

Rescued to Know Him: Learning to Be Holy

Exodus 20:18-23:19

If you've never read C.S. Lewis's book, *Mere Christianity*, I highly recommend it to you. He begins the book by talking about our innate sense of right and wrong. Here's how he describes this sense as being obvious in our lives:

"Every one has heard people quarreling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: 'How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?' – 'That's my seat, I was there first' – 'Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm' – 'Why should you shove in first?' – 'Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine' – 'Come on, you promised.' People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown ups. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about." – C.S. Lewis

Lewis goes on to build the case that our innate sense of morality comes from somewhere. He's not so much focused on specifics yet, he's more building the case that even the fact that we think in terms of right and wrong, moral and immoral, means there is some authority that has given us this sense. If your view of the world is a purely materialist view, that is, that nothing exists outside of the physical universe, then you can only ever know what happens, never what should happen.

You can never actually tell someone it is wrong to steal, only that throughout human history people have generally agreed that stealing is bad because it keeps us from trusting one another and we need to trust each other so we can work together to survive. You can't actually say stealing is a violation of a law written into reality and you should not steal.

Of course, the truth is that we all believe people should act this way and shouldn't act that way because there is a creator God who has written His law on our hearts

and revealed that law to us in His Word. And the law He gives is a reflection of His character.

The Bible is a profoundly moral document because the God of the Bible is a profoundly loving person. His love expresses itself through redemption as well as through the giving of moral commandments and guidance to His people and that is exactly what we have found in the covenant He makes with Israel in Exodus 19-24. So, let me remind you of where we are and what God is doing.

He has redeemed Israel by rescuing them from Egypt and has brought them to Mt. Sinai to make a covenant with them. The purpose of this covenant is that they would be His special people and represent Him to the nations. As they fulfill this task He will come and dwell among them to bless them. But in order to represent Him they must be a holy people and this means living deeply ethical and moral lives that put God's character on display. They must love God and love others, and this is what we find in the 10 words in Exodus 20.

Of course, God spoke these 10 words to Israel directly from Mt. Sinai and they were terrified. Look at their reaction in Exodus 20:18-21. God has given them these words in this way so that they may not sin and now He will expand on these words to further give them moral guidance and make them a holy people.

So, we saw the 10 words and they were very broad revelations of God's character. Now, God will fill out the rest of the Book of the Covenant by giving them further instructions, or case law that expands and clarifies the 10 words. So, remember how chapter 20:1 called these the "words" of God? Now look at 21:1 where God, through Moses, communicates these "rules" to Israel. Now, let's look forward to 24:3 where the entire covenant is summarized. The covenant is made up of the broader, more fundamental "words" as well as the "rules" that flesh out God's intentions more and give more specific guidance.

But here's the thing about the "rules". These don't even function like detailed laws covering every possible circumstance the people would encounter. They had to study these examples in chapters 21-23 and then apply them in wisdom to various situations. In other words, there are principles that these examples work out. And these are the principles that I want to draw your attention to today. You and I can learn much from these "rules" regarding how to live and pursue applying God's Word in our lives. I don't want to study this section by going

through every example. Instead, I want to give you **5 Lessons that Guide our Application of God's Truth to Life**. And we'll pick up on specific examples from these chapters. Now, my encouragement to you would be to take these 5 lessons and go back and read these chapters later from start to finish and see how these lessons are consistently put on display.

1. We Remember that Ethics are Rooted in Redemption

I cannot remind you enough of how important this will be in your life and in your pursuit of holiness and goodness. Over and over again God reminds Israel that their pursuit of holiness begins with His deliverance of them and continues as the working out of His redemption. Remember Exodus 20:2. Notice how the "rules" section of the covenant begins. Look at 20:2-6. Now, to be clear, this "slave" here is more like a bondservant and comes into the service of a master because of financial debt. God begins these rules by talking about the freedom of a slave to remind Israel that their actions toward each other must reflect God's actions toward them. Slaves could not be kept indefinitely. They must be released after 6 years. But, there is the opportunity to continue to serve one's master if the master is kind and loving, which is of course a reflection of Israel's service to God.

I want you to notice later in 22:21 and 23:9 what God says about Israel's treatment of foreigners and refugees. He uses the word "mistreat" here, which is used of Egypt's mistreatment of Israel. Notice too that God says He will hear their cry to Him, which is exactly what God did with Israel.

It's like the story in the NT that Jesus tells regarding the unforgiving servant. One servant had amassed a debt so monumental that it would have taken several lifetimes to pay it back. In a shocking display of grace and pity, and at a huge personal loss, the master simply forgives the debt and allows the servant to walk out a debt free man. The forgiven servant goes out and finds a man who owes him a much smaller debt and rather than forgiving, throws the man in prison. What has to go wrong in a person's heart to simply miss the hypocrisy of being forgiven and being unable to forgive another?

