

Exodus 20:22-21:32

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Well, if ever there were a by-and-by kind of biblical text, you hit it today. I've been in ministry nearly 30 years.

This text I have found to be the most challenging in the three decades. It traverses some incredibly difficult terrain.

The difficulty is not merely due to the fact that it is entirely unfamiliar to us, although it is unfamiliar. We are spending this summer at the mountain, and you are aware that most of us have heard of chapter 19, where God comes down on the mountain, and we're familiar with walking the trail of the Ten Commandments.

But we also know the covenant book, the committal of the people in 24, the construction of the tabernacle in 25 to 30. But we are largely unfamiliar with what takes place in 21 to 23.

Let me put it to you this way. At the age of 55, today is the first time in my lifetime that I've ever heard this text read in church.

[1 : 16] At the age of 55, this is the first sermon I will have ever heard from this text, live or on the web, by anybody.

And I happen to be the one delivering it. It's a text that is difficult because of its unfamiliarity. Yet, if it was only the unfamiliarity of the text, we wouldn't have a trouble.

It's difficult, not only for its unfamiliarity, but more so because it crosses terrain that almost seems impassable.

Warren Rogers, one of the guys in California who helped connect the paths that later would form the Pacific Crest Rim where you could walk from Mexico to Canada, knew that some trails had been walked, but there was terrain where they had to cut it through and connect it for the first time. In other words, there was terrain that seemed impassable. And on this text, the impassibility of the terrain rises from two primary needs, two stumbling stones buried deep within the soil of these verses.

[2 : 45] The first relates to our own nation's religious history. Let me put it to you this way. Let me put it to you this way.

of peoples. They opened up the Bible and proved it from here. In 1867, notice the year, even two years after the Civil War, Robert Louis Dabney published a work called The Defense of Virginia. Originally, it was entitled The Defense of Slavery. And the chief concern with the book was to argue for slavery from the Bible. And this is what he says, quote, The fact that God expressly authorized domestic slavery among the peculiar and temporary civil laws of the Jews, that's this text.

That's this text. While it does not prove that it is our positive duty to hold slaves, does prove that it is innocent to hold them unless it has been subsequently forbidden by God.

And then he would go on to argue that there was no subsequent prohibition. How we can fathom in this country the injury, the cost, the weight that has fallen upon human bodies.

[4 : 41] I use the word bodies because Ta-Nehisi Coates has rightly indicated the destructive forces of slavery upon the human body.

How we can look at this text, given our history, is nearly impossible. For the Southern Church at the time of the Civil War, we have to remember that millions of African Americans were our country's greatest financial asset.

And the use of the biblical text is buried under a contextual desire to make sure that we didn't jeopardize our greatest financial assets.

We are, even today, reaping, reaping, reaping what was sowed then. And even then, they were reaping, reaping, reaping what was sowed at the founding.

When posited with a choice of having two nations or one, the founders put slavery off to the side that we might get on with it.

[6 : 07] And then thinking that the Civil War had solved it, found publications of works like the one I've just read to you on the back side of it. And even today, it continues to haunt our history.

Indeed, it is our history. Well, it makes the text nearly impassable, doesn't it? So what do you say, what will you say, when people say that the Bible actually makes an argument for the slavery that took place in North America?

Do you know what you would say? Just draw your attention down there to verse 16 real quickly. Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him shall be put to death. The Bible has consistently, throughout, repudiated an understanding of North American or Caribbean slavery.

You find the same thing in 1 Timothy. If you're wondering where you might go to tell someone that the Bible has always stood against slavery as we have known it in our country.

[7 : 19] In 1 Timothy, chapter 1, verse 8 and following, they're talking about the goodness of the law, if it's used lawfully. Understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient.

And notice, one of the things that the law puts forward as ungodly, right there in verse 10, enslavers. That is, those who take someone captive in order to sell him into slavery.

The Scriptures, from the beginning to the end, have repudiated slavery, as slavery has been understood in North America, the intentional subjugation of a people's, for their own financial well-being.

The Bible has never stood behind it. And those who have argued from the Bible have maligned it.

There is no rightful appeal to this text for what this country has done.

