

Applying Israel's Ceremonial and Civil Law (Exodus 20:22-21:1)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton 12/3/2023 (www.gcb.church)

We sang 'Come to set Thy people free' and 'O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns...' Think of captives in Israel today, think of the price of ransom/exchange, they need Emmanuel. Many in that land mourned but some rejoice as hostages are set free from terrorists into Egypt. People of Israel were in cruel captivity for weeks; women, little children, and others. God has answered prayers, but there's still much to pray about and much injustice. The government of Gaza is founded on principles contrary to God's law we're studying. It's hard not to think of God's care for life and His heart we've seen in Exodus 20. 3,500 years ago, God brought the captive people of Israel out across the border of Egypt. Old Pharaoh like Hamas brutally killed Jews, even babies, and would face God's justice. As Israel fled, there was fear as Amalek, the 1st terrorists, attacked women and children. God delivered Israel from all enemies and brought them to a place of safety and justice. Imagine the terror of captivity and then being freed. In Ex 20:20 Moses says 'don't be afraid.' In Ex 20 God offers more than an exchange, more than just a temporary cease-fire. By sacrifice, there can be true peace, blessing in worship and in society.

The one true God speaks His way of an offering for peace and how men can have 'God with us'

Ex 20:22 *And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and **sacrifice** on it your burnt offerings and your **peace offerings**, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered **I will come to you and bless you.** ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'* ¹ "Now **these are the rules that you shall set before them. [We'll stop there today, but look down at v. 12:]** *Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. ¹⁴ But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.*

So this section is about God's rules for justice and mercy (altar was the place of mercy). Some call Ex 20 the first bill of rights (rights of workers, right to life, right of property, etc.). Ex 20:2 is God's declaration of independence from captivity, this is a '*law of liberty*' (James 1:25). The sacrificial system Jesus ended by His sacrifice, but Ex 21-23 has societal wisdom. 21:1 starts rules of law for the State of Israel that also influenced the United States. We saw before, Ex 18 influenced America's legal system (local, regional, federal judges). The Judeo-Christian ethics in ch 21-23 have much for us to learn from. The law God gave Moses speaks to our world still.

Some of it is unique to ancient society, but there's abiding equity and morality here

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to the U.S. Congress, he ended with "Facing me right up there in the gallery, overlooking all of us in this [House] chamber is the image of Moses. Moses led our people from slavery to the gates of the Promised Land. And before the people of Israel entered the land of Israel, Moses gave us a message that has steeled our resolve for thousands of years. I leave you with his message today [he quoted Deut. 31:6] "Be strong and resolute, neither fear nor dread them." Just a few weeks ago, the new Speaker of the House Mike Johnson also drew attention to that image of Moses in his inaugural address.¹ Mike Johnson knows something about U.S. law and biblical law as a legislator and litigator and former lawyer for Alliance Defending Freedom, a group that defends legal rights of believers. He taught at Liberty University on the Constitution in its evangelical school of Government.²

As he became Speaker of the House of Representatives in October he pointed to God's lawgiver

We need to pray for him and our nation to keep looking up to God's law and gospel

The House Chamber has several portraits 'chosen to represent historical figures who established the legal principles underlying the American system of government. Moses is in the center...' ³ Across Washington D.C. the Supreme Court building has a statue of Moses top front and center. Moses and/or images of God's law on 2 tablets of stone are 'are displayed also at the center of the sculpture over the east portico of the building, inside the courtroom, as well as being engraved over the chair of the chief justice and on the bronze doors of the court... Harvard Law School Professor Alan M. Dershowitz [has] said: "The Ten Commandments are clearly a precursor to all Western Law, including American Law." A scholar Mark Rooker traces how the law of Moses influenced 2 'greatest rulers of medieval Europe, Charlemagne of [France] ... and Alfred the Great of England... both established legal systems based on biblical laws that included the Ten Commandments. The Laws of Alfred (c. AD 890) began with a recitation of the Ten Commandments along with excerpts from other portions of the Mosaic Law.' ⁴

My goal today is to introduce a study on how later laws of Moses apply to modern Christians

1. The aspects of law after the Decalogue (10 Commandments)
2. The application of this next section to us

Decalogue is the Greek word for the 10 words commanded in Ex 20:1-17. The Hebrew Torah is a term for all the law in the following chapters through Deuteronomy. There's 613 commands in Jewish teaching and Israelites saw that law as a unified whole. We can also see that after the Decalogue (1st 10) the other 603 have different aspects. Review context: God Saves (Ex 1-19). God Speaks (Ex 20-40). This next section through ch 23 is different than, but builds on the Ten.

