

God's Concern for Community

Exodus 22:16-31

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We have said over and over that the Book of the Covenant is distinct from the Ten Commandments; it applies the principles set forth in the Ten Commandments to specific social and economic context in Israel. The Ten Commandments were written with the finger of God. The Book of the Covenant was given to Moses and written down on parchment. We have also said that the Ten Words, or Ten Commands, give us the fundamental legal principles for Israel's society, and then these laws found in the Covenant Code apply them to a specific social context. They serve as illustrations about how the law might apply in certain cases.

And we've said over and over on several different occasions that this law teaches us at least three great lessons: (1) that we are accountable to God; (2) that we are to be concerned for the welfare of our neighbor; and (3) that holiness before the Lord is a lot more than private piety; it is about public morality. Furthermore, as we have looked at these laws, we have looked at subjects like worship, slavery, murder, manslaughter, the death penalty, laws about bodily injuries, due penalty for those bodily injuries, theft, negligence and restitution. Now we come to a set of laws and some of them are case laws but some of them are principles. They concern seduction; three significant cases in which capital punishment is required; the care of strangers, widows, and orphans; loans to those who are impoverished or needy; respect for rulers; the giving of the first-fruits; and ceremonial consecration. That may sound a bit random, but there is a certain logic to this grouping of God's law so let us hear God's holy and inspired word beginning in Exodus 22:16.

If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her *to be* his wife. "If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the dowry for virgins. "You shall not allow a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death. "He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the Lord alone, shall be utterly destroyed. "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. "If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and my anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the

sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest. "If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear *him*, for I am gracious.

You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people. "You shall not delay *the offering from* your harvest and your vintage. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. "You shall do the same with your oxen *and* with your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me. "You shall be holy men to Me, therefore you shall not eat *any* flesh torn to pieces in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

Lord, again we ask that You would teach us wonderful things from Your law, and that by Your Spirit You would open our eyes that we might emulate Your compassion in our dealings with our neighbor and with our Christian brothers and sisters. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You look at a set of laws like that and wonder, "What am I supposed to get out of that?" I think that there are a number of answers to that question, but here is at least one. There is a big lesson in all the laws which are set forth in this passage tonight, and that lesson is this: our personal actions, even our private actions impact the whole community. And because God cares about the welfare of the whole covenant community, He sets forth laws which impinge upon our personal and even private actions. Let's look at some of these together. There are seven different sets of laws before us tonight. Let me outline those for you briefly.

You have the case of the seduction of an un-betrothed virgin listed in verses 16-17; you have three capital crimes listed in verses 18-20—sorcery, bestiality, and idolatry; thirdly, you have treatment of widows, orphans and strangers grouped together in verses 21-24; fourthly, in verses 25-27 you have laws on lending to the poor; fifth, in verse 28 you have a law about respect for God and rulers; sixth, in verses 29-30 you have a law about the first fruits—we first met this back in Exodus 13; and seventh, in verse 31 we have what you might call "road kill" and consecration. Maybe we'll get there by the time we get to the end of this study.

I. God's people are not to rob the chastity of others.

Let's look at some of these things together. In verses 16 and 17 you have this case of a seduced, un-betrothed virgin. I want you to notice how both the seventh and eighth commandments come to bear in this law. God is teaching us in verses 16 & 17 that God's people are not to rob the chastity of others. This case involves seduction and illicit sex with consent—not rape. Rape is dealt with elsewhere in

the code. But it does specify that a bride dowry must be paid to the father of this woman upon discovery. Now, the purpose of this is to protect the woman. A woman who was not a virgin had a very negligible opportunity to be married in this society, and she being virtually unmarriageable after this act, was taken care of by the law. She *had* to have a bride price offered to her. Her father (verse 17) nevertheless retained the right to receive the dowry but to deny the marriage. This also protected the woman. The sin that they had committed was indeed considered a sin, and there was a price for it; the price of the bride dowry. But notice that the man is held to a higher accountability. The woman is viewed in the more vulnerable situation here and therefore, the male perpetrator of the crime must pay the bride dowry. Isn't it interesting that this case law is connected with those previous cases about robbery. Why? Why would you move from robbery to seduction? Apparently because God reveals to Moses this case law concerning the seduction of an un-betrothed virgin; He views it as the stealing of virginity. Her sexual purity has been compromised and stolen and we see here the wisdom and kindness of God in discouraging sexual license and at the same time, protecting vulnerable women. Let me say in passing, have you noticed so far that we haven't found any general laws on marriage in the covenant code? Guess what? You won't. There are no generic laws on marriage in the covenant code; there are only laws which apply to specific circumstances. They're addendums like the one that we have before us. That is evidence that the covenant code is *not* intended to be a comprehensive legal code for Israel and for all nations. You're going to make up a legal code and you are not going to have any laws on marriage? Have you ever seen Mississippi's laws on marriage? It's a long set of laws; there are none in the covenant code. The covenant code serves to illustrate how to apply the principles of the Ten Commandments; it doesn't attempt to cover every possible circumstance or every major area. And so we have another example of that here. This law is simply an addendum to an existing practice with regard to marriage.

