live in greater holiness before our King.

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 5 of 12

---

## **The Setting**

As we begin examining Numbers chapter 25 it will be useful to remind ourselves of what has taken place in the life of the people of Israel in the time immediately preceding these events.

We find just a few pages back, in Numbers chapter 21, that Israel had won two great military victories. They had defeated Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og the king of Bashan – two powerful pagan kings, who had stood against Israel and against Jehovah.

We find in chapter 22 that after those victories, God moved the camp of Israel into the plains of Moab. And we read there that the Moabites were "sick with dread" because the nation that had defeated the Amorites and Bashan – this great encampment of over two million people – had now come into their land.

So Balak king of the Moabites hired Balaam to pronounce a curse upon Israel. But as we know, God frustrated Balak's evil scheme, and instead of cursing Israel, Balaam repeatedly pronounced God's covenant blessings upon them. And not only that, but Balaam under the restraining hand of God also pronounced doom upon other pagan nations in the region, yet to be dealt with. And so God has done great things for Israel. Great victories have been won – both military and spiritual.

But then we come to the opening words of chapter 25, and we read this:

Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices

---

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 6 of 12

---

of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor [and it must be noted that the cult of Baal-peor was a particularly licentious form of ancient paganism]: and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel.

### **Israel's Habitual Sin**

Now we may ask: "How can it be that Israel, having just experienced these great victories by the hand of the Lord – how is it that Israel could turn so quickly, even as God was preventing a curse being pronounced upon them and instead compelling Balaam to pronounce blessings upon them – how is it that Israel could so quickly, and so dreadfully, and so wickedly, fall into such licentious idolatry?"

We find the answer to this question many times throughout the history of Israel. Let me call your attention to just one example.

Just a few chapters previously, in Numbers chapter 21 beginning at verse 3, before the victory over the Amorites, we find the people of Israel rebelling against God and desiring to go back to Egypt – back to paganism. And so the Lord sent a plague of fiery serpents among them. Many of the people of Israel died. And so they came to Moses and said, "We have sinned – pray to the Lord, that He would deliver us from this plague."

And so God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, and to set it upon a pole, so that the people could look upon that bronze serpent and be healed of the plague. And Jesus

---

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 7 of 12

---

would much later tell Nicodemus in John chapter 3 that this serpent in the wilderness was a picture of Himself – that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness to heal Israel as they repented of their rebellion, so also must the Son of Man be lifted up as the full and final atonement for sin.

But what did Israel do with that bronze serpent after the plague was stopped? We find that they kept it. And 500 years later, in Second Kings chapter 18, we find the people of Judah in the days of King Ahaz worshipping that bronze serpent as a god, and burning incense to it. Idolatry was always in their hearts.

In Ezekiel chapter 23, God through the prophet tells Israel and Judah that they are soon going into captivity because they have never ceased from idolatry of one form or another, ever since they were captives in Egypt. Idolatry was always in their hearts.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Holy Spirit uses the same word to describe Israel's attitude: In the King James Bible the translation is that they constantly went "whoring" after evil. Or, as we have it in Numbers chapter 25, they committed whoredom or harlotry. In the original language this word speaks not only of unfaithfulness to God, but of a particular characteristic of unfaithfulness. It speaks of always being on the lookout for the new thing, the new experience, the new excitement, constantly pushing against the boundaries, constantly resisting limits – forsaking that which is true for that which is a deception.

That was so often the case in Israel. And oh, how we see it in our own day – even in the organized church. We see harlotry in the church today. Rebellion against God's

---

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 8 of 12

---

ways, against God's paths. Constant partnership with the world. It's the "new worship" – the "new theology" – and sadly, in much of the church today, the "new morality" – which isn't new at all. It is the same old immorality. It is as old as sin.

But dear friends, let us not think that we are so different. Let the truth be told: The propensity to idolatry is never far from each of us individually. The heart of idolatry is never far from the Church as a body. The tendency toward idolatry is never far from us in our homes.

We must face these facts. The Word of God requires that of us. The mirror of the Word of God, held up before us, confronts us with this fact. And so we are told, repeatedly in the New Testament, as we read in First John chapter 5 verse 21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." The propensity for idolatry in one form or another is always with us, this side of Heaven.

### **The Principle of Purity**

What we have before us is a graphic scene of God's wrath against idolatry. God's wrath against the violation of His holiness. And it is a scene of religious zeal, zeal for God, on the part of one man in particular – Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, and the grandson of Aaron the first high priest.