There's, not the only difficulty though, isn't the Christians' past use of the text that keeps us from knowing how to handle a text like this. I'm just going to put it to you this way, it's the non-Christians' present use of the text.

[8 : 46] Where the Christians' past use of the text is an argument from history, or religious history. The non-Christians' present use of this text is more logical than historical, more philosophical than religious.

Let me give it to you by way of a quote, Sam Harris, Stanford grad, American atheist, author of many New York Times bestsellers, including *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Quote, here he is, if the Bible is the best book we have in the West in ethical terms, we should be practicing slavery. The creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves.

He simply tells us not to beat our slaves so severely that we put out their eyes and their teeth. In other words, he is appealing to our text logically, philosophically, to say that because the presence of a slave code exists here, its presence condones the practice.

And because these come to us as the rules, verse 1 of 21, the rules given to Israel by God, by nature then, those rules legitimize the practice that God is here discussing.

[10 : 11] Let me put it to you this way. The church has to struggle with chapter 21 because of our own history in this country.

But the culture uses 21 to say this is why you shouldn't ever think of becoming a Christian. Beyond that, a Jew.

Beyond that, a Muslim. How do we respond? I want to take a couple of tacks.

St. Augustine thought that slavery was the consequence of sin and the fall of man. He writes that slavery was unknown in the scriptures until righteous Noah branded the sin of his son with that name and then therefore the principle moves forward.

In his city of God, he writes the following, God did not intend that his rational creature who was made in his image should have dominion over anything but the irrational creation.

[11 : 23] Not man over man but man over beasts. And hence the righteous men in primitive times were made shepherds of cattle rather than kings of men.

God intending thus to teach us what the relative position of the creature is and what the desert of sin for it is with justice we believe that the condition of slavery is the result of sin.

So what Augustine is arguing is that while you have material like this in the scriptures, the rules of God, they are subsequently being birthed up and out of the rebellion of humanity.

He is now offering policies and procedures to deal with a world gone awry. That's Augustine's logic.

And while he would say that slavery then was in some sense inevitable, the inevitable consequence of being in a fallen world, that fact was not to be attributed to God because the creator had something different in mind through intention at his creation.

[12 : 39] I want to take another tact to think about the non-Christian use of the text that rejects any Christian teaching because of the insertion of material like this, not merely a movement from the distinction between what happens at Sinai as a result and in contrast to what God intended at creation, but the very words of Jesus himself who was approached concerning a question on a matter of Levitical or Torah law about the marriage of a man or the divorce of a man from a woman and his response was, because they were pitting him against the very word, he ends up saying in Matthew 19 that Moses provided that permissive exception for you out of the hardness of your heart, but from the beginning it was not to be that way.

So what Jesus says is don't try to pit what God is doing at creation with what Moses puts forward by way of exception.

They wanted him to choose between one or the other. In one sense they didn't want to believe either. He knew the Pharisees weren't going to believe what God put forward at creation.

One man, one woman. They didn't want that. And he knew that they didn't want the single exception put forward in the Mosaic Torah. They wanted all kinds of ways out.

And the same thing happens today. The non-Christian community will continue to ask you to pit one place of Scripture against another place of Scripture.

[14 : 33] And the tactic of Jesus, his apologetic in 19 is clear. He says, no, no, no. I'm not going to put God at creation against Moses in the Torah.

Moses gave you what he gave you out of the hardness of your heart. That's the way God began to deal with you. You ran away from him. He began to deal with you in one sense on your terms. But from the beginning it was not to be so.

Let me put it... I'm just trying to clear stones. Can you see that the first half of this message?

Usually when you preach you just plant seed. But I lived in New England for four years and I always loved those stone walls that show up around the fields.

But you've got to realize that those stones got there because they wanted to plant seed but they had to spend a lot of time taking some rocks out of the soil before they could get some seed in. And when you come to Exodus 21 there's some big stones to set along to the side before you can actually take a look at it.

And some of those stones are the Christians past use of this text. Abhorrent. Yet it keeps us from reading the text on its own terms.

[15 : 54] The non-Christians present use of this text reductionistic. It would be as though I was to look at a single line in the University of Chicago's policy against sexual harassment and abuse and pick on a phrase where they talk about someone who might be a repeat offender in what we do and on the basis of that implicate the entire university as being okay with sexual harassment.

