
Altars and Assaults

Exodus 20:22-21:32

Introduction So, where are we this morning? How do we locate ourselves so that our preaching from this text is profitable for you?

We are living in our foolish and wicked culture. The current myths of evolution and social justice are changing the fundamental principles of law. Rather than God's righteousness, man's rights are at the center of the law.

There is much living without justice. Many people whose crimes deserve the severest of punishments are often set free through minuscule holes in the law or errors of procedure by the police.

There is much demand for vengeance and retribution. The courts are becoming a place to extract vengeance against ones enemies. They are being used to "send signals" and to punish corporations. People are suing and getting extravagant awards often for their own foolish decisions – no Paula, you cannot dry a cat in the microwave.

There is much in law that is destroying our freedom. The federal government now regulates almost every area of life with the great loss of freedom and with great cost to the economy.

We are located in our difficult and challenging text.

In the lapse of time since we were last in Exodus. It has been two months. That is a lot of time for us to forget where we were in the text and how what we are in today is framed and focused for us.

In the distance from the life of the text. We are no longer God's people as a physical nation gathered at the foot of a fenced and fearful mountain. We are no longer under the blessings and curses of this covenant.

In the New Covenant handling of the text.

The problem of *the Law in theology* has been a source of much contention and dissension down through the ages. Whole schools of interpretation, confessional creeds and denominations have been formed around one's understanding of the Mosaic Law and particularly the 10 Commandments. As New Covenant theologians, we have a distinct, and we believe, Biblical view of the Law that is grounded firmly in the Word of God *alone*.

The place of *the Law for then* was clearly defined in Exodus 19-20 and by a cluster of texts in the New Testament. It was given as a code of conduct for the nation of Israel that defined them as God's and distinguished them from the world. It was a guardian, a tutor, up until the Messiah came (Galatians 3:19, 23). Its blessings were conditioned upon obedience. Its curses were guaranteed upon disobedience. No one kept it, except for Jesus Christ. It was added because of sin and was in force for God's people until Jesus came.

When Jesus came, just as He fulfilled the prophets, He fulfilled the Law (Matthew 5:17-20) declaring, demonstrating and demanding His own righteousness.

The purpose of *the Law for now* is clearly taught in the New Testament. It is not for the righteous – that is, not for believers, but for the unrighteous, the wicked, the transgressors, the sinners (Galatians 3:19-29). It is to bring them a knowledge of sin and thus to condemn them (Romans 3:19-22). Christ is the end of the Law to those who believe (Romans 10:1-4). It is obsolete, had faded away and is now gone (Hebrews 8, especially verse 13).

The preaching of *the Law in the church* should follow the Apostolic example. It is preached as condemnation for the lost and a call to Christ. We do not preach the Law for the godly conduct of believers – we preach Christ, sonship and the power of grace by the Spirit of God (Romans 6-8). Yet we preach from the Law as we do from all the Scriptures, all of which are inspired by God and profitable to make us wise to salvation and mature in our Christian walk and work (2 Timothy 3:10-4:2).

We have our immediate and defining context. We are come in this text to the Fenced and Fearful Mountain where God enters in to the covenant with the nation of Israel. When we worked through Exodus 20, this is the general outline of the chapter.

- ☞ The Parties to the Covenant
 - ☞ As their Revealer
 - ☞ As their Ruler
 - ☞ As their Redeemer
- ☞ The Content of the Covenant
 - ☞ Commands Relating to Loving God
 - ☞ Commands Relating to Loving Neighbor
- ☞ The Response to the Covenant
 - ☞ The Fear of the People
 - ☞ The Call for a Mediator
 - ☞ The Purpose of God

Remembering then that we are at Mt. Sinai, a fenced and fearful mountain to which we no longer come, we open the inspired and profitable text to see how God intended Israel to live, how all the people will be judged and finally how the sweet nectar of the gospel raises our hopes and brings us help. May we through our preaching of the Law now earnestly seek to set our gaze, our faith, our hope in Christ alone.

Laws about Altars

(20:22-26)

²² And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

Its Relation to Worship

(v.22-23)

As the Decalogue closed, God declared to Israel that they were to worship Him in response to His Word. He had spoken to them. He had revealed Himself to them in words, both audible to Moses and written in stone. Their making of altars was a response to Him. But it was to be according to His Word. Altars of sacrifice and worship were common to the history of God's people. The pagan culture had corrupted them into the worship of idols and myths. But Israel was not worshipping a god made of gold or silver who was the graven image. God was invisible and incorporeal, but yet was to be worshipped through material and human means.

