

Poverty and Property

Exodus 21:1–6, Colossians 4:1–14

This message is part of a series on the “Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 20:22–23:33; the term itself is taken from Ex. 24:7). It is arguably the first part of the word of God written. It is a collection of laws and commandments given by God to Moses for the Israelites, including teaching on worship, interpersonal conflicts, and principles for civil judges. This part of Exodus serves as a foundational document for the covenantal relationship between God and his people, emphasizing man’s obligation to follow God’s commands.

Note the word “covenant” (בְּרִיתָה). A divine covenant is *a formal agreement that establishes a relationship of commitment between God and his people*. God takes the initiative to establish this relationship. In Genesis 17 the LORD (יהוה, the self-existent one, the Creator) tells Abraham, “I will establish My covenant (בְּרִיתָה) between Me and you and your descendants (זָרַע, literally *seed*) after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants (זָרַע) after you.” He promises him, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants (זָרַע) after him.” Notice that God takes the initiative; this was not Abraham’s idea. The covenant is entirely gracious. God establishes the covenant, and man receives it. This revelation was all very overwhelming to Abraham. We read that “Abraham fell on his face.” That was the proper response—worship!—but Abraham’s behavior is not exemplary. The verse continues: “Abraham fell on his face and *laughed*, and said in his heart, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” Abraham and Sarah wanted a son more than anything else. They had been married for many years. Years earlier, in Ur of the Chaldees, before Abraham came to Canaan, God had told him, “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you” (Gen. 12:2). The years had passed, and still no child. Sarah even gave her husband a concubine, Hagar, and Abraham had a son by her, but that didn’t turn out well. Now God promises, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son.” Abraham was overwhelmed. He was 100 years old. God was going to show his power through man’s weakness.

Now, again, much time had passed. The people of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. God had heard their cries and come to deliver them. He brought them through the waters of the Red Sea, which cascaded back to drown the armies of Pharaoh. His people stood at Mount Sinai. They heard God thunder forth his law. They were terrified and pled with Moses to go speak with God and tell them what they were to do. Moses had done that and returned. He writes down what God had said and reads it to the people—perhaps the first-ever public reading of Holy Scripture. We read in Exodus 24:7 that Moses “took the Book of the

Covenant (סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית) and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.’”

This is a story that we need to hear over and over. God’s has entered into a covenantal relation with his people. This is entirely by his grace and not by obligation. He is sovereign and not obligated to save anyone. He promises, “Ye shall be my people, and I shall be your God.” Man does not deserve this. It is entirely by grace.

Now we are beginning to study the Book of the Covenant. It defines the covenantal relationship between God and his people, emphasizing man’s duty to obey God. Our text this morning begins: “Now these are the *judgments* which you shall set before them.” The translations use different words to try to express this. KJV and NKJV have “judgments”; NASB has “ordinances”; ESV has “rules.” “Judgments” is the most literal. The Hebrew word comes from the word meaning *judge* (שָׁפַט). You’ve heard this word before: it is the second part of the name Jehoshaphat (יְהוֹשָׁפָטִי YehoSHAPHAT), meaning *Yahweh has judged*. A judgment is a legal decision; compare Deuteronomy 16:18 (ESV), “You shall appoint *judges* and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall *judge* the people with *righteous judgment* (מִשְׁפָּט־צְדִיקָה).” Civil judges were distinctly charged to judge with *righteous* judgment, not according to their own personal preferences or likes and dislikes. Judges are not to be influenced by a money, or by social standing, or a pretty face, or a smooth talker. The judge’s only consideration ought to be: *what does the law say?* If it is determined on the testimony of two or more credible witnesses that the defendant has broken the law, then the judge is to rule: guilty as charged! He is not allowed personal discretion.

The LORD is called “the righteous judge” (ὁ δίκαιος κριτής, 2 Tim. 4:8). Any legal decision made by a human court that is out of accord with the Word of God is fundamentally *unjust*, no matter how high the standing or reputation of the judge that renders it, or how popular it is. The Christian says with the Psalmist, “Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way” (Ps. 119:128): “*all* thy precepts concerning *all* things”—no exceptions! God’s judgments are just, and if man’s judicial decisions disagree with God at any point, they are unjust.

Last week, as we began our study of the Book of the Covenant, we observed that the first and last topics touched on in this little book-within-a-book had to do with God’s *worship*: we are not to put anything else whatsoever on a par with the true God: no rivals, no other gods to compete for the affections of our heart (20:23). Israel must never enter into a covenant with the heathen, lest they be tempted to serve any foreign gods (23:33).

