

Generous Justice

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[0 : 0 0] Well, my children went to nursery school in Edinburgh a few years ago now, and when they were there, there were certain rules that they had to follow, and these rules were called the golden rules, fairly standard, I think, in nursery school, primary school, to have golden rules, and the point of the golden rules is to encourage positive behaviour, and so my children in particular had to remember to be a good listener, to use nursery voice and say kind words, to have kind hands and kind feet, to walk when they were indoors, to look after the nursery toys and books, and to help keep the nursery tidy. Six golden rules that if all the children followed those rules every day in the nursery, then the nursery would be a great environment, and children would grow and develop, and that was the aim. Anyway, golden rules were there for a purpose, and I guess you could say to the parents of the nursery children when they turn up on day one, love your neighbour. It's all you need to do when you turn up at nursery is love your neighbour, which is good, it's a good command, but what does that actually mean? What does it look like in practice? How is it to be worked out in the context of a nursery situation? Well, there's a sense in which the nursery golden rules flesh out what love thy neighbour looks like. They're almost like an exposition of the command to love your neighbour. And so when we come to lengthy chunks of the Bible, scripture passages like Exodus chapter 21 to 23, and we read a massive list of rules, and David only read a section of them, and there are lots of different kinds of rules, and lots of these seem completely random and irrelevant to our lives today, then what are we to make of them? Well, as we see why God gave these rules in the first place, then we'll understand how this text applies to us today.

And so what we've got in Exodus chapters 21 to 23 is what is later referred to as the book of the covenant. So in Exodus chapter 24 verse 7, it speaks of the book of the covenant and the words of it being read. And so it's thought that this is the book of the covenant, chapter 21 to 23. And of course, it follows on alongside and after the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20. And so this material, the Ten Commandments, the book of the covenant, Exodus chapter 20 to 23 and 24, is essentially the covenant obligations that God gives to Israel. This is what Israel is supposed to do. This is how they are supposed to live. It's what God demands of his people. Sometimes it's called the Mosaic Covenant. And so the point here is that God is teaching his people how to live their lives in covenant relationship with him. If the people are to be blessed in their relationship with God, then it will be as they obey all of these rules that God gives to them. And as we read them, we see that there is a vertical dimension to them and how the people relate to God. And there's also a horizontal dimension to them because they're about how the people relate to each other and how they relate to each other in the world around them. And so what we're looking at here could be described in these chapters as a fleshing out of the Ten Commandments, where the book of the covenant applies the Ten

Commandments to various situations in life. And here's where it applies to us, because if we have been saved by grace like the Israelites had, then obedience to God's rules is how we're to live life in this world. Not to be saved or to earn God's favor, but because God has already saved us and then shown us how we're to live. And so he gives these rules so that we know how we are to live in relationship with him and with others. And so let's look at this passage under three headings this afternoon.

First of all, what God gives. Second, why he gives them. And then third, how to obey. What God gives, his covenant obligations. Why he gives them, gives them for the living of life and how we are to obey by loving God and loving our neighbor. So first of all, what God gives, his covenant obligations.

The first verse, chapter 21, says this, and God says it, these are the laws you are to set before them. Speaking to Moses about what to tell the people. So God gave the Ten Commandments, and

now he gives the laws and rules, which essentially apply the Ten Commandments to different situations in life. And so we get cases of what the principles of the Ten Commandments look like in practice. And so God had already said to his people back in Exodus chapter 19 that you are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So then he tells them, well, here's what that's going to look like in practice. Here is how that will be fleshed out in your lives. And so these laws describe concrete situations. And because they were spoken away back then, they apply particularly to life back then. And that's why they were given in this particular social context, because that's the context that people of Israel lived in. But you notice that it's not an exhaustive list of rules.

[5 : 41] It doesn't cover every single thing. It's not exhaustive. So every situation that the Israelites would find themselves in, it's not as if there was a rule that applied to all of those situations.

So what we've got here is a representative section of what living as God's holy people would look like. And so while not for every eventuality, not every practice is mentioned here, but what is clear is that there are principles that are always going to apply to life, whether then or now. Because a lot of what is said here is quite irrelevant for life these days. I'm guessing that you have never given a much thought as to how you should treat your slaves. I mean, I hope not. And I'm guessing that you have never really worried too much about what to do if your bull gores someone to death.

These aren't really modern day problems. Perhaps they are for some, but not really for us in Glasgow this century. And so as we look at this passage, what we need to remember is that there are principles that always apply, even if specific practice doesn't. And so let's quickly look through these rules, these laws, and highlight some of the principles along the way. So chapter 21, verse 1 to 11, David read it. It's laws about slaves. So how they should be treated, when they should go free, what happens when they have family, and so on. Lots of rules about slaves.