In Ex 20:3-17 God thundered out for all Israel to hear and wrote it on 2 tablets with His finger. The 10 were indelibly etched on stone, moral ethics permanently put in the ark of the covenant. But ch 20 ends with words that were temporary about altars before the Tabernacle (ch 25-32). 20:24 commands an '*altar of earth*' (mound of dirt), but later this command becomes obsolete. God's moral law is absolute, not obsolete; never commit adultery, covet, steal, murder, lie, etc. But laws like v. 26 against exposure were a temporary need (ex: till modest garments in ch 28). Other laws were temporary till the NT, but even in the OT it updated, anticipating a monarchy. ⁵ The rest of this section through ch 23 God didn't put on stone, in the ark, or thunder out to all.

There would be changes in how and what God instructed, even within the OT

20:19 they '*said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."* ... ²¹ *The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.* ²² *And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel..."* So the rest is mediated. Ex 24 says Moses wrote down the rest of words that God gave him and then he read it to them and it's called '*the book of the covenant.*' It's then that God gives Moses the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments that God wrote by His finger. So there's the commandments God spoke directly to all, then there's a covenant book that's in a different form.

Ex 21-13 is the book of the Old Covenant under a Theocratic government

Ex 20 law is *you shall not* (Hebrew absolute, unconditional, no exceptions, 2nd person singular). **21:3** *If he* (3rd person conditional) *comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him...* ¹⁸ **"When** *men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed,* ¹⁹ **then if** *the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed...*

There's a lot of if/then/when in these rules. Ex 20 is 10 commandments, 21-23 is their case law. Think of the Constitution and then Supreme Court rulings that apply it to different situations. **21:1** *Now these are the rules that you shall set before them* [other versions have 'regulations' or 'ordinances']. America has a declaration of independence, a bill of rights, and local ordinances we call 'law.' Some of Israel's law to come was local ordinances unique to their land, society and experience.

22:21 *You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt...* [that's not our experience in Egypt] ... ²⁶ *If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep?* [that's not the case in our land or society's pledges, but it's OT Israel's case law]... **23:25** *You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you.* [that's not a guarantee to Christians today, that was a covenant promise for God's OT people unique to then]. Ex 21-23 has civil law penalties we don't enact (sorceress must die, rebellious kids stoned, etc). Ex 21-23 has societal laws and sacrificial laws as part of a system we Christians aren't under.

But we're morally obligated to serve God, not oppress or wrong sojourners, care for poor, etc.

WCF⁶ 19.4 says Israel's 'ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament. To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state [of OT Israel], not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require. (Exod. 21, 22:1-29...)' They also cited Eph 2:15 to us outsiders of the commonwealth of Israel, Paul says as Jesus died He was 'abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances...' (that's the word in Ex 21:1 in some versions). The commandments of circumcision, ceremonial ordinances or the judicial law we're not under as Christians. Rules and restrictions like diet that divided Jew and Gentile are abolished at the cross but there is still moral law

And as our forefathers said, there's general equity or principles God requires in Ex 21-23

20:23 *You shall not **make gods** of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.* [moral]

²⁴ *An altar of earth you shall make for me and **sacrifice** on...* [ceremonial or sacrificial law for OT priesthood]

21:1 *Now **these are the rules that you shall set before them.*** [judicial ordinances, WCF calls 'general equity']

These are 'judgments...guiding cases, procedures...civil, religious and political categories...'⁷

So this is a transition from the Ten Commandments and moral law to ceremonial and civil rules

How does this next section apply to us as new covenant Christians, or does it?

