

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 15: Laws of Justice and Mercy

Exodus 21:1–22:31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Exodus 21 and 22 present the case laws, the civil and judicial ordinances by which God governed Israel as a nation under the Old Covenant. The teacher's first task is to frame these rightly. These laws are not bound on Christians; we do not enforce the law of the goring ox or the rules of Hebrew servitude in the church. The civil and ceremonial details of the Sinai covenant have been fulfilled and set aside in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8–10; Galatians 3:23–25). To bind these specific penalties on believers would be to misunderstand the gospel. Yet to dismiss these chapters as irrelevant would be equally wrong, for they were written for our instruction (Romans 15:4) and they reveal, in concrete detail, the unchanging character of the God who gave them.

The enduring value of these laws lies in the moral principles that shine through the particular rulings. Underneath the specific cases runs God's passion for justice, His insistence on personal responsibility and restitution, His demand for honesty, and above all His tender, protective concern for the vulnerable, the servant, the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. The teacher should help the class read past the unfamiliar particulars to these timeless truths and to see in them the very heart of God. The laws regulating servitude deserve careful, honest handling: they did not establish the brutal chattel slavery of later history but regulated and limited an existing institution within Israel, mandating release, protecting the mistreated, and guarding human dignity, pointing forward to the fuller dignity of every person revealed in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Philemon).

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson aims at the conscience and the heart. A God this concerned with the goring ox and the borrowed coat is a God concerned with how we treat the people right around us. The class should leave examining their own honesty, their willingness to make restitution rather than mere apology, their use of whatever power they hold over others, and their compassion toward the weak. The aim is a people whose ordinary, daily dealings reflect the just and merciful heart of God, the heart that would one day be revealed in full in Jesus, who lifted up the lowly and made enemies into family.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 21:1–6. These case laws begin to apply the Ten Commandments to the ordinary disputes of daily life. What does it reveal about God that, after the thunder of Sinai, He gives such detailed, practical instructions for justice among neighbors (compare Deuteronomy 4:7–8; Psalm 19:7–9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set these chapters in their place. They open with then these are the rules that you shall set before them (21:1), beginning the section often called the Book of the Covenant (24:7). Having spoken the Ten Words, God now applies them to the concrete cases of community life. The majestic principles of Sinai come down to earth among neighbors, oxen, and disputes.

Help the class marvel that God cares about this level of detail. The same God who thundered from the mountain stoops to legislate about a borrowed animal and a dug pit. This is not beneath Him; it is characteristic of Him. A holy God cares how His people treat one another in the smallest dealings, because holiness is meant to fill the whole of life, not just the religious moments.

Note what a gift this was to Israel. Moses later marvels, what great nation has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law (Deuteronomy 4:7–8), and the psalmist calls the law of the Lord perfect, reviving the soul, right, rejoicing the heart (Psalm 19:7–9). Surrounded by the cruel and arbitrary laws of the nations, Israel was given law shot through with justice and mercy, a sign of God's nearness.

Frame the section honestly for Christians. These are civil case laws for the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant, not statutes binding on the church. But their righteousness still testifies to the character of the God who gave them, and that character does not change.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The case laws applying the Ten Commandments to the concrete disputes of community life (Exodus 21:1).
- A holy God who cares about the smallest dealings between neighbors, not only religious moments.
- The righteousness of God's law as a gift and a sign of His nearness to Israel (Deuteronomy 4:7–8; Psalm 19:7–9).
- These as Old Covenant civil laws not bound on the church, yet revealing God's unchanging character.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it say about God that He legislates about oxen and borrowed property?
- Why was Israel's law so different from the laws of the surrounding nations?
- How does holiness reach into the small, ordinary dealings of daily life?

Question 2

Student Question:

God cared enough to give Israel guidance for the small, ordinary frictions of life, the borrowed animal, the dispute between neighbors. Where do you tend to think your everyday dealings are too small to matter to God, and how does this passage challenge that?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes God's concern for ordinary disputes and presses it inward. We are prone to a quiet compartmentalizing, imagining that God cares about our worship and our big moral decisions but not about how we handle the borrowed tool, the disputed bill, or the small workplace conflict. These chapters explode that assumption.

Help students see that there is no zone of life too small for God's interest. He cares how we return what we borrow, how we settle disputes, how we treat the person who wronged us over something minor. Faithfulness in little things is the very arena where character is formed and where our love for neighbor is proved (Luke 16:10).

