

Lesson 11 - 10 July 2011

Balaam's Willful Way

Lesson Scope: Numbers 22 to 25 and 31

Lesson Focus

Israel was now camped on the plains of Moab at the border of Canaan, looking forward to crossing into the Promised Land. Balak, king of Moab, in cooperation with Midian, called Balaam to come and curse Israel. It seems Balak realized there was a spiritual dimension to this threat. If he could get God to turn against Israel, he hoped to be able to drive them out of the land.

Balaam, a prophet from Mesopotamia, was asked to come because of his reputation for being able to bestow effective blessings or curses (Numbers 2-2:6). Apparently Balak also knew that Balaam could be bribed by the promise of money and position.

Balaam is portrayed in Scriptures as a man who had some knowledge of God, but who was not fully committed to serving Him. He seems to have wanted God's blessing without submitting to His direction.

Balaam was like many people today. He wanted God's blessing and approval on his life, but he was unwilling to accept God's direction. Like many other uncommitted people, Balaam tried to get as close to the world as he could without losing God's blessing.

In a sense Balaam advised Balak to entice Israel as a nation to do what he as an individual was doing—trying to enjoy the pleasures of sin and still be God's people. Balaam's life of compromise was disastrous not only for him as an individual, but also for God's people as well. This lesson can be used to show us not only the course and calamity of the self-willed on an individual level, but also the danger the self-willed pose to those whom they influence.

God deserves and requires undivided loyalty. Professing an identity with Him while coveting "the wages of unrighteousness" places one in direct conflict with God.

Lesson Aim: To see the course and the calamity of the self-willed.

Theme Verse: [2 Peter 2:15](#). Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.

Lesson Text:

The Insistence of Self-will.

[Numbers 22:10-15](#)

¹⁰ And Balaam said unto God, Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, hath sent unto me, *saying*, ¹¹ Behold, *there is* a people come out of Egypt, which covereth the face of the earth: come now, curse me them; peradventure I shall be able to overcome them, and drive them out. ¹² And God said unto Balaam, Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they *are* blessed. ¹³ And Balaam rose up in the morning, and said unto the princes of Balak, Get you into your land: for the LORD refuseth to give me leave to go with you. ¹⁴ And the princes of Moab rose up, and they went unto Balak, and said, Balaam refuseth to come with us. ¹⁵ And Balak sent yet again princes, more, and more honourable than they.

[Numbers 20:18-21](#)

¹⁸ And Edom said unto him, Thou shalt not pass by me, lest I come out against thee with the sword. ¹⁹ And the children of Israel said unto him, We will go by the high way: and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it: I will only, without *doing* any thing *else*, go through on my feet. ²⁰ And he said, Thou shalt not go through. And Edom came out against him with much people, and with a strong hand. ²¹ Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border: wherefore Israel turned away from him.

The Blindness of Self-will.

[Numbers 22:22](#)

²² And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the LORD stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants *were* with him.

[Numbers 22:27-35](#)

²⁷ And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff. ²⁸ And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? ²⁹ And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. ³⁰ And the ass

said unto Balaam, *Am* not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since *I was* thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay. ³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face. ³² And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because *thy way* is perverse before me: ³³ And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive. ³⁴ And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. ³⁵ And the angel of the LORD said unto Balaam, Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak. The Judgment of Self-will.

Numbers 23:10

¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth *part* of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!

Numbers 31:8

⁸ And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; *namely*, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword.

Questions for Study

The Insistence of Self-will

1. How did Balaam demonstrate his self-will?
2. Was it wrong for Balaam to ask God again for permission to curse Israel? Explain.
3. How can we know when persevering in our request to God becomes self-will?

The Blindness of Self-will

4. How could Balaam have known that his way was perverse before he saw the angel?
5. What does verse 34 reveal about Balaam?
6. Why are the self-willed often blind to their condition?

The Judgment of Self-will

7. If Balaam desired to die the death of the righteous, why did he die with Israel's enemies?

8. List some areas where we might attempt to serve both God and the flesh.

Analyzing the Passage

Joshua 13:22 calls Balaam a soothsayer. Apparently he was able to tap into the spirit world and access the powers there. Yet he realized his need for divine approval in his endeavor to curse Israel.

Although Balaam professed a desire to "die the death of the righteous" it seems his sympathies lay with the enemies of God's people. Add to this his desire for reward, and it seems it was almost impossible for him to turn a deaf ear to Balak's call.

Balaam wanted to curse God's people, but God turned it into a blessing. It seems that Balaam then concluded that, if Israel could be led into sin God would need to withdraw His blessing. This explains his counsel to Balak (Numbers 31:16).

The New Testament refers to Balaam's sin in three ways. "The way of Balaam" (2 Peter 2:15) and "the error of Balaam" (Jude 11) involve sacrificing principle for material gain. "The doctrine of Balaam" (Revelation 2:14) teaches that God's people and the world can mix teaching many people follow today.

Principles and Applications

The Insistence of Self-will.

1. The self-willed are governed by selfish motives (Numbers 22: 10-11). The whole reason for Balaam's going to Balak was to place a curse on God's people and get a reward for doing so. It does not appear that Balaam evaluated whether it was right to curse God's people. We must evaluate the opportunities of life according to God's Word not just by whether they will bring financial gain or increase our social prestige. Our living standard, the cars we drive, and our way of dealing with other people, are all evidence of motives that govern our lives

2. The self-willed are careless with their interpretation of God's message. (Numbers 22:12-13). God told Balaam why it was wrong to curse God's people, but it seems that all Balaam heard was the command not to go. It is an indication of self-will to stay focused on our disappointments and not see beyond them to God and His greater plans. It is also an indication of self-will to always find a way around the 'No' we receive. We should have no desire to pursue a course once we realize God cannot bless it.