Its Purpose in Worship

(v.24)

The altar was a place of sacrifice where blood was shed. The only way to come to worship at an altar was to bring the sacrifice required. This was the only way a person could be accepted by God. Two offerings are mentioned: the burnt offering and the peace offering. Later, in Leviticus, the distinction between the two would be developed further. But worship will involve an altar where sin is dealt with and peace with God is wrought. There, God will meet with His people and bless them as a result of His Divine initiative. His people will come because God has caused them to remember His name.

Its Construction for Worship

(v.25-26)

Two things are being regulated here: the materials from which it is made (v.25) and the maximum height allowed (v.26). If the altar is made from earth or rock, then it must not be hewn or carved. The rocks must be laid in their natural state. The work of man to shape the building up the altar will in fact profane it. God will allow altars to be made of wood covered in beaten gold and silver. But the common altar must rise out of the common ground.

The altar must not be made so tall that the worshipper needs steps to reach its top. The altar must be at a level that the ordinary adult can reach it. Because robes and tunics were the common clothes of both men and women, then the concern is that a worshipper not be exposed by ascending the steps of an altar. Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, nakedness has been associated with the shame of guilt. But an altar is not a place of guilt and shame. It is a place of sin's being covered and cleared.

At the fenced and fearful mountain where blessings and curses are tied to obedience, the altar is immediately introduced as the way forgiveness and reconciliation with

God is brought about. One of the primary reasons for God's revelation is point us to the problem of our sin and the provision at the altar of sacrifice.

Thus, Christ fulfilled the law concerning altars by being Himself the altar, the sacrifice and the priest. It is through Him that we come to God forgiven and reconciled. It is through Him that God meets us and blesses us.

Laws about Slaves

(21:1-11)

One of the criticisms of the Bible and the Old Testament in particular is that slavery is not outlawed. A godly Jew serving God in the Old Covenant could and often did own slaves, own other human beings. The care for and treatment of slaves was carefully regulated to protect them from harm and to ensure them a reasonable place in the culture. However it might rub our sensibilities, certain kinds of slavery was allowed under both the Old and New Covenants. The abolition of slavery as an institution may be commendable, but it is not necessarily Christian. Any even handed handling of the actual texts of Scripture bear this out.

However, let me be clear about this. The kind of slavery where people were stolen from their homes and then sold as commodities into permanent, lifelong slavery is forbidden in the Old Covenant. This was the predominant form of slavery in the 1800's. Further, many slave owners all over the western world treated their slaves harshly and savagely compounding their sin against God and others.

Man Servants

(v.1-6)

21 "Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. ²When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. ⁵But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' ⁶then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

These words of the Mosaic Law governed the ownership of male slaves. They allowed a person to be held as a slave for only six years. In the seventh year, he was to be set free. When he was set free, he was allowed to depart with what he had acquired during his term of slavery. If the master gave him a wife who bore him children, then when he left he could not take them with him. They are the master's. This of course, bound most men to their masters.

The next paragraph allows slaves who did not want to leave their masters or presumably their wives or children to voluntarily and permanently attach themselves to their masters. He was to publicly declare his love for his family and his master. Then he was taken to the door of the master's home where an awl (a pointed punch for either setting nails or punching holes in leather) was used to punch a hole in the earlobe of the slave. Thus he gave up his right to be freed and put himself under his master's care for the rest of his life. As a side note, later law would note that a man doing so did not bind his children to the master.

This law points us to the fulfillment in Christ who is our master forever. In our profession of faith, we are publicly declaring our love for our heavenly Master. Upon us He sets the mark of His ownership, that is, the Holy Spirit. We are now His servants forever.

Phil Ryken wrote the following on this text, “If a servant loves a master who takes care of him and treats him like a friend, imagine what a servant would do for a master who saved him, and at the cost of his own life! We are loved by such a Master. Why would we ever want to serve anyone else, least of all ourselves? What we ought to do is give ourselves entirely to his service. We ought to make a public declaration of our allegiance to Christ. We ought to listen to his Word and obey his voice. We ought to say, “I love my Master, and I want my heart to be bound to him forever.” Service to such a gracious master is not bondage but freedom.”¹⁷

Maid Servants

(v.7-11)

⁷ “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

These words of the Mosaic Law governed female slaves. They were designed to protect the lady from being abused by a master. When a daughter is sold to a master, she is not freed by the seven year release laws. However, she also cannot be taken advantage of. She may not be discarded if she does not please the master. The language here used elsewhere is referring to intimacy, but also applied to other matters as well. She was to be redeemed; that is, she was to be set free for a price. She was not to be sold. She could be designated or given to a son as his wife but in the same manner that the master would treat or give away a daughter. If the master takes another wife, he must continue to provide for her in the same manner that she was accustomed before. If he failed to care for her, then she was to be set free without cost.

