

Justice and Neighbor-love

Exodus 23:1-9

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The Ten Words give us the fundamental principles for Israel's society and the covenant code here in Exodus 21, 22, and chapter 23 specifically applies those principles to the social context in which Israel found herself. And so the code is at least, in part, a temporary and derivative application of those general principles. And you don't have to look far to find changes even within the first five books of the Bible of some of the specific applications of these general principles.

That having been said, it is also clear that there are general lessons which are still applicable to us today. For instance, as we study the covenant code, it is stressed over and over that we are all accountable to God. How we respond in specific situations in dispensing justice to neighbor is something about which we are accountable to God. Secondly, the covenant code makes it clear that we are to be concerned for the welfare of our neighbor, and that holiness is more than personal piety; it is about public morality. And we've seen some of the instances of public morality dealt with so far. Believe it or not, over the course of this study we've dealt with the subjects of worship, slavery, murder and manslaughter, the death penalty, laws about bodily injuries—due penalty, appropriate penalty for the particular crime, theft, negligence, restitution, seduction, three significant societal capital crimes, how you go about caring for strangers or resident aliens, widows and orphans, lending to the needy, respect for rulers, the giving of the first fruits and ceremonial consecration. All of those things so far in the covenant code from Exodus 20 to this point here in Exodus 23.

With this message, we come to a section that in the main applies the ninth commandment-- the commandment not to bear false witness. In the main, this set of laws or exhortations, calls on the people of God and especially on those who are in positions of influence—judges for instance, to be truthful in their dealings in the settings of the courts, but also it exhorts us to kindness to our enemies. So let's hear God's word in Exodus 23, beginning in verse 1.

Let's pray:

Lord, help us as we study this passage tonight to do so with a desire that we might display the reality of renewed hearts with the Law engraved upon them

through the grace work of the spirit of Christ. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The big message of this passage is clear. We are not to show a sinful bias toward our neighbor. We are not to show a sinful favoritism or partiality, whether that is in the courts in the midst of a dispute, or in neighbor relations, and especially those who are in places of leadership in the community are not to show sinful bias, favoritism, and partiality. In other words, this passage is in large measure a call to biblical impartiality.

I'd like you to look at it with me in three parts. In verses 1-3, we have dictates for personal and practical obedience of the ninth commandment. Then if you look at verses 4 and 5, we have directives for practical kindness to personal enemies. And then in verses 6 through 9, we have demands for Israel's judges to show impartial justice to all alike. Let's look at each of these three parts.

I. Our personal commitment to holiness is to show itself in our public fairness and truthfulness in disputes.

First, verses 1 through 3, where we see these dictates for personal and practical obedience to the ninth commandment. What we learn in this passage is that our personal commitment to holiness is to show itself in our public fairness and truthfulness in the context of disputes. The language of this whole section, really verses 1 through 9, but especially verses 1 through 3, sounds a lot like the Ten Commandments. Did you catch the five "you shall nots" in the first three verses? Verse 1: "You shall not." Verse 2: "You shall not." Verse 3: "Nor shall you." Over and over "you shall not." General exhortation, general prohibition, no penalty. These are not like those case laws we were studying just a few verses ago. These sound like those grand exhortations of the Ten Commandments. "Thou shall not kill." The language sounds like the Ten Words.

We have here, then, categorical laws; these aren't like the case laws. If this happens, then you do this; if this happens, then you do this. These are categorical laws—no penalties—they are exhortations. They come with some threatenings. Five prohibitions are found in verses 1 through 3 which outlaw behavior in courts of law that would jeopardize the integrity and the impartiality of the judicial process. These laws in verse 1 through 3 are applications of the ninth command. You shall not bear false witness, and the exhortations of verses 1 through 3 are especially directed at the people of Israel. When we get to verses 6 through 9, they will be directed primarily to the judges of Israel. But first Moses speaks to the people of Israel specifically about their behavior in legal settings and legal proceedings. And these commands indicate how seriously God takes impartial justice and the well being of our neighbor even if we are in dispute with our neighbor.

And there are five instructions given here regarding our conduct in court and in

general legal judicial settings. Look at them. You'll see one in verse 1; you'll see a second one in verse 1; you'll see two of them in verse 2; and you'll see one of them in verse 3. Let's start off with verse 1. "You shall not bear a false report." There's a specific application of the ninth commandment. "You shall not bear false witness." You shall not bear false report. That addresses those who are litigants in a judicial case as well as the witnesses involved. There are people in this room who know how important that command is, and it's violated all the time. Secondly, look at verse 1. "Do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." There is a command against collusion with people who are perpetrating a fraudulent charge or claim. Don't collude or join in with a wicked man as a malicious witness.

