

# Taking Responsibility for Our Actions

Exodus 21:18–21; Ephesians 4:22–32

The title of my message this morning is “Taking Responsibility for Our Actions.”

We’ll get to our text in a few moments, but first, consider the beginning of our race. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden they refused to acknowledge their guilt. They each shifted the responsibility to another, Adam blaming Eve and God, Eve blaming the serpent.<sup>1</sup> They refused to acknowledge their guilt and blamed others for their sin. Such has been the case with men and women ever since; we tend to blame others for our sins and shortcomings: “It’s not *my* fault.” “I was having a bad day.” “People were being mean to me.” “I forgot to take my medicine.” “I was raised in a dysfunctional home.” “The government hasn’t given me enough benefits.” “*Society* is to blame!” And on it goes.

Yet as David prayed—and we ourselves prayed in our prayer of confession a moment ago: “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden.”<sup>2</sup> *That’s* what God wants us to do: to *acknowledge* our sin. My sin is “*my* sin”! It is not another’s. I myself bear the guilt of my sin, and I need to seek God’s forgiveness. The only way to get that is to look to Christ who “died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> The glorious news of the Gospel is that the sins of all the elect were laid on Christ (Isa. 53:6). Christ died for our sins; and by faith, the perfect righteousness of Christ is credited to us as our righteousness.<sup>4</sup> If we look to Christ by faith, we are “clothed . . . with the garments of salvation . . . covered . . . with the robe of righteousness” (Isa 61:10).<sup>5</sup> As the hymnwriter so beautifully put it, “Jesus, thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress; ’midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.”<sup>6</sup> Hallelujah! Oh, the joy of sins forgiven!

If you have made excuses for your sin, then own them. Acknowledge your guilt. Ask God for forgiveness, and look to Christ as your Savior. Confess him before men with his church. That is the only way you can receive the peace of God that passes all understanding.

But this the unregenerate man will *not* do. He is full of pride. He wants to save himself. He wants to take some of the credit for his salvation.

In recent weeks we have been considering what the Bible calls the “Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:7). This is essentially the three chapters immediately following

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 269

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 32:5

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 15:4

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3, 9, 22; Jas. 2:23

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Isa. 52:1; 2 Chron. 6:41; Ps. 132:9, 16; Gal. 3:27; Phil. 3:9; Rev. 4:4, 7:9–14, 21:2

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/jesus-thy-blood-and-righteousness/> accessed 3-21-25

the Ten Commandments, Exodus 21–23.<sup>7</sup> Here we have a summary of God’s holy law—moral, ceremonial and judicial. The moral law is God’s perfect rule of righteousness, grounded in God’s holy character. As such, it is unchanging, for God is unchanging. The ceremonial law contains rules for the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices, and worship under the Old Covenant; it has been abrogated with the completion of Christ’s saving work on the cross. The judicial law contains instructions for human judges. It expired when Jesus said, “It is finished,” although it contains principles of general equity which perfectly reflect the moral law; for example, the requirement that civil courts must determine guilt only on the testimony of two or more sworn witnesses who are cross-examined; no one is ever to be put to death on the testimony of a single witness. These principles continue to be binding upon all human courts. Civil judges at all times must “judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24)—that is, judgments that are in accordance with God’s perfect righteousness. Civil judges are required to know the Bible, and the church must instruct them.

Our text this morning is not often preached on, but it reveals God’s character and helps us appreciate what Christ did for us in his suffering and death. Consider the following points: (1) Explanation and application; (2) How it points to Christ. First,

### **1. Explanation and Application**

There are two related cases in today’s text. Both start with “if,” indicating that they are hypothetical cases to be studied in order to assess similar situations that may arise. First:

“If men contend with each other, and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but is confined to his bed, if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck him shall be acquitted. He shall only pay for the loss of his time, and shall provide for him to be thoroughly healed.”

Two individuals are having an argument. The cause could be a misunderstanding; difference of opinion; dispute about property, grazing rights, water rights; ownership; a failed romance; an insult. Each party tries to make his point, but the other doesn’t accept it. Emotions run high. Neither is willing to bend. The argument becomes vehement, then violent. Fist-fighting ensues. In the heat of the moment one of the contenders picks up a stone and hits his opponent on the head, knocking him to the ground. He lies there, unable to get up. Perhaps he has broken a bone or is hemorrhaging. The victim’s friends offer first aid. The crowd disperses. Finally, his friends carry him back to his tent and lay him in his bed. Family members wash his wounds and try to nurse him back to health. This was

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically Ex. 20:22–23:33

attempted murder, but the victim is still alive. In time he recovers to the point of being able to take halting steps outside his tent using a cane or walker.

