

# The Book of Exodus

## Lesson 15: Laws of Justice and Mercy -- Exodus 21:1–22:31

The thunder has faded. The smoke on the mountain is lifting. Israel has heard the ten great words spoken from the fire, and now God does something we might not expect. He gets specific. He starts talking about oxen and pits and borrowed donkeys, about what happens when two men fight and a bystander gets hurt, about a coat taken in pledge that must be returned by sundown. After the majestic Ten Commandments, this can feel like a strange descent into the small print. But stay with it, because something beautiful is happening here. God is showing what holiness looks like on a Tuesday.

These chapters are the case laws, the ordinances God gave Israel to live by once they reached the land. They take the broad commands, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and work them out in the ordinary friction of life together. What do you do when an ox gores a neighbor? How do you make it right when you borrow something and it dies in your care? What does justice look like when the poor man's only blanket is the coat he handed you as collateral? These are not abstractions. This is God caring about the actual texture of human life, down to the goring ox and the borrowed pot.

And what runs through all of it, like a golden thread, is the heart of God. Look closely and you will see Him bending again and again toward the vulnerable. The servant must go free. The widow and the orphan must not be wronged, or God Himself will hear their cry. The poor man's coat must come back before nightfall, for it is his only covering, and God says, I am compassionate. The foreigner must not be oppressed, for you were foreigners in Egypt and you know the heart of a sojourner. These laws are not cold. They pulse with mercy.

Now, these are civil and case laws given to govern the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant, and they are not bound on Christians today. We will not be enforcing the law of the goring ox in our congregations. But do not let that make you think these chapters have nothing to say to us. Beneath every particular ruling lies an enduring truth about the God who gave it: His passion for justice, His insistence on honesty and restitution, His fierce tenderness toward the weak. Read this way, these old laws become a window into the unchanging heart of God, the same heart that would one day take on flesh in Jesus and lift up the lowly forever.

**Group Discussion:** Again and again these laws bend toward the vulnerable: the servant, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the foreigner. What does this relentless concern reveal about the heart of God, and how should that same concern shape the life and priorities of the Lord's church today?

**Personal Reflection:** These laws press the matter of restitution, of actually making right the wrongs we have done to others. Is there a wrong you have done, a debt or a hurt, that you have never made right, and what would honest restitution look like for you?

*Read Exodus 21:1–22:31*

## **Study Questions**

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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)?
4. 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?
5. 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)?

6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

## Digging Deeper

**Reflect on these passages:** James 1:27, where pure religion is defined as caring for orphans and widows in their distress; Luke 19:8-9, where Zacchaeus shows true repentance through restitution, repaying fourfold; Matthew 5:38-42, where Jesus moves His people beyond eye for an eye to refusing personal retaliation; Galatians 3:28, where in Christ the distinctions of slave and free are transcended in equal dignity; 1 John 3:17-18, which calls us to love not in word only but in deed and truth toward those in need.

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