

And Then The Other Commands.

Exodus 21:12-24

Portions adapted from, "An Eye For An Eye! I Want My Revenge!" by Ross Cochrane @ SermonCentral.Com

As we have followed the Exodus story up to this point, Moses has brought the people of Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai (God's mountain) where he has gone up alone, or with Aaron his brother to speak with God "in the thick darkness where God was" (20:21). There God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which formed the general principals by which the Hebrew people were, and yes we Christians are still, expected to live. You can find the Ten Commandments in your Bible, both in Exodus, chapter 20 and then again in Deuteronomy chapter 5 where Moses repeats them some 40 years later.

But what most people don't know is that immediately after giving Moses the Ten Commandments, in chapters 21-24, God next expanded these commandments into a list of laws governing everyday events, which might happen once the people had settled in the promised land, along with indicating the legal recompense due anyone who broke these laws. God told Moses, **These are the ordinances that you shall set before [the people of Israel]** (21:1).

God's laws given in this section do such things as making a distinction between premeditated murder and both accidental or negligent homicide along with their appropriate punishment, capital or otherwise. They also explain how to treat slaves, thieves, or disobedient children along with livestock problems, agricultural disputes, lending practices and much more. Together these laws were known as **The Book of the Covenant** because as chapter 24 records,



and all the people answered with one voice,
'All the words that the Lord has spoken
we will do.... We will be obedient.'
Exodus 24:7-10

Moses came and told 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 that the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord... then he took the **book of the covenant**, and read it in the hearing of the people; and [again] they said, **'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'** (24:7-10).

Sadly, most people skip over this legal section in Exodus thinking that such laws no longer apply to us in modern times since we don't have oxen running amuck and we long ago outlawed slavery. But if you look more deeply into these laws in their context, you can learn a lot about what God values.

- You will also discover that portion of scripture which outlines the concept of "lex talionis" (*eye for an eye, tooth for tooth ...*(21:24)),
- along with the scriptural origin of the expression, "Who's ox is being gored?,"
- but even more importantly you will learn what God thinks are the rights of the unborn child.

But what you can learn most of all from this portion of scripture is that God values recompense, not revenge, punishment, but not cruelty, deterring crime, but also not accepting bad behavior and especially that God highly values human life in all its circumstances – rich, poor, citizen, or alien – always seeking to protect the most vulnerable from oppression by the more powerful.

Some of the rules in this section will still seem cruel and unfair to us, like God's acceptance of **slavery**; most of which for the Hebrew people was actually **indentured servitude**, rather than perpetual enslavement as it was practiced in early America. Also that while indentured slaves had rights and were to be treated fairly, their rights and their status were not equal to that of a free person. **So we might feel justified in asking, does God approve of slavery?** We can try to excuse it by noting that according to their laws, slaves in Israel were better off than in other cultures of the time – which they were, but let's learn what was really going on here and so gain a better understanding of what God actually thinks of slavery.

Slavery didn't come into being with the Book of the Covenant. It had long been a part of ancient culture, remember Joseph's brothers thought nothing of selling him into slavery and as an entire people, Israel had been enslaved in service to Pharaoh. In fact some of the children of Israel coming out of Egypt, probably owned their own slaves and brought them along to the promised land. So what these laws in the Book of the Covenant did was to regulate the practice of slavery, ensuring that slaves were treated humanely, without commenting on whether the practice was right or wrong.

However, as you read along in your Bible, you will quickly learn what the Hebrew people also eventually learned, which was that God greatly disapproves of slavery, but do to the nature of the times chose to allow and control what could not be easily eliminated. We learn this from the various laws which God instituted concerning the acquisition and treatment of both slaves and slavers.

- Such as the law requiring that no one in the Hebrew nation will oppress the **widow, the orphan, or the resident alien** – those people most susceptible to being enslaved against their wishes – because God promised that He would hear their cries and avenge them.
- There was also a law that any female slave purchased for the purpose of marriage, would thereafter be treated as a wife with equal privileges or set free.
- Also a law that prohibited the return of runaway slaves to their masters; the escaped slave was not to be oppressed wherever they chose to settle (Dt 23:15).
- But most significantly, there was the law demanding the death penalty for anyone caught kidnapping people to sell as slaves (Ex 21:16, Dt 24:7).