Ludicrous! The fact that we have policies to deal with the fallen world in which things are going to arise is not in and of itself my legitimization of that very thing.

And the fact that we look at this one moment in the Scriptures that has this policy put forward does not and cannot be reduced to only this. We have to look at all the Scriptures.

And if you read the Scriptures from the beginning to the end the character of God can be impugned in no way unless you have an agenda to cut and a use of the text where you don't really want the fullness of the message you just are an evangelist for atheism.

If you're an evangelist for atheism you'll use any text the way you want but the fullness of the record cannot be reduced in that way. So yes the past Christians use of the text is abhorrent.

[17 : 26] The present non-Christian use of the text is reductionistic. That doesn't answer all the questions that are put forward in the text. but at least clears a couple of things out of the way to take a look.

What was God's intention for the text? That often gets lost. What was God's original intention for this text?

This little unit between 21 and 23 these rules verse 1 that followed the 10 words. It seems to me that his original intention was to distinguish Israel from the nations around them.

He appeals to the fact that they had been slaves in Egypt and under Exodus 1.14 submitted to harsh slavery.

Exodus 1 the kind of slavery that actually went not only to the subjugation of their work and the destruction of their families but to then the infanticide of their own children that they might have control over the whole thing.

[18 : 45] Having seen that world of slavery he now has called his own people to himself and he begins to lay out some rules that says now having been slaves you are not to treat each other the way you have seen among all the nations.

And so there is one sense where these chapters by way of analogy and no analogy is perfect by way of analogy feel to me as though they are a bill of rights.

In other words he begins to address immediately the people who are most likely to be abused in the new community of God. And who are the people most likely to be abused?

The ones at the lower end of the spectrum and so he wants to say there is recourse for a servant in the household. There is recourse for a woman in a marriage.

There is recourse when someone actually dies. There is restitution that has to be made when bodily injury occurs. I mean that is it not? The very organization of the text.

[19 : 54] Verses 1-11 concerning slavery both man in 1-6 and then the daughter or woman in 7-10 or 11. And after this kind of distinguishing characteristics that are going to move to the betterment of the people he moves from there to 12-17 and picks up capital offenses.

And from capital offenses bodily injury. 18 to the end of the chapter. And all of those who are put forward there are given for the first time in written code some rights.

Some protection. So it says there concerning the slave, this isn't in perpetuity. You don't own people.

hardness of your heart. You may have six where you got someone working for you in that way, but after six they're gone. They're free. In fact, they don't have to pay you anything to get out.

Take the woman, daughter, as a slave. Three things here. You can no longer have someone who marries someone and then says, you know what, I don't really think this is the one for me.

[21 : 15] But then he begins to treat her harshly. He says, no, no, no, she can be redeemed. She can get out of this. Or if he designates her for his son, verse 9, look at that.

You're going to have an arranged marriage for someone for your son? Guess how you're supposed to treat her? You who made this arrangement for her without necessarily the consent of her, you treat her like a daughter, it says.

Or, verse 10, if food isn't present, if clothing isn't given, if marital rights are not adhered to, if these three things aren't there, guess what?

She's out. So this text, which through the lens of our past Christian history equates 1 to 11 with American slavery, we need to know that there are some distinctions and differences.

that in the ancient world everyone was a servant of someone. Think of Israel now. He freed them from slavery to do what?

[22 : 25] 312? When you get to this mountain that you might serve me. Same word as slave, servant and slave. So when they are freed from bondage, they merely pledge their allegiance to a new master who happens to be God.

Israel is not free. This is the lie of the 21st century which now we are into 50, 60, 70 years of working a social construct where we've put God to the edges because we needed to throw him off. And the liberation of the individual governs everything we do. And so now all truth, all behavior, all activity is to liberate the individual, man or woman, so that they are free to do whatever they want to do.

Well, how's that working out for us? What the scriptures are saying is, you are a servant. Okay, okay, Dylan aficionados.

Everybody going to serve somebody. the American notion that freedom equals individual libertarian autonomy, this is a brand new experiment, people.

