

Divine Imperatives

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[0:00] So we're up to Exodus 23. We're going to look at Exodus chapter 23 this morning.! Kind of a representative text of a broader section in the book of Exodus that comes following Exodus 20, which is where the Ten Commandments are.

So Exodus 23, 1-19. Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd. Do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you falling down under its load, do not leave it there. Be sure you help him with it.

Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Do not accept a bribe. Have nothing to do with a false charge.

[1:33] And do not put an innocent or honest person to death. For I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe. For a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.

Do not oppress an alien. You yourselves know how it feels to be aliens. Because you were aliens in Egypt.

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops. But during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it.

And the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work. And on the seventh day do not work.

Let your ox and your donkey may rest. And the slave born in your household and the alien as well may be refreshed. Be careful to do everything I have said to you.

[2:38] Do not invoke the names of other gods. Do not let them be heard on your lips. Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.

Celebrate the feast of unleavened bread. For seven days eat bread made without yeast as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib. For in that month you came out of Egypt.

No one is to appear before me empty handed. Celebrate the feast of harvest with the first fruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the feast of ingathering at the end of the year.

When you gather in your crops from the field. Three times a year all the men are to appear before the sovereign Lord. Do not offer the blood of sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast.

The fat of my festival offerings must not be kept until morning. Bring the best of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.

[illegible]

Turns out he was doing all the wrong things.

He thought he was fighting for the Lord. Turns out he was fighting against the Lord. His story, of course, is told in the book of Acts. Saul, the chief persecutor of Jesus, he was trying to eliminate the church. His pride and his tradition combined with the devil himself holding Paul in bondage, holding him in bondage. He said it later himself, writing to Timothy, he said, I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. But then everything changed.

The Lord met him on the road to Damascus, confronted him, corrected him, called him, enlisted him. His name was changed to Paul, from Saul to Paul. And really what God did is he carried him out of bondage, out of bondage. And the chief persecutor of Christ became the chief ambassador of Jesus Christ and the church of Christ, the apostle Paul. And it happened too. God did it too with a leper and a blind man and a crippled man and a greedy little tax collector and a woman possessed by demons and all of them. He led out. God in Christ led them out of their bondage. Our good shepherd, shepherd. It's what he does. He goes out and he finds lost sheep and he dismantles the trap that they're in and he, he leads them out, sets them free. We talked last week about God's law. And we talked about four words that kind of encapsulate what God's law is all about. And one of those words was life. Uh, Jesus, he, he talks about it in John 10. Uh, it's the good shepherd chapter. He says in

John 10, 10, I have, I've come that they may have life and have it to the full. The thing is though, that, that life it's, it's not just about surviving. It's, it's about really living. And that's what our good shepherd wants for us. And that's why he's not done with us after he saves us. The exodus, God saving his people. It turns out that was just the beginning. After that, he met them and spent a lot of time with them at Sinai and patiently instructing and teaching them. It's what we find in the shepherd Psalm two, right? Psalm 23. What does it say? Because he leads us in paths of righteousness. He prepares a table before us and he's with us in the valley, in the hardship, even the valley of the shadow of death. And, and he restores our souls and he's so gracious and good to us. But part of that graciousness and good goodness to us is that he, he guides us in paths of righteousness. He did it with the apostle

Paul. He did it with that greedy little tax collectors at Kias. He did it with Israel too. And that's what we see here. We see him not only leading Israel out of the bondage of slavery, but he keeps going because once you get saved, you still have all these nasty things kind of with their teeth in you and they're, they're holding on to you. And so God keeps going, keeps freeing us from our bondage in different ways.

[7:41] He saves us and then leads us on paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Because that's what he's doing with Israel this morning. He's, he's concerned more, more than just about their, their survival. He's, he's concerned about their souls too. And, and their society and their wellbeing and their relationships and the alien within their midst. And so he keeps going, leads them on. The main thing God does at, at Sinai really, the whole second half of the book of Exodus really is, is leading people in paths of righteousness, teaching them how to be a nation, how to form a society, how to relate to each other, how to be husbands and wives and sons and daughters and neighbors and bosses and workers. These are all things they needed to learn.

I like how Proverbs 12, 28 kind of summarizes this. It just says in the way of righteousness, there is life. I have come, Jesus said that they may have life and have it to the full. It's already here in Proverbs in the way of righteousness, there is life. It's what God wants for his people, right living, right relationships. He doesn't want a society where might makes right. No, he wants a society where things are actually right, where things are in line with how he eternally designed them and ordained them to be. And so he leads us in paths of righteousness because that's where we really come alive. That's where the life is.

