

## Valuing and Honoring Life (Exodus 21:12-25)

Preached January 14, 2024, by Pastor Phil Layton ([www.gcb.church](http://www.gcb.church))

I'm eager to be with you in Ex 21 and to bring the book of the law of Moses.

- We'll read the text and explain it to understand the meaning and sense God's word to us.
  - As Pastor Corey preached last week in 1 Pet 2 this is pure spiritual milk for us to grow by
  - It helps us put off malice and hurtful speech or deeds, and taste and see the Lord is good.
  - To a bad world, God's law to Israel was a good gift to correct injustice and protect life.
- And its principles have application for today

**As we keep teaching through Exodus, may the Lord keep speaking to us in His Word**

Ex 21:12 *"Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. <sup>13</sup> But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. <sup>14</sup> But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. <sup>15</sup> "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. <sup>16</sup> "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death. <sup>17</sup> "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. <sup>18</sup> "When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, <sup>19</sup> then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. <sup>20</sup> "When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. <sup>21</sup> But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money [i.e., his investment and work time lost, but the master isn't executed for crime of battery]. <sup>22</sup> "When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. <sup>23</sup> But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

**Main point/principle of section is valuing life vs. violence or vengeance**

Last week I trust none of you beat up a slave, or hit a pregnant woman to induce an early birth.

- I hope none of you have kidnapped or stolen human beings and sold them recently.
- But don't sit back and relax if you've never do that or murder; God sees heart sin, too.
- Whether I curse outwardly or hate or want to hurt inwardly, to God it's evil and lethal.
- How we speak to or treat parents or the poor (slaves in that day) is deadly serious to God.
- If we wound, we need to heal and restore. The altar reminds us of mercy in the gospel

We're not OT Israel under their civil and judicial system but there's moral principles for us here

**Our scripture reading earlier said 'love does no wrong/harm to a neighbor' (Rom 13:10)**

2 weeks ago we were in Galatians talking about Christ redeeming us who were under the law.

- It says God's adopted sons in Christ led by the Spirit aren't under the law as Israel was.
- Not under the law's curse, or its condemnation, or its covenant under Moses.
- Not under its circumcision requirement, ceremonies, special days, or civil legal system.<sup>1</sup>
- We're not under a law of legalism, but Paul says we're under a law of love.<sup>2</sup>
- Galatians (same book) says *'fulfill the law of Christ'*
  - o and all OT law is fulfilled by love (6:2, 5:14).
  - o It says OT law is a tutor to lead us to Christ, 3:24.

So let's look at this next section of the law to love the Lord and neighbor and to lead us to Jesus

**Outline:**

- 1. Value and honor all life in God's image**
- 2. Violence or abuse brings God's judgment**
- 3. Vengeance isn't ours; look to God's Son**

1<sup>st</sup> value and honor life in God's image – one of the first principles God gave back in Genesis.

2,000 years before the law to Moses, God told Noah and the new world to come this in Gen 9:5 ‘...for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning...from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.’<sup>6</sup> “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” That’s part of God’s covenant grace to the end, to not wipe out life like the flood (see rainbow).

- Bigger than Israel and before the old covenant at Sinai is a death penalty for murderers. Jesus said those who live by the sword will die by the sword, Rom 13 says the State bears that.

- James 3:9 says we shouldn’t even curse men who are made in the image of God

That’s the broader context for Ex 20:12: “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.”<sup>13</sup> But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. [then the altar was a place of mercy and refuge for accidental manslaughter]<sup>14</sup> But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning [premeditated murder] you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

**We talked about all that and v. 15-17 in ch 20 (honor parents, you shall not murder/steal).**

v. 12 and 14 is capital punishment for violations of the Ten Commandments we see in Genesis:

- In Gen 4 Cain lay in wait for Abel, attacking and killing him by cunning out in the field
- Gen 4:22 Lamech said to his wives [his first problem, plural wives]... “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.”<sup>24</sup> If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”
- Not ‘wound for wound’ it’s ‘I kill the man who wounds me, the youth who strikes me’
- God’s law and order won’t allow gangsters like Lamech, bragging killing like gangsta rap
- In Gen 34 Jacob’s boys murder Shechemites by cunning (‘get circumcised for wedding’)
- They wait till the men lie in post-surgery recovery and strike dead for defiling their sister

**God’s law is correcting sins of the fathers to not continue or multiply**

Some people think God’s law is harsh or cruel in its ‘life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...’

