

Exodus – Lesson 16

The Laws of Civil Society

Read Exodus 20:22-23:19

1. (a) What commandment is God *commenting* on in Exodus 20:22-26? Why does God *prohibit* the Hebrew people from using tools to build altars?

Based on the *explicit* statement of v. 23, God is “commenting” on the *second* commandment, that the people were not to “*fashion*” for themselves anything that would serve as an idol. In this case, God *extends* this prohibition even to the construction of altars. By prohibiting the use of tools in building altars, God prevents the people from “building” something that they might consider more important than God himself. In other words, by forcing the Hebrews to build altars only using their bare hands, they would not consider the altar *itself* something to be worshiped.

- (b) Explain the *prohibition* of Exodus 20:26.

God prohibits the building of altars that require steps to be ascended to reach them (i.e. altars that are high off the ground). Part of this prohibition comes, of course, out of the previous one regarding altars built with tools. However, God also prevents altars that are built as “*high places*,” a concept drafted from the pagan nations around them. The Hebrews were to build altars that were short and unassuming, for the altar was *never* to be considered more important than what was offered on it, and certainly not as important as the God to whom the offering was made. The concept of seeing their “*nakedness*” is not easily understood, however, in this context. Possibly God was saying that walking up stairs to an altar might make their “undergarments” visible to people below, bringing shame on them and offending the offering being made to God. In any case, God requires the offering of sacrifices to be something done by the meek and the lowly, in full humility before God, and never as an act of self-righteousness or idol-worship.

2. (a) Read Exodus 21:1-6. What does God require for Hebrews *enslaved* by other Hebrews?

God establishes a “jubilee” for Hebrew slaves owned by other Hebrews. Any Hebrew who was enslaved to another Hebrew, for whatever reason, was to be released after six full years of service; the seventh year became a “jubilee” for the slave to be set free (see question 2b for an explanation). In this passage, however, God provides some conditions for release: 1) those who are married when enslaved are able to take their spouse with them in the jubilee, 2) those who are married during their enslavement (as a function of their master’s will) are freed during the jubilee, but their spouse and children remain as property of the master, 3) those who are married during their enslavement may choose to remain as their master’s property in perpetuity if they wish to remain with their spouse and children.

- (b) Why do you think that God *requires* Hebrew slaves to be set free in the seventh year?

The “jubilee” of Hebrew slaves prevented slave owners from exercising *undue* control over other Hebrews; just as God had set the Hebrews free from Egypt, Hebrews were not (typically) to hold other Hebrews as slaves. Just as God had worked to *remove* the bondage of slavery from the Hebrews, the Hebrews were to *avoid* the continuing issue of slavery amongst themselves as much as possible. This law would force the Hebrews to give their brothers a break and would make slavery less permanent than it had been in Egypt.

3. (a) From Exodus 21:12-32, what *primary issue* are these laws dealing with?

The primary issue being dealt with in these verses is life and death, and the sanctity of life as given by God. The Hebrews were given detailed instructions about what to do in various cases where people were killed by others, either by accident or on purpose. In each case, God provides an appropriate punishment in order to demonstrate that life is his to give and to take away, and that human beings *do not* inherently possess the authority to take human life. This is a *foundational* truth for the human race, finding its genesis all the way back in the days of Noah (see Genesis 9:6), and is reiterated (for example) in 21:12-14. Because God considers human life sacred, as a function of the *Imago Dei*, he demands an *equally* harsh punishment for those who treat life (and him) so lightly.

- (b) Why is the *punishment* of Exodus 21:17 so harsh? How is it *connected* to Exodus 20:12?

God commands in this verse that anyone who “*curses*” his parents must be executed. The command of Exodus 20:12, “*honor thy father and thy mother*” is clearly in view here: the *opposite* of honoring a parent is to curse a parent, to deny a parent their rightful place of honor or to rebel against them or cause them harm in some way. As an agrarian society, the family was a central part of their culture and civilization. Breakdown of order in the family would need to be dealt with seriously, since much of the civil laws and customs of the day centered around the family unit. God takes family seriously, enough to justify the execution of children who are rebellious against their parents or who take direct, harmful action against them. God is a God of order, and family is a means by which order is maintained.

- (c) What is the *principle* of Exodus 21:22-25? How has this principle been *compromised* in modern times? *Why* has it been compromised?