The last Sunday, as I mentioned, we looked at the 10 commandments and the 10 commandments kind of kick off this whole section. They're kind of the overview. So God gives kind of the heart of the matter right up front, but he doesn't stop there. And, and what we read from today is another whole section of commands and instructions that God gives to his people. And they're still at Sinai at this point.

It's an extended stay there at Sinai and they're still being taught. God's still meeting with his people. It's just, they're not getting these summary overarching instructions on gold tablets or stone tablets anymore. These laws now that they're getting are, are more specific, more applications of the 10 commandments. If you want to think of it that way, they're more detailed. The Bible describes this

section, these chapters as the book of the covenant. And there's this whole range of stuff in there. from chapter 21, man steals an ox. He must pay back five head of cattle for the ox. It's very specific. [10:29] Chapter 22, one of them is, do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts. We read this morning in chapter 23, the fat of my festival offerings must not be kept until morning.

The level of details getting down there a little bit, right? We're, we're more specific and, and we don't maybe spend as much time reading these chapters in the Bible because it can take more work to read them. A lot of the times it can be hard to, to know how to interpret what's here, what to make of it, how to apply it to today. It's not easy. One author put it this way, this section of Exodus, which the Bible calls the book of the covenant does not make for very exciting reading unless one happens to be a lawyer. Frankly, it's one part of Exodus that preachers usually skip.

Whether or not we find it very interesting though, the book of the covenant is important. The mere fact that it's in the Bible means that it merits our attention. The book of the covenant teaches us how to live for God day by day. That's what this is day by day. God gave all these specific commandments because he's interested also in our day-to-day lives, just everyday stuff, not just our spiritual lives, our, our whole lives. And he's wanting to help us with all of our choices, even the little ones. And that's, well, that's what a good shepherd does, leads us along. He, he guides his sheep step by step on those paths of righteousness.

Exodus 21 and following is, is basically, like I said, God applying the 10 commandments, applying Exodus 20. The book of the covenant is, is, is God applying the big 10 to the daily lives of the Israelites.

Exodus 21 and following is, God applying the 10 commandments. It's full of truth for us today. It just takes a little more work for us to kind of translate and figure out what that is. Because their context is very different than ours. They also lived at a very different time and point in redemptive history before the coming of Jesus Christ.

[12:44] So the 10 commandments kind of apply pretty much across the board, across cultures. These more specific commandments in Exodus 21, 22, 23, they sometimes require a little translation. So let me, uh, quote our expert again. He says, these commands do not bind with the same eternal force. Somehow they are less fundamental. This explains why we do not keep these laws down to the very letter. While the book of the covenant contains principles that we can still apply today, its specific pronouncements and penalties were for the nation of Israel and thus are no longer binding on the church or the state.

So, like I said, reading this part of the Bible can require a little bit more effort. It can take work to uncover those enduring principles, but it's worth it.

Second Corinthians or second Timothy three says all scripture is God breathed and is useful for correcting, rebuking, training and righteousness.

God's wanting to shepherd us along and to help us through all the day to day stuff in our lives too. He's training us in righteousness and scriptures and scriptures is for that. He's guiding us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

So we got some very specific pronouncements here, but they're in the Bible for a reason. So let's get into a few of them here this morning. I've selected a few of them for us to look at. One about false reports, one about oxes and donkeys wandering off and another about cooking with milk.

[14:30] The first of the commands is the very first one actually that we read this morning from verse one, do not spread false reports. And this fits really well with the ninth commandment that we spent a little bit of time with today as well. And this command, amongst all the commands that are in this chapter, um, is actually one that requires maybe the least translation. It doesn't require a lot of translation work. It's pretty clear and just as relevant for us today and important for us today and maybe even harder for us today to follow than folks back then. I can avoid out and out lying, but still be guilty of this, of spreading false reports. For example, if I tell only one side of the story, I'm spreading a false report. If I take what someone said out of context, I'm spreading a false report. If I have kind of selective hearing and and just pass on a little slice of what I heard or or just the part that I liked and just pass that on, I may be spreading a false report. If I only consult a, a single biased source and then just go spouting off, I may well be spreading a false report. I could go on. There are lots of examples.

Plus, it's helpful to know here that the word false in the original can also mean empty or worthless. So if I hear something juicy about a politician or a celebrity or a classmate or a co-worker and I pass it on, I may well also be guilty of breaking this command of spreading a false report.

Even if it has a grain of truth to it, if it's not the whole truth, or if it's pointless or worthless or malicious in some way, I'm breaking this command, spreading a false report. If it's not the whole truth, I'm breaking God's command.