Move toward concrete application. Invite the class to name an everyday dealing they have treated as too small to involve God, and to bring it under His lordship. Often it is precisely in these unglamorous, ordinary transactions that our real honesty and love are revealed, far more than in our public religious life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to compartmentalize God out of ordinary, daily dealings.
- No zone of life being too small for God's interest and lordship.
- Faithfulness in little things as the arena where character is formed (Luke 16:10).
- Bringing everyday transactions under the lordship of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What everyday dealings have you assumed were too small to matter to God?
- How does faithfulness in little things shape who we become?
- Where is God calling you to greater integrity in an ordinary transaction?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 21:2–11. These laws regulate and limit Hebrew servitude, requiring release, protecting the mistreated, and guarding the dignity of the vulnerable. How do they show God restraining and humanizing an existing institution within Israel's covenant, while the fuller dignity of every person is revealed in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Philemon 15–16)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The laws on Hebrew servitude (21:2–11) require careful, honest handling. This was not the brutal, race-based chattel slavery of later centuries. It was a regulated institution within Israel by which a person in deep poverty or debt could sell his labor for a set period to survive. These laws did not invent the institution; they restrained and humanized one that already existed in the ancient world.

Notice how God's laws protect the vulnerable within it. The Hebrew servant must be released in the seventh year (21:2). A servant girl is protected from mistreatment and given rights, so that she cannot simply be used and discarded (21:7–11). Elsewhere a servant injured by a master goes free, and a runaway servant must not be returned to an abusive master (21:26–27; Deuteronomy 23:15–16). The thrust is consistently toward limiting power and guarding dignity.

Show the trajectory toward Christ. These laws regulate an existing institution within a fallen world, but the gospel reveals the fuller dignity of every person. In Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28), and Paul urges Philemon to receive his returning servant Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother (Philemon 15–16). The seed planted in these protective laws flowers fully in the equal dignity of all who are one in Christ.

Be honest with the class about the difficulty here without distorting the text. God meets Israel within the realities of their world and bends those realities toward mercy, even as His ultimate purpose, revealed in Christ, is the dignity and freedom of every person made in His image.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hebrew servitude as a regulated institution for the poor and indebted, not race-based chattel slavery (Exodus 21:2).
- God's laws limiting power and protecting the dignity of servants (Exodus 21:7–11, 26–27).
- The trajectory toward the fuller dignity of every person revealed in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Philemon 15–16).
- God meeting Israel within their world and bending it toward mercy.

Discussion Prompts

- How do these laws limit power and protect the vulnerable servant?
- How does the gospel reveal a fuller dignity than even these protective laws?
- What does Paul's appeal to Philemon show about where these seeds were always heading?

Question 4

Student Question:

These laws protected those with the least power and the fewest options. Where has God placed people under your influence or authority, at work, at home, in the church, and are you using that influence to protect and dignify them or to take advantage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the servitude laws' concern for the powerless and applies it to whatever authority we hold. Most of us have some sphere of influence over others, as employers, parents, supervisors, teachers, or simply as those with more resources or standing. The question is how we use it.

Help students see the heart of these laws: God watches how the strong treat the weak. The same God who protected the Hebrew servant and the servant girl watches how we treat the employee, the child, the newcomer, the one who depends on us. Power is a trust from God, given to be used for the good of those under it, never as a license to exploit.

Press toward concrete self-examination. Where has the class member used position, knowledge, or resources to take advantage rather than to protect and dignify? The call is to imitate the protective, dignifying heart of God toward everyone our influence touches, treating people as image-bearers, not as instruments.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Everyone holding some sphere of influence over others as a trust from God.
- God watching how the strong treat the weak and the dependent.
- Using authority to protect and dignify rather than to exploit.
- Treating people under our influence as image-bearers, not instruments.

Discussion Prompts

- Over whom has God given you influence or authority?
- Are you using that influence to protect and dignify, or to take advantage?
- What would it look like to steward your power as a trust from God this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 21:12–27. The law distinguishes intentional murder from accidental death and limits vengeance with the principle of an eye for an eye. How does this reveal both the value God places on human life and His concern that justice be measured and proportionate rather than unbounded (compare Genesis 9:6; Matthew 5:38–39)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These laws address violence and injury (21:12–27), and two great principles emerge. First, human life is precious because it bears God's image. Intentional murder is met with the severest penalty (21:12–14), echoing Genesis 9:6, whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. To take a life is to assault something that belongs to God.

Second, the law carefully distinguishes degrees of guilt and limits punishment. It separates intentional murder from accidental killing, providing a place of refuge for the latter (21:13). And the famous principle, eye for eye, tooth for tooth (21:23–25), was not a license for vengeance but a strict limit on it. In a world prone to escalating blood feuds, where a lost tooth might provoke a killing, God ruled that the punishment must not exceed the crime. It was a principle of measured, proportionate justice administered through proper channels.

Show how Jesus builds on this. He quotes the eye-for-an-eye principle and then calls His people higher still: do not resist the one who is evil; turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–39). Jesus is not contradicting the justice of the law but lifting His followers above personal retaliation altogether, calling them to entrust judgment to God and to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19–21).

