

Title: The Grace of Law  
Text: Exodus 21-23.19 (21.1-11)  
Theme: God's gracious gift of the law  
Series: Exodus #39  
Prop Stmt. God cares about the people that most people don't.

- 1) Intro the Book of the Covenant
- 2) What are we supposed to do with this?
- 3) Look at the 1<sup>st</sup> section of the book of the covenant

Read Text: Exodus 21.1-11

Gary and Laurie Scheer have served for many years in Rwanda, Africa. Cathi and I met them 6 years ago in Kenya. This week I received this picture and note from them.

“This man, Laurent Katabirora, is not new to you who follow our prayer updates. We've asked you to pray for him over these last two years. He's been in prison sentenced to 19 years for having allegedly been on a committee that planned to kill people who had fled to a church during the genocide of 1994. There is not one shred of hard evidence yet presented in court to prove his guilt. We've been praying for his retrial for over a year. It has FINALLY been granted!

10 days ago was the first day at court. It did not go well. The "judge" took the role of prosecutor. The accused is not allowed the help of legal counsel. The judge, having spent 4 hours literally laughing at anything said by or on behalf of the accused and declaring the reasonableness of all the arguments against him, finished the day saying, "Well, I think we all can see where this is headed!" as he adjourned the court to resume this Thursday, the 20th.

I am not asking that a guilty man be set free. I am asking that you pray that justice will be served. Since nothing even remotely resembling what we would call evidence has been submitted in any of Laurent's days in court I am afraid that an innocent man will serve 19 years in prison, leaving his wife and 5 kids to fend for themselves.”

An innocent man treated as guilty, (Lockerbie bomber) a guilty man celebrated as a hero

Our world's view of power is no secret. Those who are in charge get to do whatever they want, after all, they are in charge. Positions of power are perches for personal gain. That is why our world has never understood Christ. Jesus Christ is the true King, who set aside his rights as King in order to come and die for us that we could be rescued from our sin and live as the subjects of his kingdom. The subjects of his kingdom live radically different than everyone else who are still in the kingdom of darkness. The reason for that is because there is no God like the true God. The point of this goes way beyond the fact that my God can beat your god up, cause mine is bigger. Because there is no God like the true God, God's people are to be different than all of other people. God's people are to live as true humanity, or as here in Exodus 21-23, we are learning what God expects

from his people. He expects them to be different. These chapters are part of what we call the Law. Some of God's expectations for his people are revealed in these chapters. But we get to look back at these chapters having an advantage that the children of Israel did not have. We get to see them from the perspective of what they were all pointing to. This is critical for us to keep in mind as we look at these chapters.

Here is what the law can do:

The effect of the fall was so severe on the world (human race) that it is impossible for us to fully comprehend how God originally designed for us to live. We fell hard and far. The law of God is a gracious gift from God to help us put some things in order, for the good of the people and the glory of God.

- 1) It can tell us about what is important to God.
- 2) It can tell us how his people were supposed to knit worship and life together.
- 3) It can show us pictures of Christ.
- 4) It can show us our need of Christ.

Here is what the law cannot do:

- 1) It cannot make us love God.
- 2) It cannot make us love our neighbor.
- 3) It cannot make us acceptable to God.
- 4) It cannot change our hearts.

