

Exodus Sermon Series

Justice for All

Exodus 22:16-31

God is not only just, but justice itself. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of the coming king and messiah who would rid Israel of evil shepherds and establish faithful ones: "In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: Yahweh our Righteousness (Jer. 23:6). "Righteousness" and "justice" are same word in both Hebrew and Greek, so doing what God wants is always a justice issue. "For I, the Lord, love justice" (Is. 61:8).

Sexual Justice

In the #MeToo era, there are few things we need more than sexual justice and wisdom. The first law addresses when a man seduces and sleeps with a virgin, and has to pay the bride-price (v16). This is not a case of rape, which was a capital crime (Deut. 22:25), but one where a man treats a woman like he is going to marry her without committing himself by covenant. He wants the privilege of love without the responsibility, and even though she goes along with the seduction, he has to pay the price--the dowry that would have been given to and kept by her (e.g. Gen. 24:53). But this doesn't mean her father has to give her to him. If he refuses, the man still has to pay (v17). We have a vestige of the idea that a father protects and has authority to give his daughter away in wedding ceremonies, but rarely do fathers exercise their God-given authority to protect their daughters. Fathers do not possess their daughters; God requires them to sacrificially serve and protect them. Assyrian laws mandated partial payment of the bride price and gave the father authority to do whatever he wanted with his daughter, including getting rid of her. But the Bible establishes honors women and forbids them from being passed around as sexual objects. Not too long ago it was understood in our culture that if a man has sex with a woman, and certainly if she gets pregnant, he ought to be willing to marry her. Our laws bribe women via welfare not to marry the fathers of their children, and women are treated like sexual play things to be used and abused.

Spiritual Justice

There are three capital crimes in verses 18-20. The first is for sorcery or witchcraft (v18). If we feared injury, deformity, and death via sorcery, we too would legislate against it. This was a real issue in the ancient world, and in Exodus the Egyptian magicians performed impressive miracles (Ex. 7:11). The Code of Hammurabi and Assyrian laws mandated the death penalty for the use of magic against others. It's a testament to the gospel that we mostly deal with palm readers and Ouija boards today, but we should reject all astrology, attempts to know the future, and spiritual manipulation. The second and third capital offenses are bestiality and sacrifice to false gods (vv19-20). Sexual immorality was closely linked with idolatry in the ancient world, and God often confronts idolatry as spiritual adultery against Him. In the Epic of Gilgamesh the goddess Ishtar has relations with various animals, and in Canaanite worship Baal was pictured copulating with a cow. This sort of Baal worship was opposed later by Jehu: "Now

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it happened, when Joram saw Jehu, that he said, “Is it peace, Jehu?” So he answered, “What peace, as long as the harlotries of your mother Jezebel and her witchcraft are so many?” (2 Kgs. 9:22). The Hittites imposed the death penalty for relations with some animals and not others, but in Israel the perverted, infanticidal, and enslaving worship of idols is prohibited. The apostle Paul alludes to verse 20 when he tells the Corinthians to put a sexually immoral man outside of the church so that he would come back to Christ (1 Cor. 5:5).

Justice for the Weak

The Israelites were not allowed to mistreat a sojourner because they were strangers in Egypt (v21). Similarly, they could not afflict a widow or fatherless child, and if they did, God’s own nose would burn and He’d visit them with the sword, widowhood, and fatherlessness (vv22-24). Israel was a mixed multitude already, but the Promised Land was an international crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa. These people were to be received and loved while their false gods had to be rejected. God’s poor (“My people with you”) were not to be charged interest on loans, but this meant that they would receive loans (v25). And someone’s garment, what he needed for sleep, if used as a pledge for collateral could not be kept overnight (v26). This likely kept the coat from being used simultaneously for multiple loans, thus protecting the poor from huge debt. God knows what the poor man needs and hears his cry because He is gracious (v27). You must facilitate the work of the poor, not hinder it.

Justice for Authorities

Just as we must honor and respect the poor, so we have to honor the authorities above us. We must not revile or make light of God (v28). “Revile” is the same word used in 21:17 about children and their parents, later quoted by Jesus to condemn Pharisees who didn’t take care of their aging parents (Mk. 7:10ff). Don’t bear God’s name in vain or stop honoring Him. And don’t curse the ruler He has put above you (v28; cf. Rom. 13:2). Whether you love or hate a president, honor the office. If he dishonors it, don’t be disobedient and do the same (cf. Acts 23:3). We’re to honor God with our firstfruits, both “fullness and drippings” (v29). Israel would redeem every firstborn son, indicating the whole family is the Lord’s and in need of forgiveness and cleansing, and offer firstborn oxen and sheep (vv29-30; cf. Ex. 13:13). Lastly, God says they must be holy men to Him by not eating animals that were killed by other animals (v31). This is a priestly distinction in the holy land, though you also may reject roadkill on other grounds. God wants His people dedicated to following Him in everything, and not just taking in whatever happens to be in the land. God’s justice is wise, kind, generous and full of joy. As sinners in need of grace, we must be justified by the alien righteousness of Christ in order to love Him and walk in His ways.