How quickly a dispute can become violent—even lethal! When Jonathan befriended David, with whom he had entered into covenant, King Saul took that as a personal affront. He became hotheaded and yelled at him: “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?” When Jonathan defends his friend and says, “Why should he be killed? What has he done?” Saul *casts a spear* at his own son to kill him—but misses!

Thankfully, in our Exodus example, there is only injury, not murder. But there is loss. The victim walks only with difficulty. Whereas before, he was in good health; now he is a cripple. He cannot do the same work he did before. Perhaps he will never be independent. He has had a serious injury. He could have easily died, but God spared his life. He should be thankful.

Our text says, “if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck him shall be acquitted.” What this means is *acquitted of the charge of murder*. But this does not mean the perpetrator gets off scot-free. Our text goes on to say, “He shall . . . pay for the loss of his time, and shall provide for him to be thoroughly healed.” What does this mean?

Here is a man that did a very foolish thing. He became hotheaded and almost murdered a fellow Israelite. Now, the injured man can no longer support his family. So under this law the attacker, though he will not be tried for attempted murder, has committed himself to a heavy financial burden. He is responsible before the law to provide for the injured man’s family—to feed them and pay their bills, as well as his own. Further, he will have to pay doctors, therapists and nurses who can provide care for the injured man whose life is now going to be radically different than it was before. He may have the responsibility for supporting the injured man, his family and his medical care that will last the rest of his life. The attacker will have a heavy burden.

How much better to be a peacemaker! Jesus said, “Agree with thine adversary quickly.” Now our Exodus text was written long before the time of Christ, but this principle was written on men’s hearts from the beginning. In Genesis 32, Jacob, who had earlier stolen his brother’s birthright for a “mess of pottage,” later stole his blessing while Esau was out in the field hunting venison to make a special meal for his father. When Jacob heard his brother wanted to kill him, he fled to his uncle’s house far away in Haran and lived there for twenty years. Now he’s returning, and he’s heard that his brother is coming to meet him along with 400 men! What should he do? Jacob sent a large present ahead to try to pacify his brother. Here is a story that teaches peacemaking. God’s people need to be peacemakers.

There was a proverb circulating around Israel, which was later incorporated into the Proverbs: “The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop contention before a quarrel starts” (Prov. 17:14). Once water is released, there is no putting it back. So it is when we get into a quarrel. Things can happen that were unanticipated.

Rather than try to seek mutual agreement, the man in our hypothetical case got hotheaded and violently struck his opponent, causing serious injury. Remember, “Whosoever *hateth* his brother is a murderer.”<sup>8</sup> What this means is that hating your brother is the *root* of murder, a violation of the sixth commandment.

There is a lot of hatred in our world today. Christ came to bring peace on earth, goodwill among men. He teaches us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. But men are naturally hateful and want to destroy their enemies. The only thing that keeps us from actually carrying that out is the fear of punishment—punishment in the here-and-now at the hands of civil magistrates, or punishment hereafter at the hands of Almighty God. Hateful men want to *kill* their enemies. They dehumanize them and consider them sub-human—human trash, unworthy of protection, worthy only of destruction. One constantly hears this kind of talk in political speech today. The man in our text murdered his enemy in his *heart*, but God in mercy prevented him from carrying out that desire. His victim did not go to his grave, but to his sickbed. God’s law says that the inflictor of violence is responsible to financially support his victim and provide for his healing, which he should gladly do, rather than face greater judgment at the hands of his Creator. He should take responsibility for his actions.

The second case concerns violence toward an indentured servant. If an Israelite became bankrupt, unable to pay his bills, a fellow Israelite, needing laborers, could “buy” him—that is, pay off his indebtedness and take him into his own family, supply room, board and clothing, and use him in his family business for up to six years, teaching him business skills and life skills, and at the end of that time sending him away with a large financial bonus, enabling him to start a business of his own and become a success in the world.<sup>9</sup> The point is that the master has a large financial stake in the servant.

But what if things go bad? What if relations between the master and the servant disintegrate to the point where the servant is no longer an asset but a liability, where he no longer obeys his master but is belligerent, constantly arguing and challenging authority? Consider with me verses 20–21: “If a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be

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<sup>8</sup> 1 John 3:15

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 15:13–14

punished; for he is his property.” The word “property” is literally *silver*, that is, his money.

The master has a natural incentive to treat his servant well, so that he gets the best work out of him. But in this particular instance an argument between master and servant comes to blows. Reasoning hasn’t worked, threats haven’t worked, punishments haven’t worked. The master approaches his servant, rod in hand, to discipline him, but the servant refuses to listen. The master strikes the servant harder than he should and kills him. If the servant dies, then the master loses his investment. The law requires that the master “shall surely be punished.” If it is determined that he killed him intentionally, he would forfeit his own life.