Help the class hold both truths: God takes the value of human life with utmost seriousness, and God restrains vengeance, refusing to let justice become a runaway fire. These civil penalties are not ours to administer, but the principles, the sanctity of life and the limiting of revenge, reveal His character and shape ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sanctity of human life as image-bearing, guarded by the severest penalty for murder (Exodus 21:12–14; Genesis 9:6).
- The law distinguishing intentional murder from accidental killing.
- Eye for eye as a limit on vengeance, requiring proportionate justice, not unbounded retaliation (Exodus 21:23–25).
- Jesus lifting His people beyond personal retaliation to entrust justice to God (Matthew 5:38–39; Romans 12:19–21).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God treat the taking of human life so seriously?
- How was eye for an eye actually meant to limit rather than license vengeance?
- How does Jesus call His people higher than the law's minimum here?

Question 6

Student Question:

The eye-for-an-eye law was meant to limit revenge, not to license it; Jesus calls His people to go further, refusing personal retaliation altogether. Where are you holding on to a desire to get even, and what would it mean to entrust that wrong to God instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the limiting of vengeance into the heart. Even though we do not administer these civil penalties, the deeper issue, the desire to get even, lives in every heart. We nurse grudges, replay offenses, and quietly long to see those who wronged us suffer.

Help students see what Jesus asks. He does not merely limit our revenge; He calls us to surrender it entirely, turning the other cheek and refusing to repay evil for evil (Matthew 5:38–42; Romans 12:17–21). This is not weakness but profound trust, handing the wrong to God who judges justly, as Christ Himself did when reviled (1 Peter 2:23).

Move toward release. Invite students to name the wrong they are still clutching, the score they are keeping, and to entrust it to God. Holding on to vengeance poisons the one who holds it; releasing it into God's hands is both obedience and freedom. The cross is where we learn that our God can be trusted with every injustice done to us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The desire for revenge living in the heart even where we do not act on it.
- Jesus calling His people to surrender retaliation, not merely limit it (Matthew 5:38–42).
- Entrusting wrongs to God who judges justly, as Christ did (1 Peter 2:23; Romans 12:19).
- Releasing vengeance as both obedience and freedom from a poison we carry.

Discussion Prompts

- What wrong are you still holding on to and longing to avenge?
- What would it mean to entrust that wrong to God rather than settle the score yourself?
- How does the example of Christ help you release a desire to get even?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 22:1–15. These laws require restitution, often more than was taken, when someone harms another's property through theft, negligence, or carelessness. What do they reveal about God's concern for honesty, responsibility, and actually repairing the damage we cause (compare Luke 19:8; Romans 13:7)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These laws on property and restitution (22:1–15) reveal God's concern for honesty, responsibility, and repair. Notice that the response to theft is not merely punishment but restitution, often multiplied: a stolen ox must be repaid fivefold, a sheep fourfold (22:1). The thief must restore more than he took. Justice in God's economy aims not just to punish but to make the victim whole.

Observe how far the responsibility reaches. It covers not only deliberate theft but negligence and carelessness, the kindled fire that spreads, the unguarded pit, the borrowed animal that

dies (22:6, 14). God holds people accountable for the damage they cause, even when it was not malicious. We are responsible to repair the harm our actions, and our carelessness, bring on others.

Show how this shapes biblical repentance. When Zacchaeus meets Jesus, his repentance takes the form of restitution: if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold (Luke 19:8). True repentance, where wrong has been done to others, moves beyond sorrow to actually making it right. Paul echoes the principle: pay to all what is owed to them (Romans 13:7).

Apply this to Christians, not as binding civil penalties, but as enduring moral truth. God's people are to be scrupulously honest, to own the damage they cause, and to repair it as far as they are able. This is the integrity that flows from a heart shaped by a just God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restitution, often multiplied, as God's way of making the victim whole (Exodus 22:1).
- Responsibility reaching to negligence and carelessness, not only deliberate harm (Exodus 22:6, 14).
- True repentance moving beyond sorrow to actual restitution (Luke 19:8).
- Scrupulous honesty and paying what is owed as the integrity of God's people (Romans 13:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God require repaying more than was taken rather than simply punishing the thief?
- How does God hold us responsible even for harm done through carelessness?
- How does Zacchaeus show us what repentance looks like when we have wronged others?

Question 8

Student Question:

Restitution means more than feeling sorry; it means making the wrong right as far as we are able. Where have you settled for an apology when God may be calling you to actually repair what you damaged or repay what you took?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the principle of restitution straight to the conscience. It is easy to offer an apology, which costs little; it is far harder to make actual repair, which may cost money, reputation, or pride. Yet the biblical pattern is that where we have taken or damaged something, sorrow alone is not enough.

Help students distinguish apology from restitution. An apology says, I am sorry; restitution says, and here is the wrong made right. Both have their place, but we often hide behind the cheaper

one. The thief who only apologizes still has the stolen goods; the one who repays restores what was lost. God's heart is for the wrong to be repaired, not merely regretted.