3. Prestige and honor appeal to the self-willed (Numbers 22:15). Because

the self-willed person focuses on himself, he will be attracted to that which exalts him. Fancy borderline dress, lavish living standards, and prominent positions are attractive to the self-willed. Jesus said. "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). If we find it difficult to bear the reproach of the world, and resist whenever cross bearing is made practical in our life, it is an evidence of self-will.

The Blindness of Self-will.

4. Persisting in their own way leads people to believe they have God's blessing (Numbers 22:20-22). The Scriptures seem to indicate that Balaam finally went without being called not considering that in so doing he forfeited God's blessing. When people persist in their self-will, they use standards other than God's Word to decide if God is pleased with their life. They may focus on being at peace with their decisions, on financial success or on answered prayer and conclude that God is blessing them when, in reality, they are on a self-willed course that will bring judgment.

5. The self-willed fail to see roadblocks on their path as a mark of God's mercy (Numbers 22:27-29). The unwillingness of the ass to continue was God's mercy; otherwise Balaam would have been killed by the angel. If God places a roadblock in our way through the counsel of the church or through circumstances of life, we need to accept that to continue in our way is dangerous. We need to seek direction from God and His people as to how to go from there.

6. Self-willed persistence is perverse in God's sight (Numbers 22:31-32). Balaam may have convinced himself that he had God's blessing but his way was actually perverse, and God was ready to destroy him. When we persist in our course against better knowledge the counsel of our brethren, or of the revealed will of God, we lose God's blessing. "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft. and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry (1 Samuel 15:23)

The Judgment of Self-will.

7. The self-willed may attempt to serve both God and self (Numbers 23:10). Balaam clearly understood which side he needed to be on, yet his stubborn will kept him in the enemy's camp. If we find the Christian life a struggle between what we know we should do and what we want to do, it can be an indication of self-will.

8. The end of the self-willed is destruction with the wicked (Numbers 31.8). Balaam never fully identified with Israel and never fully accepted that they were blessed of God. In the end he died with the enemy kings,

men whose wealth and power he found so appealing. No matter how small the issue we exercise our self-will over, the consequences will be deadly.

Important Teachings

1. The self-willed are governed by selfish motives (Numbers 22:10-11).
2. The self-willed are careless with their interpretation of God's message (Numbers 22:12-13).
3. Prestige and honor appeal to the self-willed (Numbers 22:15).
4. Persisting in their own way leads people to believe they have God's blessing (Numbers 22:20-22).
5. The self-willed fail to see roadblocks on their path as a mark of God's mercy (Numbers 22:27-29).
6. Self-willed persistence is perverse in God's sight (Numbers 22:31-32).
7. The self-willed may attempt to serve both God and self (Numbers 23:10).
8. The end of the self-willed is destruction with the wicked (Numbers 31:8).
9. The self-willed do not accept God's Word as the final authority (Numbers 22:18-19).
10. The self-willed blindly persist in their way against better knowledge (Numbers 22:34, 35).

Answers to Questions

1. How did Balaam demonstrate his self-will?

He focused on God's denial of his wishes rather than on God's plan to bless Israel. He saw God's answer as a roadblock rather than as a revelation of God's will.

2. Was it wrong for Balaam to ask God again for permission to curse Israel? Explain.

God had made it clear that Israel was blessed. Balaam's asking a second time was a part of his pattern of behavior. He tried to see what God would allow him to get by with.

3. How can we know when persevering in our requests to God becomes self-will?

It is self-will to request things that violate Bible principle. When we lack patience and lose the joy of the Lord, self-will is evident. When the circumstances of life make it clear that this is not God's will, it is self-will to continue asking.

4. How could Balaam have known that his way was perverse before he saw the angel?

He did not accept God's first response as final. The unusual behavior of the ass in turning out of the way and finally talking to him should have alerted him to the fact that something was wrong.

5. What does verse 34 reveal about Balaam?

In spite of his statement that he had sinned, Balaam was not repentant. He was sorry that God was displeased; he does not seem to have been sorry for what he had done.

6. Why are the self-willed often blind to their condition?

The self-willed focus on themselves rather than on God. They are not open to being shown their faults. Finally, God allows them to continue on their self-willed way

7. If Balaam desired to die the death of the righteous, why did he die with Israel's enemies?

Balaam had a heart problem, not a problem of understanding. To show the self-willed the end of their course often is not enough to stop them. The only solution to the problem of self-will is complete surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

8. List some areas where we might attempt to serve both God and the flesh. Sacrificing the principle of the unequal yoke for monetary gain, wanting to enjoy the benefits of being a part of the people of God yet not supporting the standards of the church, and being unwilling to take a stand that sets us apart from society around us are attempts to serve both God and the flesh.

Research Guide

Look up the New Testament verses that speak about Balaam's sin, (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14).

Summarizing the Lesson

Love not the world! Its dazzling show
 Conceals a snare of death:
 The sweetest joy earth can bestow,
 Dies as a wasted breath.

Love not the world! Its wealth, renown,
 The blood-bought soul enslaves;
 Oh, strive to win a heavenly crown,
 Which plumes of glory wave.
 glory
 —Gertrude A. Flory