So, do not think that if we could just somehow create a society where these laws were accepted and enforced that we would have succeeded in making the perfect little world. God is preparing his children to live as a free people. In order to live free, you have to live under his authority. Only God is truly free. What we are reading is the unfolding of the law of God by God to his people. He has given them the 10 commandments which themselves are a reflection of what matters to God. His people are told what not to do and what to do. For the most part however, God does not say what will happen if they don't do what they are commanded to do, or what will happen if they do what they are commanded not to do. The 10 commandments are like the prologue. They are not complete. Take for example the command not to kill (murder). What if someone broke into your home and is threatening to kill your wife and children? Are you supposed to do nothing to protect your family? What happens if you kill the intruder? What about the command to honor your father and mother? What if they command you to bow down to an idol? What are you supposed to do if keeping one command brings about a violation of another? The 10 commandments do not tell the entire story. So, God gives more revelation and more detail with some case studies. They don't cover any all possible scenarios, but they are sufficient for the judges of the land and the people to take it from there. This next section (21-23) is called the "Book of the Covenant." The Book of the Covenant spells out in more detail what an OT worship life is supposed to look like. The basic idea is this: Do all that you want, but don't violate these laws. You have freedom within these borders. The borders are reflected in the "do not" statements. However,

once in a while there are a couple of “be sure you do this” commands given as well. (e.g. 23.1-9)

The rest of the book of Exodus focuses on the construction of the tabernacle which is not only the place where God is going to live in the middle of his people, but it is also the place where sacrifices are offered for those (all) who break the commands. The sacrificial system is spelled out in detail in Leviticus, more laws are given in Numbers, and in Deuteronomy much of the material is repeated so it would be fresh in their minds before they entered into the land. Taken together, the first five books of the Bible are known as the Torah or Law. The 10 commandments, the Book of the Covenant, the sacrificial system, the ethical and societal and liturgical code for Israel is here in all of its detail. It was of this that David said, (Ps 119) “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors. I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” David was saying this about the law of God.

Think of this. Your sixteen year old boy has just gotten his drivers license and says, “Dad, please, please, please give me a curfew! I just love it when you establish strong boundaries for me. I think of them more than girls and would rather my soul chew on them than eat the finest pizza in the city.” We don’t think that way about laws because we fail to understand what a grace God’s law really is.

But, how are we to understand these chapters? We are not the OT people of God. We are not preparing to conquer a piece of ground, nor establish a sacrificial system that centers on a tabernacle. So, what do we do with this? How are we supposed to apply this? It is obvious that God gave it and preserved it, so what do we now, do with it? It is rather common for people to divide up the law into 3 compartments: the moral law, the civil law and the ceremonial law. Those who do this, recognize that we are not identical to the nation of Israel, in that we do not live in their land, nor have a Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system, but they also recognize that these laws are part of God’s revelation to us and are included in the Bible for our benefit. I used to look at the OT law like that, but I don’t do that anymore because the OT law was never given in three compartments. The ethical code, the laws of society and the worship life of the children of Israel all flowed together as one river. There were not three different streams. Besides, if you say that the only thing that is relevant to us today is the moral part, you find out that all of the moral imperatives are repeated in the NT. So, why bother w/ even reading this much less spend an entire sermon series on it, if all we should take away are moral imperatives that are repeated in the NT anyway? Another way to look at the OT is to try to draw principles from this for us today. While I believe that there are principles revealed, I am not sure that you can necessarily discern what that is for every law. Take for example, 23.19b. Even if you came up with a principle from that, it would be difficult to make it binding and authoritative due to the ambiguity of it. We know that all Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable. We know that these things were written for our benefit, so

what is that benefit? How are we to understand this and apply it this morning and this week?

It is always good to remember that before this was God's Word to us, it was God's Word to them – meaning: The law of God reveals the heart of God to the people of God in a specific time and place. There are going to be things that are unique to that time and place, that are not necessarily applicable today. However, we can and should see this as it was. God wants you to understand how he dealt with his people after he redeemed them. God rescued a particular people for a particular purpose. These people were set apart by God, redeemed by God and then given instructions on how to live. The ones who took it to heart, were the ones who really got it, while the rest were just along for the ride. They were the people of God in name only, but not in reality. That is clear then, that is true today. Their physical redemption is clearly a picture of our spiritual redemption. But, those who truly embrace his Word, are the only ones who can claim to be true followers. But looking a little more tightly at these chapters, it is good to remember how Christ interpreted them. These laws were summarized by Christ when he said that we are to love God with all of our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves. So, I am going to do an overview of these sections with a view toward seeing 1) what the people of God were supposed to know and believe/obey about God and 2) what the people of God were supposed to know and believe/obey about their life together as the people of God. As always, we will see reflections of Christ in this.

