



Numbers 22:20-21

(20) And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men come to call you, rise *and* go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do." (21) So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

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One can almost hear Balaam saying to himself, "Great! [God](#) gave me permission! I can go! Load the gold!"

How Balaam replies to the embassy of Balak is one of the main themes of this whole account. In verse 18, he says, "I cannot go beyond the Word of the LORD my God to do less or more." And then in verse 20, God tells him quite specifically, "Only the word which I speak to you, that you shall do."

God is on to him, giving Balaam enough rope to hang himself with - and he just sticks his head right into the noose. The noose is the "if" statement: "If the men call on you, then you may go." The Bible, however, gives no indication whatsoever that the men came to call on him. It says only that Balaam awoke, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

What did Balaam do here? We might call it bending the rules. God gave him *conditional* permission to do something. And what did Balaam consider it to be? *Absolute* permission. It is almost as if he failed to hear God say, "If the men come to call on you." All he heard was, "Then you can go."

How many people do that? In our modern way, we have turned it around: "Well, the Bible doesn't say that you can't do this." Others put it as, "There is no 'Thus saith the Lord' about this" - though there may be dozens of verses that say that one should not do it because of this, that, or something else. Or, there may be a whole story about someone who does something, illustrating a principle of a way we should not go. Nevertheless, because Scripture does not specifically say, "You shall not do this," then many people think it is okay to do it.

Consider smoking. No place in the Bible says that a person shall not smoke cigarettes. It does not say anywhere that one should not breathe in the smoke of any kind of flammable substance. However, there are huge principles - love toward God, neighbor, and self; not defiling the temple of God's Spirit; slow suicide - that people totally ignore. This is similar to what Balaam did.

His thinking process may have gone something like this: "God didn't say that I could not go. He gave me a condition, but I'm sure it will be all right this time if I go. If He was willing to give me permission in this case, it must be okay." So, he went. He did not believe God.

Consider I Peter 2 in terms of what Balaam did. What Peter had been telling his readers to do was submit - submit to government; submit to the king; to governors; to anyone in authority - for the Lord's sake, because that is what God wants us to do. He wants us to learn to submit to authority, especially to God's.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good [submitting to government] you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men - as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ([I Peter 2:15-16](#))

God gave Balaam conditional permission. He made him free to do a certain thing, which was to go with the men, but He put a condition on it: "If they come to you." Well, Balaam used his freedom, his liberty, as a cloak for vice. Balaam's vice was money; he wanted riches. He was going to get his riches by cursing Israel - another vice! Cursing people is not a good thing - certainly, it does not show love for them.

As Christians, we have been given grace, freedom, and God-given gifts to do good. He warns us, "Do not use this freedom to do evil. I have given you, not freedom *from* the law, but freedom *within* the law - to do good and not evil."

Yet, how many have used the liberty given to us by [Christ](#) as license to [sin](#)? "God will forgive us! That's what God does best! So, if we do it just this once, it will be okay!" That is what Balaam did. He received permission from God in one small area, under a certain circumstance, and Balaam interpreted it as freedom to do generally as he pleased.

Does that not sound like mainstream Protestantism? This is why within Protestantism there is an overriding emphasis on grace. Truly, grace is a wonderful thing. God has given us so many freedoms, but there are also law, responsibility, and submission to the will of God, things Balaam totally left out of the picture. He ignored the conditions God placed on his liberty. All he wanted was the freedom. And his taking license came back to bite him severely in the end.

— Richard T. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:

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