

November 5
Lesson 10 (NIV)

FAITHFUL GOD, UNFAITHFUL PEOPLE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 44:1-8, 13-19, 26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Numbers 25; 1 Samuel 2:27-36

NUMBERS 25:10-13

¹⁰ The LORD said to Moses, ¹¹ “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. ¹² Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. ¹³ He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.”

1 SAMUEL 2:30-36

³⁰ “Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever.’ But now the LORD declares: ‘Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. ³¹ The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age, ³² and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, no one in your family line will ever reach old age. ³³ Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.’

³⁴ “And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day. ³⁵ I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always. ³⁶ Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead, ‘Appoint me to some priestly office so I can have food to eat.’”



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KEY VERSE

I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind.—1 Samuel 2:35

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell God’s responses to the priestly ministries of the son of Eleazar and the sons of Eli.
2. Explain the consequences of unfaithfulness.
3. Identify and correct one unkept commitment.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Matter of Trust
- B. Lesson Background: Phinehas #1
- C. Lesson Background: Phinehas #2

I. God Rewards Zeal (NUMBERS 25:10-13)

- A. God Speaks (v. 10)
 - B. Phinehas Commended (v. 11)
 - C. Covenant Established (v. 12)
 - D. Permanence Promised (v. 13)
- II. God Punishes Sins (1 SAMUEL 2:30-36)
- A. Consequences of Unfaithfulness (vv. 30-34)
 - Honor*
 - B. Rewards for Faithfulness (vv. 35, 36)
 - A Faithful Priest*
- Conclusion
- A. Unfaithful to Commitments
 - B. Prayer
 - C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. A Matter of Trust

Since 1977, Gallup has been asking people to rate the trustworthiness of various professions. Clergy have usually ranked near the top in these polls. For example, in the 1980s about two of every three Americans agreed that ministers have “high” or “very high” moral standards. In 2013, however, fewer than half of those polled responded in that way. “The Catholic priest abuse stories from the early 2000s helped lead to a sharp drop in Americans’ ratings of clergy, a decline from which the profession has yet to fully recover,” wrote one analyst.

There are some people we instinctively trust and others we do not. When those in vocational ministry misuse their authority, it is not only they who suffer. There is collateral damage when trust is violated. The Bible shows that some of God’s priests were trustworthy, while others were not. As is true today, this made difference in lives other than their own.

B. Lesson Background: Phinehas #1

[Numbers 25:1-9](#) gives the background to the story of a certain man’s zeal for God and commitment to the covenant of Mount Sinai (the law). The Israelites were camped at Shittim, the final stopping place before crossing the Jordan ([Joshua 2:1; 3:1](#)) and before Moses’ death on Mount Nebo ([Deuteronomy 32:48-52](#)). Shittim was about 10 miles east of Jericho.

But tragedy struck when a plague killed 24,000 Israelites because of disobedience to God’s covenant laws ([Numbers 25:9](#)). The idolatrous worship of Baal, the main fertility cult of Canaanites at the time, was the context. The vicinity was probably the foot of the mountain of Peor ([23:28](#)).

Such worship was an attempt to influence a pagan god and goddess to have sexual encounters so that the land and its inhabitants would be productive. The accompanying sacrifices and feasts ([Numbers 25:2](#)) were an abomination to God in combining what today would be considered forms of pornography, idolatry, sexual immorality, and worship of nature. Of the Ten Commandments broken, that episode violated at least the first (no other gods), the second (no idols), and the seventh (no adultery). No wonder God’s wrath was poured out against the leaders who encouraged God’s people to yoke themselves to Baal of Peor! (See [Numbers 25:4, 5](#); [Deuteronomy 4:3](#); [Hosea 9:10](#)). God’s wrath was withdrawn only when Phinehas intervened in a deadly way.

That background has its own background in the form of Balaam’s oracles in [Numbers 22-24](#). Having failed at cursing the Israelites—blessing them instead in four oracles—Balaam advised Balak on how to entice the Israelites to sin ([Numbers 31:16](#); [Revelation 2:14](#)). The year was about 1407 BC.

C. Lesson Background: Phinehas #2

The second part of the lesson jumps ahead about 340 years to consider another man by the name of Phinehas. He, his brother Hophni, and their father Eli were priests ([1 Samuel 1:3](#)). The brothers were corrupt, and they are called “scoundrels” ([2:12](#)), indicating that they were wicked.