Then in verse 2: "You shall not follow the masses in doing evil." No mob rule in Israel. It doesn't matter if the multitude is doing it if the multitude is wrong. We are not to follow along with a perverted majority. Perhaps this part of verse 2 especially refers to passively acquiescing to what the majority is doing. Look at what is said in the very next phrase. "Nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice." Same issue but there is active involvement. In the one previous you went along with the multitude, here you are actually fostering the wrong thing that the multitude is doing. So you are neither passively nor actively to acquiesce or be involved with a multitude in perverting justice.

In verse 3 you see the fifth command, "Nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute." Now that's the most surprising one. You are expecting Moses to say, "Don't be partial to a rich man in his dispute." But he is saying don't be partial to a poor man in his dispute. Now that is so surprising that liberal scholars retranslate that verse and they add one particular syllable to the word for poor man and change it into rich man, but there's actually a parallel passage in Leviticus that says the same thing, which confirms that Moses really means what he's saying. Why does he say this? Think about it. For two chapters now Moses has been saying what? Don't take advantage of the poor. Care for the poor. But even though we are not to take advantage of the poor, to care for the needy and not to oppress them it would be wrong to be biased for the poor in the context of court. That would be just as wrong as being biased towards the rich. What is being called upon here? We are being called to be impartial. We are not to look at the social condition of people who are before the court. In the interest of impartial justice, no consideration is to be given to the social standing of the litigants. That, by the way, is revolutionary for near eastern law because even if you take time to sit down and for instance read the Code of Hamurabbi or the Laws of Hamurabbi, there are all sorts of distinctions made on the basis of the social standing of the individuals involved. But God's law is to be impartially administered. What is the significance of this for us? Our love for God is to be made manifest in our personal commitment to justice, fairness, and truth-telling in relationship to our neighbor. Personal piety is to reflect itself in a personal commitment to justice, to the truthfulness of our speech, our fairness in judicial

dealings, and our personal commitment to holiness is to show itself in public fairness and truthfulness in disputes. There's the first directive. It is aimed primarily at the people—people who are going to be witnesses, people who are going to be litigants.

II. Our commitment to the second table and to neighbor-love must even extend to enemies.

Now an interesting thing is introduced in verses 4 and 5. It's the second thing I want you to see tonight. Having heard these dictates of how we're to see the ninth commandment applied in our lives, Moses now tells us some directives for practical kindness to personal enemies. In fact, he gives two examples. In these two examples he shows us that our commitment to the second table of the law—the neighbor law commands, must extend even to our enemies we are told.

The enemy here may well mean your legal adversary. This may not be an enemy of the nation although it could mean that. It may just mean the person who happens to be your legal adversary. You're having a property dispute; the guy who is on the other side is your enemy. You may not want to kill him or maybe sometimes you do feel like killing him, but he is your legal counterpart; he's your adversary in court. In both of these two illustrations, we are told to treat that opponent, that enemy, with humanity and with kindness.

In verse 4, the point is that we should deal with an adversary just like we would deal with a neighbor. If we came across a neighbor's ox or donkey that had wandered away from his farm, we'd take the animal back. And this law says to do the same for your enemy. He's your opponent but treat him like a neighbor when the opportunity presents itself. The example in verse 5 is one of a burdened down domestic animal. The animal is so burdened down that it can't get up. Guy Richard said that the most humorous thing on their trip on the way over to Scotland to begin their studies there was when they had gotten everything together, packed in and they had loaded down his little daughter's back pack and put it on her and it was so heavy that she toppled over backward and her little hands and feet were up in the air and she was not amused that everybody else was laughing at her. Well, here's this animal burdened down and he can't get up, but he's your enemy's animal and what's the point of verse 5? Well, the donkey hadn't done anything to you, so don't take it out on him. Rather, show appropriate kindness to one's adversary. Understand, the mind set of the believer is to be actively looking for opportunities to express neighbor love even with an enemy.

