

"A JUST AND HOLY SOCIETY"

I. Introduction

A. About 100 years ago, a London newspaper sent out an inquiry to a number of famous authors asking the question, "What's wrong with the world today?"

1. One of those authors responded to that inquiry with a simple note that read as follows:

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours,

G.K. Chesterton.

2. Chesterton's response is both humorous and theologically astute.

3. Everyone has an opinion about what needs to be changed in our society, and Christians certainly should try to be an influence for the good.

4. Still, no amount of reform is ever going to transform any human society into a utopia.

5. As Chesterton's note so wryly points out, the world's deepest problems will remain unhealed as long as it is inhabited by fallen human beings.

6. This would still be the case even if every single person on the planet became a Christian, because sin continues to reside within our hearts after we are converted.

7. Our only hope for a perfect world is for God to make a new one, which is exactly what he has promised to do.

8. In the words of the apostle Peter, “according to [God’s] promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Pet. 3:13)
- B. When God set up Israel as his holy nation, he was setting it up as a typological foreshadowing of that heavenly kingdom.
1. Of course, Israelite society was far from perfect, but God did give Israel his law, and he showed them how that law should govern all aspects of their society.
 2. Because of this, Israel’s civil law provides us with a picture, albeit a shadowy picture, of what a just and holy society looks like.
 3. As we study this section of the Book of the Covenant, we will consider more of the case laws that God gave in order to teach the Israelites how to apply the Ten Commandments to the affairs of daily life.

II. Laws Concerning Property (21:33-22:17)

- A. The first set of case laws in our text are laws that focus on applying the eighth commandment: “Do not steal.”
1. As we saw when we studied that commandment several weeks ago, it has a much broader application than we might at first realize.
 2. The eighth commandment forbids us from any attempt to take what is not rightfully ours or to withhold what we owe to others.
 3. The key principle that is set forth in this set of case laws is that when we are involved in a situation that results in a loss for our neighbor, we need to compensate for that loss.
 4. The first example describes a scenario in which your neighbor’s animal wanders onto your property and falls into a pit that you have dug, perhaps as a storage place for grain.

5. Now, I realize that you may never have been faced with this particular problem, but try to put yourself in the shoes of an ancient Israelite.
 6. What is your knee-jerk response to this situation?
 7. Isn't there at least something in you that wants to tell your neighbor, 'Well, you should have kept your animal off of my property'?
 8. That might make sense to us, but it is not how God tells his people to respond to that situation.
 9. Instead, he essentially tells them, 'You are not an island unto yourself. You are your brother's keeper. If you fail to keep your property safe, then you bear the responsibility in case of injury.
- B. The next example looks at a scenario in which your ox butts your neighbor's ox and kills it.
1. If it was an unforeseen accident, then you need to sell your ox and split the proceeds with your neighbor.
 2. Even though it was nobody's fault, the loss needs to be shared.
 3. We need to understand that to a poor farmer in the ancient world, the loss of an ox would be a devastating blow.
 4. Oxen were expensive animals, they took years to train, and they were needed in order to make one's livelihood.
 5. The law of neighbor love demanded that the loss be shared when an accident such as this occurred.
 6. However, if the offending ox was known to be dangerous, then the owner of that ox has to bear the full responsibility for the loss because of his negligence.

- C. The next set of examples deal with situations involving theft.
1. In Israel, a thief was not put in jail as punishment for his crime.
 2. He had to make restitution by paying back four or five times as much as he had stolen.
 3. Notice the equity in this punishment.
 4. The thief tried to enrich himself by taking from his victim, and as punishment the victim is enriched by taking from the thief.
 5. Notice also that while God's law protects private property, it also protects the life of the thief.
 6. If a thief breaks in to your house in the nighttime, you are entitled to use lethal force against him, even though your life may not have been in any real jeopardy.
 7. However, lethal force cannot be used if such a break-in were to happen during the daytime, assuming of course that it is a mere burglary and not any kind of assault.
 8. God is saying that human life, even the life of a thief, is more important than possessions.
- D. The same basic principles are applied to a variety of other property issues in the rest of this section
1. For the sake of time, I want to skip ahead to the example that is given at the end of the section in 22:16-17.
 2. This is not a case of rape, which is dealt with elsewhere in the law and was a capital offense in Israel.
 3. This is a case where an unengaged woman has sex with a man who has not paid her father the bride-price for her.

4. In such a scenario, the man has robbed the woman of her chastity and now he needs to make restitution for what he has done.
5. Notice, by the way, that the bulk of the responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the man, even though the sex was consensual.
6. In Israel, if a man seduced a woman to satisfy his lusts, he had to make restitution.
7. Even if the woman did not become pregnant, the man was held responsible for taking her virginity.
8. He had to pay the full bride-price to the woman's father, and the father was not obligated to give his daughter to be that man's wife.

III. Laws Dealing with Gross Immorality (22:18-20)

- A. We turn now to the brief section found in 22:18-20.
 1. These verses very tersely set forth three crimes that called for the death penalty in Israel.
 2. Sorcery, bestiality, and idolatry were capital crimes in Israel.
 3. God speaks of these things in a manner that makes it clear that they are simply not to be tolerated among his covenant people.
 4. In each of these sins, the offender defiantly looks beyond God and his revealed will and follows after his own twisted desires.
 5. The person who engages in sorcery (which includes things like reading horoscopes) is trying to learn hidden information in hopes of gaining an upper hand in life.
 6. The person who has sex with an animal is debasing God's gift of sex and using it to seek perverted self-gratification.