II. There are some crimes that are particularly spiritually injurious to the covenant community.

Secondly, look at verses 18-20, here we see three capital crimes dealt with: sorcery, bestiality and idolatry. Notice here how the first, second, and seventh commandments are being applied. What we learn from this passage is that there are some crimes that are particularly spiritually injurious to the covenant community. These laws are all put in the imperative; they sound just like The Ten Commandments. "You shall not allow; shall surely be put to death; shall utterly be destroyed." You get the imperative feel of The Ten Commandments even though they are dealing with specific situations. They are not phrased like the previous case laws--if this happens, if this happens, if this such and such. They are imperative; they are categorical laws about society; they are categorical ethical statements or religious stipulations and that reminds us that they are basic and fundamental. Let's look at each of them. Sorcery or witchcraft is here

placed under the ban for the sake of the whole community. This is the old covenant origin for the witchcraft laws which used to exist in England and America. In verse 19 you see the laws regarding sex with an animal. Sex with an animal as well as homosexuality was a capital crime in Israel. Now, it is interesting that some of the nations around Israel had laws like this but exempted certain animals from these laws. And so you can tell that since the law is begin given, it needed to be given. That is always a tip. When you see a law on the books there is a reason that it is there, and apparently in these times there is a relationship between this type of activity and certain types of worship of other gods in the neighboring nations.

Finally, in verse 20, you see idolatrous sacrifice mentioned. It is a violation of the first and second commands in Exodus 20:3-4, and the criminal who participates in this is put under the ban. Everything associated with him must be destroyed. Why capital crimes for these things? Think about it for a minute. Sorcery is a challenge to the sovereignty and providence of God. It is either an attempt, in some cases, to *know* the future that God has prepared, or in other cases, it is an attempt to *manipulate* the future that God has prepared. In other cases it is an attempt to usurp His sovereignty and providence over His people by doing *harm* to people through magic; and therefore, it is a challenge to God and is considered a capital crime in Israel.

What about bestiality? Well, it's a perversion of the divine gift of sex and it is a perversion and a denigration of the dignity of the image of God in man. Man is made *above* the animals and this blurs that glorious divine distinction, and it is considered a threat to the whole community and is therefore a capital crime. How about idolatry? Well, it is a fundamental denial of our purpose for being. We exist to do what? To glorify and enjoy the one true God, and idolatry is seen as a fundamental denial of this. So as murder kills the body; as far as Moses is concerned, sorcery, idolatry, and false religion kill the soul. And so these things are treated as capital crimes in Israel.

III. God is extremely concerned with the welfare of the most vulnerable in the covenant community.

Thirdly, look at verses 21-24. Here God speaks of how his people are to treat widows, orphans and strangers. We learn here that God is extremely concerned with the welfare of those who are most vulnerable in the community. This passage provides two explicit reasons and one underlying reason for God's people being kind and just in their treatment of those who are most vulnerable in society. First of all, if you look at the second half of verse 21, you'll see that Israel is to treat strangers and widows and orphans with fairness and justice. Why? Because *they* were once strangers in Egypt and therefore, they are to treat strangers graciously and compassionately and justly now. Secondly, if you look at verses 23-24, they are to treat strangers and widows and orphans rightly

because of the warning of God. God promises that He will judge those who do not treat widows and orphans with kindness. And underlying these two things is God's own compassion and later in the chapter, we see a declaration of this: "I am gracious," God says in verse 27. Because God is gracious or perhaps this should be translated compassionate, Israel is to be compassionate. Strangers were resident aliens; they were foreign born, permanent residents and because they were foreign born, they were liable to discrimination and God explicitly prepares a law that demands that they not be mistreated and in fact, that they receive fair treatment from His people. This shows His compassion and His concern for those who are vulnerable. In verse 22, widows and orphans are mentioned. It would have been tempting to exploit because they had no natural protectors and we are told here that this is a grave sin in God's eyes to do so. He says, "If they cry out to Me, I promise you I'll hear them." And His words of judgment are chilling. He says that if you take advantage of orphans and widows, I'll make your wife and children widow and orphans. God's warning of judgment in verses 23 & 24 promises that He will hear the cries of the mistreated and He will judge those who mistreat others correspondingly. It kind of reminds you of what happened in Egypt. The Pharaoh attempted to kill the male children; in the end the first-born of Egypt died—blow for blow, penalty to crime. God's attributes warnings and commands in our own experience ought to move us to have hearts of compassion for the weak. The importance of these laws in Israel is apparent from how often they are repeated-- especially in the laws of Moses. God is serious about concern for those who are most vulnerable. This same train of thought continues in the fourth section that I want to look at with you.