Look down at verses 26–27: “If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.” If a master destroys his servant’s eye or tooth, he would essentially lose his total investment in the man.

In the present case, since the slave did not die immediately as a result of this act of using the rod, but remained alive a day or two, the master would be judged to have struck his slave with disciplinary and not homicidal intentions. One writer observes: “This law is unprecedented in the ancient world where a master could treat his slave as he pleased.”<sup>10</sup> The Bible constantly holds forth the value of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God. Humans that live around us have value in God’s sight, and the Christian at all times is to love his neighbor as an expression of his love for Christ. In Jesus’s words, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Now let’s look at

## **2. How it points to Christ**

Our text speaks first of an argument where a man “strikes” his opponent with a stone or with his fist, and secondly of a man “beating” his male or female servant with a rod. In the original Hebrew the words for “strikes” and “beats” are the same. In the KJV both are translated “smite.”

But consider this. Isaiah 50:6 says prophetically concerning Christ, “I gave my back to the *smiters*,<sup>11</sup> and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting” (KJV). The dictionary defines *smite* as “to strike sharply or heavily, especially with the hand or an implement held in the hand.” Here is Jesus saying that he gave his back to the smiters. What is this saying?

In the gospel of Matthew, 27:26, we read of Pilate, “Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had *scourged* Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.” The word for scourge means to *flog*. To flog is to beat with a rod or whip. In ancient

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<sup>10</sup> Expositor's Bible Commentary

<sup>11</sup> Another form of the same root, נָכַח

times flogging was a punishment inflicted on slaves after a sentence of death had been pronounced on them.<sup>12</sup> This is what happened in the case of Jesus. The Jews had called for his crucifixion. Pilate protested: “Why? What evil has he done?” But the Jews wouldn’t settle for anything but crucifixion, and finally Pilate capitulated. He pronounced the sentence of death on the sinless Son of God! As Peter would preach on the Day of Pentecost, “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). And so we read the prophecy, “I gave my back to the smiters.” The Lord Jesus did this voluntarily, going to the cross, taking our sins upon him, dying in our place, so that we who look to him in faith could live.

Utterly amazing! The Son of God, who possesses all power and authority in heaven and in earth, voluntarily gave his back to the *smiters*! He did not resist it. *We* were the ones who smote him without cause. He could have taken the easy way out. He could have run off. He could have called for the angels of heaven to come and protect him. But he did not do that. Why not? Because he was on a divine mission agreed to by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit before the foundation of the world. He came to give eternal life to as many as the Father had given him—that is, his elect (John 17:2).

Here is where we, who are saved by faith in Christ, fit into the story. When we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly. He came to die for sinners, not for the righteous. He did not save us because we deserved it. He came out of sheer love.

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.” But we were *not* friends! We were enemies. We hated him. He did not have to suffer and die. But he chose that course, because there was no other way to save unworthy sinners.

Jesus did not come to save those that were nice to him. He came to save those who smote him. This is something that my late great-grandfather, Rabbi Max Wertheimer, discovered. After losing his first wife to illness after just a few years of marriage, he was plunged into depression. He resigned his office. He studied various false religions. Nothing satisfied the ache in his heart. Finally, he examined the claims of Christ. He began to look for the evidence for Christ in the Hebrew Old Testament. In Isaiah 50:6 he found the words, “I gave my back to the smiters.” He wrote: “I pondered that: Who gave his back to the *smiters*? In the beginning of the chapter it says, ‘Thus saith Jehovah.’ Jehovah is the only speaker in the chapter. Jehovah gave His back to the smiters? Had God a back? When and why was it smitten? Who smote it? Further I read: ‘Who gave his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair.’ And still further: ‘I hid not my face from shame and spitting.’ What

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<sup>12</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, φραγελλῶ (Logos Bible Software)

did all this mean? Who had been so abused? When? Why? Did Jehovah have all these human characteristics?”<sup>13</sup>

In the providence of God my great-grandfather’s study of the Scriptures led him to Christ—something for which I will be eternally grateful!

Consider our New Testament text: “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:20–24).

The Lord Jesus, the eternal Son, left the glories of heaven to suffer and die in our place. When he was reviled—subjected to verbal abuse—he did not revile in return. When he was flogged mercilessly by Roman soldiers, he did not threaten or cry out. He bore our sins in his own body on a cruel Roman cross, so that we might live. He did this out of love, that he might bring us to heaven.

Dear child of God, give your life to him in return. As you endure the indignities of this life, do it manfully, for the sake of him who loved you. God wants you, as his follower, to take responsibility for your actions. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> “How a Rabbi Found Peace,” <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/rabbi> accessed 3-19-25