In our own time we see a great deal of violence that many people also characterize as religious zeal: Muslims are committing mass murder in various places around the world, murdering in the name of their false god, Allah. And it is sad to say that even

---



Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 9 of 12

---

some professing Christians applaud the zeal of a man like the Muslim who committed mass murder in a night club in Orlando, Florida some time ago. They applaud what they see as an act of just retribution against people who came to that evil place for no other purpose than to consume their perverted lusts upon one another.

And we cannot deny that God may well have used an ungodly instrument to mete out His righteous judgment on such people. God did that many times with Israel. He sent the pagan nations to mete out His judgment upon Israel. But God has not called His church to such actions. And we must remember that God also brought down the hammer of His wrath upon the pagan nations who were His instruments of retribution.

Our God is the holy God. He is also the just God. In His justice, He will by no means clear the guilty. He has brought His judgment upon the pagan nations of all times – even as He has also often used those nations to deal with the ungodliness of other nations. It is in this way that God confounds and restrains the designs of Satan, the world-ruler of this present age of darkness.

And we have God's sure promise that He will mete out His wrath against the ungodly nations of our own day. And God's wrath is surely coming against this nation, unless there is repentance, unless there is mercy for the sake of a godly remnant.

But what are we to say of the violent act that we find here in Numbers chapter 25? What are we to say of the man Phinehas, zealous for His God, who follows an Israelite who has taken a pagan woman into his tent, and kills them both? How is this different

---

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 10 of 12

---

from what we see happening around us today? And how does this apply to us as the people of God?

### **The Old Covenant Implementation: Numbers 25**

What we see here in Numbers chapter 25 is the Old Covenant implementation of a great principle. We find it stated many times in the Word of God.

We have one of the most striking statements of it in Leviticus chapter 10, at verse 3. In that passage, two of Phinehas's own uncles, Nadab and Abihu, have just been slain by the Lord because they offered strange fire, pagan fire, before the Lord in the earliest days of the institution of the tabernacle service.

And God tells Moses their uncle, and Aaron their father, why He has done this – and it is quite likely that Phinehas's own father Eleazar, the brother of Nadab and Abihu, would have been present to hear these words as well. Perhaps a younger Phinehas himself witnessed God's judgment, and heard these words.

This is what the Lord said – Leviticus chapter 10, verse 3: "By those who come near Me, I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified." The Lord said this in another form in other places: "Be holy, because I am holy."

In Leviticus chapter 23, the Lord said this: "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them...I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (vv. 3 & 12). In Leviticus chapter 20 the Lord said this: "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy: for I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 20:7).

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Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "The Principle of Purity" (Numbers 25, Colossians 3:5)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 11 of 12

---

Jehovah had said to Moses that He would condescend to come and live among the people of Israel. He would dwell above the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. And His presence would be visible in the form of a pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night.

But, the Lord said, there is a condition for My dwelling among you. You must keep the camp of Israel holy, because I walk among you. You must keep the land I am giving you holy, because I live among you in this tabernacle.

You must obey My Law. You must not persist in sin. And when you do sin, you must come to My one altar and offer atonement for your sin before Me – the bloody sacrifice of the sin offering that I have prescribed. And you must put to death those among you who refuse to follow after Me. Put them to death, in order to keep holy the land in which I dwell, and the people among whom I dwell.

“I will be regarded as holy.” That is the great principle. And here in Numbers chapter 25 we see a most graphic implementation of that principle. Israel, taking for granted the mercies of God, abusing the grace of God, sins grievously against Him. They defile themselves. They defile the camp in which Jehovah dwells. And so His wrath comes. A plague comes. 24,000 people die.

But the plague is stopped because of the action of one faithful man, Phinehas. He slays a blatant, unrepentant idolater who comes with a Midianite woman and takes her into his tent – even as the people of Israel are weeping over the disaster. And Phinehas slays the pagan woman that this man has brought among the nation of Israel, defiling

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Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/13/2017

Page 12 of 12

---

his own tent, defiling the people, defiling the land, defiling the dwelling place of the holy, one, true and living God.

### **The New Covenant Implementation: Colossians 3**

But what are we who live in the New Covenant dispensation to make of these things? Has the principle changed? Is God any less holy? Is God any less demanding of holiness on the part of His people? Certainly not. God has not changed. But He has changed the situation of His people.

What does this mean for you, dear friend, in your life at the present time? How are you to "put to death your members which are upon earth"? What is your responsibility before God? In our next broadcast, the Lord willing, we are going to see the answer.

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