

Sermon on Numbers 25 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 25:1-18

Jesus demands all of you.

This week as I studied our text I couldn't help but think of hybrid dogs. Now for the record I have three mutts of sorts, mixtures of wonderful breeds to make adorable pooches. But none of that was on purpose.

Hybrid dogs however are increasingly popular because they take great attributes of unique breeds and merge them with good qualities of others to create the most "desired" outcome. A hypoallergenic dog. A dog that doesn't shed. A dog that doesn't bark. A dog that doesn't poop... Not yet!

Always been this way with dogs. Why we have more than wolves.

But the results, while they meet the demand, they don't always produce what is best.

Article in the Guardian last September: "Three decades ago, Wally Conron bred two unlike animals to unleash a creature the world had never seen. Today, he says it's his "life's regret": "I opened a Pandora's box and released a Frankenstein's monster." That travesty was a labradoodle."

Hybrids are cool, but for our purposes they give us a picture of blending different things to make an "ideal" new.

Innovating beyond design to ruin.

This is exactly what we have in our text this morning.

Israel's last rebellion in the wilderness. It's a doozy of sex and worship of pagan gods. Final plague and purging of the unfaithful.

More than just a story about these misfits in the wilderness - it's a story about us - bloody yes, but hopeful.

Syncretism. Solidarity. Substitute.

Syncretism

[early 17th century: from modern Latin syncretismus, from Greek sunkrētismos, from sunkrētizein ‘unite against a third party’, from sun- ‘together’ + krēs ‘Cretan’ (originally with reference to ancient Cretan communities).]

The amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.

“The Roman emperors used syncretism to help unite the expanding empire. Social conversion to Christianity happened all over Europe. It became even more effective when missionaries concurred with established cultural traditions and interlaced them into a fundamentally Christian synthesis.”

Bad.

When we lived in DC we helped to lead small groups at our church and I remember fondly one campaign with the goal to have the highest number of small groups ever at the church. Ambitious. But it meant we needed lots of leaders. And in one conversation we were reviewing those who had volunteered to lead groups and among them was a young man whose facebook profile (back in the day when your about page decalre dyour faith) indicated he was a “Buddhist Christian.”

The chap leading the team was a bit perplexed how to handle the situation but it was clear there could be no such thing... and maybe this guy shouldn't lead a group!

For Israel however, they had clearly been told forty years prior to this event that it would be unexecptable.

Exodus 20:1–3 “And God spoke all these words, saying, [2] “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

[3] “You shall have no other gods before me.” (ESV)

“Surveys repeatedly show that when asked to rate the Ten Commandments in order of importance, people invariably rank “Thou shalt not kill” as the most important commandment, and “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” as the least important.⁵ Our culture clearly regards the things that I do that offend or hurt people as far more important than anything I may choose to believe or not to believe about God. The Bible, on the other hand, knew what it was doing when it put the first commandment first. It thereby asserted that the ban on idolatry was the most important, not the least important, of the Ten Commandments.”

Be reminded that the purpose of Israel’s existence is to be blessed to be a blessing. To showcase to the world what life with the One True God, Yahweh, was to be like. And key toward that end was that his life and worship was exclusive.

Still the thing.

John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (ESV)

But here, Israel is yoked, bound to Baal of Peor. First mention of Baal, the local god.

“This was nothing less than the Israelites’ total abandonment of their status as the covenant people of God, separated to the Lord and devoted to him alone. The sexual immorality that preceded the idolatry provided a graphic picture of the underlying spiritual reality. In offering sacrifices to Baal, Israel was abandoning her true husband, the Lord, and was taking up with a foreign lover. God might never be unfaithful to his promises or change his mind about his love for his people, but Israel was certainly capable of unfaithfulness.”

Take their side for a minute... Isn’t this a good idea, merging worship for effectiveness. Maybe it is even the neighborly thing to do.

