**BCM Bible Study: December 2/3**

**Exodus 20:22-21:36: The Law Part 1**

The law is often thought of as a hard-to-read interruption from the story of Exodus. Moreover, some see it as irrelevant to us because of Jesus. Before we dive into the details of the law, let’s take a look at the original purpose of the law along with its relationship to modern Christians.

What role do you think the law of the OT played in the life of the ancient Israelites and their relationship with God?

* There is a common misconception that ancient people were saved by the law and that we are saved by faith. This is not true! We must remember that the law is given only *after* the people are delivered from slavery. In what way do you see people (or yourself) trying to make Christian “law” a way of salvation? (being saved by good works)

How did people of the Old Testament view the law in the following passages? **Read Deuteronomy 32:44-47** and **Psalm 119:129-136**.

* Do you think of the law of God in this way? Describe your relationship with God’s law.

The New Testament seems to have more of a mixed review of the law. **Read Romans 4:13-15**, **Galatians 3:19-24,** **Matthew 5:17-20.** What is the relationship of the law with the gospel?

* The fundamental human problem is sin. That is, we are enslaved to sin, utterly broken by it and unable to consistently obey God. The law is good – it showed people what God was like and helped them live in the way that God intended. But the law did not fix the sin problem; people’s hearts were still enslaved to sin. What Jesus did on the cross was not contradictory to the law and did not do away with it (except for the sacrificial laws, which would no longer be needed since he was the sacrifice once and for all). Instead, through the presence of God’s Spirit, the law is written on the hearts of believers, so that people can now actually obey God and experience freedom and deliverance from sin. We can have an intimate relationship with God as Jeremiah prophesied. **Read Jer. 31:31-34.**

We must remember that throughout Exodus, the Lord is concerned with making himself known to his people and through his people. The law is a continuation of this purpose – the law lived out imitates God’s character. As his people obeyed the law, the nations would see a picture of what God is like. This will be one of our primary concerns as we study the law and seek to find its modern application.

Idols and Altars: **Read Exodus 20:22-26**

God begins the law by reminding Israel that proper worship is to Him alone. The inclusion of the instructions about the altar has provoked many questions, but it seems that the instructions given in verses 25-26 lead the Israelites to worship in a way that is specifically different from how Canaanites worshiped. Why would this be important to God?

* God told his people to be a “holy nation.” This means that they were to be set apart and different. 1 Peter, in applying this to the church says that we should also be holy. **Read 1 Peter 2:9**. What does it look like for the church to be holy?

**Slaves**: **Read Exodus 21:1-11**

Leader’s Note: One inevitable question for this section is – what didn’t God simply rule out slavery outright? I cannot provide a completely satisfying answer to this, but I think Matthew 19:8-9 offers some insight. God’s concession in allowing them to divorce is because of their hard hearts. It’s almost as if God is saying, “I would have given you the full picture, but you couldn’t handle it yet.” I think a similar issue is at work regarding slavery. Yes, in a perfect world, God might have simply abolished slavery. But for whatever reason, God made a concession in this case. He instead decides to give them a system that is contrasts significantly from the laws of the surrounding nations in its humanitarian concerns for slaves.

* Why do you think topics regarding slaves is covered first? (See 22:21, 23:9)
* What would you say is the general principle for how slaves should be treated?

Slavery was a means of provision for those who could not provide their own shelter and food. It was their way of being taken care of. The general concern in these verses is restoration and redemption. God wants to make a way for slaves to be free and financially independent.

* What does this tell you about God’s heart for the poor?
* **Read Matthew 25:41-46.** Jesus was highly concerned with the poor and calls us to do the same. How can we take can of the poor?
* One interesting aspect of this passage is that only Israelites are in view – enslavement of foreigners is not mentioned. How does this shape your understanding of the passage? How does this inform the way we treat one another within the church body?

**Injuries**: **Read Exodus 21:12-36**

Note: Once again, it seems that slaves are not treated equally here. But see the note above. The slave belongs to the master which clearly impacts the severity of the punishment.

* What would you say is the general principle of this section?
* In what way do you see God’s concern for justice in these verses?
* What do we learn about God-given human responsibility in this passage?

Verses 22-25 are interesting for a couple of reasons. First, God’s care for life seems to extend to the unborn. Second, the “eye for an eye” principle is something that Jesus discusses. **Read Matthew 5:38-41**.

* What does Jesus say about the law of retaliation? Is he dismissing the law?
  + Jesus is speaking about personal relationship, not governmental justice. It is not up the individual to enact justice, we leave that up to God and the authorities he has established. See Romans 13:1-7
* What situations might you face that retribution is an option for you? What would it look like to follow the example of Christ?
* In what way do you see the heart of God in this section? How does this inform the way we do justice to one another?

**Challenge**: Follow the BCM Advent devotional on social media (begins Nov. 29). Families could do this together!

Nerd Notes

* The discussion above about the law and the gospel just scratches the surface – many more passages could have been considered. If you want to chat more, talk to Scott or another staff member!
* Notice that God’s laws fit best in a time when Israelites are settled into the land. This was the plan, after all!
* It is fitting that the law begins and ends with passages about worship.
* The instruction about avoiding nakedness in walking up altar steps is probably meant as a statement against Canaanite cultic practices, which sometimes involved sexual rituals. Israelites were called to avoid any connection to such a practice.
* One curious aspect of verses 3-4 is that the slave go as he came. It is hard to know why but it is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 7 where believers are encouraged to stay in their current marital status. There may be no connection between these passages, but it is an interesting thought!
* An interesting interpretation of Matthew 25 is that the “least of these” specifically references the church. In other words, it is a warning against those who would not care for others believers. This lines up with the concern for the family of God in Ex. 21:1-11.
* 21:7-11 present a number of questions. Why would a man sell his daughter as a slave? Who is the “he” is verse 10? Again, details escape us. But don’t miss the general concern of care for the girl who has been enslaved. However odd this is to us, the humanitarian concern is clear.
* The place to which the person can flee in 21:12 will appear in Numbers 35 as cities of refuge.
* The penalty of death for cursing our mother and father seems odd to us. Peter Enns suggests that this cursing was likely some serious breach of responsibility, not mere words.
* We must be careful in drawing out legal principles like the death penalty from this passage. We have to first understand that Israel existed in a theocracy and we do not. When we are governed not by God, but by men and women who often have no concern for God, the waters are muddy. Moreover, there had to be significant, consistent witness to enact the death penalty in the OT law.
* Verses 22-25 are famously difficult to interpret. Some would say that the implication I draw about God’s concern for the unborn is unsure, but I believe that it is a fairly safe conclusion. The concern seems to be for both the child and the mother – injury and death are options for either.