

You Shall Know I AM:

The Uses of the Law (Exodus 20:18-23:19)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 3, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ My daughter is in second grade in a Christian school committed to classical education and to a collaborative effort where parents take an active role in their child's education. So on one of the home days, I get the privilege of being there and studying world history with her. One of the books we read on ancient history had a whole chapter on **the Code of Hammurabi**. If you have no idea who or what in the world that is, don't feel bad. I was clueless like you. I don't remember being taught that as a kid.

- ❖ Basically, he was an ancient Babylonian king (18th-century BC) who developed a system of laws in order to rule his vast empire with order and justice. He didn't want the people's obedience because they feared his army but because they respected his laws. So he carved them into a stone monument, which have been preserved and are the first set of written laws that we know of. They predate the Mosaic Law by centuries. **And as my daughter and I read some of the laws found in the Code of Hammurabi, it was pretty interesting.**
 - Now I know what an ancient Babylonian would do if someone accidentally flooded his field or stole one of his goats. Now I know what an ancient Babylonian farmer should do if his neighbor returned his plow broken (or didn't return it at all). **That's interesting, but it doesn't seem very relevant.** And I don't feel like I have to keep any law in the Code of Hammurabi. It's interesting reading, but it's not authoritative.

- ❖ **But isn't that how many of us read the Mosaic Law?** Today we're covering a large section of Exodus from chapter 20:18 to 23:19. And a good chunk of it is a seemingly random list of laws addressing common crimes or civil disputes that you'd expect to find in ancient times. It's called **the Book of the Covenant** (24:7). It covers situations on what to do if you lend a neighbor your ox but they're careless and the ox dies or is seriously injured (22:10). Or what do you do if your neighbor digs a pit, leaves it uncovered, and your donkey falls into it and dies (21:33)? And then you have seemingly random prohibitions like "*You shall not permit a sorceress to live*" (22:18) and "*You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk*" (23:19).
 - Just like the Code of Hammurabi, the Book of the Covenant can be fascinating for some; boring for others. But we're all wondering if these laws have any relevance for us today and any authority over us to obey what it says. That's the interpretive challenge before us: **How are Christians today supposed to read and apply the Book of the Covenant?** Or are we even supposed to? Maybe this section is not relevant anymore since we're under the New Covenant and not the Old.

- ❖ We're covering a large section today, so there's no way to cover every verse and comment on every law. So I plan to focus on what's commonly known as **the Threefold Use of the Law**, and I'll rely on three metaphors to do that. We'll consider 1) the law as restraint, 2) the law as mirror, and 3) the law as teacher. And as I unpack these uses, I'll make reference to various laws found in our larger text.

- ❖ **But my bigger goal is to demonstrate how the entire Book of the Covenant finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.** That means Christians are *not* under the Book of the Covenant like the Israelites were. **The OT law is no longer normative for believers. But there are still moral norms and commands that Christians must obey.**
- ❖ So if there are any laws to be restated or principles to be drawn from this OT text that apply to us today – **Christians obey not because it's written in the Mosaic Covenant but because those laws and principles have been restated in the New Testament and written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit.** That's the blessing of the New Covenant. By the end of this message, I'm going to exhort every believer to obey the law – what Paul calls the "*law of Christ*" (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21), which is really the law of love, to love one another (Gal 5:14).

The Law as Restraint

- ❖ But let's begin with the metaphor of the law as restraint. The law is a restrainer of evil. As we'll demonstrate, the law is ineffective at changing human hearts or producing within us a desire to obey. That it can't do. **But the law can restrain sinners from committing all the sins we are capable of committing.** It can't make you good, but it can keep you from doing all the evil you, in your sinful flesh, could do.
 - **This is, of course, is based on the scriptural premise that we are all deeply corrupted by the effects of sin.** We are depraved and capable of the most heinous of sins. Now we admit we're sinners. We're not perfect. But we watch the news and hear reports of great sinners doing atrocious things and committing unspeakable crimes, and we think, "*What is wrong with these people? Who could do such a thing?*"
 - And the Bible says, "*You could. I could. We could because we share the same fallen condition as the worst of sinners.*" **What's wrong with those people is what's wrong with us.** Our hearts are bent towards sin and selfishness.
- ❖ Thank God for the Law. **For in the Law, the worst impulses of our sinful hearts are curbed and restrained.** By God's common grace, the consciences of the vast majority of the human race are not completely seared to a sense of shame or a fear of punishment. In other words, by God's common grace, we're not all sociopaths.
 - So when a people are taught the Law of God – and when a society orders itself accordingly – the Law still has an effect (through its demands, threats, and punishments) to stem the tide and to keep us from acting upon our worst inclinations.
- ❖ We see this kind of restraining effect in chapter 21:1-6 – in these laws regulating the practice of slavery among Israelites. **Now upfront, I want to say clearly that slavery is an ancient practice that has always been rooted in human depravity.** We can argue that Israel's practice of slavery was different than the chattel slavery that mars our nation's past – in that slavery in Israel wasn't race-based and didn't involve kidnapping and slave trading. And we can point out that it was a common means of getting out of debt, where you sell yourself into a form of indentured servitude until you pay it off.