[23 : 50] And it wasn't the case for Israel. And so when you think about God's original intention for this, all of a sudden there are provisions made in a horrifically fallen world that begin to look out for the needs of others.

Look at capital punishment. If you strike a man, you kill him, you'll be put to death. I'm not here today to get into the warrants or not of capital punishment. I want you to basically at least allow me this much, that God holds human life as sacred.

Sacred. So sacred that he puts it as one for one. So elevated is his creative work in a male or female that is never to be taken.

And if it is taken, well, what's the remedy? And you did it willfully. This little phrase here in verse 13 could be confusing.

But if God let him fall into his hand, it almost seems like, oh, opportunistic killing going on. When really what the intention is, if you set out to kill someone, then the text is that you'll be put to death because we have to value human life.

[25 : 11] But if something happens where they die and you didn't intend to murder anyone, well, then there's a provision for you. There's something versus a distinction between the intentional and the unintentional.

Look what it is in the family situation. You strike your father or mother, you're put to death, you steal, anyone. There's the slave traders. Or you sell him.

There's the buyers. Anyone found in possession of him, there's the owners. Well, you have so degraded the value and dignity of human life that your life has taken.

when he moves into the bodily injury, he's offering guidance to judges. That's what this text is for, to provide judges with guidance on how to settle disputes that have happened along the way.

You can see that very clearly in verse 23. And he shall pay as the judges determine. And so this code in 21 is being used in the court of law to provide guidance to the judges on what to do when bodily injury is taking place.

[26 : 29] You have that horrific sounding phrase though, don't you? in verse 21. But if the slave survives a day or two, he's not to be avenged for the slave is his money.

It is almost hard for me to read it out loud. But we have to understand it. This does not mean, this for, this because, does not mean that he is able to do whatever he wants with him because he is his silver, literally.

What it means is the judges in a death of one would have some means by which they know is this intentional or unintentional? If it's intentional that you did this, then we're going to serve you a sentence of one sort.

And what the implication here is someone who's surviving and gets through that, the judges were to take into consideration then, well, then did the person really, want him dead?

Because after all, he was his own investment. Why would he be working against his own investment? See, you can't read this just woodenly.

[27 : 46] It's difficult, yes. It's nearly impassable. And there's always an element where we're going to understand it by and by. to say that you strike the eye of a servant in your house and destroy it, that you should go free.

To imply, therefore, that you had the rights to strike a slave in the eye is ludicrous. What it ought to do to anyone who had servants under them is to say, wow, I better not put out my hand against anybody here.

If I injure this person, we've lost this person. There's recourse here. The Christian's past use of the text, abhorrent.

The non-Christian's present use of the text, reductionistic. God's original intention for the text, protection, recourse, to distinguish Israel from a horrific world in which they lived and to look out really for the most needy among them.

So let's circle this thing down then to today. Today, interestingly, the progressive world in which we live, which has displaced God and his word from the center, isn't making as much progress on these fronts as we would like to imagine we are making.

[29 : 36] having now been about the liberty of the individual to give them freedom from all outside constraints to do what they want, we are finding that the oppression of humanity is increasing, not decreasing.

that human sin as a pattern is just replicating itself. Let me put it to you as clearly as I can. We like to read these texts as moderns and think we are way superior, but our world is no different than theirs.

I went to some friends here in the congregation who could sort out some things because I know their commitments, gospel commitments to get a sense of the world in which we live.

And it's difficult to track all of these things by way of index, but the International Justice Mission, which is a reputable Christian organization, looks at global slavery in the index and they estimate

that illegal activity is impossible to track, but perhaps 45.8 million people today are in some form of slavery.

2016. that would include exploitive situations where victims cannot leave due to violence, threat, or coercion.

[31 : 02] The most common forms continue to be sex, slavery, and labor trafficking. The Polaris Project, which is another reputable organization, cites 4.5 million people globally trapped in sexual slavery.

daughters sold off, 4.5 million. The Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation estimates that between 18 and 24,000 people in Chicago, Chicago, that's a city, are trapped in some kind of sexual exploitation like forced prostitution.

You can come to church or not come and denigrate the Bible all you want, but you got to do something about what's real in the world today.

