Moses and the Law of God (part 3)

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[0:00] Okay. So, for one last time, we're thinking about Moses and the law of God. We've been thinking for the last two weeks, what role does God's law play in the life of His people?

So, we recognize in the flow of the book of Exodus, God's people are saved by grace, and they're saved for covenant relationship. And law obedience becomes the condition for them to continue to enjoy that relationship that they're brought into with God. We saw that they've been set free from slavery, but they've also been set free for something, for free and grateful obedience. So, that law obedience for them becomes a heart issue and a worship issue, just as for us, that Jesus would be the master we would gladly serve. We saw last week that Israel becomes a nation under God, with a special mission to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, that they might bring God glory. So, there is something in the law obedience of God's people that is intended to reveal God's goodness to the world. And Jesus picked up on that in the Sermon on the Mount, as we heard. So, we've been considering so far the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments represent the principles, the foundation upon which the life of God's people was to be built. But now we come to this lengthy section where these principles, these foundations begin to be worked out in practice, in families and in society. How do they apply to workplace issues, the justice system, personal property, social concern, religious life? One of the questions that we will be asking, and we ought always to ask is, how do the principles of the Ten Commandments, which are binding on all of God's people at all times, how do we work them into our life today?
Because just to hear that list of laws, we realize Israelite society was very different to our society, but those principles remain. So, we're going to ask four questions this evening to help us with this. One is the longest by far, the other three are far more brief. The first question, how do we worship God in all of life? I hope that we'll see that the intent of these various laws is that we would worship God in all of life. How do God's ways affect my ways? How did God intend that His character, as it's revealed, work itself out in the character of His people? The third question, what difference does it make to be different? And then hopefully leading from that, we'll understand why this question, fourth question, why do we need grace and the gospel?
So, question one, how do we worship God in all of life? Okay, some introductory points about this section. First, if you've got time, you can read through all of this, but if you read it, you will discover this is demanding. Alec Motier, an Old Testament scholar, said that the Lord means His law. That's one of the things that's clear as you read these chapters. He means that His law would govern the daily life of His people. That God expects reflection on His law and how to be obedient to that law, how to work out those principles in life is not straightforward. It is demanding.
[3:27] This section also reminds us that the law is comprehensive in the areas of life it covers. We can't just make compartments into our lives and say, well, God's law applies here, but just regular principles for my life over here. No, it covers all areas of life. And actually, if you were to take the time, if you were to look at any individual law, you would find behind it one of the Ten Commandments.

So, the Ten Commandments stand behind all the various laws that are here. So, it's demanding. It's comprehensive. It's also unique. So, people have compared it with the legal documents of other ancient societies at the time, and it's recognized that none of those documents cover as much ground as what's known as the Book of the Covenant. None of them give people as much dignity and value as what we have before us. And while each claim, every ancient sort of people claim their laws came from a God, there is something unique about the God of Israel, because He has acted in grace and in salvation to bring them to Himself, inviting them into relationship as a starting point for receiving His law. So, having said that, and with our Bibles open, let me give you the very briefest of overviews with some key points recognized. In chapter 21, verse 1, it says, these are the laws you

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are to set before them. So, the first section of the law, first 11 verses of chapter 21, are all about slavery. Now, when we think about slavery, we probably go to 17th, 18th, 19th century. We think about a racist system. We think about those horrendous abuses. That's not what we have here. A couple of vindicators. Verse 2, compulsory and lifelong slavery was forbidden. Six years work, seventh year go free.
Also, we understand that this was a system that people could appreciate. Yes, there were abuses, but it also provided a sense of stability for a family. And we see that in verse 5. A servant could declare, I love my master. I want to be part of his extended household for life. So, there's partly stability going on here. Verses 8 and 9. And this is one of the unique things about the law code of Israel. There is protection from abuse. There is a measure of care for the rights of female slaves. There is the concept of redemption. A slave owner has no right to sell a woman to foreigners. So, it begins with slavery. And then it moves, verses 12 to 27, to consider various aspects of personal injury. So, verse 12, anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it's not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate.
All these laws put together remind us that God takes life and the protection of life very seriously. Going back to the book of Genesis, people made in the image of God. If someone takes the life of an image bearer, then God demands that life. Judgment comes. But also, there's this principle that innocent life should be protected. So, verse 13, there's that person who accidentally kills someone else instead of judgment and vengeance falling on them that are established these cities of refuge.
[7:08] So, there's slavery, there's personal injury. And within that, verse 24, words that are perhaps familiar, if you know the Sermon on the Mount, if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Now, we need to know the context for this because one of the things that Jesus does in the New Testament is He rescues this law from abuse. The law of eye for eye, it was a law for the law courts. So, the setting here, verse 22, people are fighting, a pregnant woman's been hit, she gives birth prematurely, but there's no serious injury. The offender must be fined wherever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.