And the thing is, this is very difficult too, because we tend to not have a lot of humility about our own ability to judge things and to judge whether things are true or not. We tend to overestimate our ability to judge how true something is. We tend to overestimate how right we are about things. We tend to overestimate how important certain things are that we have strong opinions about. And our desires to fit in, that makes us more prone to spreading false reports. Our desire to kind of further our own agenda makes us prone to spreading false reports.

So how do we not do this? How do we keep this command of God? Well, it involves a lot of discipline, actually. It's really hard not to chime in when you're in a group and a certain topic comes up or a certain person comes up. And if we know something about that person or that topic, we really want to say, and it's really hard to keep our mouth shut, even if it's not ours to say.

[17 : 49] If there's something we have an opinion about, we really want to chime in, even if our opinion isn't very well-formed or well-informed. So what we need is discipline. I guess what we need is some old-fashioned self-control.

And the implications of this are huge, actually. There are whole communities of people, whole towns, whole schools, whole workplaces, where the relationships have gotten all surface-y, very just surface level, because nobody trusts anybody anymore. And why would that be?

Well, very well could be that someone, over time, people kind of shared things that were of a more personal nature, and those things always got out and got passed around and kind of gawked at, and so no one shares anything anymore. And perhaps people just kind of spouted off their thoughts and opinions in an unfiltered sort of way, and it ended up leading to all sorts of conflict. And that wasn't fun, to be working in an environment like that, or living in an environment like that all day. And so, eventually, people just kind of clammed up and stopped talking about much of anything at all. And now everyone's very guarded, and it's all very surface-y.

So, the implications of this are big. In a context like this, where this command is not followed, you just have surface level relationships, and it ends up being kind of sad. And it's all the result of not following Exodus 23 verse 1. Following God's law, as we talked about it, it brings life, right?

It brings life-giving relationships, and life-giving conversations, and life-giving groups, and whole communities. Not following God's law will lead us to the opposite.

[19 : 53] So, there's one example from verse 1. Let's go to verse 4 and look at another example. This is the one about the ox or donkey. If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering up, be sure to take it back to him. You see the donkey of someone who hates you falling down under its load? Don't leave it there.

Be sure you help him with it. Again, the broader context is that God is getting his people ready to enter the promised land, to build a new society. And God knows the way things kind of naturally go. When you get a bunch of people together, you get hurts and rivalries and grievances and cliques and judges or grudges that happen.

And he knows the damage that these things can do if they're left to grow and to fester. He doesn't want that to happen. He doesn't want that to happen. So, he teaches his people another way. He teaches them. In fact, he commands them to do the right thing and the kind thing, even when it involves their enemies. You may know Jesus talked about this in the New Testament, right? About doing good to our enemies, even loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us. We see something of that in the Old Testament here already, too. I read recently about a man who, he lost the better part of his inheritance. His cousin had made contact with his parents who were older and had convinced his parents to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in this investment scheme. And it didn't go well. And as you can imagine, it put quite a strain on family relationships. This man's parents lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Not long after that, the parents died and there was a funeral. And the cousin, he came to the funeral. He was grieving too. He came and this man, the son, as soon as he saw his cousin into the church, as hard as it was, he went over and he greeted him, welcomed him, made him feel welcome. He believed it was the right thing to do. But we did it. Hard as it was. If the donkey of someone who hates you falls under its load, if someone who hates you needs your help, be sure to help him. Be kind. That's God's will for us today, too.

Just very briefly, I want to cover a few more before we land and go more detail and a couple of ones to end up with. But just kind of an overview of a few more here in chapter 23. God commands that

the poor get justice and not get taken advantage of. God commands us to not accept bribes, to not show favoritism. He commands us to not oppress an alien. He doesn't give us a particular immigration policy, but he says, don't oppress the alien. He commands us to not follow the crowd in doing wrong. If everyone else is doing it, it doesn't make it okay. So what we have here is kind of God as teacher, God as parents teaching us right from wrong to live rightly on paths of righteousness. We kind of need this at any end.

There's another command here at the end of what we read that I want to spend a moment with as well. Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. So on one level, what this is, is God doing some teaching about basic propriety, about what's proper and improper. That's one level. So milk is kind of meant to give life. It's okay to cook goats. It's okay to eat meat. But cooking a goat in its mother's milk, God seems to be pointing out here that that's just not proper. So that's one level. On another level, and maybe more significant, more important, what's going on here is God is steering his people away from idolatry.

[24 : 24] So this sort of thing with the goat, this is the sort of thing that the Canaanites would do. It's a pagan ritual that they would engage in. The pagan ritual that people engage in to try and get blessed in some way, to try and get help from various spirits or divine powers.

And God knew that his people, that they'd go through hard times. And sometimes when you're in a hard time, you kind of get desperate. And he knew that they would be in that position. And they might be desperate enough even to try something like this.