Their actions in taking advantage of worshippers was a great sin in God’s sight ([1 Samuel 2:17](#)). They added to their sin by seducing women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting and by ignoring their father’s rebuke ([2:22-25](#)); they therefore knowingly broke at least the fifth, seventh, and eighth of the Ten Commandments, probably others as well ([Exodus 20:1-17](#); [Deuteronomy 5:7-21](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

-
- Abiathar Ah-bye-uh-thar.
 - Adonijah Ad-owe-nye-juh.
 - Azariah Az-uh-rye-uh.
 - Baal Bay-al.
 - Balaam Bay-lum.
 - Balak Bay-lack.
 - Canaanites Kay-nun-ites.
 - Eleazar El-ih-a-zar or E-lih-a-zar.
 - Gibeah Gib-ee-uh (G as in get).
 - Hophni Hoff-nye.
 - Levitical Leh-vit-ih-kul.
 - Peor Pea-or.
 - Phinehas Fin-ee-us.

Shittim *Shih-teem*.

Yahweh (*Hebrew*) *Yah-weh*.

Zadok *Zay-dok*.

The life of godly Samuel sharply contrasts with theirs (see [1 Samuel 1-4](#)). At some point during young Samuel's formative years, an unnamed "man of God" came to Eli and condemned the unpriestly way that man and his two sons were conducting themselves ([2:27-29](#)). The zeal of Phinehas #2 was certainly not like that of Phinehas #1!

I. God Rewards Zeal

([NUMBERS 25:10-13](#))

Two things are clear from [Numbers 25:7-9](#): (1) the first Phinehas of today's study had just killed two people for blatant disobedience to God and (2) his initiative in that respect halted further Israelite deaths. Even so, 24,000 were already dead by plague—capital punishment from the Lord.

A. God Speaks (v. 10)

¹⁰. The LORD said to Moses,

The use of *LORD* (small capital letters) represents God's personal name "Yahweh." The unique relationship that Moses has with Yahweh has already been seen in the incident of the jealousy of Aaron and Miriam ([Numbers 12](#)). Yahweh reprimanded those two by reminding them that he usually gives prophets visions or dreams, but with Moses he speaks "face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord" ([Numbers 12:8](#); compare [Exodus 33:11](#)).

That last phrase reminds us of the occasion when Moses was able to see the "back" of Yahweh as he passed by ([Exodus 33:19-23](#)). Thus we should understand that Yahweh is communicating with Moses in a direct way.

B. Phinehas Commended (v. 11)

¹¹. "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal.

This is the Lord's recap of what is narrated in [Numbers 25:6-9](#). What *Phinehas*, grandson of the first high priest, did with so much zeal was to kill an Israelite man and a Midianite woman while they engaged in an immoral act. The sinful nature of that act was compounded by the idol worship that accompanied it ([25:1-3](#)).

We may be shocked that a priest has committed such an act! But we must remember a couple of things. First, those sins amounted to religious and political treason. Second, the death toll would have been much higher than 24,000 ([Numbers 25:9](#)) if Phinehas had not acted. As it stands, God commends him for being *zealous for my honor*. The result of this man's actions was a great point of rescue: *God did not put an end to them in [his] zeal*.

The words *zealous* and *jealous* are closely related. This is seen where a word in the original language is translated "jealous" or "jealousy" in one passage but "zealous" or "zeal" in another. For example, the Hebrew noun translated "jealousy" in [Ezekiel 8:3, 5](#) and [Zechariah 8:2](#) is rendered "zeal" in [Isaiah 9:7](#); [37:32](#); [59:17](#); [63:15](#). In the New Testament, the Greek noun translated "jealousy" in [2 Corinthians 11:2](#) is the same one translated "zeal" in [Philippians 3:6](#).

The common idea is one of fervency. We usually think of jealousy as a negative thing, but it can be positive when the fervency (zeal) is properly motivated and informed. We see the positive side in [John 2:17](#) (quoting [Psalm 69:9](#)); we see the opposite in [Philippians 3:6](#). Thus we should take care to understand what it means for the Lord to be jealous. The biblical concept of jealousy when applied to God indicates a profound sense of caring and commitment. God's "name is Jealous" ([Exodus 34:14](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to be fervent for God today?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Before believers
- Before unbelievers
- Before no one but God himself

C. Covenant Established (v. 12)

¹². "Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him.