If you find yourself having a difficult time pursuing holiness in a particular area, remember your redemption. Remember what you have been forgiven. Let that compel obedience to God's good commands.

2. We Value Justice

Now, this is rather simply stated here, but it's impossible to read this section of case law and guidelines for Israel and come away thinking that God doesn't value justice. Over and over again in this section these examples would have taught Israel to be exacting and careful about making sure justice is done, both procedural justice and restorative justice. Here's what I mean by procedural justice (23:1-3) and here's what I mean by restorative justice (22:22-24).

Now, let's talk about this whole eye for an eye thing. This has often been viewed as a barbaric, sort of brutal and primitive way of viewing justice. You poke my eye out I get to poke yours out. There's really no indication that they were supposed to take this literally. In fact, in the verses before this (vv. 18-19) and very next verse after it (v. 26) you have an example of how this wasn't applied literally. The point of it is that justice should be done and things should be made right in proportion or fairness to the injury sustained. In many ways, all of these examples in the book of the covenant are meant to build Israel into a just and equitable society where each person is dealt with according to what is due to them.

And this makes sense because of what we know about the character of God. If Israel was going to put God's glory on display, they must be a people who do justice because God is a God of justice and righteousness. Listen to Deut. 32:1-4. And also listen to the prophet Micah's unique summary of what God requires of us in Micah 6:6-8. As God's people who represent Him we must be passionate about treating others with fairness and justice. It should flow naturally from us because of who our Father is. And part of justice means treating others with dignity and compassion.

3. We Uphold Human Dignity with Compassion

One of the things you notice very quickly in these chapters is that God requires Israel to treat everyone, and particularly the weak and marginalized with dignity and compassion. In the ancient world nearly every society was broken up into social levels of importance almost like a caste system. How you were treated and what compassion you were afforded depended on your social standing.

We've already seen how God requires Israel to treat sojourners and foreigners with kindness and dignity because the Israelites themselves understood how

difficult it was to be a stranger in a foreign land. But I want you to notice as well that the poor and weak were treated with compassion as well.

I'll show you this with a couple of examples. First, look at 21:28. You might think, what's so significant about this? Well, in other ancient cultures there was no penalty or restitution required if an ox gored a woman. It just didn't matter. But here God presents men and women as on equal footing in His law. I'd also like to hit one of the most difficult passages in this section head on. Look back to 21:7-11. There's a different word used here than the word used of a normal slave. This word indicates that this woman is being presented for marriage and the "payment" is a dowry payment.

Now, we don't know the specific circumstances, but it could be that the family get the dowry money early, before she is of age to be married and she moves into the other house. You'll notice here that the new family isn't allowed to "sell" her as a slave to another people group outside of Israel. She can only be redeemed back to her original family.

Beyond that, if the dowry is paid for her to marry the son, she is not treated as a slave at all but as a daughter. If she is a second wife, or a concubine, as was common in this culture, though not condoned by Scripture, she was to be treated with dignity and respect. Verses 10-11. The point here is that God demanded that people be treated with honor and respect, regardless of social status or financial status.

Listen to 23:6-8 for one more example of this.

4. We Pursue Right Motivations and Right Actions

There's always a danger for Christians in ignoring motivations when it comes to determining what is right or wrong. We can, at times, act without any affection or love behind it. While that's a common problem, I see a growing problem among Christians today where we seem to think that motivation is all that matters.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard Christians say, "Well, that wasn't my intention," or "I didn't mean to." While intention is part of the equation when it comes to right and wrong, it's not the whole thing. God values both motivation and action and you can see that clearly in this passage. Listen to 21:12-14. There's a difference in outcome when the motivation for the action is good, but there's

still restitution that must be made when we inadvertently harm another person.
22:5

5. We Remember that Ethics are Always Vertical

Finally, as you read through this passage you will encounter many examples of human to human interaction and much of what we have talked about deals with horizontal relationships. But, ethical choices are always tied to one's view of God and one's relationship with God.

Right in the middle of these case laws we read this in 22:31. The whole point here is for the people of Israel to be set apart to God. In other words, they are to be holy out of love for God and devotion to Him. Many of these laws and commands deal with Israel's relationship to God. The Sabbath is addressed in chapter 23. God's compassion is talked about in 22:26-27. The whole section begins with a discussion of altars and how Israel must build altars to God in 20:22-26. Why? Because for Israel, their worship of God and their ethical choices before Him have the goal of making them a people fit for God to dwell with them to bless them. Look at the second part of verse 24.

In the coming weeks we will get into the tabernacle and the entire point of the tabernacle is for Israel to be holy so that God can dwell among them and bless them. As we've seen with God's deliverance of Israel, grace precedes obedience, but obedience must always follow redemption. Ethics and the type of obedience God calls Israel to does not stand alone. It's necessary and the end result is glorious. Listen to how Jesus put this in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:8.

I hope this is our greatest ambition and our hearts most passionate desire. To see God. To truly know Him. Let's pray.