- But the context in their world and much of ours is to make pay far greater than the crime
- It’s the Elliot Ness way in The Untouchables: ‘He pulls a knife, you pull a gun, he sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That’s the Chicago way.’
- Lamech pledged seventy-sevenfold revenge, a lad struck him and is struck dead in return!
- Not ‘wound for wound,’ sin wants to hurt worse, ‘you insult me, your whole family dies’!
- ‘You took off my hand, I’ll take off your head!’ God says ‘no, hand for hand (not head)’!
- Instead of justice for the one life that assaulted Dinah, Israel took all the Shechemite lives
- The end of v. 22 talks about judges so the punishment fits the crime and doesn’t exceed it
- This is about judges, not justice vigilante-style. And it’s only one life for one life in v. 23
- Ex 21 is correcting their harsh cruel world and saying Israel’s forefathers deserved to die
- And not only for that, Jacob’s sons also captured and sold their brother Joseph as a slave

Ex 21:16 “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

- What Joseph’s brothers did deserved death. The 12 tribes should’ve died out long ago.
- Same word from 7<sup>th</sup> commandment ‘you shall not steal,’ no man-stealing, slave-trading.
- All involved in the African slave-trade, stealing, selling or owning, were to die, God says
- This shows the value and honor of all in God’s image. Human beings aren’t like property
  - o or animals (in ch 22 you steal those, you repay up to 4x or 5x).
  - o In 21:16, you steal a slave, you pay by your life for that life in God’s image.

Israel had temporary voluntary slavery to pay off debts, but if you kill a slave, in v. 20 you die.

- What God values and honors is often different than man’s law

- The ancient Hammurabi's Code only gave a death penalty for kidnapping the upper class
- OT scholar John Currid writes: 'Scripture has a broader application...any person. The Bible does not discriminate regarding the heinousness of this crime. The death penalty for kidnapping reflects the biblical teaching of the value, worth and dignity of man in God's image. It is appropriate punishment because kidnapping is an assault on the concept of the person created in the image of God.'<sup>3</sup> And in v. 20, executing masters who beat a slave to death: 'These laws protecting slaves in Israel are unique in the entire ancient Near East. They represent a profound and startling advance upon all those cultures'<sup>4</sup>
- Civil rights to all, v. 20 slave or free, females, protecting elderly parents, unborn in v. 22
- The law later requires 2 or 3 witnesses, a fair trial to investigate the principles of Ex 21
- There must be no partiality for higher society vs. poverty, no discrimination by ethnicity
- But Rom 13 says governing authorities/law enforcement 'bear the sword' of deadly force
- To let men brutally take lives of others but keep their own life devalues and dishonors life

### Value and honor all life in God's image is #1. Now #2: violence or abuse bring God's judgment

<sup>15</sup> "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death [same verb in v. 12 for striking down to die].

This isn't a boy wrestling dad and fun gets too rough, it's violence or abuse by a grown child, potentially deadly

- An assault on the family (fabric of society) was so serious it was a capital crime in Israel
- Ancient patriarchal laws focused on the father, God's law equally especially *mothers*, too
- God gave special protections for pregnant women in v. 22 and for abused wives in v. 10
- If a man neglected essentials, abandoned her for another, v. 10-11 says she could go free

<sup>17</sup> "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. [This is verbal abuse, murdering with words]

- The 5<sup>th</sup> commandment is honor father and mother so it will go well and to enjoy long life
- To curse or verbally wish your parents were dead meant you would be dead in God's law
- This verb goes beyond dishonoring disrespect to disowning words, denouncing parents
- God is deadly serious about you honoring parents in how you speak to and treat them

**Even if our govt. doesn't judge it like Israel, our God judges this**

Dt 21 says parents lovingly disciplined first, but in severe dishonor could bring it to the elders.

- A consistently disobedient stubborn rebellious drunkard could be examined, executed.

Dt 21:21 says death in severe cases was 'so you shall purge the evil person from your midst...'

- NT churches aren't the state of Israel
- but verbally abusive homes can ask church elders to help.

There's loving discipline needed in families and church families, even law enforcement family.

- Strikers or revilers today we don't put to death,
- but stubborn sinners can be put out the church.

1 Cor 5:11 says don't associate as Christian fellowship with unrepentant sinners, including 'reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one...[v. 13 quotes the law] "Purge the evil person from among you."

- For OT Israel 'purge the evil person' was code for capital punishment.<sup>5</sup>
- For the NT church it's applied to separation with a hope of restoration to fellowship.
- Parent-child relations are critical and God's law calls aging parents to be protected.
- Violence or abuse in a home is a deadly evil.

**Parents, children, repent of any evil, and resolve to seek help from elders if you need it**

<sup>18</sup> "When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, <sup>19</sup> then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear [of the death penalty in v. 12-17]; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.

Philip Ryken writes: ‘People who injure others should provide their victims with some form of compensation. They should pay for what they have done... [in v. 21] by compensating the victim for his loss of income and by making sure that he received adequate medical care... and take care of his victim’s medical bills. This law reminds us not to resort to violence. Arguments have a way of escalating, and once we get angry, there is no telling what we might do... we are never justified in using physical force to settle a personal dispute.’<sup>6</sup>

The principle also applies to verbally striking back: when you wound, you need to heal. Pr 12:18 *There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts [cutting words], but the tongue of the wise brings healing.* Some of you verbally jab, and speak sharply or harshly, ask forgiveness to heal the one you hurt  
**Ask the help of God who ‘heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds’ (Ps 147:3)**

<sup>20</sup> *“When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged.* Other ancient societies sometimes let masters literally get away with murder, but not in God’s Law.

- Fatally wounding a slave meant the master lost his life, injuring one meant loss of money
- In v. 21 masters were only killed if they killed, but they paid by loss of work if they hurt
- Masters had a vested interest and investment in workers, to disable shoots yourself in foot
- In God’s law, to seriously abuse a slave meant you lose a slave. <sup>26</sup> *“When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. <sup>27</sup> If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.*

Ryken again: ‘a master did not have the right to injure his slave in any way... whether the injury was as serious as losing an eye or as minor as losing a tooth—the slave was set free. This was a major difference between slavery in Israel and slavery anywhere else. If a master so much as knocked out a tooth, his slave would be set free. The master had failed in his God-given duty to protect his servant; so he was released from his servitude. This law was intended to eradicate the physical abuse of slaves. Such a law was unparalleled. We know of no other statute from the ancient world that provided similar protection for slaves. But this law is in the Bible because everyone (slaves included) is made in the image of God and thus has a right to his fatherly care.’<sup>17</sup>

### [Value God’s image vs. violence that God judges, #3. Vengeance isn’t ours, look to God’s Son](#)

<sup>22</sup> *“When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. <sup>23</sup> But if there is harm [I take that as harm to mom or child], then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

Next week we’ll look at valuing and honoring life in the womb. Unborn life is to be protected

- as part of the ‘life for life’ principle in God’s Law against harming unborn life.
- But this week, notice vengeance didn’t belong to the husband, it was up to the judge.
- A wounded party was not the one to make pay, the judge determined the fine to be paid.
- v. 20 uses the word *avenged*, but the avenger was someone else (not the one who died).
- This is not about personal vengeance, the context is the judicial system executing justice.
- And it must be measure for measure justice. A fine must match the crime.
- No interpersonal revenge, like he injures your eye, you injure his.

In v. 26-27 a slave losing eye or tooth doesn’t take out his master’s, he goes free as payment.

- It isn’t a crass physical getting back and getting even
- it’s a principle of equitable compensation (equal scales, balanced justice).