This Mosaic Law was fulfilled by Christ who has taken us as his handmaidens given by His Father. We were redeemed, bought by the blood of Christ so that we are God’s. But he has designated us as His Son’s. He has treated us as His daughters. He has cared for us even when we did not please Him. There is no price that could be paid that could free us from our loving servanthood to God our Master and Jesus our husband.

¹⁷Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus : Saved for God's Glory*, Includes Bibliographical References (P. [1165]-1202) and Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005), 706.

Laws about Assaults

The Mosaic Law addresses the sins of assault and murder. Grounded in the Noahic prohibition against homicide, these case laws carefully establish basic principles of determining the type of assault, weighing its motivation and establishing the consequences.

Capital Crimes – Assault with Intent (v.12-17)

¹² “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. ¹⁴ But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

¹⁵ “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

¹⁶ “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

¹⁷ “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

The Mosaic Law, the Book of the Old Covenant, first addressed capital crimes. These are the category of crimes where death is the punishment. Capital punishment has always been a part of all of God’s covenants. Capital punishment is the eventual punishment for rebellion against God. With that in mind, God required that in the case of these crimes, the perpetrator was to be executed. Mercy could be shown if so granted by the family of the victim. The reasons for capital punishment are not given here, just the fact of it.

Those who murdered with premeditation, struck or cursed their parents or stole and sold people into slavery or received such slaves were to be executed. Those who committed homicide without premeditation were punished differently. Cities of refuge were later appointed as places of incarceration for these people.

It is important to note that the kind of slavery largely practiced by the Muslims and the west before its abolition in the 1860’s was indirectly forbidden. Those who were involved in man-stealing in any way were to be executed. The threat of capital punishment deterred and largely prevented this kind of evil among God’s people.

All through the Bible, the authority of parents and the honor due them is held in high regard. In the Mosaic Covenant, to curse or to strike your parents was a capital crime. Children were expected to keep themselves in submission and in control. An uncontrolled, vicious assault on a parent with the intent to kill whether it succeeded or not was to result in punishment by death. This preserves the integrity of the family and the viability of the civil order.

This high regard by children for their parents reflects Jesus’ high submission to and honor of His heavenly Father. Jesus fulfilled this portion of the Mosaic Law by Himself being executed as a criminal. He had done nothing to deserve the sentence of death. He was innocent of the charges and any charge against Him. Yet, because of all our sins that deserved spiritual (and in some cases, physical) capital punishment, Jesus was executed as our substitute. Praise God, we then are acquitted at the bar of God’s justice.

Personal Injury – Assaults Requiring Reparation (v.18-32)

¹⁸ “When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, ¹⁹ then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.

²⁰ “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. ²¹ But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.

²² “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. ²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

²⁶ “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. ²⁷ If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

²⁸ “When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. ²⁹ But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. ³⁰ If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him. ³¹ If it gores a man’s son or daughter, he shall be dealt with according to this same rule. ³² If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.

This category of assaults in the Mosaic Law cover personal injury issues. The governing principle is in verses 23-24, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” The Jewish interpreters including the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day read this as what was demanded. Jesus points out that a careful read of the language does not allow for that. This was a limitation on the reparation for personal injury. The amount to be paid was to be no more than the injury suffered. The bodily harm and loss of time or wages *were the only consideration*. Mental pain, anguish and financial vengeance were not allowed under this restriction.

The first two paragraphs establish the grounds for personal injury. For an assault that results in a non-permanent injury coverage of loss of work and income was required including the costs for healing. If in the case of assaulting someone else’s slave, then capital punishment was the consequence if the slave died and reparation to the owner if the slave did not.