Again, in much the same way as the law of 21:17 and those around it, God considers life sacred and strives to protect it with these laws. Here, God outlines regulations regarding the protection of *unborn* life, and provides severe punishments for those who violate this principle. When a child is born *unharm*ed by a man striking a pregnant woman, the man must pay a fine (as her husband deems fit). In this case, no harm to the child warrants nothing more than a fine. However, if the child is *harmed*, either by being injured or killed, the punishment to be inflicted on the guilty party shall be commiserate with the damage done to the child. If the child is only injured, the guilty party was to be injured similarly; if the child died, the guilty party was to be executed. A law of retribution was being imposed here; those who attacked and harmed an unborn child were to receive a retribution since God considers life sacred. Unfortunately, this principle has been severely compromised in our times, given the rampant disregard for unborn life, evidenced by the easily accessible and completely legal option of abortion. This is probably because 1) human life has slowly been losing its value over time. The *essential* nature of human life, and its *primacy* in the world, has been overshadowed by the *individualistic* tendencies of modernity. This individualization has broken down the fabric of the family as an *integral* part of society, and lowered the importance of children to that makeup, and 2) the individualization of culture has made personal *comfort* and *autonomy* more important than the unborn. Thus, women are granted (almost automatically) the “right” to abort an unborn child if the pregnancy is considered a “nuisance” or “hindrance.” Such a thing would have been exactly *opposite* to what these laws implied: that human life is *never* a hindrance, but a gift from God and part of *his* nature as a God of life.

4. (a) From Exodus 21:33-22:15, what *primary issue* are these laws dealing with?

The primary issue of these laws are *restitution*; making amends for the failure to do what is right in any given situation, either by accident or on purpose. These laws provide ways to “right” a wrong by allowing an offended party to be compensated for his or her loss. This would include accidental offenses, such as an animal being injured, or purposeful offenses such as theft.

(b) Which of the Ten Commandments are being *addressed* in these laws?

These laws directly address the eighth commandment, “*thou shall not steal,*” by providing ways of compensating those who are stolen from. However, it is also possible that these laws address the ninth commandment (“*thou shall not bear a false witness against a neighbor*”) by providing ways to salvage a damaged reputation.

(c) From Exodus 22:8-9, what kind of *government* is being established for the Hebrews?

The type of government being established here is known as a *theocracy*: a nation ruled *directly* by God through human agents. Whereas in a *monarchy* the people are led by a king, and in a *democracy* the people are led by elected representatives, in a *theocracy* the head of the nation is God himself. He may choose to appoint *subjects* who act as judges in his stead, but he maintains *ultimate* authority and control over the people. This type of government was established and maintained from the time of the Exodus through the period of the judges up until the time of Saul, who was appointed as king, converting the nation from the *theocracy* to a *monarchy*. The phrase “*come before God*” is the evidence in these verses that this type of government is being established. Any serious disputes between citizens was to be handled directly by God. *How* this is accomplished is not outlined here, but the Hebrews would later have such ways implemented for them through the priests and judges.

5. Why does God make the *harsh* laws of Exodus 22:18-20? What is the *purpose* of the laws outlined in Exodus 22:21-24 and 23:9?

The laws of 22:18-20 are designed to address *perversions* of society that would detract from a holy relationship with God. In many respects, they are like the prohibition against having any graven images: such practices were common amongst pagan religions, and God specifies that they are *never* to be dabbled with in any way as forms of *idolatry*. The laws of 22:21-24 and 23:9 were established to remind the Hebrews that they themselves were once sojourners in a foreign land and were rescued by God. Therefore, they were to treat foreign sojourners with deep respect, primarily as a memorial to the fact that God had rescued them from a foreign land.

6. To which part of the *tripartite* code of law do the regulations of Exodus 20:22-23:19 belong? Why?

All of the regulations of this section belong to the *civil* code, laws related to the *horizontal* nature of human-to-human interpersonal relationships in a civilized society. They are all designed to maintain *order* and *civility*, and to provide recompense in the case of accidental or purposeful acts of harm towards others. However, even though they are *civil* in nature, they are also *moral* in content: the civil code of the law always existed “*over*” the moral code (i.e. the moral code acting as their foundation), which gave prudence to and support for all other laws. This is obvious in the way these *civil* laws are enforced; *morality* is the basis for how one is recompensed for an offense. Taking life, a serious offense *against God*, is treated with severe consequence, demonstrating the *moral* nature of life issues in society. In other words, all of these laws find their *basis* in the moral code, but deal specifically with day-to-day, person-to-person issues in more detail.