God's *covenant of peace* is attested in the Old Testament only here and in [Isaiah 54:10](#); [Ezekiel 34:25](#); [37:26](#); and [Malachi 2:5](#). The latter is part of a stinging rebuke of priests who were not obeying the Word of God in contrast with forefather Levi. "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace. . . . True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me . . . and turned many from sin" ([2:5, 6](#)). One could say the same of Phinehas.

Peace (*shalom*) is more than the absence of hostilities. It means wholeness, health, well-being, and blessing. Further implications of this *covenant of peace* are given in the next verse.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways your church can promote peace without getting political?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Racially
- Economically
- Socially
- Other

D. Permanence Promised (v. 13)

13. “He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.”

The scope of the covenant of peace is now explained: it is a *covenant of a lasting priesthood*. Phinehas is assured that his descendants will enjoy God’s blessing and security. Phinehas himself will become famous for his righteous indignation, an act that is considered to be an *atonement for the Israelites* (compare [Psalm 106:28-31](#)).

Later, Phinehas will have a role in the destruction of these same Midianites as well as Balaam, who had instigated the sordid affair ([Numbers 25:16-18](#); [31:1-8](#)). He becomes noted as a defender of God’s honor (see [Joshua 22:11-20](#); [Judges 20:24-28](#)) and as a ruler over the gatekeepers of the tabernacle ([1 Chronicles 6:4, 50](#); [9:20](#)).

II. God Punishes Sins

(1 SAMUEL 2:30-36)

A second Phinehas is now a part of our lesson. He and brother Hophni are the sons of Eli, a priest ([1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25](#)). Eli seems to have seldom, if ever, disciplined his sons for their malicious acts ([2:29](#)). God had chosen Aaron, son Eleazar, and grandson Phinehas for the honorable and holy task of priesthood. But Eli and his sons have brought dishonor and unholiness to the role.

A. Consequences of Unfaithfulness (vv. 30-34)

30. “Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: ‘I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever.’ But now the LORD declares: ‘Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.’

The Lord, the God of Israel is speaking through an unnamed “man of God [who] came to Eli” ([1 Samuel 2:27](#)). *Far be it from me* is an idiomatic statement that denies to Eli the positive content of the rhetorical questions of [1 Samuel 2:28](#). Thus God is revoking a promise because that promise is taken for granted and even despised—thus despising God himself, who made the promise.

HONOR

In medieval Europe, honor was usually associated with members of the nobility and what was perceived as their rights. To take land away from a nobleman, to malign his reputation, or to offend him in some way was to disparage his honor, requiring him to do battle to restore that honor.

In early America, duels were fought to avenge men’s honor; one instance was the killing of Alexander Hamilton by Aaron Burr, Vice President of the United States. Similar duels were fought over offensive comments about a woman’s reputation.

Honor codes live on. Military academies have them. Universities have them. And college instructors may give take-home exams on the “honor system,” which assumes that a student will not cheat. Our society may not have the same honor code as medieval Europe or even our own country’s early days, but ancient Israel realized that God’s honor was not something to be trifled with. For God’s people to act immorally was to denigrate God’s honor. Have we learned this lesson?

—J. B. N.

What Do You Think?

What specific improvements can Christians make in bestowing honor?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To God ([Hebrews 3:3](#); [Revelation 4:9-11](#); etc.)

Outside the church ([Romans 13:7](#); [1 Peter 2:17](#); etc.)

Within the church ([1 Corinthians 12:26](#); [1 Timothy 5:17](#); etc.)

Within families ([Ephesians 6:2](#); [Hebrews 13:4](#); etc.)

31. “The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age,

Other versions of the Bible begin this verse with the word *behold*, which reflects a Hebrew expression meant to get the attention of the one listening—in this case, Eli. God will *cut short* the *strength* of the house of Eli to the point that all will die young. *The time is coming*, and sooner than one thinks, when these curses will begin to unfold. The sin of Hophni and Phinehas will have repercussions that reach beyond their own lives and times.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who says that God’s statement in [1 Samuel 2:31](#) wasn’t fair to future generations?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering [Exodus 20:5](#) with regard to [Jeremiah 31:29, 30](#)

Considering the “fairness” of Jesus’ death

32. “and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, no one in your family line will ever reach old age.