This takes us from the aspects of law after the decalogue to #2. The application of this to us

Old dispensationalists, Scofield Reference Bible basically saw the law as irrelevant or opposed to grace. It has study Bible notes on Exodus until this part where it makes no application on the law or 10 commandments. It just skipped over entirely ch 19-25 in its verse by verse comments! Others never teach the law, but add extrabiblical laws. In my circles, I never heard sermons on God's law till PJ at GCC. PTL some TMS friends and my local pastor friends preached Exodus recently I've heard. But the laws in ch 21-40 are new territory for many and a challenge to study

There's errors on all sides if you don't apply the OT law rightly

RCC brings back priesthood and sacrifice (the Mass). Adventists reinstate dietary law, Saturday Sabbaths. Some don't think law applies at all based on misunderstanding Paul saying we're '*not under the law*' while others want all under the civil law (Theonomy, Christian Reconstructionist).

One friend said what helped was not asking which laws apply, but how they each law applies

Calvin's 3-fold application⁸ helps us: law shows sinner need of Christ (mirror or schoolmaster), restrains evil, shows what pleases God. But how do I teach ch 21's laws on slavery, 2nd wives? Edwards: 'There is perhaps no part of [theology] attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox [theologians] do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the dispensations of Moses and Christ.'⁹ America's greatest theologian says it's hard, it's hard! How to apply Moses as Christ-followers, Law and Gospel is a big complicated subject

But I start with the greatest theologian, Jesus, who said the least in His kingdom is the one who annuls the least of the commandments but whoever teaches them will be great in the kingdom.¹⁰ I don't want to teach others to relax a jot or tittle. Even what Jesus fulfills is still to be taught. In Mt 5 after He said that, He quoted Ex 20 and showed how to not relax its application. Murder and adultery commands from the decalogue He applied deeper to heart principles. Jesus quoted from Ex 21 just a few verses later, but changes its application for Christians ('eye for an eye...but I say to you'). That's Ex 21:24 that they had heard taught differently. Jesus applies it to individual Christians in persecution differently than to law enforcement. We don't avenge like OT Israel, we love enemies even as governments fight them. We need to teach Ex 21 but apply it rightly.

There is a general equity principle in 'eye for an eye' judges can apply but (future week study)

The NT says all scripture is useful for teaching,¹¹ but we need to apply it like Jesus and the NT. So we'll teach through the Law in the weeks ahead, trying to follow our Lord's own example. I plan to major on the major principles like He did, and not strain every gnat as scribes did. Jesus taught some commandments are 'least' or lesser' than others ('love God and love neighbor' He said is the greatest, first, foremost, and sums up all the law). Jesus affirmed there's no greater law and love is more than all burnt offerings like in Ex 20.¹² It was Jesus who spoke of different aspects or 'weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness' (vs. laws about tithing, Mt 23:23).

So how do we apply the law? WDJJ (What Did Jesus Do with the law? Get us all wristbands?). What did Jesus say to do with the law? How Jesus applied it is how I want to apply it. He said we shouldn't annul the least of the commandments or teach others to. He also said don't neglect the weightier matters of the law (justice, mercy, faithfulness). So as we teach Ex 21-23 I want to balance what's weightiest to Him, principles of justice. Faithfulness is a more significant matter of the law I think we see even in old ceremonies. The law has promises and pictures of gospel grace Jesus faithfully fulfilled to the t or dot. On the weightier principle in the law of mercy, He rebuked the Jewish law teachers who didn't apply their OT right '*I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*'¹³

God ultimately didn't want sacrifices, they're a temporary picture of what He desired: mercy

So let's look at Ex 20's sacrifices but not neglect weightier matters: mercy, justice, faithfulness. 20:22 *And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. Don't miss God's mercy in speaking to His people what He desired. No other nation saw that, and this also shows the weighty matter of God's faithfulness in His promises to them.*

²³ *You shall not make gods of silver to be **with me**, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.* This repeats what the first 2 of the 10 commandments teach: no other gods and don't make images of God. God repeats it as a weightier matter for emphasis, and warning they need to heed (golden calf, ch 32). How does that apply to us? Today we may not trust statues we make, but we may trust the silver of dollars we make. We can make gods of other things that glitter besides gold, too. There's a general principle that applies to consumerism, materialism, whatever we put in the #1 position. Don't make gods or elevate anything other than God physically or mentally. Jesus said the whole law is about loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, then loving others.

v. 23 is a moral obligation for all time, but v. 24-26 is a ceremonial ordinance for OT times

²⁴ *An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.* ²⁵ *If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it.* ²⁶ *And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'*

We don't just skip over these verses, there's still application in these verses

That was a temporary practice, but the abiding principle is purity and simplicity in worship. It still applies that we approach God modestly and He doesn't need impressive stone structures.