So, this is a protection against a family demanding excessive revenge. This is what's going to prevent cycles of revenge from happening. And so, when Jesus comes in Matthew 5, verses 38 to 42, He understands that the Pharisees were using it and teaching it in exactly that way. And so, Jesus says no to personal revenge, and in the Sermon on the Mount, He says absolutely yes to being a peacemaker who pursues good for others. Chapter 21, verse 28, attention moves to personal property all the way through to verse 15 of chapter 22. Principles here, you must care for the property of others.
We are not to be negligent. There's the command, if you are found to be stealing, you must pay back with interest. Chapter 22, verse 1, whoever steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. From there, there was that section that we read about social responsibility, which ended with the idea that Israel were to be God's holy people. What did it look like to be God's holy people? Would it involve certain things about how they related to one another? So, there's in verses 16 and 17, treatment of women. Verse 21, the treatment of foreigners is there. Verse 22, treatment of the widow and the orphan. We'll come back to that. There's verse 25, treatment of the poor.
Even how they treat God is included here. Verse 28, do not blaspheme God. Verse 29, do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. So, there are relationships and responsibilities within those relationships that are being included within the book of the covenant here. Chapter 23, first nine verses are all about justice and mercy. It begins there. Verse 1, do not spread false reports.
Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness. So, a principle is about truth and integrity, especially in a court of law, the importance of honoring someone's good name, testifying accurately. Then verse 4 is interesting. If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. So, there's the principle of mercy to an enemy. And then verses 6 to 9, there is the provision of justice for all. Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.
[10:27] And then after that, there are laws about religious life. So, the Sabbath rest is established as a gift for all of society. So, the land gets rest, servants get rest, foreigners get rest, the Israelite gets to rest. And then there are these, in verses 14 to 19, commands about the three annual festivals.

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So, when they entered into the promised land, they weren't free to determine when and how they would worship God directed that. So, put all that together, and hopefully we can recognize that all of life matters to God. How we live in all of life matters to God. That He wants His people, Israel, He wants His people today to apply His revealed Word, the Bible, to the details of our lives. And of course, that requires us to do some thinking, because our time and place and our specific circumstances are clearly very different to those of Old Testament Israel. I can't think of a time when my enemy's ox was wandering by and I happened to find it. So, we need to be thinking. We can't just take these and say, okay, this is how I'm going to live. No, we have to go back to the principles of the Ten Commandments and begin to think for ourselves. What does it look like to apply those principles to my life in the 21st century as a follower of Jesus? Because Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount reminded the crowds in His day, not one iota, not one little part has gone from the law.

So, the principles remain. And He made plain as well that obedience becomes a matter of the heart. It's not enough to do the outward box ticking thing. And it's important too, as we heard, that it's an expression of our worship. That the way that we seek to live, to live in society, has as its goal the glory of God. That we would let our light shine so that men might see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. So, it calls us to seek God's wisdom, to be guided by the Spirit, to be thinking about how to apply the Ten Commandments to the times in which we live. You know, think about areas like technology, artificial intelligence, social media.

Does my smartphone usage allow me to love my neighbor well? Does the way that I interact with social media, does it lead me towards gossip, coveting hate, or is it a chance for me to express worship and to encourage other people?

The principle here of showing mercy to the poor and the weak runs all through the book of the covenant. What does that look like in our day and age? Who are the poor? Who are the weak? Who are the vulnerable in our society? And what's the best way to help? Should we do that directly? One person to one person?

[13:37] Do we do it through a charity? Do we seek to be a voice for the voiceless? It requires wisdom. There are principles about work and about consumption for the Israelites, but what about for us?

I think we would all do well to think about how do I Sabbath well when life is busy? How do I rest well? How do I worship well? When I purchase, are we thinking about a fair deal for those who are producing, for farmers, for factory workers? How is it that we can, in our own workplace settings, show compassion and care to our colleagues? The issue of social concern, caring for others, is everywhere in these verses. Even as we come to think, for example, about how to vote in a general election, where does the balance of concern fall? Does it fall for my interests? Or am I thinking about the interests of the disadvantaged? How do we think about immigration issues in light of what is taught here? So this call to obedience, it is a call to a life that is demanding that the law is comprehensive, it is for all of life. So it is a call for us to worship and it is a call for us to think and to pray and to act. Well that is question one. That is the longest question by a long shot.

Question two is this one. How do God's ways affect my ways? Now to help us to think about this, let me just share a story of a man by the name of Dr. Bill Wilson. Some of you may have heard of him. He is the president of an organization called Metro World Child Ministries, which by now is a global organization, but it began in New York City with a very deliberate aim of sharing the love of Christ with children from very difficult conditions. And Bill Wilson and his workers do this at great cost to themselves at great risk to their own lives. It's a wonderful story whose child is this.