The statement that Eli will *see distress in God’s dwelling* is a word of judgment against Eli and his sons. Those three live and conduct their unholy ministry at Shiloh ([1 Samuel 1:3](#)), the place of the tabernacle ([Joshua 18:1](#)). By the time of the prophet Jeremiah some four centuries later, Shiloh is no more ([Jeremiah 7:12, 14](#); [26:6, 9](#); [Psalm 78:59, 60](#)).

The prophecy that *no one in your family line will ever reach old age* continues the judgment against Eli and his lineage. Their fate is discussed below.

33. **“Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.**

The thought of the last phrase of [1 Samuel 2:32](#) is repeated in different words in the last phrase of the verse now before us. The shortened life expectancy for Eli’s line means that he will be the last one to live to be “an old man” ([1 Samuel 4:18](#)).

For God to *cut off* Eli’s descendants *from serving at my altar* means an end to their tenure as priests. A fulfillment happens several generations later regarding Abiathar. The texts [1 Samuel 4:18-21](#); [14:3](#); and [22:9, 20](#) establish him to be a descendant of Eli. Following the destruction of Shiloh, the sanctuary ends up about 16 miles due south, in Nob (between Gibeah and Jerusalem). The priests who serve at Nob during the reign of King Saul pay with their lives for welcoming David ([21:1-10](#); [22:9-19](#)). Abiathar alone escapes and joins David ([22:20-23](#)). Ultimately, however, the prophecy against Eli’s descendants is fulfilled when Solomon removes Abiathar from the priesthood because of the man’s complicity in a rebellion ([1 Kings 1:7, 8, 19, 25](#); [2:26, 27](#)).

34. **“And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day.**

The Israelites’ superstitious use of the ark of the covenant as a good-luck charm in battle ([1 Samuel 4:3, 4](#)) ironically has the opposite effect: its presence causes such fear among the enemy troops that they fight even harder ([4:6-9](#)). The result is total defeat for the Israelites. On that *same day* both sons of Eli die, being among the 30,000 slain ([4:10, 11](#)). Eli himself dies when told the news ([4:18](#)).

B. Rewards for Faithfulness (vv. 35, 36)

35. **“I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always.**

The *faithful priest* refers to Zadok, a priest during David’s reign ([2 Samuel 8:17](#); [15:24-29, 35](#); [20:25](#)). Zadok will replace Abiathar as high priest after the latter conspires with Adonijah against Solomon ([1 Kings 2:35](#)).

God firmly establishes the *priestly house* (dynasty) of Zadok so that his family flourishes for many years, beginning with his son Azariah ([1 Kings 4:2](#)), continuing through the return of the exiles ([1 Chronicles 6:12-15](#); [Ezra 3:2](#)). *My anointed* refers to all the Davidic kings under which the descendants of Zadok serve as priests.

A FAITHFUL PRIEST

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was studying to be a lawyer when he had a scary encounter with a thunderbolt. The experience led him to become a monk instead.

Because Luther was already well educated, the monastery decided to further his training and have him become a priest. Five years later, he was awarded the doctor’s degree and a position on the faculty at the University of Wittenberg. While teaching, he also served as the parish priest for St. Mary’s Church in town. It was during his studies there that he came to a new understanding of salvation. Contrary to prevailing Roman Catholic interpretation, Luther concluded that the apostle Paul taught salvation by God’s grace, not by works of merit or by purchase of indulgences.

For years he was badgered to recant and submit to the authority of the church. On trial, Luther was again told to recant his writings. He responded that some of his writings were commentaries on Scripture; to recant them would be to deny the Word of God. Ultimately he declared, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Luther remained faithful to his calling in the best way he knew how. He could do nothing else.

Peter says all believers are being “built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” ([1 Peter 2:5](#)). What more can you do to be faithful to your priestly calling?

—J. B. N.

What Do You Think?