Church worship isn't about a building or the best tools of the trade, it can be a mound of earth. It can be in the dirt outside in the Ecuador jungle like I've experienced. It's not about sights and sounds and style of music, it's about the Savior and His sacrifice. Worship is what He says, not what I feel. It's not going up stone steps of a cathedral, it's bowing down to honor God's name. End of v. 24: *In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.*

Again in the law we see the weightier matters of mercy and faithfulness that still apply. God is faithful to mercifully come to bless His people in every place of worship. Notice He causes His name to be remembered there and He comes to bless those who do. He's faithful to this promise

We sing 'O come Emmanuel (God with us)' knowing He still comes to bless us in worship

The altar is where the weightier matters of the law in mercy and justice come together. God in justice requires death for sin in His law, but He provides mercy at the altar. We deserve to die for breaking the Ten Commandments in v. 1-17 but v. 24 offers up life. With the law is grace. Life for life is God's standard of justice, mercy allows a substitute life to die in place of another. v. 24 says on the altar they sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings, sheep and oxen. Their Father Abraham was told to offer his son Isaac on an altar as a burnt offering (Gen 22:2). Isaac asks 'where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Reply: 'the Lord will provide the lamb my son.' God stayed the execution and made an exchange, an adult sheep on the altar in his son's place.

Every Jew knew that story as they heard here 'sacrifice on an altar burnt offerings of sheep'

Just weeks earlier their sons had avoided death by sacrificing a Passover lamb without blemish. And at the end of v. 19 they fear they're going to die as they hear God speak His holy law. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is offered in His Son's sacrifice for us. It's what we celebrate at Christmas, the Christ who was born among sheep and oxen. Shepherds watching sheep came to see baby Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away sin. The earth was His altar to bring peace on earth and mercy and satisfy justice on the cross. Jesus kept all the law for us in life and in death said '*It is finished!*' He is the end of the law in its sacrifices for all who believe

The Lord did provide the Lamb for an offering for His sons and daughters

The law's weightier matters of mercy and justice are served in faithfulness to God's promises. It's better than an Israeli-Hamas swap of sinful men, the guilty for innocent hostages. Jesus was the innocent One who surrendered His own life in exchange for us guilty sinners. He can make true peace. v. 24 ends with '*peace offerings*,' so our last application is peace with God and man. Christians don't need to obey this command to make an altar, but we need to apply its principle. Mt 5:23 *Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*¹⁴ That was the application while Jews still offered animals at altars. On this side of the cross, that still applies to worship and even communion remembering Christ's offering for us

If you recall a hurt brother or sister you haven't pursued peace with, go and seek to be reconciled

The Lord's Table is important, but top priority is going, striving to reconcile before you come. Right worship requires pursuing right relationships, and asking and granting forgiveness. Rom 12 says as much as is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all. Jesus said right before in Mt 5 to be angry at a brother or call him a fool makes us guilty of hell, but '*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy...Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*' We all trespass God's law of love, pray '*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*'

Our closing song is a prayer to the Lamb of God to cleanse us as we come in this time

Think of your sins against the Savior who sacrificed Himself on a cross so you could have peace, pray for help. Think of a Passover meal where Jesus offered 'this is my body, which is for you...this cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me.' As we apply that forgiving mercy and peacemaking He will come to bless in this place where His name is remembered like Ex 20:24 says.

¹ [Is the New House Speaker, Mike Johnson, a GENUINE Christian? - Living Waters](#)

² <https://albertmohler.com/2023/10/26/briefing-10-26-23>

³ [Here's the Sculpture of Moses in Congress that Netanyahu Referenced | Time](#)

⁴ Mark Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics*, introduction.

⁵ 1 Samuel 10:25.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith.

⁷ Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus 19-40*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Lexham Press, 2016), 72-73.

⁸ From John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.1.304–10.

⁹ As cited by William VanGemeren in *Five Views on Law and the Gospel* (Zondervan, 1996), 14 [“theology/theologians” substituted in the quote for the original old English term “divinity/divines”].

¹⁰ Matthew 5:19.

¹¹ 2 Timothy 3:16.

¹² Mark 12:28-34.

¹³ Matthew 12:7.

¹⁴ NASB95.