Realize that kidnapping was how most African slaves were acquired, to then be sold as "property" in America, with little hope of ever gaining their own freedom once again. Contrast this condition with the Hebrew slave, who at any time could be redeemed to freedom by his or her family or by paying their own debt.

We also need to understand that slavery, as practiced in Israel, provided a social net to care for those who fell into complete poverty and might otherwise perish. With all the government sponsored social services available to me, I will never know what it might feel like to be so poor that I am left with no option but to sell, myself, or my children, or my entire family into slavery, because this was the only thing I could do to ensure their survival. As slaves at least they would be fed, cared for and protected by laws. In Israel, slavery saved lives

Slavery was a place where a person could start over, even learn a trade. A person in financial trouble could sell himself as a slave to a wealthy person to pay off his debt. But no matter how big the debt, after 6 years of service, he was to be freed with the master even giving him money and resources to start fresh (Dt 15:12-1). It is a little known fact that between half, to two thirds of all Europeans coming to colonial America came as indentured servants and it was these ancient Biblical principles which largely guided and limited their servitude to six years.

Also appropriately, convicted thieves who could not pay the penalty for their crime – usually five times the value of what was stolen – would be sold into slavery for duration of that debt, thus both conveniently negating the need for prisons, while setting appropriate term limits for their incarceration (which makes me wonder if this principle could somehow be adapted for modern times).

So slavery, at least among the Hebrew people, was part of the social network designed to insure that no one would perish due to poverty and that petty criminals received appropriate punishment without having to become a ward of the state.

So much for slavery. Now let's move on to the distinctions made between accidental or negligent homicide and **premeditated murder** or self-defense, as also covered in this section.

- The Book of the Covenant assigned the **death penalty** for both premeditated and murders committed in a moment of passion – what we would call 1st and 2nd degree murder,
- but for an accidental homicide, it established refuge cities to where the person could flee and be protected from revenge until judges could determine the appropriate recompense (21:12-14).
- **Killing a person who was breaking into your home was also allowed**, but the law was written in a unique way so as to make a distinction between a genuine act of self-defense and one where the burglar actually intended no human harm (22:2).
- In a similar way, if your ox gored another person to death, your ox would be destroyed but you the owner would not be held liable, unless that ox was known to have gored people in the past, then you the negligent owner would be put to death with the ox.

- Or if your ox gores another farmer's ox, that ox is then to be sold and the two of you are to split the proceeds.
- But if that ox had a reputation for goring other oxen, then the offending animal would be given to the offended farmer – ox for an ox - while all you will get to keep is the dead ox.

Thus to ask the question, "**whose ox is being gored?**" is an attempt to determine among two parties in conflict who was being the most negatively impacted by the event (now, don't you feel smarter for knowing this?).

But the most compelling capital offense law which speaks to legal arguments in our day, regards the **accidental death of a prematurely born child** (Exodus 21:22). This law declares that if two men are engaged in a fight in the midst of which a pregnant woman gets struck so as to cause her to enter premature labor, if the mother survives and the child is born without any further harm, then one or both of the fighters will be assigned a fine according to what the woman's husband demanded and the judge deemed fair. But if either the mother or the premature baby died, then the law demanded a life for a life.

These days, as our current abortion laws continue to deeply divide the nation, by this and other Biblical passages, the Christian should at least know that God both sees and values every unborn child (cf. also Psalm 22:9-11, 139:13-16). While some abortions may be medically necessary, such actions always take the life of a person already known and loved by God. Thus using abortion simply as a means of birth control even though legal, in God's opinion is the same as committing murder.

