

The Law
Exodus 20:22 – 24:18
Series: Book of Exodus [#17]
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August 23, 2009

Introduction

We are looking at a fairly lengthy section of Exodus today that has to do with *The Law*. I think we are a fairly typical group when it comes to the subject of the Old Testament Law. Some of us may not know much if anything about it. Others may picture detailed, rigid, legalistic rules. A few may know some of the specifics and have a good overall picture of it. Then there are those who think the picture of God it portrays, the sacrifices and laws, don't line up with today, and aren't important. "Why spend my time thinking about something that doesn't affect me or apply to me?"

Wherever you think of when you hear about *The Law* of the Old Testament, let me assure you that there is important truth for you in this section of Exodus. We are going to take an overview of God's Law for Israel, His Law for us, and His challenge for everyone. So let's get going with God's Law for Israel.

God's Law For Israel.

We need to begin with the foundation and function of the law. The law God gave to Israel, often called the Mosaic Law, was not the first of God's laws or commands. After God created Adam and placed him in the garden, He

“commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’”

(Genesis 2:16-17)

God is the sovereign creator and judge. All that He tells us are not suggestions, but commands which He expects and enables us to do.

Every command God gave Israel revealed something of what He is like, some of His character. Some links are direct and plainly evident, such as “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Others are fairly easy to see, but not stated with a direct link. For example, the Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness” (20:16), points to God being truth and always truthful. So then, being made in His image, we are to be truthful. Yet others are not so direct or easily understood with respect to God's character. For example, the dietary laws found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14; or the commands not to plant two kinds of seeds in the same field, and not to wear clothing with two kinds of materials mixed together (Leviticus 19:19).

Whether the link between God's commands and His character is easy to see or not, every one of His commands or laws showed them something of what He is like. The law, then, *helped them know God*.

The law also helped the people of Israel *know themselves*. It showed them their sinfulness and need of God. As the apostle Paul told us, “I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” (Romans 7:7).

Also, and very importantly, God gave Israel His laws for their own good—good for them and, as they understood and accepted them, good to them in their own experience. God’s plans for them were for hope and a future with Him, not for hurt, misery or distress (cf. Jeremiah 29:11). So God called them to trust and obey Him. Last week we noted Moses’ response to the people’s fear after God’s dramatic appearance and words. He told them, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin” (Exodus 20:20).

Just as Abraham, the father of this nation, was saved, justified by faith, so it was and is for everyone (cf. Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). No one in Israel would be, could be saved by keeping the Law.

With this foundation, let’s move to briefly note some highlights or features of the Law stated from the end of chapter 20 on through chapter 23. At the start, remember that this section is not a complete listing of the Mosaic Law. We find other statements in the rest of the books of Moses. Jewish teachers and scholars have listed 613 commandments from the five books of Moses. Not all the lists are the same, and while many of the laws cannot be followed since the last Temple was destroyed, they all retain importance to Jewish people today.

Now let’s turn to some specifics. At the close of chapter 20, verses 22-26, God gives Moses instructions for worship, restating the First and Second Commandments and then giving directions for altars. As they presented their offerings on the altars, God said in verse 24, He would come, meet and bless them. The altars were to be simple, rather than ornate, idol-like altars as many man-made religions used.

Chapter 21 opens with laws regarding Hebrew slaves. God set protections in place for those who often were in that position because of financial problems. They had to be given freedom after six years. The only exception being that if he really loved his master, a slave could choose to stay—for the rest of his life.

Then at verse 12, and on through the end of the chapter, there is a section on laws covering injury—injuries to others and injuries involving animals. The Sixth Commandment on murder was restated and manslaughter was clarified. There were limits placed on punishment. Go to verse 24, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise” (24-25). This specified that the punishment fit the crime, that it was to be neither too light nor too severe. For example, it prevented wealthy people from buying their way out with a relatively light fine. This did not require that if you injured me and I lost sight in one eye, that you would have to lose one eye. The point was a proportional, adequate penalty. In other words, true justice.

Chapter 22 opens with some laws about property. Thieves had to pay four or five-fold compensation when they were caught if they had disposed of the property, or double if they still had it. If you let your animals graze on someone else's fields or started a fire on your property that spread and destroyed a neighbor's grain, you would pay restitution. If you were keeping something safe for someone and then tried to keep it, the fine was double the value of what was entrusted to you.

A section of laws on religious and social matters begins at 22:18 and goes on through 23:19. Sorcery and sexual perversion were not to be tolerated, nor worship of any man-made gods and taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable, such as strangers, widows and orphans. Money was to be lent to the poor and all their fellow countrymen without interest. The people were to be truthful, honest and merciful, even returning an enemy's wandering animals. 23:6 introduces the sabbath year for the land as part of recognizing the sabbath (stopping, resting) principle, and providing opportunities for the poor. At 23:14 the three annual feasts are introduced.