And he didn't want them going there, getting tangled up in all that. And he didn't want them getting all superstitious. And he didn't want them going after other gods and trying out different idols and different rituals. He wanted them to come to him.

Trust in him and lean not on their own understanding. Not get lured away. And so he point blank warns them about pagan rituals such as this. Out of love, as a safeguard, he lays down the law. And in that sense, it's very relevant for us today, too. And probably something we need to hear. Maybe a warning we need.

[25 : 39] We might not be tempted to boil a goat in order to get blessed, but we might be tempted to buy lots of lottery tickets or to get involved in those new prediction markets or something like that.

Or spend lots of time with our horoscope or get all superstitious about any number of things. When we put our faith in pagan things, we start engaging in the rituals of the world.

When we start getting all religious about earthly things, fleeting things. Well, there's a problem. And that is what God is warning us about here.

He's saying we don't need that stuff. He's got us. He's in control and he's good. He's got us. We'll be okay. Lean not on your own understanding. He's got us.

He's in control. That leads us to the last thing. So all the way through, you may have noticed, there's a lot of what are called prohibitions, right? Don't do this.

[26 : 42] Don't do this. Stay away from that. There's a lot of don'ts. And then there's a do, right? He says what he wants his people to do.

He wants them to celebrate. Verse 15, celebrate the feast of unleavened bread. Verse 16, celebrate the feast of harvests. Also in verse 16, celebrate the feast of ingathering.

The feast of wine. The feast were times for people to rest from their work and to get together and to eat and to worship and give thanks to their God.

God made us for fellowship with him, for a worshipful relationship with him. God made us for fellowship with one another. And he knows how important it is for us to come together and to remember and give thanks and to reconnect and have some fun together.

And so God here, he commands his people to do that, to step aside three times a year to stop and to celebrate. And he institutes these three feasts for his people.

[27 : 48] And he commands them to take part, join in. And they all kind of sound like good things. So why don't we as Christians do these things?

Well, probably the main thing is that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament feasts. We live, as I mentioned, a different time, a different point in salvation history. And so our feasts are different. Each of the Old Testament feasts, in its own way, pointed ahead to Jesus Christ. So they were mainly filled with sacrifices. And Jesus came as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

These feasts, they're filled with promises, the promises of God. And the Bible says that all the promises of God are yes in Jesus Christ. And now Christ has come.

With the advent of Jesus Christ, we now fix our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith. And so we don't celebrate the Old Testament feasts.

[28:48] We don't follow the particulars of all the instructions that God has here about those feasts. But we do follow his instructions. There's certainly a message and a principle and a command that's here that's just as much for us as for ancient Israel.

God's command to celebrate. It's for us, too. It's just that as Christians, we do it a little bit differently. Since Christ has come, we do it differently.

Our focus now is on him. And so we celebrate Advent, Christmas. We celebrate Good Friday and Easter. We celebrate Ascension and Pentecost.

We celebrate the Lord's Supper and baptism. We celebrate the Lord's Day, Sunday, first day of the week, every week. And sometimes we're feeling it and we're really into it.

And other times we're not really feeling it and we don't really want to do it. But our God, he knows that we need it. He knows that we need to step away from our normal lives.

[29:53] He knows that we were made for fellowship with him. He knows that we need this fellowship with one another. He also knows how much we need to stop and remember all that's commemorated in these feasts, all that's been done to get us where we are.

We need to remember these things. And he knows that we need encouragement and renewal and to have some fun together and to have the joy of our salvation rekindled. He knows these things. And so he tells us, he commands us to come together, to gather, worship, feast, to celebrate. It's a good word from our Lord.

So reading through this latter part of the book of Exodus and on into Leviticus, it's not easy. It's a bit of work. It takes a bit of work to discern the principles that are here for us and the message for us today.

It's not easy, but it's worth it. All scripture is God-breathed and useful. And that's certainly true here. What we've got here are some old laws that show us some ancient paths, some ancient ways and timeless truths, and we need these.

[31:11] We need the righteousness of Jesus Christ to make us right with God, and we need these ancient truths to help us live it out and to walk down these paths of righteousness that God's brought us on by grace.

And our God, he walks with us, and he leads us on, and he continues to teach us. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Amen. Lord, we pray that you would make us humble and teachable and eager to find these ancient paths, to live out your eternal truths.

As old-fashioned as it sounds, we need more righteousness in our lives and in our society today. Help us to use our words well and to show kindness, even when that's hard.

Help us to resist pagan rituals and various idols that tempt. And show us how to really celebrate again. Renew us, Lord, in the image of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen.