

# Love is the fulfilment of the law

## Exodus 21 – 23

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Recently, my daughter had a birthday, and she and her grandmother had painstakingly made 2 boxfuls of cupcakes to be taken to school to share with her friends. I was charged with delivering them to school. I was told in no uncertain terms not to tip them over! Oh! 2 boxes of precious, lovingly decorated cupcakes! The pressure! So, I had the 2 boxes, cradled it in my arms. They were heavy. I lugged them up to the school yard. I found a safe-ish looking spot under a tree in the playground while waiting for my daughter to come pick them up. But Kids were playing and mucking around! I had to position my body to protect them against any kids stumbling upon them. Man, it felt like mission impossible. I repositioned those boxes of cupcakes 3 times to get to a safe spot. I had to take safeguards to protect these precious cupcakes.

Just like I had to take safeguards to protect those precious cupcakes, God had to give the Israelites safeguards to protect his precious possession. You see, his people were his treasured possession. He had taken them, freed them from Egypt and brought them into a relationship with him.

God has already chosen Israelites as his people. However to safeguard his precious possession, to safeguard his people in this unique relationship with him, in this unique time and place, he gave them laws to keep his people in check. So that they could maintain a healthy relationship with him and to their fellow neighbors. These laws are a code of conduct is to ensure they stay on course and continue to be right with both God and their fellow neighbors.

As we look at a couple of these case law examples, we ought to be mindful that these rules and regulations are meant for a unique people, in a unique relationship with God who are called uniquely to be set apart, to be a holy priest and nation for God.

We turn to the first issue in exodus 21. It's about the treatment of slaves.

Now this segment on slavery opens up a pandora's box. What does the bible or God have to do with slavery? Didn't the Israelites get set free from the Egyptian slavery? But now the Israelites are enslaving each other... father is selling daughter into slavery. Some probably used these verses to justify slavery. How then can we reconcile this difficult passage with who God is. The God of love. Friends, there are no easy answers but perhaps a little analogy might help.

Just imagine your normal Saturday evening mixed men and women's touch footy. You know the rules. Modified rugby rules apply. It's the same kind of rules as rugby except instead of being tackled to the ground, in "touch footy," when you get tipped, you put the ball down. Now imagine in a touch footy game you had a 100kg rugby player who says "This touch footy thing is just not up to scratch. Let's just play it like real footy. See that 50kg girl running towards the line, im gonna crash tackle her." How do you think that's going to go down? Well she might end up in hospital and all hell will break loose. You see you can't take full rugby and apply it to touch footy. Similarly, we shouldn't take our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities and try to impose them on the social conventions of another time. But what we can take from this is that God can work in all time periods, all social conventions to further his purposes. To show his glory and his nature through how his people live according to the adage of loving God and his neighbor.

1. In the time of exodus, one could buy a Hebrew slave. They are to serve 6 years and to be let go in the 7<sup>th</sup> year.

I think it's likely when you become a slave in the ancient world, you are a slave for life. But, in this era, God presses the slave owner to respect the Sabbath. Just as God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the slave owner is to "give rest" to his slave in the 7<sup>th</sup> year and set him free. Giving up your slave after 6 years seems like a raw deal. You have to realize that it's likely this goes against social conventions of that period. The Slave owner is to willingly giving up his possession because God's love for his neighbor demands it.

2. Also, in this segment, the law is concerned about the rights of the slave owner and slave. If the slave is unmarried when he became enslaved, he is to leave unmarried. If slave owner helped him get married, then the woman and children belong to the master.

In this part, it seems like slave owner is given his rights. It's about property law here. As much as it offends our sensibilities today, the fact is, the slave is the master's property and since the master gave the slave a wife, the wife and the children belong to the master. The slave can

choose to stay with his master to continue to be with them. The slave can do so because he loves God and his family so much so that he allows this principle of love to constrain him.

3. In addition, a father can sell his daughter as a slave. If the master doesn't like her, she can be bought back but not to be sold to a foreigner.

A female slave who becomes a wife must have her basic human rights even if the man takes a second wife.

In this segment, God protects the female slave/ indentured servant. It may be that things are so dire that the father has to sell the daughter into slavery. Think about it. In those times, there is Medicare, no social security. If you are down on your luck, you could be left for dead. Totally vulnerable and oppressed. Being sold into indentured servanthood, even for a female, might be their only ticket for a livable existence under the auspices of a God fearing Hebrew slave owner who fears God. It protects the woman from being sold to foreigners who have no fear of God. If she is to become a wife, she is to be given her basic human rights. And if these needs are not met, she is to be sold back. This protects the woman. The slave owner who observes this rule shows he fears God and is showing his vertical love relationship with God affects how he properly deals with the female slave.

We need to respect the social conventions of the time. We can't just thrust our 21<sup>st</sup> century prejudices and thinking onto that time. These passages are a timely reminder that God works in all times, all circumstances and all social conventions. Don't think that this is just an OT issue. Remember the letter the great apostle Paul sent to Philemon. Onesimus was Philemon's slave but ran away. However, Paul met Onesimus, shared the gospel with him. Onesimus believed in the lord Jesus Christ. And God provided grace in this situation. Paul did not tell Philemon to give up his slave but rather sent Onesimus back as beloved brother and fellow Christian. But still sent him back a slave. The grace and love of God works in all circumstances even in places and times where the social and moral conventions offends us. We need to see the overarching love and grace of God working here.

The second issue in today's sermon is about the property law on material possessions in chapter 22.

1.

From first 4 verses,

We see justice for theft should be left to the authorities. Don't take it into your own hands. However, if stealing occurs at night, then the owner can defend himself. That's fair when you think of it. You don't know what you are dealing with at night and have right to protect your life and your family and property.

It is clear that death is not the penalty for death. The law of retribution in the earlier section doesn't support this. This tell us a couple things about God. Man is made in God's image. There is inherent value in each and every person, no matter how low they have fallen. Death is not the right penalty for stealing because God is fair. While they are not excused, they are given a second chance. If livestock is found, thief pays back double. If livestock already been sold, the thief gotta pay back 4-5 times. If the thief can't pay it back, they have to be sold into slavery. Punishment helps thief. It helps restore them. if we are lax and allow people to get away with things, then thieves get more emboldened. They will only go on to more evil things if left unchecked.

Therefore we can deduce from this that God is fair. God punishes the guilty thief. Reparations are made to make things right for the owner and the guilty thief punished to help them know the error of their ways.

Any of you watch the Voice? It's riveting viewing. You've got the sad story line. I've got this problem or that struggle. And he or she got that struggle. Sometimes it almost feels who has got the most heart-wrenching story line that gets the judges and viewer's attention. Its not just about the music. So you listen to their struggles, then you see them perform. They belt out this tune and then the judges give their opinion and then the MC asks who the judge wants to take through to next round. "So Kelly, who do you want to take to the next round?".... And then bang, you get commercial about Colgate or Harvey Norman. And you'll like "aww Come on. Just tell me already!"

It also kinda like this when you read exodus or other "dry" parts of the bible, you read all this action packed stuff about the parting of the Red Sea and plagues of frogs and river turning into blood. But when it comes to rules and regulations, you might be like. "This is just stuffy legal stuff."

But really, these regulations and law, which might seem boring, is God's act of grace given to Israelites. Rather than painful things they have to do to be right with God, this actually is the kind of behavior that God wants Israelites to do because they are God's people. Because God

is a God of love, and his people already been redeemed in love, they too should exhibit the behavior of love in how they relate to their neighbors. Truly, these laws or regulations are things that should come naturally for a people that been redeemed, loved and cared for by God. They help us keep continue on this journey he has redeemed us for his purposes. Without these laws, we go begin to stray and go off the rails. No wonder it says in psalm 119:97 NIV "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long."

As for verse 5-6, its about the issue of negligence. If your ox or cow gone into someone else's field and eat up their field, then you got to pay back. And what's more you got to pay back with the best of your field or vineyard. You are not to give the dregs as repayment. That says something about making up for wrongs. We should be earnest and make reparations that is not only adequate but surpasses the basic payback. It says something about love that undergirds all these laws. God is love and we as God's people are to express this love. The reason why you can give your best crop is because love is at the heart of how we behave. You realize that it would be hard if not impossible to check if you have given your best to your neighbor. You could hide your best fruits somewhere or sell it. It's a repayment that comes from the heart and not from superficial regulations. You can't legislate the heart. It comes from within. Comes from God's Spirit working in you and in the hearts of the Israelites.

3. As we come to third and final part in exodus 23, let me reiterate that the law is a gift. It's not poison. The law codifies what it sees as the expected behavior of God's unique people in a loving relationship with a God of love. Justice and fairness is what the law requires. It's not meant to be burdensome or oppressive but an expected way of life of a people free because of God's love.

You know with my kids growing up when they were quite young. There was quite a big temptation to use screen devices a lot to baby sit the children. Now I am not saying its wrong or judging anyone. I do use these devices to keep them occupied when we are out or let them use it at home too. However, there was this temptation to JUST let them have it to just get them out of my hair. At whatever time was convenient for me, let them have it so I can have more "me" time. But tamara my wife was quite firm and against it. We had use other means to get them off our backs.

You know on the surface, not letting the kids use devices may seem onerous, burdensome or even oppressive to some kids. Why you so unfair!?

But truly, this rule is not oppressive or burdensome but these rules are a gift. A gift so that the children can develop their brains and relationships without being stuck exclusively in the inner world of these screen devices. I reckon it helps their emotional and interpersonal development.

So in a similar way, the law of book of covenant is a gift. It's a list of rules for a people bought by grace that been redeemed. This is how you are to be because of whom God is and how God has treated you. Because you are free, behave as you are free. The law is how a free man or woman behaves. Not slaves to sin but freed people who love. Love is the fulfilment of the law.

We ought to look at this segment through this lens. Justice and fairness is what ought to come naturally to God's people. This is the codified behavior of what's expected of God's free people.

Here, we see Israelites are told not to give false witness. They are even told not to favor the poor. Don't give false witness in court. In God's justice, it is totally blind. Don't matter if they are rich or poor, man or woman, foreigner or local, God's justice is fair. No favoritism! God gives equal justice to all because God is just. And importantly, justice is fair because love is fair. Love fulfils the law.

A really interesting rule in v4-5. If you see an enemy's cow or donkey running loose, take it back to him. If his donkey has fallen because its overloaded, help your enemy get on its feet. Don't walk off!

Wait a minute! What's going on here? This is supposed to be book of covenant with laws and regulations. But yet here is a law that is hard to police.

Imagine a neighbor in your unit block who really hates you. He is moving out. Yay right!? Well there he is now, being quite silly trying to carry a ginormous table by himself down the stairwell. What's more he loaded up some stuff on it. his wallet, passport and books as well. That's just crazy! Oops look he accidentally dropped the wallet. He didn't seem to see it. Now what would you do? Do you just say... well it's his fault.

But something in you urges you to help him. And you do. You say "hi." You pick up the wallet and hand it back. You offer to help him carry the table and he gratefully, sheepishly accepts your kind offer.

You see friends, you can't legislate this kind of behavior. It comes from the heart. It comes from a transformed life under God's grace. Under God's freedom, you can act freely like this. The law in exodus 23 can't compel you do right coz no one can really police you helping out a neighbor but rather this is the expected loving behavior of God's people.

As we draw to a close, let me summary this into some salient points.

Take the law not legalistically but to heart as God's conduct for us in his world as people who are already in his family. God's family behave a certain way. The pattern of the law is love.

The law reflect nature of God, his loving nature.

It's not an exhaustive list of law or regulations but rather rules and laws that codifies what is already at work in the heart. Love is from the heart. That is worshipful. That is mature. That is centered in Jesus Christ. Such love affects our behavior in relation to a vertical and horizontal relationship. Love does no harm to its neighbor because love is the fulfilment of the law.