

“God, His Law and Me”
Exodus 21-23
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21:1-11 “These are the laws you are to set before them (my people):

² “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. ³ If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

⁵ “But if the servant declares, ‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ ⁶ then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

⁷ “If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do. ⁸ If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. ¹⁰ If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. ¹¹ If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

22:21-27 “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. ²² “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. ²⁴ My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

²⁵ “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. ²⁶ If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, ²⁷ because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

23:1-12 “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

² “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,
³ and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.

⁴ “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. ⁵ If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.

⁶ “Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. ⁷ Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

⁸ “Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.

⁹ “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt. ¹⁰ “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, ¹¹ but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

¹² “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.

Pray – asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and soften our hearts to understand and respond to his Word today.

If you read the Bible at all, and especially if you are faithful to read often, you have read sections like the ones above before.

And if you are like many Christians, you aren’t quite certain what to do with some of what you read.

Sometimes it feels like you are reading someone else’s mail as when you read about how to treat servants or when ears are to be pierced to indicate perpetual servitude (21:6).

Sometimes you aren’t quite certain how literally you should take some laws such as not charging interest on a loan you offer or better yet, whether you can demand that someone not charge you interest on the money you borrow (22:25).

What are we to do with these “laws” of God?

Must we obey them or do we consider them for another people at another time and thus not applicable to us?

I addressed this subject, in part, several months ago as we began the section of the book of Exodus containing the 10 Commandments

(September 18, 2005 Exodus 19-20 "The Law of God in the Life of the Christian").

But today I want to look again at this issue because while we consider the 10 Commandments to have an uniquely enduring quality we aren't as certain about the other laws of God such as the ones before us in Exodus 21-23 or if we were to look into the book of Leviticus.

So how are we to understand these laws and their application to us?

There seem to be two extremes in thinking about the OT laws:

One is that Christians are obligated to obey nearly all the OT laws of God.

They cite such verses as 1 Peter 1:25 quoting from the Isaiah 40:8 "The Word of the Lord stands forever."

There are good and godly people who think we should reconstruct a society based on the laws of the OT.

For example, as I understand it, they would argue for a civil government that stones adulterers and deals the death penalty to those who dishonor their parents.

This view, promoted by some Post-millennialist and Reconstructionist has never gotten much traction in mainstream evangelicalism, I think due in part to Jesus' teaching that his kingdom, his rule in people's lives, is not of this world.

That is, it is not brought about by civil governments and laws but by his Spirit in the hearts of men and women.

But there have been many who have argued for something close to this rigid interpretation of the OT laws.

I vaguely remember the heyday of Bill Gothard who, like others, would dip into OT passages and make it sound like the particular laws he liked were binding on believers today.

He would call them principles but they were treated as law.

I said I think there are two extremes when it comes to applying the Old Testament laws of God.

One is that Christians are still obligated to obey those laws

The other extreme is that we are obligated to keep NONE of the OT laws of God.

The idea is that GRACE has made the OT laws largely irrelevant to today's believers.

Those who hold this view cite such verses as Romans 6:14 "you are not under law, but under grace" and Romans 10:4 "Christ is the end of the law..."

But in so doing they fail to reconcile those verses with other verses from the NT where, for example, the Apostle Paul says in Romans 7 "the law is good" and "I delight in God's law."

Or James who says of the Law in James 1:7 "The perfect law that gives freedom."

And they fail to reconcile the OT prophecy that we love to cite from Jeremiah 31:33, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

What laws does God intend to write on our hearts if not the laws of the OT by which his people were to live their lives?

And furthermore Jesus didn't abrogate the laws of the OT; if anything he made them more radical, pointing out that the issues were not merely outward appearances but inward motivations.

Being under grace doesn't mean the law is irrelevant.

But how then are we to understand such statements as "you are not under law" that I quoted earlier from Romans?

What does Paul mean when he says, “You are not under law but under grace?”

In its context Paul is arguing against those who thought that law-keeping was the way of earning a right relationship with God. (See Morris Romans 259 or Dunn Romans 340)

He wasn't saying he law is not **applicable** to us as believers, he was saying it is not **the way to salvation**.

So what did Paul mean when he said, “Christ is the end of the law?”

The word “end” can be understood in two ways:

Either as the termination of or as the goal of.

We can say “The policeman brought their car race to an end.” It was over.

We can also say, “To what end were they racing?” meaning for what purpose or goal.

Likewise, in its context, Christ is not presented as the termination of the law but as the goal of law, the fulfillment of the law; he is what the law was pointing forward to. (For a fuller treatment of this see Kaiser's chapter in Strickland's The Law, the Gospel and the Modern Christian, 181)

There's more that can be said about those passages and others like them but the point is that Jesus and the Apostles do not teach that the law is invalid under grace.