“Surely they thought to find enhanced peace and prosperity. Politically, intermarriage held out the prospect of peace and a place in the land without the painful necessity of warfare; spiritually, the sexual and sacrificial rituals with Baal of Peor were designed to ensure fertility and prosperity for the community.⁶ The results of their idolatry were, however, exactly the opposite of what they sought:

they ended in a permanent enmity between Israel and Midian, and death for thousands of people.”

Motivation mixed. Sexual immorality as the driver.

Nothing new under the sun. Still today we are aggressively blurring lines of difference for acceptance.

It is less “worship” in a religious sense but equally spiritual humanistic inclination. Taking to worship of created things, ourselves included. It becomes a rejection of God and his way.

“In Romans 1:18 the Apostle Paul declares that the primary reason for the wrath of God being revealed is the godlessness of mankind that leads us to suppress the truth about God. That godless suppression of truth leads to all manner of sinful behavior, to be sure, as Romans 1:24-31 attests, but the root sin from which all other sin flows is the refusal to worship the Lord as God.”

Ways we are prone to syncretize:

- Rapidly evolving sexual ethic
- Political idolatry
- Mushy moralism (just be “good”)
- Skewed ethics (strategies of the world)

Moving trust off of the One it is exclusively meant for. And however enticing, whatever good these idols profess to provide, they all lead to ruin.

This is always the way it is with Satan’s snares. They seem to offer comfort but in reality deliver emptiness; they seem to offer peace but in reality deliver turmoil; they seem to offer a fuller life but in reality deliver death. Time and time again we are deceived by Satan’s promises because we have not learned that he is a liar and a cheat. The outcome of choosing his way is always death.

Yahweh wants all of Israel. Heart, mind, soul. Their exclusive worship and trust.

Jesus wants all of us.

Wages of idolatry is still death... and in this story it is brought by a plague.

Solidarity

“Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group.” For us it is unity with God, as the sole focus of our worship and faith.

Israel yokes itself with other gods... and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

Numbers 25:4 “And the LORD said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” (ESV)

We can not mistake this for a light issue. This is significant.

Moses will be disobedient, he tells the chiefs to kill just the culprits because he doesn't realize the contagion has spread through the people.

And in brazen rebellion, Zimri, son of Salu, chief among Simeon, brings a Midianite to the family tent to be yoked together if you will.

Right by the weeping people of Israel suffering a plague for this rebellion.

It's not clear where exactly in the camp this is happening, mention of the tent of meeting and the bedchamber maybe of the family's tent... but Phinehas, a levite charged with protecting the tabernacle, keeping it undefiled - stands to act. He sees this as violating the sacred space.

Now, *this is not a call to spear all the sinners* around us, something deeper at work here.

He took a spear in his hand and while they are in the midst of the act, he pierced both of them. Gruesome.

But at that moment, the plague stopped.

Numbers 25:10–13 “And the LORD said to Moses, [11] “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of

Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. [12] Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, [13] and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.'" (ESV)

Phinehas is the hero. The one with zeal for the Lord.

"Faithfulness to God may or may not win us friends among men. However, what we are told clearly is that the Lord saw Phinehas' actions and rewarded him for it. If our hearts are set on serving the Lord and he is pleased with us, we will not worry too much about what people think."

A covenant of peace is also mentioned in Is 54:10; Ezk 34:25; 37:26; and Mal 2:5. The recipients of this covenant were assured of God's presence, protection, and provision in times of trouble.

Peace is the fruit of solidarity - the exclusive worship of God.

Simeon - the tribe Zimri is part of - would be the tribe with the greatest reduction in the wilderness because of rebellion and sin.

These star-crossed lovers though also represent our sin. Idolatry in our lives. And we are invited to be as Phinehas and kill it.

Part of our call to die to self.

John Owen said so famously, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you."

Romans 8:13 "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (ESV)

In Owen's book on this verse, "Mortification of Sin," his instructions for waging war on sin:

1. Diagnose Sin's Severity - When a person has struggled with a sin for a long time, it'll be more difficult to kill.

2. Grasp Sin's Consequences - being hardened by sin's deceitfulness, God's temporal discipline, losing peace and strength, and, finally, the danger of eternal destruction
3. Be Convinced of your guilt
4. Earnestly Desire Deliverance
5. Consider the relationship between your sins and your natural temperament.
6. Avoid Occasions that incite sin
7. Address sin's first signs - stop the flow of water before there is a flood
8. Meditate on God's glory - We must not let it gain ground. Instead, we must turn from our sin to "the excellency of the majesty of God."
9. Don't rush to comfort yourself - Owen warns us not to speak peace to ourselves before God speaks it (Jer. 6:14), but rather to "examine [ourselves], to see whether [we] are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). He warns we may console ourselves falsely if we treat the process of repentance lightly, don't show concern for other sins, or if our consolation "is not attended with the greatest detestation imaginable of that sin in reference."

"Sin (idolatry) is like an aggressive snake. If we don't proactively attack sin, it will prove deadly. Thankfully, we aren't alone in the fight. The power to kill sin comes from Christ through the Holy Spirit. As we focus on snuffing out sin, we must also draw near to the throne of grace. It's there we'll find grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:16)." Grant Gaines

Your aim must be to always be killing all sin, so that sin does not kill you. The Spirit will help you. He helps you by making you alert to sin, by making you grieve over sin, by applying the sin-killing work of Christ at the cross to you, by fighting the good fight of faith, and by enabling you to put the sword through sin.

The crowd may demand syncretism... they may say "Christianity would be more appealing if there was no sin, no exclusivity..." That is just the error of those that worship Baal.

We get the strength to slay this in ourselves outside of ourselves.

While solidarity is what is required - honestly we are the ones caught in the act. We need a way out. And that is good news.

Substitute

Fast forward...

John 19:30–37 “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

[31] Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. [32] So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. [33] But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. [34] But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. [35] He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. [36] For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” [37] And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.” (ESV)

Jesus takes our place, bearing the anger we deserve. The judgment our idolatry, our syncretism earns.

He is our peace.

Ephesians 2:13–14 “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (ESV)

Because we have a substitute, we can be exclusive.

Not only does Jesus want all of us, he makes a way for us to be completely his.

Now, in him, all of life is repentance and faith. Turning from our sin and idolatry, the inclination of our heart toward it, and stepping forward trusting Jesus.

Our wrong actions are simply the fruits of our false theology that sets created things on the throne of our hearts. Until we repent of our unbelief, as well as the actions that flow from it, we have not reached the heart of our sins.

Repentance and faith in Christ impacts everything. Our souls. Relationships. Work. Leisure. Love of those around us.

Settles our hope where it belongs. In Jesus.

“We are ingrafted by faith into him: he becomes our covenant Lord, and we are thereby brought under the settled blessing of God. Now God’s attitude toward us does not rest on our faithfulness or lack of it. Even though we continue to be idolaters daily, listening to Satan’s whispers and enthroning other things in the Lord’s place, the Lord now views us through Jesus, in whom we are permanently blessed. That is why there is now no condemnation for us (Romans 8:1). That is why we now have peace with God (Romans 5:1). What is more, this new people of God includes both Jews and Gentiles, even Simeonites (Revelation 7:7) and Moabites such as Ruth, the ancestress of the Lord (Matthew 1:5). The aliens, strangers, and outlaws are invited in and made welcome in the name of Jesus, while those who trust in their own goodness remain outsiders to God.” Iain Duiguid

Jesus wants all of you.

Not a hybrid. But exclusive worship, trust, and faith.

Beloved, you will be constantly bombarded with enticements to eat and bow down to the gods of this world.

Hebrews 10:23 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” (ESV)

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Onward we go.