**Vengeance is God’s call, by governing authority, vengeance doesn’t belong to us**

Later in the Law, God says in Dt 32:35 *‘Vengeance is mine, and recompense ... the LORD will vindicate ...’*

Rom 12:17 *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* <sup>18</sup> *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* <sup>19</sup> *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”* <sup>20</sup> *To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”* <sup>21</sup> *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* <sup>1</sup> *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities... [v. 4 calls] an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer ... [then v. 9 quotes Exodus]... You shall not murder, You shall not steal...” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* <sup>10</sup> *Love does no wrong [NKJV ‘harm’] to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. [to do that, v. 14 says] Put on the Lord Jesus Christ...*

- We look to God’s Son, the Judge of all the earth who will do right, and right all wrongs
- He determined the fine and He paid in full the penalty for all the sins of all who believe
- Jesus is the ultimate Avenger in the end, and He rescues us from our desires for revenge
- He can burn away the hurts that burn us and leave scars as we see His nail-scarred palms
- Remember Paul says the law is our tutor to lead to Christ, so how does Ex 21 do that?
- Jesus loved like a father but He was cursed by the children of Israel who disowned Him
- Jesus was struck by the fist and with objects, and suffered injustice, violence and abuse
- They hurl abusive words at Him, but no violence was in Him, He opened not His mouth
- Instead of forcing them to pay for injuring Him, He prays forgiving for them on the cross
- Jesus was sold for the price of a slave by murderers lying in wait to kill Him by cunning
- Jesus was beaten with rods as a slave would be beaten, but took no personal vengeance
- Death on a Roman cross was for slaves, not citizens, for the most serious capital crimes
- They treat Jesus as a slave and beat Him so bad He can’t walk, Simon carries His cross
- The Law said ‘*hand for hand*’ – His hands were crucified for sins our hands have done
- ‘*Foot for foot*’ – His feet were pierced, nailed to wood for wickedness we’ve walked in
- ‘*wound for wound*’ – He’s wounded for our transgressions, punishment I deserve on Him
- ‘*stripe for stripe*’ is what the Law said, the gospel says ‘*by His stripes were are healed!*’
- ‘*thoroughly healed*’ – Jesus heals beyond the physical to the spiritual and emotional. PTL

The law spoke of the man struck down ‘if he rises again,’ – Jesus rises again for lawbreakers!

- If you’re guilty, flee to refuge in Christ. Grab hold of the altar of the cross to save you
- If you’ve cursed or hurt with your words, confess and heal that relationship by His grace
- If you have a problem with anger, get help because that sin can and will cost you greatly

**Above all, value life in God’s image instead of violence or vengeance**

Let’s close in Matthew 5 where Jesus quoted from Ex 21 and clarified how to apply OT Law. He says there He didn’t come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and that we need to teach it all. But He not only fulfills, He fills full the Law that NT Jews had heard taught in a limited way:

<sup>17</sup> *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them...”* <sup>21</sup> *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’”* <sup>22</sup> *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire...”* <sup>38</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ [They’d heard that means if he hits you in the eye or tooth, hit him back, fight for your rights, it’s biblical]”* <sup>39</sup> *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

- The context isn’t police authorities who use force, it’s personal insults or even persecuted believers
- Jesus is not forbidding international war by nations, this context is about interpersonal conflict

<sup>43</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”* <sup>44</sup> *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*

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<sup>1</sup> See Galatians 2:16, 3:10-13, 4:4-11, 5:1-6, 18, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See Romans 13:8-10.

<sup>3</sup> John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 19–40*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 13:5 17:7; 19:19; 22:21; 24:7, etc., quoted and applied in 1 Corinthians 5:13 for removing from the church (v. 2). I DeYoung: “Expel the evil person from your midst.” Fascinatingly, that very expression occurs six times in Deuteronomy in reference to capital punishment. In other words, the language of capital punishment in the Mosaic covenant—where you’re living in a theocracy, so if you sin in these egregious ways, you are to be put to death—is no longer how the New Testament expects us to apply these commandments... These commands to put people to death for various crimes are now transposed in the New Testament to speak of life together as a church. Who can belong to the covenant community? Who needs to be set aside? Who needs to be purged and expelled—not by death, but by the duly administered discipline of the church? – “An Eye for an Eye,” [universityreformedchurch.org](http://universityreformedchurch.org)

<sup>6</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 713.

<sup>7</sup> Ryken, 714.