

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: Sin at Peor and the Zeal of Phinehas

Numbers 25:1-18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Numbers 25 confronts the class with the seriousness of idolatry and immorality among God's own people and the holiness of the God they serve. The chapter exposes the deadly link Scripture repeatedly draws between sexual sin and false worship; the two arrive together at Peor and pull the heart away from the Lord. Teach that this is the fruit of Balaam's counsel (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14), so the class sees that what no curse could do from outside, compromise accomplished from within. The aim is to let God's burning anger against the sin, and His provision of atonement, register as the measure of how seriously He regards the purity of those who belong to Him.

Handle Phinehas with care and with confidence. His zeal was credited to him as righteousness and turned away God's wrath, and it belongs firmly to the Old Covenant setting in which God authorized such judgment within the camp. Do not soften it into mere approval of violence, and do not recoil from it as if God were unjust; present it as zeal for God's holiness rightly placed in its time. Then draw the line forward honestly: under Christ our warfare is not carnal, and holy zeal is now expressed through personal purity, faithful church discipline, and the spread of the gospel. Phinehas's atoning act and covenant of peace point ahead to the greater atonement and the lasting peace we have in Christ our High Priest.

For the spiritual formation of the student, aim at the heart, not at self-righteous distance from Israel. Paul says Peor was written for us, that we might not desire evil as they did and might trust the God who always provides a way of escape. Lead the class to name the quiet invitations to compromise in their own lives, especially after seasons of blessing, and to resolve, by the Spirit, to flee idolatry and immorality and to worship the Lord with a pure and undivided heart. The goal is purity of heart and worship, held out with sobriety but also with the hope of the gospel, never with harshness.

Question 1

Student Question:

Numbers 25:1-3 shows sexual immorality and idolatry arriving together: Israel commits harlotry with Moabite women, then eats their sacrifices and bows to Baal of Peor. Why does Scripture so consistently link sexual sin and false worship, and what does this teach about the true nature of idolatry of the heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with a single, devastating sentence: Israel remained in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab (Numbers 25:1). It does not begin with a battle or a curse but with a settling in, a lingering, and then a slide into immorality. The very people God had just refused to let anyone curse now stumble into sin on their own.

Immediately the immorality opens into idolatry. The women invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods (Numbers 25:2). Israel was joined to Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:3). Sexual sin and false worship come as a pair, because both are at heart a turning of love and loyalty away from the Lord toward something else.

This is why Scripture so often speaks of idolatry as spiritual adultery. The deepest issue at Peor is not merely bodies or banquets; it is a heart that gives to another the devotion that belongs to God alone. Idolatry is, at root, misplaced worship, and immorality is its frequent companion because both spring from the same divided heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture consistently links sexual immorality and idolatry; both are a turning of the heart's loyalty away from God.
- Idolatry is at heart misplaced worship, giving to something else the devotion owed to God alone.
- Sin at Peor began with lingering and compromise, not with open rebellion.
- What no external curse could accomplish, internal compromise did.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do sexual sin and false worship so often appear together in Scripture and in life?
- What does it mean to call idolatry spiritual adultery, and how does that expose the idols of our own hearts?
- How does a heart drift from lingering, to compromise, to outright worship of another god?

Question 2

Student Question:

The fall happened in the plains of Moab after God had repeatedly protected Israel from every curse. Where in your own life have you let your guard down precisely after a season of blessing or success, and how did compromise creep in?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The timing of this fall is striking. It comes in the plains of Moab, right after God has spent chapters refusing to let Israel be cursed. They had just been declared blessed, secure, untouchable by any enchantment. And it is exactly here, in the afterglow of blessing, that they fall.

There is a spiritual law in this. We are often least guarded when we feel most safe. Seasons of success, answered prayer, or spiritual high points can lower our defenses, and the enemy knows it. The soldier relaxes after the victory, and that is when the ambush comes.

The wise believer learns to be especially watchful after blessing, not before. Gratitude should sharpen vigilance, not dull it. The story warns us that the ground just past a great deliverance is dangerous ground.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's people are often most vulnerable to compromise right after seasons of blessing.
- Spiritual success can lower our guard and invite carelessness.
- Gratitude should sharpen vigilance rather than breed complacency.

