

A Holy Nation: Justice and Mercy - Exodus 21-23

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 23 August 2026, 12th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 20:22-23:9 (Exodus 20.22-21.25, 22.16-23.9)

One of the most helpful books I've read when it comes to understanding the Old Testament is *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* by Chris Wright. Now I happen to have lent this out and I don't know to whom! So if you've got my copy, can you please return it. As well as being a top notch Old Testament scholar, Chris is the Global Ambassador of Langham Partnership, an organisation dedicated to training majority world preachers, Biblical scholars and publishing biblical resources in local languages. Chris tells the story of teaching a seminar on Old Testament ethics in India, when he met a young man who told him he became a Christian through reading the Old Testament. He was a Dalit, the so-called "untouchable" caste, despised and oppressed by high-caste Hindus. While studying at university he found a Bible and happened upon the story of Naboth and his vineyard, stolen by king Ahab and queen Jezebel. "That was my story," he said; "false accusations, confiscations of land, violence, murder - my family suffered all such things." He was amazed to read that the prophet Elijah would take the side of the poor against the rich king and queen, in the name of a god he had never heard of. He then went back and read the Bible from Genesis and was even more amazed by the laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy about how people were to live and especially how they were to treat the poor. It was this picture of a God of justice that led him to faith in Christ.¹

Today we're looking at the Exodus 21-23, what scholars call, "The Book of the Covenant". It's a section in the book that outlines laws that were to govern Israel's life as a nation. These laws get further expanded in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. There's too many for us to go through each of these laws, but what I want to do this morning is look at how we can understand and apply these laws as Christians, look at how these laws step out what the 10 commandments look like in ancient Israelite society, and look at a couple of examples and see how they speak powerfully to us today. Let's dive in.

Reading the Law - Ceremonial, Civil, Moral

How should we understand and apply Old Testament Laws as Christians? When we read, say, that you shouldn't go up to the altar on steps or your private parts will be exposed,² is it

¹ Chris Wright, *Exodus: Story of God Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 2021: 424-5

² Exodus 20.26

a matter of “go and do likewise?” After the Bible and the Creeds, a key statement of Anglican doctrine is the 39 Articles of Religion. Article 7, on the Old Testament tells us a really helpful rule of thumb when it comes to understanding the Old Testament Law.³ That is, there are 3 kinds of laws in the Old Testament. The Ceremonial, The Civil and the Moral Law. The ceremonial laws are things like all the laws about the sacrificial system. The book of Hebrews shows how Jesus fulfills this as our High Priest and Sacrifice. As such the Ceremonial Law no longer applies. The Civil law are things like civil penalties for breaking a law. Israel was if you like a religious and a political community, and so Moses, then the judges and then kings would seek to enforce the law and execute punishment on those who broke it. But things are different this side of Jesus. The Church is made up of people from different tribes and languages and nations.⁴ It crosses political boundaries. And second Jesus explicitly says the church is not to wield the sword.⁵ The power to execute justice is given to governing authorities and NOT the church.⁶ As such the Civil laws in the Old Testament no longer apply.

The Moral Law however does apply for us as Christians. This is summarised in the 10 commandments. Texts like what we are looking at today show how these were applied in ancient Israelite society. So when we read, say, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death,”⁷ this is an application of the 5th commandment, “Honour your father and your mother.” So we agree with the moral principle, but the Church is not authorised to execute anyone. Nor would we say that our government ought to enforce this penalty, even though it’s not great for society for kids to curse their parents.

So just to summarise, Jesus fulfills the Ceremonial and Civil Law as priest and king, but the moral law still holds for us as Christians. It’s just a rule of thumb, but it’s a helpful starting point for us reading Old Testament law

Ok, now let’s have a look at how these laws in Exodus 21-23 applied the 10 Commandments, or the Moral Law in ancient Israel’s life. To do this we take an imaginary time machine back to the place these were given, which is very different from today. Many of these laws are what you might call case law. They outline a specific circumstance from which you can

³ *Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.*

⁴ Revelation 7.9

⁵ John 19.36, cf. Matthew 26.52-53

⁶ Romans 13.1-5

⁷ Exodus 21.17

derive a legal principle that may be applied in other cases. We'll have a look at some specific examples.

Broadly speaking chapter 20.22-26 fleshes out commands 1-3. "**I am the Lord your God**, you shall have no other gods before me." So the prohibition on making idols is repeated. Instead God says that his people are to make an altar wherever they go and worship God there.

Chapter 21.2-11 takes the 4th command "Remember the **Sabbath** day by keeping it holy," and applies this to the ancient practice of slavery. Now before we write off this text as justifying slavery, we need to step into that time machine and go back to the Ancient Near Eastern context. The slavery in mind here is not the chattel slavery of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In fact, chapter 21.16 says that kidnapping is a capital offence, and Deuteronomy 24.7 expands this to include human trafficking. This effectively subverts the whole practice of slavery. The term Hebrew is only used in Genesis and Exodus in a derogatory way, and so this may even refer to non Israelites, as well as Israelites. This law addresses the situation where a person has come into severe debt and the only thing they can sell is their labour.

And what does it say?

That they can serve you for 6 years, but in the seventh year they must go free, without paying anything. That is, this law applies the principle of Sabbath rest. Deuteronomy expands this law and says that you must "not send them away empty handed, but supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress."⁸ That is, you are buying their labour and your job is to help them get out of poverty. So when they go free on the Sabbath year, you have to help set them up so they don't go into debt again.

The exception is if the person decides that actually they don't want to go free, they can stay. But again, this is not some sort of coercive arrangement. It's where they want the security of stable work in a good household with a kind head of the family.

Verse 7-11 speak to the situation of female debt-slaves. On a first reading this sounds awful to our ears in prosperous, 21st century Tasmania. But again, let's appreciate the context. This law speaks to the common Ancient Near Eastern situation where family has come into debt, and to pay this they sell their daughter as a servant to another family. This female servant may then be given as a wife or concubine to a man in order to bear children. This is like Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham, or Rachel and Leah giving their servants Bilhah and

⁸ Deuteronomy 15.13-14

Zilpah to Jacob. Ok, we might not like this circumstance, but now let's look at the protections this law provides. Verse 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.

That is, this law prohibits sex trafficking. She can be redeemed, presumably by relatives.

Verse 9: "If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter."

This means that the woman becomes his daughter in law. This means he can have no sexual contact with her. She cannot become the sexual plaything of the men in the family.

Verse 10, if he takes another wife, polygamy being an ancient near eastern custom, "he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights." And if he does, verse 11, "she is to go free, without any payment of money." That is, this law prohibits neglect, abuse, and exploitation and says these are legitimate grounds for divorce. Instead the woman from an impoverished background through this law would be given the dignity and security of a husband and a family.

If we step back and think about our own context, actually there are far more people in slavery today than at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And the major cause for people ending up in slavery is debt. People find themselves in bonded labour with debts they can never hope to repay that get transferred intergenerationally. Women and children are kidnapped, trafficked and neglected, abused and exploited. And we have a problem in Australia as we supply a high proportion of sex tourist in SE Asia and consumers of livestreamed child abuse from that region. Applying this section of Exodus today could be a call for Christians to advocate and act for those trapped by modern debt-slavery. One agency that does just that is International Justice Mission. They work with governments, including our own, to strengthen justice systems. They work with law enforcement agencies and communities to rescue victims and restore survivors. And they advocate for survivors to bring perpetrators to justice.

Chapter 21.12-22.20 looks at what you might call assaults on **Persons and Property**. This fleshes our commands 5-8:

- Honour your father and mother.
- You shall not murder
- You shall not commit adultery
- You shall not steal

We've already seen a law applying "Honour your father and mother."

21.12-14 fleshes out, “you shall not murder”. First it says murder is a capital offence: “Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death.”

Then it distinguishes between intentional homicide and accidental homicide. Intentional homicide is murder, accidental is manslaughter, and the killer may flee to a place of safety. This law is then further expanded in Deuteronomy 19.

The next step down from murder is physical injury. And the laws step out what to do in various cases. The guiding principle is laid down in 21.23-24:

“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...” This is the law of retribution, or in Latin, *lex talionis*. To modern ears this sounds barbaric and violent. Isn't this just spreading the harm around? Yes, we live in much less violent times than the context in which this law was given. But actually there is something fundamentally important here. This principle is not so much a license for violence, as much as a restraint upon revenge. That is, it says that the penalty for the crime has to be proportionate to the offence. The proper administration of the law should protect even the wrongdoer from escalating and avenging violence. And some of the laws detail how this principle may be translated in terms of monetary compensation rather than actual returning the same physical injury.

In 22.1 we read that if a person steals an ox or sheep, they must pay back 5 head of cattle for the ox and 4 for the sheep. It's very interesting that when Zacchaeus meets Jesus, he says, “If I have cheated anyone I will pay them back four times as much.” He knew his obligations under the Law!

Chapter 22.21-23.13 outlines what we might today call **Social Justice**. This applies command number 9 - you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour, and command number 10 - you shall not covet. The paradigm setting for command number 9 is the law court, and the seeking of justice. They outline the importance of impartiality in court. These laws also highlight what scholars call the quartet of the vulnerable: the foreigner, the widow, the orphan and the poor. So we read:

²¹ ‘Do not ill-treat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

²² ‘Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³ If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.

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^{23:6} ‘Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

Here the laws remind Israel both of their own story of God's Redeeming love "You were foreigners in Egypt", and "I will certainly hear their cry". Just like God heard their cries as slaves and rescued them, so justice in Israel is to look like caring for these marginalised groups. This is a spirit of generosity the opposite of coveting.

It seems to me that those categories of the foreigner, the widow, the orphan and the poor are just as relevant today in diagnosing those who face structural injustice and exclusion today.

Ok, so that is a bit of a cooks tour of these laws governing Israel's life to make them a holy nation. I'm sure you've got lots more questions, and maybe you can have a chat about them over morning tea. We've seen how while the civil penalties don't apply today, the moral principles these laws embody are just as relevant to us as we seek justice and to overcome evil with good. Our final example grounds these laws in the story of God's character and salvation. As those who have received his mercy in Christ, we can be people who are shaped by his Law to be holy and to and shine his light by doing good.