The book of the covenant begins and ends with a section on worship. In the middle are the laws about society. The way we worship God will be put on display in the way we live with each other. After the opening section on worship (20.22-26) there is a broad section on social life (21.1-22.17), then a final section on social responsibility as a people living in the presence of God.

Laws about servants and slaves (21.1-11)

Laws about personal injury (21.12-27)

Laws about personal responsibility (21.28-36)

Laws about personal property (22.1-17)

Laws about social responsibility (22.18-23.19)

- laws about false worship
- laws about oppression and loaning money
- laws about offerings, your firstborn and holiness
- laws about justice and mercy
- laws about the Sabbath and holy days

Two questions that we are asking as we look at these sections: 1) What can we learn about the nature of God? 2) How are the people of God supposed to look like God to each other (and by implication – to the world)?

1. **Laws about servants and slaves** (21.1-11)

**What do we learn about the nature of God in these laws about servants and slaves?**

God's people have a responsibility to care for, protect and help those who are on the lowest rung of society's ladder. The way you care for those who are vulnerable tells you a lot about how well you understand your own condition apart from God's grace.

As problematic as murder is to a society, this section of social laws begins with laws governing servants and slaves. This passage is embarrassing to some because it sounds like slavery is being condoned by God, doesn't it? Why didn't God simply abolish slavery? After all, the children of Israel had just experienced its cruelty in Egypt, surely they would be ready to be rid of the entire system? Our challenge is that most of us read into this issue, the American experience, and it is not the same. What happened in our country was kidnapping and selling – plain and simple. God addressed that kind of slavery in 21.16. Anyone caught doing that was to be executed. God has no tolerance for that kind of slavery. But, there were other kinds of servitude.

In Israel there was such a thing as voluntary servitude. A person could be hired as a member of the staff of an estate. His pay was room and board, in exchange for his services, often in the field. (Lev. 25.39) In some cases, like the prodigal son that Christ spoke of, a person became poor because of sinful decisions and hiring himself out was the only way that he could survive. Servitude was an act of mercy but like anything else, it could be abused. Sometimes a person had to pay back a debt from stealing (22.3). The idea of sitting in a jail and doing nothing (and costing society even more) really makes very little sense. If the person stole something, they need to pay it back. If they do not have what it takes to pay back, then they have to sell themselves, that is hire themselves out. God gives 2<sup>nd</sup> chances w/ consequences designed to help you change.

Another point that is often misunderstood, is that servant-hood in Israel was meant to be temporary. There was never to be a permanent upper class and lower class. This is in radical contrast to their world. Hebrews who had sold themselves to others, were set free in the 7<sup>th</sup> year. The master had a responsibility to help his servants become productive members of Israel society. Most of the time the reason a person became a servant was because they were wiped out by the consequences of their own sin, or simply by a bad harvest, or other issues related to living in a sin-cursed world. By hiring themselves out to a stable family, they could get back on their feet, get some on the job training, and be re-launched back into society. If they had sold their land, in the year of Jubilee they would even get that back.

In some cases, (5) the servant realized that life under a fair and capable master was to be preferred to life on his own. The servant concluded that it would be better for his family if he were stay in this setting, so, he could voluntarily commit himself to be a slave for life. We can all understand that. But what about verse 4? That initially seems unfair doesn't it? Well, hold the phone. The father who was free to go, was a former debtor. The last time he was free, he found himself in deep weeds. Now, he has a wife and kids. I think the point of this law is for the protection of the wife and kids. If this guy leaves and "makes it" in life, he can then buy his family's freedom, (Lev. 25) after all, they are still married and still a family. If however, he can't make it, they stayed in a stable

situation, to which he can come back and join them. We learn from this that God is careful to provide protection for slaves and servants so that they are given opportunities for advancement.