Why did that ministry begin? It's so important for us to understand. Because Bill Wilson was a child who was abandoned by his mother at the age of 12. And while on the streets he was found by a Christian man who showed care for him, who paid for him to go to a Christian camp where he heard the gospel, where he discovered love from God's people, and he was saved. And in that moment, there was a new purpose for his life. As he understood Jesus loved me and my brokenness and my mess, I want to share the love of Jesus with children that they might know it too.

[16:23] And there is this wonderful principle within the book of the covenant, where God the Lord says, this is who I am, and this is how I have treated you as my people. And because of that love and that mercy you have received, now go and do likewise. So where do we see that in our text? Turn with me again to Exodus 22 from verse 21. And we'll see this to answer the question, how do God's ways affect my ways? So verse 21, do not ill-treat or oppress a foreigner, for you were

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foreigners in Egypt.

The Old Testament picks up on this so many times, saying to Israel, remember to show mercy, mercy, especially mercy to the foreigners, because when you were a foreigner, when you were a slave, you received it. God rescued you, therefore show mercy and care to others.
Verse 22, do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. God has a particular care for the weak, for the helpless.
For the widow, for the orphan. And God invites His people to recognize that was their story. They were pitifully weak and helpless as slaves in Egypt. And God showed kindness and mercy.
And He says, you must do likewise. What about for the poor? Do not take advantage of the widow and the fatherless. Verse 25, if you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal, charge no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in?
[18:30] When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. There's the principle. God is a compassionate God. God has shown compassionate care to them. Therefore, they should not exploit others financially. They should show care and humanity in their treatment towards others.

And that prompts us to ask a question in light of the gospel of redemption. You know, how has God, if we are Christians here today, how has God treated us?
Has He shown us mercy? Of course He has. He's shown us kindness. He's shown us love. He's refused to retaliate when we have treated Him badly. He's never sought to exploit us. He's never sought to destroy our dignity or value, but rather He cares about those. Therefore, go and do likewise.
Jesus in the New Testament gives us the Good Samaritan principle. Remember, He has that discussion with a man, and He wants to know who is my neighbor. And Jesus tells the parable to show, here's how to be a neighbor. Expend yourself. Sacrifice for anyone who is in need.
And of course, Jesus comes as the Great Samaritan, showing such love to us as His enemies, extending grace to us in our need and helplessness. And because of that, He invites that we should go and do likewise. Of course, for this to happen, for God's ways, for God's dealings with us to affect how we relate to others. That requires for us to get the gospel daily into our hearts, to remind ourselves of God's grace and mercy and love, so that when we are tempted to take revenge and retaliate, or to spread gossip, or to turn a blind eye to suffering, or to cheat somebody, or even to hold back on giving to God, we remember. We remember the life of Jesus. He held nothing back. We remember the death of Jesus, His cost for our salvation. We remember the saving mercy of Jesus, so that how God treats us would increasingly shape how we treat others.
[20:59] Well, that's the second question. How do God's ways affect my ways? Question number three, what difference does it make to be different? Because this is a call for Israel to become a very different society from the nations around them. Now, it's long been recognized that Western civilization, where we find ourselves today, is built on the values that we find in the Bible, built on the ethics of Christianity. So, even people really hostile to the Christian faith recognize that. People like Richard Dawkins would recognize that. At the foundation of our society lie Christian principles. But we know, don't we, that we don't live in a Christian society anymore.

We live in a secular society. We are a post-Christian nation, and so there is a question for our society, which is this, and we all have to ask this question, what's the basis for demanding justice? Because this is all about justice, isn't it? Everybody believes that justice matters, but why does justice matter? And one of the things that's important for us as Christians is to recognize that justice matters to us because we have a just God. If we take away the reality of God, if we are here by accident, then life has no great meaning, so why shouldn't the strong eat the weak?
If life has no design, if there is no ultimate moral standard, how can I turn to history and say that the allies were right and the Nazis wrong?
The only basis for justice in human rights, and as people think about this, they come to recognize it, there must be a creator God. It must be our starting point that we are made in His image, that values are absolute, and that life has value.
We said this last week about the Ten Commandments, and it's true as well about the book of the covenant. As those principles are worked out into society, if these were obeyed, this would create a very different society in the very best way. Compared to the nations around them, they would be far more moral and far more merciful. There'd be greater justice for all sectors of society. There would

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be greater respect. There would be more welcome. It would be more fair. And we saw it last week, and we need to restate it, that the goal of that wasn't simply that they would live in a wonderful, good society, but it's that their way of living, their way of worship would reveal God and His character, that it would draw others to want to know God. There's that amazing text in the middle of the the people movement out of slavery in Egypt. So after God has worked those ten plagues, those judgments on Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, and it became so incredibly apparent that God was with His people and for His people, that He was the one true and living God. As the crowds left Egypt, among them on that day were Egyptians. Egyptians who were clearly able to see what was happening in their day and to recognize the God of Israel. He's the one true and living God, and He's the one that we want to follow. And now that God is establishing this new nation and this new society, there is that invitation to them to represent God. And because they're representing God, all of life matters.