7. The fact that God even had to mention such a thing in his law tells us something about the depths of human depravity.
 8. And it had to be mentioned because it was a practice that had associations with Canaanite fertility cults and God knew that some of his people would be tempted to engage in that practice.
 9. As for the person who worships other gods instead of or in addition to the one true God, that person is doing something that strikes at the vitals of Israel's religion.
- B. These three commands remind us of God's holiness and of our calling to holiness as his redeemed people.
1. There are many things in this world that are very dark and very wicked.
 2. We used to be a part of that darkness, but now, by God's grace, we are light in the Lord.
 3. We are not to participate in the world's dark deeds.
 4. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, "Walk as children of light... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret." (Eph. 4:8, 11-12)

IV. Laws Protecting the Disadvantaged (22:21-27; 23:6-9)

- A. This brings us to 22:21-27 and 23:6-9, where we find laws protecting the disadvantaged.
1. God made sure that the most vulnerable groups in Israel were protected under his law.
 2. He forbade his people from mistreating sojourners, widows, and orphans.

3. He warned his people against accepting bribes or showing favoritism to the rich in a court of law.
 4. Notice what this tells us about the Bible's approach to social justice.
 5. In the Bible, social justice is not a matter of saying that society has a lump of resources that needs to be distributed relatively equally among the members of society.
 6. Instead, social justice is a matter of ensuring that all people receive equal treatment under the law.
 7. This is not to say that God does not call his people to extend compassion and help to those who are in need.
 8. He certainly does call us to do that, especially to our brothers and sisters who are in need.
 9. However, it is important to understand that this is not a matter of justice but a matter of love and mercy.
- B. God extends another protection to the disadvantaged in verses 25 through 27.
1. God forbade his people from charging interest on loans made to the poor in Israel.
 2. Some have argued that this law declares all charging of interest to be immoral, but that argument takes this command out of context.
 3. The point being made here is simply that it is wrong to take advantage of the poor.
 4. God's law says that a loan extended to a fellow Jew in dire need was not to be treated as a business transaction but as a way to help a brother.
 5. This law would not have prohibited a Jew who owned a business from asking his neighbor to consider loaning him some money at

interest so that he could expand his business.

6. The point that God is making here is that the poor are not to be exploited simply because they are in a state of such misfortune.
7. That is certainly not the way God deals with us.
8. We come to God absolutely destitute, yet in the gospel he showers us with untold riches.
9. Our God calls us to show the same kind of mercy and liberality toward those around us who are truly in need.

V. **Laws Calling for Holiness (22:28-23:5)**

- A. We come now to one more group of case-laws, which I have grouped together under the heading "Laws Calling for Holiness."
 1. The first of these is an explicit prohibition against reviling God or cursing a ruler.
 2. This is an application of both the third and the fifth commandments.
 3. God's name is to be honored, and so are the names of those whom he places in positions of authority over us.
 4. This is something that we need to pay careful attention to in our cultural context.
 5. A number of popular media figures have made fortunes on the practice of reviling and cursing our nation's political leaders, and it is all too easy for us to pick up that bad habit.
 6. You are certainly entitled to disagree with political leaders, but you should never feel like it is okay to be disrespectful towards them.
 7. Like it or not, God has put them in their position of authority.

8. Remember, Peter was speaking of Nero when he commanded first century Christians to “Honor the emperor.” (1 Pet. 2:17)
- B. The other laws in this section further depict the holiness that should characterize God’s redeemed society.
1. The Israelites are to bring their offerings to God with willing hearts.
 2. They are to be careful not to eat things that would ceremonially defile them.
 3. They are not to spread rumors or false reports.
 4. They are not to get drawn into a mob and gang up on an innocent party.
 5. They are not to show partiality towards a poor man in his lawsuit.
 6. By the way, isn’t that an interesting command?
 7. You would expect it to say, ‘you shall not be partial to a rich man in his lawsuit,’ but that is covered elsewhere in this passage.
 8. By prohibiting partiality towards the poor, God underscores his concern for total impartiality in legal matters.
 9. Nobody is to receive preferential treatment, regardless of their economic status.
 10. Lastly, God calls his people to extend neighborly help even to their adversaries.
 11. You cannot simply look the other way if you see your enemy’s animals in trouble.
 12. You have to show love to everyone, even those who hate you.

VI. Conclusion

- A. As we reflect upon this of Israel's civil law, we can see that God's law is good.
1. The law reveals God's holiness and justice.
 2. It shows us how to love God with our whole being and how to love our neighbor as ourselves.
 3. But God did not give his law to Israel in order to eradicate evil and set up a perfect society.
 4. After all, Israel's civil law tolerated and regulated certain evils, such as slavery and polygamy.
 5. Israel's civil law does give us a picture of what a just and holy society should look like, but it did not have the power to create such a society.
 6. This becomes clear when we look at Israel's history and when we evaluate our own lives against the standard that is set forth in these civil laws.
- B. We should not think that the gospel causes God to lower his standard of holiness.
1. God's grace doesn't cancel out his holiness.
 2. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that no one can see God and dwell in his presence unless they are perfectly righteous and holy.
 3. God set up Israel as a typological holy society in order to demonstrate that mankind will never be able to attain to the high standard of holiness that epitomized the true holy society: the kingdom of heaven.
 4. As Paul explains in Galatians 3, the law "was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made... For if a law had been given that could

give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." (3:19, 21-22)

5. God wanted us to see very clearly that no matter how hard we try, we are never going to be able to fix ourselves or this world that we have ruined.
6. I know that that sounds depressing, but it is the truth and we need to hear it.
7. We need to hear it so that we can place all of our trust and all of our hope in Jesus Christ, the only source of righteousness from God, the only beginning of God's new creation.