- ❖ **But even with these nuances, there’s still no point trying to justify Israel’s practice of slavery.** Because the Bible doesn’t even try. The Book of the Covenant is not establishing or endorsing slavery. It’s regulating slavery and restraining the inherent evils of it.
 - **Just consider how it prevents life-long servitude by enforcing a Sabbath – where, in the seventh year, the slave is freed even if he still has outstanding debt (21:2).** Compared to the other nations in Canaan, where Israel will soon settle down, this provision of freedom in the seventh year was unparalleled. It made Israel holy – in the sense of being “set apart” from her neighbors.

- ❖ It goes on to say in v3 that if the slave entered with a family, then he will leave with his family intact. That makes sense, but then in v4 there’s this stipulation that if he gained a wife and family while under servitude, then he goes out alone and his family remains with his master. Now I know that seems cruel. **But at the same time, it could be seen as a means to protect his wife and kids from his own recklessness.** It was probably his carelessness that led him to be in such debt that he resorted to slavery. So if he hasn’t reformed by the time he’s freed, he might fall into ruin again and this time drag a family down with him. So while he’s out there getting his act together, his wife and kids are still being provided for by the master. And once he has the funds, he can redeem his whole family.
 - Or as vv5-6 describe, he doesn’t have to leave if he actually loves his master. In such cases, the master must be so fair and benevolent that a man and his family would voluntarily serve him and his household for the rest of their lives. If so, his master would bore a hole in his ear, and there would be a lifelong covenant between them.
 - Now again, I’m not trying to justify the practice of slavery. **But am I hoping to demonstrate how the Mosaic Law was trying to curb the worst tendencies and abuses of slavery.** That God’s people might be set apart from the nations and give witness to the fairness and benevolence of the LORD.

- ❖ Now I know some of you are going to keep reading all these verses, and you’ll get to vv7-11 and you’ll think, “*How is the LORD fair and benevolent if he doesn’t grant the same freedom to female slaves in the seventh year?*” That is unjust and chauvinistic. Look, I agree these are hard passages. I recoiled when I first read it. But before we start thumbing our noses at the “backwardness” of the Bible – with what Lewis calls “chronological snobbery” – let’s try to understand the Law’s intent within its historical context.
 - The female slaves in vv7-11 are serving as additional wives of the master. Much like how Jacob had his wives Leah and Rachel, but his father-in-law also gave him female servants named Zilpah and Bilhah as wives who bore some of the twelve sons of Israel (Gen 29:24, 29). So that’s why the female slave is not released after six years because she’s a wife and mother within the master’s household. It’s about preserving the family and the covenant of marriage. **Now I know it’s still going to be unsettling for you, but at least try to see the good restraint in his law.** Notice how she *cannot* be treated like property you sell, but she is to be treated as a wife or daughter-in-law (if you give her to your son). And if she is neglected and mistreated, she gets to go free. That’s a lot of motivation for a sinful man to treat her well.

- ❖ Now we won't have the time to go into the same kind of detail for all these laws. But I can make a few more general observations. Chapter 21:12-32 contains laws related to personal injury or death. Some of these sins call for **capital punishment**, which is intended to have a restraining effect on sinners, and there's a provision for refuge when it comes to unintentional homicide. If you killed someone on accident, there is recourse and protection from a revenge killing, while a judge assesses your case.
 - And then in these cases only involving injury, **the principle of *lex talionis*** (“*an eye for an eye*”; cf. 21:23) is applied as a way to restrain disproportional punishments. Punishments must fit the crime. If someone knocks out your tooth with a fist, you can't retaliate by trying to knock off his head with a club. That's not justice – that's revenge. And what's more, these injury laws take the responsibility to exact justice out of the hands of the offended party and into the hands of impartial judges. “*An eye of an eye*” was not a motto for personal vendettas. It was a principle for proportional punishment to be measured out in court.