But there is one more thing I wish to say on this point.

One of the reasons why many Christians think the law **is** no longer valid or applicable to us is because of a major misunderstanding of the place of the Law in the life **of an OT believer**.

I spoke of this before but again I remind you, there is a popular misconception that before Christ came people were saved on the basis of keeping the law and that because so few were able to keep the law, Jesus came and changed the basis of salvation to grace.

The Scofield Reference Bible was for many years a purveyor of this error.

In his comment on John 1:17 for example Scofield wrote that under the Mosaic covenant, “legal obedience (is) the condition of salvation.” (F.B. Meyer suggests the same in Studies in Exodus 220)

But that is a contradiction of the way the NT says OT believers were saved or justified.

Romans 4:2-3 “If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

The Law was never meant to give anyone a right relationship with God.

The Law didn’t save an Israelite and it doesn’t save a NT believer.

Salvation has always been and always will be by grace through faith.

So I’m back where I began, if the Law is not obsolete, how do we Christians understand its application to us today?

Today I want to give you a way of thinking about and applying those OT laws and then I want to illustrate that way using the texts before us.

The first thing to keep in mind about the Law is what I’ve already described in some detail.

We are not saved by law keeping we are saved TO law-keeping.

Obedience to the Law is a RESPONSE to redemption not a condition for it.

Always bear that in mind so that you don’t lapse into deadly legalism; thinking you earn favor with God by keeping the law.

The second thing to keep in mind about many of the OT laws is that they were written for a particular people at a particular time in their experience together.

The instruction would change when the circumstances changed.

That understanding is not strange to us.

We know that is true even when it comes to NT commands.

1 Corinthians 11:4-5 “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵ And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.

We understand that these instructions were peculiar to the Corinthian church and we don’t demand the same in churches today.

1 Timothy 2:8-9 “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.⁹ I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes...”

We don’t forbid braided hair or pearls today.

Mark 10:21 “Jesus... said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

We don’t demand that every Christian sell everything to be called a disciple.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35 “As in all the congregations of the saints,³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

The Bible is not an owner’s manual as some like to refer to it.

Even those sections that **are** codes of conduct are written to real people in real time and place.

So we must consider the historical and relational context in which the laws were written.

Whatever it means when it says, “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” in Exodus 23:19, it doesn’t apply directly or literally to me today.

A third thing to keep in mind when looking at the laws of the OT is that they reveal something of the heart of God for his people.

Certainly one purpose of the Law is to show us how sinful we are and in need of a Savior.

But once the Savior has graciously met our need, the law becomes a window into the soul of God.

That's why David loved the law of God (Psalm 119, etc).

God's laws are not contradictions of his grace.

He has said, "Without holiness no man will see the Lord."

We were redeemed to be a holy nation, God's people.

The commands allow God's people to know how to act toward him and each other.

Without them, we would flounder and founder.

So the Law is liberating not burdensome.

That's why God would say in Deuteronomy 32:47 "They are not just idle words for you—they are your life."

How do we know what God expects of us unless he tells us?

The "law" serves the same function today – it demonstrates the character of God that we may emulate him.

The law is God's expression of himself, in part.

So, it is not, which laws **must** I obey.

It is not even, what underlying principles **must** I observe in my culture.

We are not bound, in some legalistic way, by OT laws (or even the principles behind them) but **we are informed by those laws.**

The Law is a window into God's thinking; it is insight into God's values and perspective.

So when I read those laws written for the Israelites or written for the Corinthian church, what do I learn about the nature of God and how his people were to reflect him in their conduct and I ask how may I do likewise in my culture?

When I read Exodus 21-23 I see a wide array of life situations.

How to treat others at work, in the home, in the neighborhood, in disputes; what to do with the poor, the disadvantaged, even what to do with animals.

And even though not every situation is considered, one of the things it teaches me is that all of life is spiritual.

God has a right to every part of my life and we are called to be holy like our God is holy.

The law gives me a way to think about my relationship with God and others in the concrete circumstances of life.

I have said that the laws are a window into the soul of God.

And so it is not obedience to a principle or a law, it is obedience to the God who has liberated us and loves us.

I was surprised when I read these chapters of laws over and over again, how much God put himself right into the laws.

20:22-25 God often refers to himself

21:13 "If God lets it happen."

22:11 "oath to God"

22:23 "They cry out to **Me**" (widows or orphans)

22:27 God will hear the poor man who has been misused

22:29 Give God the firstborn of your sons and cattle

23:7 "**I** (God) will not acquit the guilty"

23:13 "Everything **I** have said."

23:14 Regarding the feasts we are to do as "**I** commanded you"

23:20ff God's promises of guidance and protection.

This is not a codebook; it is instruction for relationship.