[24:48] Their holiness matters. So look at 23, chapter 23, verse 9, do not oppress a foreigner. You yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt. So one of the ways they were to be distinct was in their different treatment of the other.

Became a wonderfully powerful thing within the Christian church as well, how we treat those who are unlike us matters to God. Chapter 23, verse 12, six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work so your ox and donkey may rest. The slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed. Rather than an existence that they had of being worked to death, now they're set free.

And the way that they set up their society is to be refreshing, is to be different, is to be attractive. Then verse 13 of chapter 23, be careful. To do everything I've said to you, do not invoke the names of other gods. Do not let them be heard on your lips. So their different worship also had this purpose of pointing people towards the reality that there is a God and that He can be known and that His ways are good. Then we turn to the New Testament. We return to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We realize that same principle governs the life of the church. Matthew 5, 14 to 16, you are the light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth. Let your light shine. And what's really interesting, we didn't have time to read it, but what comes next when we ask ourselves the question, well, how do we do that? How do we become the light of the world and a city on a hill and the salt of the earth? And what Jesus does is to radically apply God's law to the lives of His followers right to our hearts. You have heard it said, do not murder. But I tell you, even if you're angry, then you're breaking that commandment. And then He calls them to seek reconciliation quickly with someone that has something against you. You have heard it said, do not commit adultery. But Jesus makes it a matter of the heart. Even if we lust after another, then we are guilty. He talks about no easy divorce. He talks about not being those who swear and break oaths, but those who are truth-tellers who let their yes be yes and their no be no.

[27:23] He speaks of the refusal of personal revenge, but rather of loving enemies. He speaks of giving to the needy as an act of worship. So, it's Jesus' design that the way that we live be what brings glory to God as we live out His Word. So, obedience matters for our mission, and we know that. We know that hypocrisy turns people off. We know that if our Christianity doesn't actually make a difference to our lives, then why would our neighbor bother? So, again, we need to apply God's Word to all of life to let His character shape ours. That brings us to the fourth question. Why do we need grace?

Why do we need the gospel? Well, I hope it becomes really apparent with just a little bit of reflection that we fail. As the people of God, we fail. God calls us to a life of holiness, and so often we don't choose holiness. God says, live in such a way that my character is reflected in your character, and that's not always true of us. God says, work out my law in all of your life, and we're trying so very hard to put God in a box, to not let His Word reach to every area.

And so, as we hear God's law, as it is applied, it reminds us again that we don't and we can't keep it, and we need God's grace. And there's wonderful, beautiful bookends of grace on either side of the book of the covenant, reminds us that grace comes before law, and it reminds us that the Christian life is lived surrounded by God's grace. So, turn with me to chapter 20, verses 22 and following.

Where is grace here? Tell the Israelites this, you've seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven. Do not make any gods to be alongside me. Then he says, make an altar of earth for

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me, and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. There's grace. There is an altar. Here is grace. God speaks. God meets with His people. God will receive worship, will accept the sacrifices for sin. God Himself will come and bless His people. There is grace.
[30:05] And then we go to the end, to the other side. Chapter 23, verse 20, all the way to verse 33, it stands as the epilogue. Let me just read at the beginning there. See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him. He will not forgive your rebellion, since my name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. See, there's wonderful grace that there is this provision of God that the angel bearing the Lord's own name will go before them, that God Himself is present to lead His people towards the promised land, that God Himself guarantees victory. He will become a source of terror to their enemies, bringing peace and salvation. Wonderful grace, but notice this.

Still, the tension is not removed. Chapter 23, verse 22, if you listen carefully to what He says and do all that I say. All those wonderful promises, all that blessing has a condition.
Keep the law, obey. And we're back to where we started. You and I don't obey. We don't keep. And that's why we need grace. That's why we need the gospel. That's why we need the coming of Jesus.
Jesus, the only one who perfectly kept the law. Jesus, the one who fulfills the covenant, so that all those rich blessings, they don't come to us on the basis of our law-keeping. They come to us in Christ. In Jesus, God meets with us. In Jesus, God is with us to bless us. Jesus is the one who bears the name of the Lord, because He is the Lord. Jesus is the one who wins the victory over His enemies for His people, defeating on the cross sin and death and the devil. He is the one who will bring us to the promised land, the new creation. He is our hope. And He's also the one who supplies the power, who supplies the grace, so that we can live more and more as His people, so that we might more and more live out His values, that we might pursue today and tomorrow and this week life to His glory.
Let's pray. Our Father, we thank You that while there are so many laws within this section that can seem so confusing, amazing.
[32:53] Amazing.

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