- ❖ Now another larger section of the Book of the Covenant, chapters 21:33 to 22:15, cover cases involving property damage or theft, and this is where **the principle of restitution** is embedded in each of these laws. That's where, if you're at fault due to negligence or thievery, you typically pay double the value to cover the loss. The point is to restrain our evil tendencies to covet and steal our neighbor's property.
 - And again it's important to place these laws in historical context. Because if you think the Book of the Covenant is harsh, just realize that under Sharia Law, you cut off the theft's hand, and under the Code of Hammurabi, you cut off his head. So in context and in comparison, restitution is a pretty merciful and proportional punishment.

- ❖ **Friends, the point is that we are all sinners and, if not for the Law and its restraining effect, we would all be carried away by our worst impulses.** We would give in to all of our sinful inclinations. These demands, threats, and punishments meted out in the Book of the Covenant helped restrain sin, evil, and injustice among Israel. **In Galatians 3:24, Paul describes the law as a “guardian” of God's people until Christ would come.** The Law guards the people of God – really from themselves – restraining them from greater evil until his Son would come to accomplish what the Law could not do – to make us good.

The Law as Mirror

- ❖ This leads to our next metaphor: The Law as mirror. And like any mirror it reflects an image. **Now on one hand, the law reflects the image of the Lawgiver.** The Law was given to Israel to set them apart as a holy nation (19:6) – holy as the LORD their God is holy (Lev 19:2). So in giving his people the Law, God was using it like a mirror to reflect himself.
 - The law is righteous as God is righteous. The law is compassionate as God is compassionate. The law is just as God is just. The law is merciful as God is merciful. **So if say you love God but if you're disgusted and appalled by what you read in his Law – how is that any different than saying you love your husband, but then gagging when you see his reflection in the mirror?**

- ❖ **If you have little love or respect for God’s Law, then what does that say about your love and respect for God himself?** As you’re being confronted with the Law of God – perhaps it’s revealing something about you. About your heart attitude. Maybe you need to repent of a pretty low view of God’s Law – because it really communicates a low view of God.
 - Friends, this is what the Law does as a mirror. **It reflects the holy image of God, but when we stare into it, we begin to see an unholy image of ourselves.** The Law reveals our sin and weakness. It shows us our filth and our need to be washed clean.

- ❖ Paul illustrates this in Romans 7. He’s writing about how in Christ we’re released from the Law, having died to it. But Paul is careful not to suggest that the Law is somehow bad. Listen to **Romans 7:7**, *“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.””*
 - **In other words, Paul says without the Law, I would’ve been craving other people’s stuff without realizing how displeasing it is to the LORD.** That it’s a sin called coveting. But just being able to name the sin doesn’t help me resist it. Paul goes on to write in v8, *“But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”*
 - So the Law is good in itself, but my sinful flesh seizes the opportunity and takes advantage of the Law’s inability to change my heart, and so the law is misused to awaken in me even more sinful desires.

- ❖ Paul’s point is the Law tells me what *not* to do. But not only am I incapable of *not* doing that thing, I discover in me a desire to do far more sinful things. **The Law has this way of revealing and exposing my sinfulness and how undeserving I am to stand before God.**
 - Think back to chapter 20:18 (that section we read earlier). It’s where the Israelites see the thunder and lightening and the sound of trumpets and the mountain smoking. And it says they were afraid and trembled and stood far off.
 - But what was it that so terrified them? It wasn’t the thunder or lightening. It was the voice of God speaking to them the Ten Commandments. **If they kept hearing God speak the Law, they felt like they were going to die.** Hearing the Law was like throwing up a mirror and showing Israel how wretched they were as sinners; how deserving they were of judgment; and how needful they were for redemption.

- ❖ This same point is being made later on in the Book of the Covenant. Look at chapter 22:29. *“²⁹You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.”* Now for God to ask for the best of their harvest and winepress – and for them to sacrifice the firstborn of their oxen and sheep – makes sense. **But why is he demanding them to sacrifice their firstborn sons?** That sounds like a disproportional punishment.

- ❖ This verse reconnects us with the larger narrative of the book of Exodus. Remember back in Egypt, during the tenth plague, the LORD slew all the firstborn sons of Egypt, and he would've killed Israel's firstborn sons because they were equally deserving of death. **But God graciously provided a means of redemption where every household could slay a spotless lamb and cover their doorpost with its blood.** And judgment would pass over that family, and God would spare their firstborn son.
 - But since that first Passover, Israel kept disobeying. So God continued demanding their firstborn sons. Exodus 13:1, *“The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”*”
 - Their firstborn sons belong to God, but a family can redeem their son by bringing him to God when he's eight days old and once again slaying a spotless lamb in his place.