By the way, do you see here how the principle of impartiality is being extended beyond the judicial setting? You're to be impartial in court. Now you're to be impartial in how you deal with your neighbor. That principle of impartiality extends to a practical concern for our neighbor's well being. This passage, and we could go to others, but this passage makes it crystal clear that the idea that 'the Old

Testament taught that you were to hate your enemy' and that 'the New Testament teaches that you're to love your enemy,' is just a fallacy. It's not that far from this to love your enemy. The principle is practical, appropriate concern even for one's enemy. And, by the way, we should also say that the uniqueness of the New Testament, as we look at this law, is if we understand Jeremiah 31, that by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit turns our heart of stone to a heart of flesh, and that law which was written on our hearts even as pagans which condemned us in our conscience, now becomes by the Spirit an energizing force for the pleasure of God, for the doing of what is right, for the walking in holiness, and so this law written on hearts of flesh becomes something that we love and long to emulate rather than something that condemns us and speaks against our conscience.

III. There is a special burden on those in positions of influence (especially, here, the judiciary) to show justice to the vulnerable.

In verses 6 through 9 we see a third thing. Now we're back to those court laws again. Here we see some demands for Israel's judges to show impartial justice to all alike. There's a special burden on those who are in positions of influence to show justice to the vulnerable. In the legal system, sometimes the only people who can help the vulnerable are those who have been officially charged to do so and placed in positions of leadership and responsibility. Here especially those who were in the judiciary.

Several things are told to us. In verse 6 we're told that those who are poor and needy are not to be denied justice. They are themselves dependent upon the court for justice. They are dependent upon those who are influential in society for justice and are not to be denied justice. In verse 7 we are commanded to be careful not to convict or harm the innocent. Why? Because God will ultimately judge. Here a motivation is stated: "Keep far from the false charge; don't kill the innocent or the righteous for I will not acquit the guilty." You know, it's an irony. Here's a judge involving himself in the conviction of the innocent, and God is saying, "If you convict the innocent, I will not acquit the guilty." Meaning, of course, the judge. The judge becomes guilty in a wrongful conviction of the innocent and God is saying, "I won't forget that. I will bring about justice." The judge is to have nothing to do with fraudulent claims. In this case a miscarriage of justice that would result in the death penalty being applied to an innocent person. We are to be careful not to convict or harm the innocent because God is the judge.

In verse 8 bribes are rebuked. Bribes are subversive of impartial judgment and they are rebuked throughout the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. In fact, according to the Rabbis, even if a litigant was in some perfunctory way showing courtesy to the judge, the judge was to be immediately dismissed from the case because of the principle of impartiality. By the way, isn't it interesting

how bribery, though it was a cultural norm in the near east just as it is in some parts of the world today, is boldly confronted by Moses. I can see someone saying to Moses, someone sort of the equivalent of a social anthropologist in Moses' day, "Now look Moses, don't get so bent out of shape about bribery, that's just how this culture does business." And Moses is saying, "Well guess what? Some things are going to change." I think our tendency today is to too quickly write something off as cultural. "Well, that's just cultural." Well, maybe God doesn't like the culture being that way. And He says that's going to change. And that's exactly what Moses does here; this is a norm which would have been accepted by everybody in the near east. Bribery was a standard *modus operandi* just as it is in some places in Central and South America today. And God says, "Not anymore." He confronts the cultural norm with a transcendent value. And He says, "The cultural norm will now come into accord with My transcendent value." He doesn't say, "My transcendent value is subject to the cultural norm." And we so often do that.

And then in verse 9, we see a repetition of Exodus 22:20. Look back at that verse in Exodus 22. In Exodus 23:9, we are told to not oppress the stranger, but unlike the passage in Exodus 22, we are here given a motive for it. What are we told? In Exodus 23:9 we're told that we are not to oppress a stranger. Why? Because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. Since we ourselves know the feelings of a stranger; since we were strangers in the land of Egypt; since we yearned to be shown justice; we are not to take advantage of the stranger. There's the picture. Israel was in Egypt as a stranger. They remember that experience, so they are not to be oppressive of strangers in Israel.

And all of us understand that motivation because Christians have known what it is to be strangers. We were strangers and aliens to the household of God. And by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been made citizens and sons. But we have not forgotten what it was like to be strangers and aliens and therefore, we are to show kindness towards those who are strangers and aliens.

But this passage especially speaks to those believers who are in positions of influence and leadership. It is incumbent upon them to promote justice and to confront all wrong doing. Over and over in this passage we see God applying the directives of neighbor love to public morality for believers. And that's something that very easily translates into our spheres. Our witness is grossly compromised in the world when we falter in these areas. May God help us to be faithful. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we pray that You would help us to do more than lip service to the laws of neighbor love, but especially in our truth telling, in our fairness, in our justice, and in our kindness even to those who are enemies, that we would show that we realize as those who have received much mercy how to give much mercy, and as those who serve a just God we know how to show justice and fairness to others. Help us then we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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