Christianity, while not answering all the questions of this text, offers some solution.

I actually think there's an element in the very beginning part of the text which we haven't looked at, that altar building between the ten words and the laws, those verses of 22 to 24.

[32 : 33] So God gives the words under which we're to live and then he says, now, those are the words under which you live. That's going to require some mediating sacrifice.

There's a mound and don't start building your way to me. Don't start cutting stone to get to me. No, this is just a heap of mound because all I care about is the sacrifice that takes place on it.

And don't start walking up here and think you're going to make your way to me. No, your nakedness would just be exposed before me. All the allusions here back to the Garden of Eden. But there's this hint right between the ten words and all the rules that there must be a mediating blood influence.

later the Lord Jesus Christ embodies in some sense a servant or a slave.

He didn't put his ear to the door and by way of all cement his loyalty to both master and wife and children.

[33 : 43] But the scriptures say he did come as a servant, the servant of the Most High to do the will of his master, his father. And on Calvary took the nails and shed his blood, pledging his life in perpetuity forever and ever as one who would not only give himself to serving God, but would pledge himself to his bride.

And that in some strange yet somewhat not understandable way only to be known by and by the good work done in Christ in history is so good that it is worthy of the great price suffered by so many.

Now I know that that might make someone a Christian and it can just as easily turn you out.

Teneheshi Coates, wonderful writer, between the world and me, isn't ready to buy the Christian message on the basis of these things because it seems to him to treat human dignity too lightly and all those slights and all that stuff.

He's an African American who does not stand within the African American religious tradition of our country because he cannot yet see how you don't denigrate all of that by simply saying Jesus will cover it.

I can respect that. But what about us? I'm closing with this.

[35 : 47] The Christian's past use of the text, the present non-Christian use of the text, the present realities of our text, Christ's call to action from this text.

Again, from Augustine, one of his lost letters now found, writes the bishop of Fasget, Alpius, who was at that moment in Italy, and he's asking him to plead for the imperial court to make a revision in the law concerning slavery.

This is what Augustine writes, quote, some four months ago there were people brought together from different places, but especially from Numidia, and to be deported from the port of Hippo.

That's where he was. This was done by Galatians, for it is only they who out of greed engage in such business. A member of our church become aware of it, and of knowing of our policy of helping with money in such circumstances wish to tell us, I was not at Hippo at the time, but immediately our faithful, that's his congregation, liberated 120 people, some from the ship on which they were already embarked, some from private prisons where they were hidden before being put aboard.

I leave it to your imagination to estimate the enormous proportions which the deportation of miserable persons had assumed in other ports here at Hippo at least, by the mercy of God, the church is on its guard so that unfortunate people are rescued from this type of captivity.

[37 : 24] He goes on in the same letter and says, for if we, that is the bishops, do nothing, will there be then anyone who has the power on the shore who will not sell these most cruel cargos rather than remove one of these unfortunate people from captivity or stop one from being put in chains out of Christian or human compassion.

This text is a call to action for the church as impossible as it appears on first reading. It is impossible for pastor or people to continue in the world without a commitment of some sort, both individual and collective, to meet the needs of those who are being trampled underfoot in our world through slavery, through women being denigrated and sold into sex trafficking, through capital offenses, known and unknown, perpetrated on purpose, through those who are injuring the body everywhere we go.

laws exist because love doesn't. The church, right here, right here at Holy Trinity, right here in this congregation, right here in this room, that's a question worth asking.

What can I, what can we do, tangibly, expressively, known, that would live under the law of Christ for the millions who have no voice?

What? my prayer, short of specificity, is that this congregation, this congregation would be, you know, would embody an answer to the questions the world is not only asking, but is hopeless to solve.

[40 : 20] What would happen? something needs to happen.

Or we have no reason to exist. Would God and His mercy for the least in our world somehow allow us to embody through Christ an answer to the questions our city is asking and yet can never remedy.

Heavenly Father, all I want to say to you now is that the weight of this word which at the outset for me and I'm sure for many just appeared repulsive as it was read would somehow in your strange way become an impetus to our obedience to represent you well on this corner.

May we learn truly what it is to be a servant. In Christ's name, Amen.