Which spiritual disciplines are most helpful to you for remaining faithful? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding disciplines of service
- Regarding disciplines of worship
- Regarding disciplines of prayer
- Regarding disciplines of Bible reading
- Considering [2 Peter 1:5-8](#)

36. **“Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead, ‘Appoint me to some priestly office so I can have food to eat.’”**

Often God’s judgment reveals irony in the process. To this point Eli’s sons have exercised their greed and gluttony by extracting more sacrificial meat than they should have ([1 Samuel 2:12-17](#)). But in the future Eli’s descendants will have to beg *for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread*.

Conclusion

A. Unfaithful to Commitments

In the Old Testament, every Israelite was obligated to keep the covenant. Likewise, Christians everywhere are obligated to keep the new covenant. But keeping commitments can be difficult. The apostle Paul used Israel’s experience in the wilderness as a warning against failure in this regard (see [1 Corinthians 10:1-10](#)). He exhorts his readers to avoid “setting [their] hearts on evil things as they did” ([10:6](#)). In other words, Christians are to avoid idolatry, sexual immorality, grumbling against God’s will, etc. When we commit such sin, we are in danger of losing it all! Since we are the ones “on whom the culmination of the ages has come” ([10:11](#)), the stakes could not be higher.

The third and fourth chapters of the book of Hebrews make a similar point as the author repeatedly quotes from and otherwise alludes to [Psalm 95:7-11](#).

Today, if only you would hear his voice, "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

God rewards those who are faithful to his covenant, and he punishes those who are unfaithful. Let us be aware of our continuing need to examine ourselves in this regard and repent when necessary.

B. Prayer

Father, forgive us the sin of unfaithfulness to our priestly covenant responsibilities! Grant us hearts for keeping our commitments to you. May we by your grace continue to be counted in the community of the committed. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Others see God's faithfulness
when we are proven to be faithful.



Visual for Lesson 10. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, "What techniques can help us keep our commitments to God?"

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

To begin class, divide the class into two teams, asking each to pick a spokesperson. Say, "A recent poll asked people what category of professionals they considered most and least trustworthy. Let's see if you can guess the top five in each category."

Starting with the “most trusted” category, alternate asking teams to guess a profession in that category. Score a point for each correct answer. Continue until all are guessed or until both teams give two wrong answers in a row. Move on to the next category. This is what the poll found:

Most trusted:

- 1 = nurses
- 2 = pharmacists
- 3 = medical doctors
- 4 = engineers
- 5 = dentists

Least trusted:

- 1 = car salespeople
- 2 = members of Congress
- 3 = advertising executives
- 4 = stockbrokers
- 5 = HMO managers

Did your students find any surprises? What occupations would they add to either list?

Lead into Bible study by saying, “There are some people we instinctively trust and others we do not. Some pollsters find that priests and other clergy can be considered either highly trustworthy or highly untrustworthy, depending on a person’s past experiences. The Bible shows that some of God’s priests were trustworthy, while some were not. As is true today, this made a big difference.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into groups of two or three, giving each group a pen and a copy of the lesson text from page 81. Allow a few minutes to complete the following Scripture marking activity:

1. Circle characteristics God wants his priests to have.
2. Underline rewards given to faithful priests.
3. Draw a line through punishments for unfaithful priests.

Alternative. Download and distribute copies of the “Good Phinehas, Bad Phinehas” activity from the reproducible page. You may wish to have both Scriptures read aloud before working through the answers as a class.

After either activity, lead a class discussion with the following questions:

- How could the character of priests have shaped people’s understanding of the nature of God?
- What are some results when priests misuse their position in order to obtain power over others?
- Read [1 Peter 2:9](#) and [Revelation 1:6](#). If all Christians are priests, what does our text say to us?

Move to the Into Life section by saying, “The perception of God that people have is greatly influenced by their perception of those who claim to represent him. If we want others to know that they can trust God, they need to know they can trust us. Let’s see how we can be more faithful priests.”

Into Life

Give an index card to each student. Tell them, “Think about a promise you have made to someone in the past month that you failed to do or have not yet followed through on. Write that on your index card. Underneath write either one way you will make up for your failure or a plan to do what you promised.”

Encourage your students to complete the cards in class or take them home to complete.

Alternative. Pass out copies of the “Good Riddance!” activity from the reproducible page. Have students work alone or in pairs to complete it. Ask for volunteers to share their conclusions.