But before pro-life people are tempted to bring this ancient law forward as a banner in their fight to overturn Roe V. Wade, realize that this same Biblical chapter also requires that any child who strikes or curses their parent should also be put to death. My point being that you can't lift any single portion of the Bible out as a proof text in support of your personally held position, without taking into account what the rest of the Bible says about other matters, with which you might disagree. So, while we can't bring ancient laws to bear upon modern circumstances – such as the current attempt by Muslims to return exclusively to Sharia Law – the Christian can learn perhaps how to better shape modern laws in line with God's life values.

While there are many more both interesting and instructive laws to be found in these three chapters, the only other one we can deal with today is the concept of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth," which is known as *Lex Talionis* or the **Law of Equal Retribution**(21:23-24). While some people claim that this law is barbaric and lacking in compassion, realize that the "eye for an eye" principle stopped the cycle of continual feuding and escalating injustice, which occurred before there was such a law. Also understand that this **law simply mandates that a person has no right to demand more in retribution than that which has been done to him and that in most cases it literally did not require the physical taking of an eye for an eye.** What

this meant is that the town Elders would negotiate the dispute or crime between the two parties in conflict to determine an appropriate financial penalty, as long as it did not exceed the cost of the actual damage done.

In our supposedly more enlightened modern times, we no longer hold this Biblical law of equal retribution which, based on the fame or wealth of the parties involved, caused some judgments of recompense to far outweigh the injuries done while at other times to provide not nearly enough.

Thus while our culture has watered down many such Biblical principles, the Christian who seeks to honor God and love others, can learn that they need to value all people equally, to treat all people with equal respect and to always be both just and compassionate in our dealings with them.

In closing, let's return for just a moment to the question of what God thinks about slavery?

There is one more law in this portion of Exodus regarding the lifelong status of a slave. If, after six years of service that person realizes that his life as a slave under a good master, will always be better than any life he could live as a free person, then that slave can come before the judges to declare his love for his master and ask to remain as his slave for the rest of his life (21:5-6, Dt. 15:15-16). This person was thereafter known as a "love slave."

It was based on this loving relationship of voluntarily serving a good master for life that the Apostle Paul and the other apostles would call themselves a "slave of Christ" or "the slave of God," while also urging all Christians to consider themselves to be living in the same relationship (Romans 1:1, Titus 1:1, see also 1 Cor. 9:19).

now that you have been freed from sin
and **enslaved to God**, the advantage
you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life
Romans 6:22

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23).

While it goes against every fiber of both our rebellious human streak and American ethos, we must acknowledge that God is by rights, both ultimate Lord and Master of not only all the earth, but also of you and me and that the reality of slavery in one form or another has always dominated our life. The Bible teaches that until Christ "redeemed" us, buying our lives back from death so that we might live together with Him as children of God ... we lived as slaves of sin. And yes Christ and the apostles often

contrasted the freedom we now have in Christ with that former slavery. As Jesus said, *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed* (John 8:36). But at the same time the Bible also teaches that in view of all the good that God has done for us, our only reasonable response would be to dedicate our life as a living sacrifice back to God - to now voluntarily live the rest of our life as a "love slave" for God (Romans 12:1-2).

As Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, since Christ died for us, we should no longer be living for ourselves, but for him (2 Cor. 5:15). Or to put it more bluntly as Paul also wrote, *do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, **and that you are not your own?***

For you were bought with a price;
therefore glorify God in your body.
1 Corinthians 6:19-20

There you have it, we may not think of ourselves as ever being slaves, but the Bible declares just as we lived the first half of our lives as unwitting slaves to sin and death, now as God's "born again" children we are called to voluntarily live our life as a love slave for God; as Jesus did before us, setting the example for us to follow (Philippians 2:5-9). Jesus assures us that in this relationship we will find rest for our soul and our burdens to be light (Matthew 11:28-30).

God the good master can teach me how to live a new life honoring fair recompense not revenge, just punishment, but without cruelty and taking a stand against crime while not accepting bad behavior. I can live rightly with others in the workplace and in my culture. I can be truthful, honest, act with integrity and wisdom. Most importantly, I can know forgiveness when I fail and learn to give forgiveness to those who have failed me.

Together let us thank God for finding the way to restore us both to His fellowship and His loving parental mastery over us.