Press gently toward action. Is there a debt unpaid, an object never returned, a damage never repaired, a reputation we harmed and never set right? Invite students to name one and to take a concrete step toward restitution this week. This is not legalism but the fruit of a heart truly turned, the integrity of those who follow a just and honest God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between a cheap apology and costly restitution.
- Sorrow alone being insufficient where we have taken or damaged what is another's.
- God's heart for wrongs to be repaired, not merely regretted.
- Taking concrete steps to make right an unpaid debt or unrepaired harm.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you offered an apology when God may be calling you to make actual restitution?
- What unpaid debt or unrepaired harm comes to mind as you read these laws?
- What is one concrete step toward making a wrong right that you could take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 22:21–27. God commands His people not to wrong the foreigner, the widow, or the orphan, warning that He Himself will hear their cry, and to return the poor man's coat by nightfall because He is compassionate. These civil laws are not bound on Christians, yet how do they reveal the enduring heart of God for the vulnerable, and how does the New Testament call the church to that same compassion (James 1:27; 1 John 3:17–18) without binding Israel's specific civil penalties on us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heart of the lesson and deserves the heaviest weight. In 22:21–27 the laws turn to the most vulnerable members of society, and the tenderness of God breaks through. You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (22:21). You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child; if you do, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry (22:22–23). And if you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, return it before the sun goes down, for it is his only covering, and God adds, I am compassionate (22:27).

Linger on what these laws reveal about God. He identifies personally with the powerless: He hears the cry of the widow and the orphan, He remembers that Israel knows the heart of a foreigner because they were foreigners, and He calls Himself compassionate. The God of Sinai is

not a distant lawgiver but a tender defender of those the world overlooks. His justice has a face, and it is turned toward the weak.

Be clear about the doctrine. These are civil laws given to Israel under the Old Covenant, and their specific penalties are not bound on Christians. We do not enforce the cloak-by-sundown ordinance as church law. But the heart behind them, God's fierce compassion for the vulnerable, does not change, and it is carried straight into the New Covenant as the calling of the church.

Show the New Testament continuation. James defines pure and undefiled religion as visiting orphans and widows in their affliction (James 1:27). John insists that if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart, the love of God does not abide in him; let us love in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17-18). The church that knows this God will be marked by practical compassion for the poor, the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan.

Help the class feel both the freedom and the obligation. We are not bound to Israel's civil code, yet we are bound to Israel's God, and He is compassionate. To follow Him is to share His heart for those the world forgets.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's tender, protective concern for the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan (Exodus 22:21-24).
- God identifying personally with the vulnerable, hearing their cry, calling Himself compassionate (Exodus 22:23, 27).
- These civil laws not bound on Christians, yet revealing God's unchanging heart.
- The church called to that same practical compassion under the New Covenant (James 1:27; 1 John 3:17-18).
- Drawing the enduring moral truth without binding Israel's specific civil penalties on us.

Discussion Prompts

- What do these laws reveal about how God feels toward the vulnerable?
- Why does God identify Himself as compassionate in the very middle of these rules?
- How does the New Testament call the church to share God's heart for the weak?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over these laws of justice and mercy, the protected servant, the limited vengeance, the required restitution, the defended widow and stranger. Name one specific way the God revealed here, who would one day show His mercy fully in Jesus, is calling you to be more just, more honest, or more tender toward the vulnerable this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws together the whole sweep of justice and mercy in these chapters: the protected servant, the limited vengeance, the required restitution, the defended widow, orphan, and stranger. Behind every ruling stands the same God, just and merciful, who would one day reveal that heart in full in Jesus.

Help students see the unity of it. These were not random regulations but the outworking of God's character in the life of a nation, and that character is unchanging. The Jesus who lifted up the lowly, defended the powerless, welcomed the outsider, and called us to make peace and to repay what we owe is the same God who gave these laws to Israel long before.

Move from admiration to formation. Invite students to name one specific way this God is calling them to change, to be more honest in their dealings, more willing to make restitution, more tender toward the vulnerable, more ready to release a grudge. The aim is not to keep Israel's civil code but to be conformed to the just and merciful heart it reveals, the heart of our Lord Jesus, and to let that heart reshape how we treat the people around us this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of these laws as the outworking of God's just and merciful character.
- The same heart revealed fully in Jesus, who lifted up the lowly and welcomed the outsider.
- Being conformed to God's character rather than bound to Israel's civil code.
- Concrete formation in honesty, restitution, and compassion this week (Micah 6:8).

Discussion Prompts

- Which of these laws of justice and mercy most stirred your conscience?
- How is the God revealed in these laws the same God revealed in Jesus?
- What is one specific way you will be more just, honest, or tender toward the vulnerable this week?