

Principles From God's Law

Exodus 21:1-36

I used to love math class in grade school and high school.

I seem to enjoy things that have a definitive result.

With math if you use the right equation and follow the right steps you end up with the right answer every time.

While I liked being able to come up with the right answer, there were times where I didn't see a whole lot of meaningful purpose in the answer that I had calculated.

I remember in one class we were learning about Pythagoras' theorem and how it relates to trigonometry.

We learned that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.

With that formula if you have any two sides of a right angle triangle you can calculate the length of the unknown side.

We also learned the memory aid Soh Cah Toa which allows you to calculate the two unknown angles of a right angle triangle.

I don't know why it got into my head that day, but I started to wonder what was the point of learning all that stuff and so I asked my teacher.

I could tell the question caught her a bit off guard and she wasn't able to provide a satisfactory answer and so I went on learning in ignorance but still enjoyed getting the right answers.

Later on in life, however, I started building things and all of the sudden trigonometry became incredibly practical.

Not that long ago when we were working on the house next door to the church here we had to lift material up to the roof but there was no real way to get a lift in there to do it.

So we built one and to calculate the angle of the ramp at the distance from the building to land at the right height I used Pythagoras and Soh Cah Toa and what do you know math is practical!

Just like math has practical applications, God's word has practical applications.

[This morning our text is **Exodus 21:1-36**. In this chapter God begins to give practical examples to Moses on how the Ten Commandments are to be applied to everyday life in Israel. As we look at these next few chapters we are likely going to find some of what we read here a little unsettling at first. It is really important to think carefully and rightly about what is written here remembering that God is God and we are not! As we apply God's word to our life we must always remember to do that in the light of the cross of Christ. Keeping that in mind we

begin to see some important and helpful principles here in chapter 21 that are good for our personal lives and society in general. Principle number one is...]

Point #1 – God wants people to be able to meet their needs.

When things go wrong in life for one reason or another it is good to have a means by which people can get access to food, clothes, and shelter.

I know full well that the issue of slavery is a hot button topic in our world today.

I find the African slave trade to be absolutely evil, and I am thankful for the many Bible believing Christians who put an end to it.

In no way am I suggesting that slavery is good or that it should be practiced.

Nowhere does the Bible make slavery a necessary command and nowhere is it celebrated as a good thing.

The scriptures do, however, regulate the practice of slavery and what is discussed in this chapter is a far different kind of slavery than the kind of slavery that we are familiar with which is rooted in racism.

Verses 2-6 here deal with someone who voluntarily sells themselves into slavery.

In the ancient world there is no such thing as social assistance.

If things went financially bad for someone they few options. They could beg for money, turn to crime, or they could sell themselves into slavery.

Notice the arrangement here is temporary and according to Deuteronomy the master is supposed to give a number of things to the slave when he goes free.

The slave here also takes everything he had when he came.

The only exception is if his master gives him a wife, then he may be forced to decide between freedom and staying with his family.

That might seem unfair to us, but I think providing is likely in view here. If the man is not capable of providing for a family before he goes into slavery, he likely will not at the end of his time of service as well.

The best choices to make in that situation are to remain single or choose to remain a servant for life to honour the marriage covenant which would mean staying with the master for life (awl through the ear to the door. Keil says this is a symbol of being bound to the house for life).

In verses 7-11 we are told about a man selling his daughter ‘as a servant.’

This is an altogether different situation. This is not mere slavery, this is a marriage.

I know we cringe at the idea of arranged marriages, but in the ancient world it was commonplace.

What is important to see here is the necessity of provision for the woman. She is to be treated like a member of the family and any failure to do so meant she would be free to leave in order to be provided for.

While we may have a hard time with some of what is written here, we need to appreciate that the purpose of these things is to meet the needs of people in difficult situations.

[A few weeks ago our family went camping with some of our extended family. I took some time a few mornings and went fishing. I caught nothing. 6:00am and first one out on the lake and I caught nothing. After about 10 minutes Michelle's uncle and cousin showed up. Within five minutes they caught a beautiful pickerel. Put the line in and caught another, and another, and another, while I caught nothing. They did take some pity on me and gave me a couple of pieces from their fish fry and I lived out the phrase, "If you give a man a fish he'll eat for a day, if you teach him to fish he'll eat for life." It would have tasted better if I had caught it myself.]

The fact is we are made to work.

God gave Adam the mandate to take care of the garden before the fall.

I know there are circumstances where people are not physically able to work and the bible addresses that in other places, what is in view here is able bodied people who fall into difficulty.

Generally speaking if human beings continually get something for nothing it feeds into our sinful natures.

We become lazy, ungrateful, discontent, etc...

This arrangement here provides the opportunity for someone to have access to food and shelter, but all the while enjoy the dignity of work.

[While I would never suggest a return to slavery, there is a good principle for us here. Rather than dependency people need opportunity to earn a living especially when they find themselves in a difficult position. In addition to being able to provide, verses 12-27 highlight a second important principle from the application of God's law. These verses deal with people harming one another and show us that...]

Point #2 – God wants people to be safe in society.

The Lord's desire for the people of Israel here is that they would be able to live from day to day without fear of being assaulted.

There is a lot of ground that is covered in verses 12-27 and while we don't have the time this morning to analyze each situation in detail we can clearly see a theme that runs throughout and that is the protection of life.

Verses 12-14 deal with intentional murder versus accidentally causing someone's death.

Accidental death is covered under God's sovereign rule of everyday life and the person who caused the death is permitted to live by fleeing to a 'City of Refuge' (Numbers 35)

The punishment for intentional murder is crystal clear here (v. 12).

Since capital punishment is not practiced in our society many of us tend to react negatively against it when we read about it in the Bible, but we must not let our experience rob us of the ability to see what is going on here.

It is impossible to escape the fact that a punishment for a crime is a reflection of the value a society places upon the victim.

It is the value and worth of the human life lost that is reflected in the severity of the punishment.

The same severity of punishment is commanded against those who attack or curse their parents (verse 15, 17) because to do so is blasphemy against God Himself.

Kidnappers are to be put to death (v.16).

If someone injures someone, but they do not die, the one responsible for the injury is to care for the injured party.

Slaves are protected against excessive violence and are immediately granted freedom if they are permanently injured (v.20-21 & 26-27 unheard of in the ancient world).

Women and unborn children are protected by strict laws up to and included capital punishment for causing the death of either one in verses 22-24.

Why such serious punishment for acts of violence against other people regardless of age or social status?

Because human beings are created in the image of God and therefore ought to be valued and protected.

[I was curious the other day what the fine for littering is in Ontario. Do you know what the maximum fine is? According to the Ontario Court of Justice website the fine is \$125 and I suspect it is rarely enforced (Municipalities can set different fines). Imagine for a moment that the fine was \$10000 and it was enforced on a regular basis. How many people do you think would be careless about throwing garbage out of their car window?]

The whole point of the severity of these laws is to make people think twice about committing acts of violence against other people.

If you are having a heated argument with your neighbor you better make sure you keep your emotions in check and don't haul off and hit him with a fist or a stone.

If a woman gets in between two men fighting, they had better stop so she doesn't get hurt.

Don't even consider kidnapping someone or worse yet intentionally taking their lives.

The point here is God wants the people of Israel to build a society where it is safe to walk down the street at night.

Where it is safe to send your kids out to play.

Where life is protected from the moment of conception to the point of advanced age.

I don't mind telling you that our society has gotten off track when it comes to the value of life.

Our government talks about being civilized and caring for people, but openly endorses the killing of the most vulnerable people in the world.

Our laws too often seem to protect criminals more than law abiding citizens.

[Some may look down at what seems to be the harshness of God's law here, but in doing so they miss the intended protection provided by these laws. As the church we are not in a position to make and enforce laws like the nation of Israel, but we can be people who value life and seek to protect it. One more principle is set before us in verses 28-36. It is something that is sorely needed in our day...]

Point #3 – God wants people to be responsible.

The Lord in His gracious providence has given us all things to steward and we need to be diligent about managing those things well for the good of our neighbors.

The verses 28-36 mainly deal with bulls goring people and other animals, with the uncovering or the digging of a pit being mentioned in verse 33-34.

Now you might say, "Hey I don't own a bull so what does this have to do with me?"

That is a good question. Commentator Walter Kaiser points out that God is giving these examples of everyday cases to act as a guide for the future judges of the nation to decide cases.

If we limit the text to bulls and digging holes we are going to miss the point entirely.

Bulls are a good example to use because when the people come into the Promised Land and start farming bulls (commentators think is a reference to oxen) are going to become a common part of everyday life.

Oxen were the John Deere/New Holland/Case IH/Massey Ferguson of the ancient world.

Their power makes them very helpful for plowing the earth and milling grain, but it also makes them a little dangerous.

What is in view here is likely the unprovoked goring of a person.

Verse 28 acknowledges that sometimes animals do unexpected things.

But then it says this in **Verse 29**.

If a person knows that their animal has hurt people and they have been warned and they don't take any steps to protect people and someone dies they are held responsible.

It is the same if someone digs a hole and doesn't take any steps to make it safe and a neighbor's animal falls into it, the person who digs the hole has to pay for the lost animal.

Of course personal responsibility is a two way street.

If someone walks up to a bull and hits it with a pole and they get gored that is their fault.

If someone removes a covering from a pit and their donkey falls in that is their fault as well.

The point is we need to be responsible for the things under our control.

[Back when Michelle and I were still living in London I was working at an electrical job. When I showed up to the jobsite the parking lot was empty. When I went to leave it was very crowded, but I still thought I could squeeze out. As I inched my way out my bumper rubbed the bumper of another of a white Toyota Corolla. At that moment I had a choice. I could just drive away and say to myself it is just a tiny scratch or I could find the owner and take responsibility. I found the owner and thankfully she was very understanding.]

I feel like personal responsibility is severely lacking these days, but it should not be so in the church.

We need to be people who show care and concern for other people in the way we manage our lives.

As Christians we ought to do our best to be safe drivers, shovel our sidewalks, keep our pets under control, put our grocery carts back where they belong, and alike.

Of course in all of these laws we are reminded of our need of grace.

Notice in verse 30 that instead of being put to death a person can pay to have his life redeemed.

Also notice that in verse 32 if a slave is gored then the owner can simply pay the price of a slave at thirty shekels of silver and escape with his life.

If you are like me when you read of the slave dying and only having to pay thirty shekels you think that is making the life of the slave less valuable than everyone else.

A few commentators point out that common Jewish interpretation is that the slave here is a foreigner and not a Hebrew, but that seems both unclear and unsatisfying.

A number of other commentators point us to the right track by reminding us of the price that our LORD Jesus was betrayed for.

Do you remember? 30 pieces of silver.

As one writer puts it, "A coincidence? I think not!"

Jesus made Himself a lowly servant, betrayed, condemned, and put to death so that we might be redeemed.

What does the gospel tell us about receiving the benefit of what Jesus does for us?

It tells us that we must confess our sins! That is we must acknowledge our responsibility for our disobedience and rebellion against God.

Then we must believe that Jesus died for us and that He rose again.

When we do that we are forgiven for His sake and declared right in the eyes of God.

Christians are not blame shifters, we are people who know their need of redemption.

Our world would benefit greatly from the principles established in God's laws.

While we are not the government we must do what we can to promote opportunities for people's needs to be met, for people to be safe, and for people to be responsible.

Let us pray that those in authority over us would have their eyes opened to the glories of Jesus and the goodness of His Word and seek those things for the good of people and the glory of God.