Discussion Prompts

- Why are we often most vulnerable to temptation after a spiritual high point or a great blessing?
- When in your life has compromise crept in precisely when you felt safest?
- What practices help us stay watchful in seasons of blessing rather than relaxing our guard?

Question 3

Student Question:

Numbers 25:3 says the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. Why does God respond so seriously to His people joining themselves to false worship, and what does this reveal about His holiness and His jealous love for those who are His?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel (Numbers 25:3). To modern ears God's anger can sound like an overreaction, but it is the natural response of holy love to betrayal. God had bound Himself to this people in covenant, and they had given His glory to a dead idol.

God's jealousy is not the petty insecurity we associate with the word; it is the rightful jealousy of a faithful husband whose bride has been unfaithful. Because His love is real and exclusive, indifference to her betrayal would be a failure of love, not a sign of it.

His holiness cannot simply wink at sin among His own people. The plague that follows is severe, but it reveals how seriously God regards the purity of those who bear His name. To belong to a holy God is a glorious thing and a sobering one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's anger at idolatry is the response of holy love to betrayal, not petty temper.

- God's jealousy is the rightful jealousy of covenant faithfulness, not insecurity.
- God's holiness will not treat sin among His people lightly.
- Belonging to a holy God is both a privilege and a sober responsibility.

Discussion Prompts

- How is God's jealousy different from sinful human jealousy, and why is it actually an expression of love?
- Why can a holy and loving God not simply overlook idolatry among His people?
- How should the seriousness of God's holiness shape the way we approach worship and sin?

Question 4

Student Question:

Israel was drawn in step by step, by invitations, meals, and relationships, until they were bowing to Baal (Numbers 25:2). What small, seemingly harmless steps tend to draw you toward compromise, and where do you need to break the chain before it reaches the altar of a false god?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the steps. The women invited; the people ate; they bowed down; they were joined to Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:2-3). No one decided at the start to abandon the Lord. Each step seemed small, even neighborly. The descent into idolatry was gradual, a series of small yeses that ended at a foreign altar.

This is how compromise almost always works. It rarely announces itself as apostasy. It comes as an invitation, a meal, a relationship, a small accommodation that feels harmless in the moment. The chain is forged one ordinary link at a time.

Wisdom learns to break the chain early, while the steps are still small. The place to resist is not at the altar of Baal but at the first invitation that would pull the heart off course. Flee, Paul will say, not negotiate (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Compromise usually advances by small, seemingly harmless steps rather than a single dramatic choice.
- The wise resist early, breaking the chain before it reaches the altar.
- Ordinary invitations and relationships can be the first links in a chain toward idolatry.

Discussion Prompts

- What small steps tend to draw you, link by link, toward compromise?
- Where is the wise place to resist, and why is it so much harder to stop later in the chain?

- What would it look like this week to flee rather than negotiate with a tempting invitation?

Question 5

Student Question:

Numbers 31:16 and Revelation 2:14 reveal that Peor was the very fruit of Balaam's counsel; unable to curse Israel, he taught Balak to seduce them into sin. What does this teach about how the enemy of God's people works, and why is internal compromise more dangerous than external attack?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Later Scripture pulls back the curtain on Peor. Moses says these women, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor (Numbers 31:16). The risen Christ says the same: Balaam taught Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel (Revelation 2:14).

So Peor is the fruit of Balaam's counsel. Having failed to curse Israel from the outside, he found a way to ruin them from the inside. He could not get God to turn against them, so he helped them turn against God. It is a chilling strategy, and a revealing one.

The lesson is that the enemy of God's people, when he cannot defeat them by frontal assault, will seek to corrupt them by seduction. Internal compromise is more dangerous than external opposition, because it does to us what no enemy could do to us. The walls that withstand a siege can be opened from within.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Peor was the fruit of Balaam's counsel; what he could not curse, he sought to corrupt (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14).
- When God's people cannot be defeated from outside, the enemy works through seduction and compromise.
- Internal compromise is more dangerous than external attack.
- Christ Himself identifies the teaching of Balaam as a threat to His church.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is seduction into sin a more effective weapon against God's people than open opposition?
- How does knowing Peor was Balaam's strategy change the way you read the warnings in Revelation 2?
- Where might compromise be a greater danger to the church today than outright persecution?