The next paragraph (v.22-24) covers the case of injuring a bystander in a fight. The law is illustrated (this is called case law) by giving the example of a pregnant woman who is injured as a bystander. It is intended to primarily protect the life of the unborn child. If her injury leads to the child being born unharmed, the assailants are to be fined as in any other assault. If the child is injured, then the assailants are to be punished in proportion to the harm they caused, and no more.

This verse is often rightly used by antiabortionists to demonstrate that an unborn infant is to be equally treated under the Law. No stipulation here is made of the term of the unborn child. If the injury to the woman causes the child to come out

before it is viable, this is treated as murder. If the accidental harm brought to an innocent bystander was subject to this kind of punishment, then intentional harm to the unborn was a capital crime. If you want to bring abortions to an end, begin charging any person causing an abortion with capital murder and the mothers who willingly go to them as accomplices.

Verses 26-27 are laws that protect a slave from personal injury. If a master causes a slave to be permanently injured, then that slave is to be set free. Since the slave is protected by the Mosaic Law, then presumably the slave is also protected under the rest of the Law from assault, injury and murder.

Finally, the Mosaic Law deals with personal injury caused by animals owned or kept by people (v.28-32). Two things emerge from this. An owner was responsible for the injuries caused by an animal he owned. An owner was more responsible when an animal had shown a predictable or repeatable bent toward causing harm. Animals that were known by their history to be dangerous were to be put down. When an owner had been negligent in this matter and one of his animals had to be put down, he was not allowed to profit from its execution. Neither the family members nor the slaves of the owner were to be exempted from this law; both were equally protected under the Book of the Covenant.

Our sinning has caused irreparable damage to the world God has created and to relationships with each other. We assaulted the person and reputation of God through our rebellion, sin and depravity. We have committed personal injury crimes against the God of heaven, as well as our neighbors. Jesus fulfills and satisfies this portion of the Law by taking upon Himself our crimes, sinned against and suffering as an innocent man and bearing the punishment of His people for them. He has paid the full price demanded; that is, the price of His life, attested to by His outpoured blood. So mercy is shown. The Judge is satisfied. The parties are reconciled. God in His wise and marvelous majesty is vindicated and glorified.

Conclusion So we are learning to handle the Mosaic Law as the New Covenant apostles did. There is the *FRAMEWORK* of the Law that is to govern the wicked, the sinners and transgressors. There is the *FULFILLMENT* of the Law by Christ where He was its perfect keeper and its living reality. There is the *FOCUS* of the Law as the shadow of the great and glorious realities which have begun in the New Covenant.

What do we learn from these particular Mosaic Laws?

- Worship requires both God's revelation of Himself and our submissive response to Him. There is no access without sacrifice. But when the proper sacrifice is brought to the altar God approves, He meets us there and blesses us. In the New Covenant, that altar is the cross. That sacrifice is Christ. What we bring is belief and submission. The blessings are the eternal presence, promises and provisions of God.
- Man is made in the image of God. His life, person and property are to be protected and cared for. Loving God and loving neighbor means that we will take care of each other and understand that there will be punishment when we don't.
- Those who are vulnerable are to be more carefully protected. The slave, the hand maiden, the unborn are to be equally treated under God's justice. Again, while we may not have all of these institutions today, as Christians, we still ought to have a mindset that demonstrates God's care for the vulnerable.
- We are responsible for our actions. Whether we live in the Old Covenant or New Covenant; whether we live in a society, culture or nation whose laws reflect God's character or not, every person will give an account for their attitudes and their actions. A just society will both require and restrain the accountability for sinful actions. But in the end, all will stand before God, the Judge of the Universe. Thank God, for those who have believed, the book of our sinful deeds will be clean by the doing and dying of Jesus.
- Human justice is about reparation and compensation, not about vengeance. The Mosaic Law clearly shifts the consequences for criminal acts out of the realm of personal vengeance. It is not a "taking of eye for eye" it is the "giving of eye for eye." Vengeance is the Lord's alone. He has reserved it for Himself. All acts of vengeance usurp God's right and God's place.

May the Law drive and draw us to Christ. May we rejoice that He has fulfilled it for us. May we not strive to be righteous by the Law, not live according to the Law yet profit from the whole of Scripture as we read it in the light of Jesus' coming and Jesus' cross.

Finally, maybe someone is struck by guilt over your sins – you hear the Law and it thunders denunciation and damnation in your soul. O, believe and bow to the Law Giver. Seek to humble yourself under His hand, receive His forgiveness and be delivered from your sin by our great and glorious Savior. Amen.

Notes