The final section, starting at 23:20, deals with entering into, taking and living in the land God prepared for them. God promised to go before them, to guard them, and "be an enemy to [their] enemies and an adversary to [their] adversaries" (22). They were to obey Him to enjoy His blessings in the land. Israel was not to make any covenants with those enemies or allow them to live in the land because of their enemies' sinfulness and sinful influence.

That is a brief summary of God's Law for Israel here. Now we move on to ...

God's Law For Us.

Looking at God's Law for Israel naturally leads to questions. It is obvious that we don't follow all these laws, but why? Should we follow any of them and, if so, why and which ones? It probably does not surprise you that there is not total agreement on these questions. The differences arise not only from differing interpretations of Old and New Testament statements, but also from varying theological perspectives and traditions. And so, there are views that

- the Mosaic Law has three different components — moral, ceremonial and civil — and that only the moral laws apply now in the church age.
- Then there are those who hold that much or most of the law is binding and should be followed. So, some say the sabbath should be on Saturday. Others say that governments should be structured largely in line with the Old Testament Law.
- Some contend that the Old Testament Law has no place today because we are under grace.
- And there is the view that the underlying principles of the Law should be followed since they reflect God's unchanging character.

To give us an overall picture, let's take a brisk walk through some of the relevant truths needed to understand God's Law for us today. We will focus on two pairs of truths. This *brisk walk* will answer some questions and may raise others. The first pair of truths is Law and grace. The relationship between law and grace is, on the one hand, rather simple: God's law sets out His holy and righteous demands; His grace meets those demands which we cannot meet. God in His eternal and unchanging character is both gracious and compassionate (Exodus 34:6) and holy and righteous (Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 32:4).

Law and grace have been together in every age. For Israel there was the Law of the covenant and God's grace of forgiveness and acceptance through faith, with the sacrificial system covering sins and looking forward to the perfect once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. For us today there also is law and grace. Every book of the New Testament gives us commands or laws from God and a message of grace. When we think of law, we realize that

- Jesus gave a "new commandment" to love each other as He has loved us (John 13:34).
- The apostle Paul tells us to "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the *law of Christ*" (Galatians 6:2).
- James directs us to fulfill "the royal law" of loving our neighbor as ourselves (James 2:8).

As we turn to grace,

- The apostle Paul wrote, in Romans 3:24, that we are "justified as *a gift by His grace* through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."
- And, as he opens chapter 5, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into *this grace in which we stand...*" (1-2).

Where the relationship between law and grace gets a bit more complicated is when we get to the role of Old Testament Law in the church age. The language of the New Testament on this is not always easy to sort out. For example, in Romans 6 the apostle Paul wrote that we "are not under law but under grace" (15). He obviously did not mean that we are free from *all law* and free to do whatever we please, for God gave us many commands or laws through Paul.

Then there is Paul's statement that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). One more, in Romans 3:31 Paul wrote "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law."

Before I draw some conclusions on this, let's move to another pair of relevant truths: the covenant and the new covenant. A covenant is an agreement. As we see here in Exodus, God's covenant with Israel was the basis for the relationship between Him and the people. Exodus 19:5, "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine." Then there is

the new covenant. When Jesus gave the command to observe what we call communion, Luke tells us, “And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in My blood’” (22:20). Christ fulfilled the Law. Through His death and resurrection Christ fulfilled the old covenant and brought about a new covenant, a covenant between God and all who place their faith in Him through Christ.

Now we need to pull this together, to synthesize these truths to see the basic thrust of God’s Law for us. You may have heard Woody Allen’s joke, “I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.” I will cover this briefly, but I can’t boil it down to three words as he did with War and Peace.

Let me state again that salvation in all ages has been by faith. It never has been by works or keeping any law. Faith takes a step beyond knowledge. You might know the design computations that demonstrate the pew you are sitting in will hold you and not collapse. But faith is when you trust that knowledge and sit down in the pew. Genesis 15:6 tells us Abraham “believed in the LORD; and He [the LORD] reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Abraham was not saved by keeping God’s commands. No one in Israel was saved by keeping the Law. That is true for us today as well. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (8-9).

Moving on from there, while the three-fold division of the Old Testament Law of moral, ceremonial and civil is a construct, that is it is not stated in Scripture, it has some merits. But it also has some limits. Canada, obviously, is not the Old Testament nation of Israel, and nowhere in Scripture are nations told to adopt Israel’s laws and form of government. Then, the New Testament makes it clear that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial law, bringing it to an end.

- Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).
- 1 Peter 1 tells us we “were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from [our] futile way of life inherited from [our] forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (18-19).
- Hebrews chapter 10 tells us that Jesus has taken away the Old Testament sacrifices and covenant and established the second. Verse 10, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

My understanding of this is that Christ fulfilled and so brought an end to the Old Testament Law. Much of its moral and ethical demands are repeated in the New Testament. All of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament with the exception of the Fourth, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (20:8) which, we noted two weeks ago, goes beyond that set of codes back to an enduring principle since creation.

But even with the Old Testament Law fulfilled and set aside, I do not see that we can skip over the parts of the Old Testament which contain Law which is not restated in the New

Testament. As I said when we looked at the Ten Commandments and also earlier today, every command God gives us reveals something of His character. As God's children, we are to allow the Holy Spirit to make us more like God. So there are principles for us in all the Old Testament Law, even those where it is not easy to see.

God's Challenge For Everyone.

We have talked about *God's Law for Israel* and *God's Law For Us*. There is one more part of this section—God's Challenge to Israel and to us, His challenge to everyone. First, look at God's challenge to Israel then and there at Mt. Sinai and, indeed, for every day of their history as a nation. Turn to chapter 24, where we will pick it up at verse 3.

“Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!’ Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” (3-8)

Moses and the people understood what was happening here. They were agreeing to, stating their commitment to and formalizing the covenant with God. So “all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!’” Now that does not mean every individual had personally, truly placed their faith in God. There were, to be sure, some if not many who agreed without true faith. This points out the great dangers in a person saying “Yes, God!” when that person has not really placed his or her faith in God. Israel's history in the wilderness and in the land clearly demonstrates this.

As Moses said in 20:20, this was also a test from God with the ultimate goal that they would reverence Him and not sin, that they would be a holy people by God's grace through faith. This was God's challenge to them: “Place your faith in Me, the one and only true God, and obey Me.”

God gives the same challenge to us today. Most of us have heard the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel, many, many times. Jesus summarized God's truth, His *law*, His challenge to everyone in the third chapter of John's gospel.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal

life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”
(14-16)

We need to know and believe in this truth, to place our faith in Christ, because all of us by nature and action are sinful, and that leaves us helplessly and hopelessly separated from God. Jesus, His forgiveness of sin and life forever are God’s free gift of grace to all who will accept it. The apostle Peter summed it up succinctly in Acts 16:31, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

Yes, most of us have heard this many times. Some of us may be hearing it for the first time. In both cases, God is challenging each one who has not put his or her faith in Him, saying, “What are you going to do? Are you going to believe Me and follow Me or not? What are you going to do today? Not tomorrow or at some later time, but today?”

Don’t just go through the motions. Just as no Israelite was saved by being part of the covenant nation, so today no one is saved by going to or being part of a church. No one is saved by just knowing and agreeing with the truth. It is only through placing your faith in Jesus Christ that you will be saved. There is no other way. As He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). If you have not yet truly come to God through Jesus, today is the day of salvation for you. You can come to Him here and now. If you have questions, talk with me, Pastor Tyler or someone else before you leave here today.

There is a second part of God’s challenge. This part is directed to everyone who has accepted God’s gift of grace in Jesus. In Deuteronomy 27:10 Moses said to Israel, “You shall therefore obey the LORD your God, and do His commandments and His statutes which I command you today.” In the New Testament Jesus has told us, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15) and, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love ...” (John 15:10).

God’s challenge to every believer is to listen to and to learn His truth, and then to follow Him by obeying that truth. Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no question or doubt about that. The question for me, for you is, “Am I living under His Lordship?”

In Luke chapter 14 Jesus tells two parables which, on a casual reading, might seem to be contradictory. The first is about a man giving a big dinner. Invitations were sent out in advance. But when his servants went to escort the guests, they had all sorts of excuses as to why they could not come. So the man told his servants, “Go out into the streets and bring people to fill my house.” The parable tells us that Christ’s invitation goes to all, to everyone who will receive it.

The second parable begins with Jesus saying,

“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” (26-27).

That is strong language! Jesus used hyperbole to make the point that His disciples must live under His Lordship. He then gets into the pictures of one who starts building without counting the cost of the entire project and a king going to war without determining if he has sufficient strength to win the battle. His point is: “If you want to be My disciple, you must “carry [your] own cross and come after [or, follow] Me.” Anyone in that day carrying a cross was a dead man—he had been sentenced to die and was on his way to his execution. Jesus tells us that being His disciple means being dead to ourselves—that is, dead to being in control, to dreaming, planning and doing what we want.

The two parables are in fact complimentary. The first one tells us that salvation is a free gift of God’s grace to all who will accept it. The second one tells us that living the Christian life faithfully means living under the Lordship of Christ.

There is a brief phrase in the third chapter of the apostle Peter’s first letter which nails this point. He wrote, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (15). Set apart your heart, the deepest core of your being, for Christ, for His Lordship, His direction and control. In the same way the apostle Paul opens the twelfth chapter of Romans by urging, calling, challenging us “to present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God,” no longer being “conformed to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (1-2).

This is God’s instruction, His command, His *law* for you and me. Question: Are you living under the Lordship of Christ? Does the record of this last week support the claim that Jesus is, was in that week, your Lord?

Conclusion.

As you think over these things with God, face His challenge. If you have not placed your faith in Christ, accept God’s invitation to you now. If you have placed your faith in Christ, examine your heart as you look at the evidence of the last days and weeks. Confess and get anything and everything that is not right straight with God. Commit yourself or recommit yourself to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart.”

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