Question 6

Student Question:

Phinehas was grieved by sin that others had grown comfortable with, while leaders wept and Zimri flaunted his rebellion (Numbers 25:6–8). Where have you grown comfortable or numb toward a sin that should grieve you, and what would godly grief over it look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Into this scene steps Phinehas, and what marks him first is grief. While the congregation weeps at the door of the tent of meeting (Numbers 25:6) and Zimri parades his sin, Phinehas is moved by something the camp has grown numb to. He feels what the moment deserves to be felt.

It is a searching question for us. Sin has a way of becoming familiar, and familiarity dulls grief. What once shocked us we learn to live beside. The camp had been so worn down by the plague and the compromise that brazen rebellion could walk right through the middle of them.

Godly grief over sin, our own and the sin around us, is a sign of a living conscience. Phinehas had not made his peace with what God hated. Before we ask about his zeal, we should ask whether we have lost the capacity to grieve over things that grieve God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Familiarity with sin dulls our grief over it.
- Godly grief over sin, our own and others', is a mark of a living conscience.
- Phinehas felt deeply what others had grown numb to.

Discussion Prompts

- What sin have you grown so used to that it no longer grieves you as it should?
- How can a believer keep a tender conscience without becoming harsh or self-righteous?
- What does godly grief over sin actually look like, as opposed to mere disgust or judgmentalism?

Question 7**Student Question:**

God credited Phinehas with turning away His wrath and making atonement for Israel, and gave him a covenant of peace and a lasting priesthood (Numbers 25:11–13). Reading this rightly within its Old Covenant setting, how does Phinehas's act point us to the greater and final atonement and peace we have through Jesus Christ (compare Romans 5:1; Hebrews 7:23–25)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God's word about Phinehas is remarkable: he has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them (Numbers 25:11). His act is

described as making atonement for the people (Numbers 25:13), and the plague is stopped. For this God grants him a covenant of peace and a lasting priesthood.

We must read this within its Old Covenant setting. This was a moment of immediate, divinely sanctioned judgment to halt a plague among the covenant people, and God Himself credits it as atonement and zeal for His holiness. It is not a pattern for personal vengeance, but a sober display of how God dealt with flagrant covenant treachery in that era.

Read forward, it points beyond itself. Phinehas could turn away wrath for a moment; Christ has turned it away forever. Phinehas received a covenant of peace; through Christ we have peace with God (Romans 5:1). Phinehas held a lasting priesthood in his line; Christ holds a priesthood that never ends, able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him (Hebrews 7:23–25). The grandson of Aaron with a spear foreshadows, faintly, the High Priest who made true and final atonement with His own blood.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Phinehas's act turned away God's wrath and was credited as atonement within its Old Covenant setting.
- This was divinely sanctioned judgment in that era, not a warrant for personal vengeance.
- Phinehas's atonement and covenant of peace point forward to Christ's final atonement and the lasting peace we have in Him (Romans 5:1).
- Christ holds the permanent priesthood that Aaron's line only foreshadowed (Hebrews 7:23–25).

Discussion Prompts

- How does Phinehas's turning away of wrath help you grasp what Christ accomplished on the cross?
- Why is it important to read this act within its Old Covenant setting rather than as a model for us?
- What does it mean for you that the peace Phinehas received as a covenant is now ours fully in Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul holds up Peor as a warning written for our instruction, urging us not to be idolaters or to commit sexual immorality as some of them did (1 Corinthians 10:7–8, 11). What specific guardrails do you need to put in place so that this ancient warning actually shapes your daily choices?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul turns Peor directly on his readers: do not be idolaters, and we must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day (1 Corinthians 10:7-8). Then he says it plainly: these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:11).

So this is not merely ancient history to study at a safe distance. It is a warning aimed at the church, at us. The same idolatry and immorality that destroyed Israel still destroy people who name the Lord. We are not exempt by being on this side of the cross; if anything, we are more accountable.