But now, as we begin chapter 21, we go abruptly from “Worship God” to “Work hard!” This abrupt transition begins a pattern that will be followed throughout the Book of the Covenant: abrupt transitions moving from one topic to another. God is giving a summary of the entire scope of his law. He will talk about the relationship between men and women in human society. He will talk about specific cases that will serve as patterns for deciding other, similar cases that will come up. He will talk about marriage. He will talk about violence. He will talk about man’s responsibility to control dangerous animals. He will talk about property, theft and restitution. He will talk about unlawful sexual relationships. He will talk about welcoming foreigners and immigrants, tithing, keeping the Sabbath and the annual feasts. He will promise gracious blessings for obedience. All this and more awaits as we study the Book of the Covenant.

So let’s get into our text. I have three points this morning: (1) Poverty; (2) Property; and (3) Abiding significance. First,

1. Poverty

God says, “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.” The people of God were called the Hebrews. The word Hebrew (עִבְרִי) comes from a verb meaning *pass over*. It means something like *the people who passed over from the other side*, a reference to Israel’s beginning, when the LORD told Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.” God’s people were strangers and sojourners in the land of Canaan. God’s people are strangers and pilgrims. As the song says, “This world is not my home; I’m just a-passing through.” That is the truth. Peter writes, “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as *strangers and pilgrims*, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). A stranger is an alien, a person who lives in a place that is not his home. A pilgrim is a sojourner, a foreigner, a person who is passing through on his way to another destination. The saints are not to get too comfortable in this world. We must always remember our pilgrim status. We *use* the things of this world, but we are not to make idols of them. God is our true portion forever (Ps. 73:26)—the portion that can never be taken from us. If we get too comfortable with this world, if we desire this world’s games and toys and fashions and values, then we are idolators and not faithful Christ-followers.

So what’s this: “If you buy a Hebrew servant.” “Buy” in this case refers to a man who pays the debts of an indigent person (that is, a person who has racked up so many debts that he is unable to pay them—something that is very foolish to do, by the way; God’s word says, “owe no man anything,” Rom. 13:8). So here comes along a wealthy man, a good businessman. He needs an employee, and he sees this indigent person; he sees potential in him, he sees that with godly counsel and the right opportunities, he could become a successful person. So he takes a risk. He

pays the man's debts, and the man becomes his servant (עֶבֶד bondservant, slave). There are two types of slaves in the Bible: a man who is in bondage (permanent enslavement); and a man who is not in bondage, but serving for a time. A fellow Israelite could serve only six years, and then be set free, but a foreigner might serve for life. That sounds cruel, but actually it was an opportunity for a foreigner to live in a godly home and work environment, hear the gospel, learn obedience, put his trust in Jehovah, and go to heaven in the end. In the case of a Hebrew bondservant, he would serve six years. He would work in the family business and learn a trade. He would learn good habits—hard work, thrift, intentionality, goal setting, pleasing a boss. People are naturally lazy. If given the opportunity, a lot of people would give themselves to pleasure and never accomplish anything. God does not want his people to be lazy. He wants us to work hard and be successful. The difference between success and failure often is the difference between hard work and laziness. God wants his people to serve him, work hard, set goals, love their families, be devoted spouses, parents, business-owners and church officers. He wants us to achieve success but not make success an idol. His word teaches, “whatsoever ye do, do all *to the glory of God*,” “whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all *in the name of the Lord Jesus*,” “and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, *as to the Lord, and not unto men*.” “Serve the LORD with gladness. Amen.”

So here's a Hebrew bondservant. He has learned to work hard for his boss. He has had a whole change in attitude. Whereas before, he was lazy, he was unfocused, he lived for the pleasures of this world and had no ambition. (In modern parlance, he was addicted to online gaming.) He piled up a lot of debts and eventually went bankrupt. But a fellow-Hebrew took a risk and helped him. He developed godly character. He became a success. He became a disciple of the master. Now he is ready to help others, to launch out on his own and disciple others. When he leaves, he is not to go away empty-handed. God's word specified: “you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the LORD has blessed you with, you shall give to him” (Deut. 15:13–14).

Here, then, is an application of the commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”: loving one's neighbor in a world of scarcity. The Bible is not just for an ideal world but for a world marred by sin. What is the best way to help the poor? Taxing everybody to fund a large, bloated, social-services bureaucracy? Or for private individuals to work out mutually beneficial arrangements between themselves as they see fit? God's Word offers the better way. All charity is voluntary, not coerced. No one has a right to other people's money. People need to learn responsibility. It is wrong to force people to support others through compulsory taxation.