IV. God reveals His own heart of compassion for the downtrodden.

Look at verses 25-27. These are laws on lending to the needy. Here God reveals His own heart of compassion for the downtrodden and shows us how He expects us to live in relation to them even in these laws that He gives to us about lending to the poor. As above, we see here Israel's concern for the disadvantage is more than humanitarian; it's based on God's command and on God's character.

This passage demands that Israel not participate in usury. Now, that word *usury* has been debated over the years. What does *usury* mean? *The New American Standard* translates it as "interest" here, but there have been two or three interpretations of it. Some have said that usury means any interest at all. However, during the first inklings of capitalism post-Renaissance in Italy when both Catholic scholars, and then later Protestant scholars, started interpreting this passage, they felt a little uneasy about rendering it just as interest. They said it really means *exorbitant* interest. It doesn't rule out interest at all; it means exorbitant interest. Don't charge exorbitant interest. Then, there have been some who have pointed out that in this passage and others, it is directly related to money loaned to the needy and so it is interpreted that it is interest charged to the needy.

So what is *usury*? What is being talked about here? Well, it's probably one and three. In other words, in this passage, God is explicitly dealing with *poor* relief, and He is demanding that His people not charge interest *at all* on money which is given for the relief of poverty. This interpretation is confirmed by verse 26. Look at the language there in verse 25, "If you lend money to My people" and here is further explanation, "to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him. You shall not charge him interest." This is a law about generosity to those in need of poverty relief and it is a law about restricting the taking advantage of the poor.

Furthermore, in verses 26 and 27, we have this story about returning the cloak of a person before sundown. The cloak was often a person's only possession. Certainly it was the most significant possession of the poor, and it was used as bedding at night as well as covering during the day. Sometimes the cloak was taken as a pledge when something was loaned to that person. So again we see this law in verses 26 and 27 protecting the welfare of the needy.

There is often a reticence, or even a weakness, in evangelical churches when it comes to *tangible* help for the needy. The principles of this command ought to remind us to be generous to those in need and this whole section of God's commands needs to be coordinated in our thinking with diaconal mercy ministry. There is much more to say, but I have two minutes and three points to cover.

V. God's people are to display a proper reverence and respect for Him and the civil rulers under His providence.

Notice in verse 28 we have the third and the fifth commandments applied to a civil law. God's people are to display a proper reverence and respect for God and for civil rulers who are under His providence. Isn't it interesting to you that these laws on respecting God and civil rulers come immediately after the laws on care for the needy, for the stranger, for the widow and for the orphan? Could it be that the juxtaposition of this law about respecting God—about not reviling, not cursing God (verse 28), follows those verses about care for the needy because our treatment of the poor, or rather our mistreatment of the poor, constitutes an ignoring of the plight and care of the poor in the covenant community, which is to revile God? Could it be that these are put side by side to show us one way that we revile God, by ignoring love to neighbor?

In the first part of verse 28 we have a reiteration of the third commandment. The third commandment told us not to take the Lord's name in vain; this commandment says not to curse Him or revile Him. It is put in the negative but it is the same command applied. And the concerns of this verse also link the third and fifth commands about honoring father and mother. We see that in the very next phrase. The second part of the verse is an application of the third

commandment to *others* in authority. “You shall not curse God *nor* a ruler of your people.” Do you know where this verse is quoted in the New Testament? You remember what was happening in Acts 23:5? Paul was in a ‘kangaroo court’ and he wasn’t real happy about it. He was being mistreated and treated unjustly and some guy was mouthing off next to him, and Paul rebuked him. And he was then struck and Paul found out that the man was the high priest and he said, “I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have rebuked him because the Bible says that you are not to revile your leaders.” Paul quotes this very passage in the *context* of persecution. And this is an important principle for us because modern cynicism about, and disrespect for, authority is rife. I would suggest to you that it is not simply derivative of our disillusionment of government leaders but it is also due to a failure to embrace respect for God and His words about leaders. We’re out of time and there is more to say. Let’s look to the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this opportunity to look to Your laws. All of Your laws remind us of the importance of Godly living in the public sphere and the importance of our godliness and uprightness to the whole community. Our behavior is not just our own business; it impacts everybody. So help us to walk in such a way that we do what is right to and for our brothers and sisters in the Christian community and our neighbors in the community at large. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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