But Paul does not leave us in fear. In the very next breath he promises that God is faithful and will always provide the way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). The warning is real, and so is the help. The point is to take both seriously enough to put real guardrails in place before temptation arrives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Peor was written as an example and warning for the church, not merely as history (1 Corinthians 10:11).
- Idolatry and immorality remain real dangers for those who name Christ.
- God faithfully provides a way of escape from temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- Heeding the warning means putting concrete guardrails in place before temptation comes.

Discussion Prompts

- What specific guardrails could keep this ancient warning from becoming your own story?
- How do you hold together the seriousness of Paul's warning and the comfort of his promise of escape?
- Where do you most need to take advantage of the way of escape God provides?

Question 9

Student Question:

Phinehas's act stopped the plague and was counted to him as zeal for God's holiness, yet it belongs to the Old Covenant order; under Christ our weapons are not carnal, and zeal for holiness is expressed through purity, church discipline, and the gospel, not the spear (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 1 Corinthians 5). How do we rightly honor Phinehas's zeal for God's holiness while understanding how that same holy zeal is now to be expressed under the New Covenant in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We must be honest about the kind of act Phinehas performed and the covenant under which he lived. His was a physical act of judgment within the theocratic camp of Israel, expressly credited

by God as zeal for His holiness in that setting. It stopped a plague and turned away wrath in a moment of national crisis under the Old Covenant.

Under the New Covenant, that holy zeal does not disappear, but its expression changes. Paul says our weapons are not of the flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). Zeal for God’s holiness is now expressed in personal purity, in faithful and loving church discipline (1 Corinthians 5), and in the bold spread of the gospel, not by the spear. The kingdom of Christ does not advance by physical force.

So we honor Phinehas rightly. We admire his refusal to make peace with sin and his jealousy for God’s glory, and we let that same fire burn in us. But we let it burn in the ways Christ has appointed for His church, holiness of life and the weapons of the Spirit, never carnal violence in His name.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Phinehas’s act belongs to the Old Covenant theocracy and was God-sanctioned in that setting.
- Under Christ, zeal for holiness is expressed through purity, church discipline, and the gospel, not the spear (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; 1 Corinthians 5).
- The kingdom of Christ does not advance by physical force.
- We honor Phinehas’s hatred of sin and jealousy for God’s glory while channeling that zeal in New Covenant ways.

Discussion Prompts

- How can we admire Phinehas’s zeal for holiness without misapplying his method to our own time?
- What does godly zeal for God’s holiness look like under the New Covenant in practice?
- How does church discipline, done in love, reflect the same concern for purity that moved Phinehas?

Question 10

Student Question:

Peor shows that the deadliest threat to God’s people is often a divided heart rather than an outside enemy. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, right now, to flee idolatry and immorality and to worship Him with a pure and undivided heart.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The whole chapter circles one piercing truth: the deadliest danger to God’s people is a divided heart. An army could not defeat Israel. A hired prophet could not curse them. But a Moabite

feast and a quiet compromise nearly destroyed them, because the threat was no longer outside the camp but inside the heart.

That is the searching word for us. We may guard carefully against open enemies of the faith while leaving the back door of our hearts unlatched. The idols of our age rarely demand that we renounce Christ; they simply ask for a place at the table, a divided loyalty, a heart given partly to Him and partly to something else.

Jesus calls us, as He always has, to single-hearted devotion. The capstone of this study is not information but surrender: to flee idolatry and immorality, and to worship Him with a pure and undivided heart. The question is no longer about Israel at Peor. It is about you, today, and where your true worship lies.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deadliest threat to God's people is a divided heart, not an external enemy.
- Modern idols rarely demand we renounce Christ; they ask for divided loyalty.
- Jesus calls His people to single-hearted, undivided devotion.
- The proper response to Peor is personal surrender and purity, not distant judgment of Israel.

Discussion Prompts

- Name one specific way Jesus is calling you right now to flee idolatry or immorality.
- Where is your heart divided, giving Christ part of your loyalty while reserving part for something else?
- What would whole-hearted, undivided worship of the Lord look like in your life this week?