- ❖ My point is that the Law is a mirror revealing your sin, your moral inability to keep the Law, and your deep need for redemption by means of a source outside of yourself – by means of a sacrificial Lamb. That's what the Law points to!
 - **Friends, the Law can't save you, but it can show you your Savior.** I shared that illustration last week of how the Law works like a mirror, showing you your dirty face. And we said how you don't take the mirror and start rubbing it on your face expecting it to clean you. The mirror is supposed to drive you to the cleansing water.
 - **In the same way, the Book of the Covenant (this Mosaic Law) is supposed to drive you to the Living Water of Christ.** The Law shows you your deep need for Jesus. That's what he meant when Jesus said he came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17).

- ❖ And that's why we said earlier that the Book of the Covenant is not binding for Christians. **Most of the laws you read here won't find direct application in your life. Because their purpose has been fulfilled in Christ.** We don't keep ceremonial laws regarding the altar and sacrifices because Jesus was the final sacrifice. We don't keep cleanliness laws because Jesus has sanctified his people from all uncleanness. We don't follow these civil laws since the people of God are not comprised as a nation anymore – Christ has made a new humanity out of Jew and Gentile and calls it his Church (Eph 2:15).

- ❖ So the Church doesn't keep these laws. Not because we now "get it" and see how backwards and unenlightened they were. **No, we don't keep these laws because their mission is complete.** Their purpose is fulfilled. They pointed to the Christ, and now he has come.
 - But just because Christ has fulfilled the Mosaic Law, that doesn't mean his followers should ignore it altogether. **There are moral dimensions to the Law that still remain in effect because they reflect the holiness and heart of God, and so they still apply to us today.**

The Law as Teacher

- ❖ This leads to our third metaphor and final point. The Law of God is a restraint against the evil inside our hearts, and the Law is a mirror revealing that evil to us and revealing our inability to make ourselves good. It points to Jesus and his Gospel. If we receive Christ, we will be born again; changed from the inside out; the Spirit of God will write his Law on our hearts; and he'll enable us to actually keep the Law, to be good – that's what happens to everyone who becomes a worshipper and follower of Jesus.
 - And that's why, for Christians, there's still a use for the Law. The Law is a teacher. **What the Law can still do is teach us how to live a life in relationship with God – a life pleasing to him.** This is what some would call the third use of the Law: the Law as teacher.

- ❖ In his book *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, the Puritan **Samuel Bolton** explains the Law's relationship to the gospel this way: *“The law sends us to the gospel that we may be justified; and the gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty as those who are justified. . . . The law sends us to the gospel for our justification; the gospel sends us to the law to frame our way of life.”*
 - In other words, the Law drives you to the Gospel of Christ to be in right relationship with God, and after you've been reconciled, the Gospel drives you back to the Law to learn how to live out this right relationship with God.

- ❖ **So as Christians, we strive to keep God's law – not so much because we *have to* but because we *get to* – and because in Christ we're *able to*.** Obedience matters – not as a means to justify ourselves – but as a means to show love to the Redeemer who justified us.
 - It's like Jesus said, *“If you love me, keep my commandments.”* (Jn 14:15) What are his commandments? In the Gospels, we see him reinforcing all the Ten Commandments, except for a strict observance of the Sabbath. And he sums it all up in the law of love – love God and love your neighbor (Mt 22:36-40). That's the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2).
 - **So there's a continuity between the Law of the Covenant and the Law of Christ.** And that's why we can read our passage and still draw practical applications for the Christian life.

- ❖ Let me give you an example. **Consider these laws demanding restitution for any damages you cause.** What can we learn? We learn that asking forgiveness is always the first step in reconciliation, but when there's a means to make restitution, we do it. So if you borrow a tool from a friend but break it, you don't just return it with an apology. You make restitution and repair it or buy him a new one. If your dog digs up a neighbor's flower garden, you replace it and offer to get your hands dirty replanting it. If you dent a stranger's car in the parking lot, you leave you name and number and try to make things right.
 - It's like how Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19 response after he was utterly changed by an encounter with Jesus and his grace. **And he not only repented before God. He made restitution before man.** He was willing to pay back four times the amount to anyone he cheated (Lk 19:8).

- ❖ It proves that Zacchaeus wasn't concerned with meeting the bare requirements of the law, which required paying back double what you stole. He went well beyond the law. And he wasn't just concerned to make up for his past. He wanted his life, from now on, to reflect the law of love, so he promised to give half of his possessions to the poor!
 - That's the heart of a Christian. **That's what it looks like to learn from the Law; and to apply it to our hearts; and to let it take shape in our relationships.** Christians are not concerned with meeting bare requirements. We're not driven to obey by fear or threats of punishment. **We're driven by love for God and love for neighbor, and the Law – like any good teacher – directs our steps and shows us how to best live that life of love.**