Verses 7-11 are similar in this respect. Debtors, poor and simple people are vulnerable to being exploited. God wants them protected. Historically, women have been exploited and still are. Sex-trafficking is universal. Our own community is full of it. People find ways to black-mail, intimidate and gain power of others, particularly young girls. How can a young girl who is from a poor background be protected?

Brian Fikkert (from Wisconsin) was working in a slum area of Kampala, Uganda in conditions that most of you have never seen and could hardly imagine. Part of the fruit of his ministry was seen in the conversion of an HIV positive, now former witch doctor. When he found out that she was sick, he and another lady set out to find her to see if they could help. The lady, they re-named Grace had developed tonsillitis. Because she is poor and has HIV, the local hospital refused to treat her. Desperate for relief, Grace paid her neighbor to cut out her tonsils with a kitchen knife. Realizing the gravity of the situation, his Ugandan partner asked him to pray. Brian said, “so I led all of us in whatever a conservative Presbyterian prays for ex-witch doctors with HIV who live in crowded slums and get their neighbors to cut out their tonsils with kitchen knives.” Now, while you are wiggin out about the tonsils, I want to ask you what would ever possess someone with privilege, status and money to go to such awful conditions in order to help?

These laws demonstrate that God cares about her. The man who sold his daughter did so in order to improve her prospects in life. In some cases, she might even marry the master’s son. If the master at some point did not want her anymore, he was bound to protect her. He could not treat her anyway that he wanted. This law provided three kinds of protection:

- 1) v.8 – If she does not work out, he must let her be redeemed. He cannot sell her to foreigners.
- 2) V.9 – If he chooses her for his son, then she in essence is adopted. She is given the status of a daughter.
- 3) V.10 – If that relationship is broken, she is still to be provided for, so that she is not vulnerable to being exploited.

### **How are the people of God supposed to treat each other?**

We are to view people who are disconnected from society and vulnerable to being exploited with the same care and respect that God gives them. How we do that, is a subject that demands from us, further exploration and work that I believe we must pursue as the people of God. Let me wrap this up.

The story is told of a visit that Abraham Lincoln once made to a slave auction, where he was appalled to see the buying and selling of human beings: His heart was especially drawn to a young woman on the block whose story seemed to be told in her eyes. She

looked with hatred and contempt on everyone around her. She had been used and abused all her life, and this time was but one more cruel humiliation. The bidding began, and Lincoln offered a bid. As other amounts were bid, he counter-bid with larger amounts until he won. When he paid the auctioneer the money and took title to the young woman, she stared at him with vicious contempt. She asked him what he was going to do next with her, and he said, "I'm going to set you free." "Free?" she asked, "Free for what?" "Just free," Lincoln answered, "Completely free." "Free to do whatever I want to do?" "Yes," he said, "Free to do whatever you want to do." "Free to say whatever I want to say?" "Yes, free to say whatever you want to say." "Free to go wherever I want to go?" she added with skepticism. Lincoln answered, "You are free to go anywhere you want to go." "Then I'm going with you!" she said with a smile.<sup>1</sup>

The scenario of v.5 and this incident illustrates our relationship with Christ. He sets us free in order to follow him. Service to him is true freedom. When you recognize his rightful and loving claim upon your life as Savior and Master and you, in glad surrender follow him, he places you into his kingdom and makes you a part of his family. As a member of his family, we are to treat people as he does. The way we provide, protect and love the vulnerable in a Christ-driven, gospel-based way will do more than show what kind of a people we are, it will show, what kind of a King we worship.

Does money give you a sense of value over others?  
Does a title give you a sense of power over others?  
How do you look at someone who is needy?  
How do your views match up with Christ's view of you?

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Ryken, Exodus, p.707.