Second, consider the matter of

2. Property

Consider verse 4: “If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself.” Does this part seem cruel? Only on the surface. Remember, the rich man has paid the woman’s debts. He has taken her into his home and she has become a servant to his wife. She, too, has learned responsibility. She has become a valuable servant. The rich man has paid her room and board for some years, as well as fed, housed and clothed her children. The servant whose six-year term is up cannot simply walk away with his master’s property. He has two choices. He can save up and pay back his master’s investment in his wife, or if that is impossible, he can make the voluntary decision to stay with his master for the rest of his life. In the latter case, there would be a public declaration. The master would take him before the judges. He would publicly declare, “I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free. I will be my master’s bondservant forever.” His ear would be pierced as a symbol of his lifetime servitude. It would be his decision, the life he had chosen for himself. Some people fear responsibility and risk-taking. They are more comfortable having security and protection. They might be more comfortable working in an established family-owned business, or for a large corporation, than launching out on their own. They are more comfortable being a follower than a leader.

What about you? Are you a follower? All of us should be followers of Jesus Christ. We should be his committed and devoted disciples, following him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Members of this church have taken the following vow, declaring before God and man, “Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and promise that you will serve him, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?”

If you belong to Christ, these are words you want to say! “Yes, Lord, I know I cannot save myself. I know you are my only hope in life and in death. Following you—being your loyal bondservant for life—is the best decision I could ever make.”

“Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until He has mercy on us” (Ps. 123:2).

If you belong to Christ, then you are the Lord’s property. “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

And those of us who know that, *treasure* this truth. Being the Lord’s bondservant is perfect freedom. And what blessings there are to being Christ’s! “If

you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). We who belong to Christ are counted as Abraham's seed. We who were afar off have been brought into the people of God. The promises given to Abraham are ours in Christ. There is one people of God, one church, and we are part of it!

Consider now point 3,

3. Abiding significance

Here is a text that is more difficult to preach on, perhaps a text that a preacher might be tempted to skip over. But a preacher should preach the whole counsel of God, not just the easy texts. On Sermon Audio there are 4,517 sermons on John 3:16. That's a lot of sermons! How many years would it take to listen to all of them? But on Exodus 21:1 there are only 398 sermons. How many preachers consider Exodus 21:1 their favorite text?

The dispensationalist maintains that this text, as a part of the law of Moses—was just for the Jews but has no relevance to the church now. But is this so?

Does this text reveal Christ? If so, how? The Son of man came to *serve*. Remember his beautiful words, "whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be *served*, but to *serve*, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26–28).

Make no mistake, my dear one. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, has, as it were, said, "I love my Master, and I will be his servant forever." He has forever dignified servanthood. To be Christ's bondservant—to say to him, "Take me, I am yours—forever," is, in the final analysis, the most important decision a rational person could ever make. You've got to serve somebody. It will either be the devil who will take you to eternal perdition, or it will be the Lord of glory who will take you to heaven.

Christ came to *serve*. All of us should emulate him and serve our fellow-man. Rather than give a handout, we should give a poor man the opportunity to learn a life-skill. "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

There is an application to families: we should resist the temptation to do everything for our children, thus teaching them that the world owes them a living. Children need to learn how to do chores. They need to know from first-hand experience all the things that are involved in running a household, so when they move out and get their first apartment, they won't fall apart the first time something goes wrong. They need to learn that they must work to support themselves. Parents support young children in their youth, and adult children help their aged parents.

Some Christian colleges have majors in "social work," training people to work for government agencies, helping the poor to find tax-supported programs that can

help them. Students in the social work major at one Christian college are taught to “advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice [and] engage anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI) in practice.” The words *racial justice*, *diversity* and *inclusion* should send up a lot of red flags!

The other morning, as I was getting my groceries out of the cart, the bagger and cashier were having a conversation. The bagger said, “Nobody should have to beg at the side of the road; there’s programs that can help” (he was referring to government programs). That’s the way that people in our society have been conditioned to think: *government* should solve the problem of poverty! Here is a text that students in social work majors at Christian colleges need to study. It helps us learn how God wants us to think about poverty. “For our sakes he became *poor*” (2 Cor. 8:9). God has a plan for the poor, and that is that they learn responsibility under the care and tutelage of disciple-makers like you and me.

God has given us richly all things to enjoy, but even as for gleaners in ancient Israel, we’ve got to go out and labor to harvest them.

The president of the Ukraine wants US taxpayers’ money, no strings attached. That is human nature: we all want to live at somebody else’s expense. Is that our attitude? Do we feel the world owes us a living? “Thou shalt not steal” is for *everybody*—rich and poor, as I said to the cashier and bagger.

The hard reality is that we live in a world of scarcity where we have to work for a living. The irony is that working for a living is no less spiritual than worshipping God. When we go to our jobs with the attitude, *I’m not serving the boss, I’m serving Christ*, then we have a perspective that is absolutely life-changing.

He is the only Savior, and he calls us to become his servants, to put our faith and trust in him.

Are you the servant of Christ? If so, you are blessed eternally. He is your portion, and no one can take him away from you. Amen!