Barbara and I have rules for our son in our household.

(His adult sisters think we have far fewer rules than we used to.)

BUT our love for our son Paris is not conditioned by his obedience to those rules.

We love him and want the best for him and that is why we have rules.

Furthermore, we don't want him to respond to the rules as some kind of legal code but as an expression of our love and a guide to a healthy life and relationship.

And we are much more concerned with his maturing and living in harmony in the family than with whether every jot and tittle of the rules have been observed.

"Come immediately when we call you" is a rule.

But what if I call and he doesn't come immediately.

He says that he was putting the dog away because it was harassing his little niece.

I must decide if that was simply a stalling technique where his intention was to violate the rule and the dog and niece were a convenient excuse or if it was truly a benevolent act only incidentally resulting in his unwillingness to obey the rule immediately.

I don't want a robot; I want a relationship.

But relationship doesn't mean there are no rules to guide us.

I've quoted him before, but author Terrance Fretheim captures it well when he writes, "The will of God does not lose its particularity in the (broader) command to love; it simply opens up those particularities to limitless possibilities. Love always means going beyond whatever laws may be articulated, but it needs their particularity for instructional purposes, charting something of what love may entail in specific situations." Fretheim, Exodus, 223

Now briefly I want us to use these three understandings of the law and think about Exodus 23:

- 1. Keeping the law is not meant to earn a relationship with God; I already belong to him by his grace through Jesus Christ.**
- 2. These laws are written to a particular people at a particular time and must be understood in their context.**
- 3. These laws are a window into the mind and heart of my God whom I desire to emulate.**

So read and listen carefully as we seek to be like our God.

23:1-3 “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,³ and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.

My God is truth and calls me to not be prejudiced by either seeking to find favor with the crowd or siding with a man falsely simply because he’s poor.

My words are to bear truth and justice.

23:4-5 “If you come across your **enemy’s** ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who **hates** you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.

My God is forgiving and gracious to me and calls me to be forgiving and gracious to my enemy.

The situation was such that I didn’t even have to do anything to get back at my enemy; it would be easy to let loss or harm come to that “turkey” by doing nothing.

But that is not the way of God.

Romans 5:10 “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”

23:6-8 “Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.”

No matter how much I stand to gain, I must not pervert justice by lying or even remaining silent.

23:9-12 “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt. “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.”

These words are not first of all about the letter of the law in keeping Sabbath years and days but it is about God’s heart for the displaced, the poor and even animals.

And the instruction comes down to much more than sympathy.

It includes actual sacrifice on my part so that the needs of others may be met.

I don’t own oxen or donkeys and I don’t have tillable ground or vineyards.

I’m not often been in court and I don’t have slaves.

But what do I learn about my God in these laws?

My God is truthful, unbiased, fair, forgiving, gracious, concerned for the poor and displaced, and kind even to animals.

And what do I learn about God’s call on my thoughts, words and actions?

The Law of God is a window into the very soul of God.

The next time you read the laws of the OT or the NT, don’t allow yourself to get sidetracked by all the things you don’t understand or by wishing that God had said more or said it differently.

Instead, as the Apostle Paul said it in Colossians 3:16”Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Or as King David said it in Psalm 119 “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long... I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”

Other notes:

The NT is not at all clear about how the OT law is to be applied to the NT believer.

- Sometimes the NT indicates that the law is not applicable to us any longer (Jesus refused stoning for adultery).
- Sometimes the NT cites specific laws as fully binding on the believer. Ephesians 6:2 “Children obey your parents...”
- Sometimes the NT speaks of a principle underlying a law (1 Cor 9:9 “Do not muzzle the ox...”).

“The law reflects the nature of God but it does so in a historical context. The Book of the Covenant is God’s law, but it reveals God to a particular people living at a particular point in time and for whom he had a particular purpose. One should not simply assume therefore, that these laws necessarily ‘apply’ to our world today.” (Enns, Exodus, 465)

Even saying it is the “principle” behind the laws that we must observe doesn’t help much because it is difficult sometimes to know what the principle is and sometimes the principles are so general as to be no helpful guide (22:20 killing anyone who sacrifices to another god). Enns 465

“Principle” (from Merriam-Webster) a: a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption b: a rule or code of conduct.

In the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21-23 cf. 24:7) the moral elements strongly emphasized are: simplicity, directness and spirituality of worship; a high and equitable standard of right; highest consideration for the weak and the poor; humane treatment of dumb animals; purity in the relations of life; the spirit of brotherhood; and the simple and joyful life. Whatever development in details came with later legislation did not nullify the simple but lofty standards of the earlier laws. (New International Bible Dictionary)

“God merits entrance into all of life.” J.A. Motyer The Message of Exodus 242