And essentially, it's clear that there was a concern about the dignity of human life. Then chapter 21, verse 12 to 27, there's lots of laws about behavior. So they speak to humans, injuring other humans, about killing, attacking, kidnapping, and cursing your parents, and all of the things that require the death penalty. And other offenses are mentioned, like beating somebody up, fighting, injuring a pregnant woman, destroying someone's eye, knocking out their tooth, and so on and so on. And essentially, the principle is that when these things happen, justice has to be done. And then there are laws about animals, chapter 21, verse 28 to 36.

So having started with rules about what to do with humans against other humans, the laws then relate to animals against humans, and then humans against animals, and then animals against animals.

[8 : 19] And guidance is given, essentially, to ensure that justice is done in every situation. And then there are laws about property, into chapter 22, verse 1 to 15. And so when it comes to property, the principle here is restitution, that is compensation or payback. And so the law addresses theft. It addresses carelessness, leading to property damage. It addresses the safekeeping of property by somebody else. And so justice was important, and had to be satisfied between different people. Because in Israelite society, the crime was always relational, because they were one people, God's people. And so whenever somebody did something wrong in somebody else, the whole society, the whole community, suffered. There were rulings on complex cases. So just for example, chapter 22, verse 14 and 15, we read, if anyone borrows an animal from their neighbor, and it is injured or dies, while the owner is not present, they must make restitution. But if the owner is with the animal, the borrower will not have to pay.

If the animal was hired, the money paid for the hire covers the loss. Again, it's saying, if something goes wrong, if something isn't right, then it needs to be put right, and justice needs to be done so all parties are satisfied. And then there are laws about social justice. Chapter 22, verse 16 through to 23, verse 9. So there's laws for sexual abuse. There's the death penalty for having sex with animals. The death penalty for offering sacrifices to other gods, and for mistreating foreigners. And so God is saying to his people that they are to be just and generous in their dealings with one another and with everyone. And so when it came to widows and orphans, when it came to lending money to the needy, or giving away the resources that God had given to them, God's people had to reflect him by showing compassion to those around them. Because when people cry out to God, God says, chapter 22, verse 27, I will hear, for I am compassionate. And so God's people were not to behave like the other nations around them and how they treated people. And so God said, chapter 23, verse 2, do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. So his people were not to pervert justice or show favoritism. They had to care for all those in society, even those who were on the

outside. Well, why? God says so in chapter 23, verse 9. He says, do not oppress a foreigner. You yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt. Can you see he's calling his people to deal justly and lovingly and compassionately with everybody they encountered? And that was countercultural back then. But I think you find that as we read this, it is still countercultural today, isn't it? Because we live in a culture that promotes really the opposite of everything that's said here. And even if it's legislated for in a court of law, still in our hearts and in our behavior, we tend to go in the opposite direction. Because it's generally selfishness and self-promotion instead of self-giving. It's deceit or disinterest instead of devotion. It's injury or injustice instead of helping. And so God's people are to display this generous kind of justice in all of their dealings with other people. And then finally, there's laws about worship. And this is into chapter 23, verse 10 to 19. So there were special instructions for keeping the Sabbath. No other gods were to be worshipped and they were to keep the festivals that God had appointed. And so how does all this apply? Well, essentially, all of life had to be lived in the light of the Israelites' identity as God's holy people. God said to them, chapter 22, verse 31, you are to be my holy people. A phrase that's right in the middle of these chapters that if you blink, you can miss it. You are to be my holy people. Because God is saying being in a covenant relationship with me means that you ought to live a certain kind of way. And so the Ten Commandments gave the foundational principles for that life. And then here in the book of the covenant, it outlines what that life means and what it looks like in practice. So that God's people were in no doubt about what God required of them spiritually and socially. Because God always causes people to live in his world in a certain way. And so whether then or now, the principle of living as God's holy people remains the same. Even if some of this doesn't apply directly to us, living as God's holy people does. And so when God speaks, then we are to listen and we are to obey so that God's rules shape our lives, whether it's our spiritual worship of God or whether it's our social engagement and social responsibility towards others.

God tells us what we ought to do. And so let's consider this further. That's the first thing. What God gives, He gives His covenant obligations. Secondly, why does He give them? He gives them for living life.

And so obedience to all of these laws laid out, chapters 21 to 23 in Exodus, was how God required the Israelites to live out their covenant relationship with Him. So these rules set a pattern for holy living in all the different circumstances of life. And so God had saved them by His grace.

[14 : 44] He'd freed them from their slavery in Egypt. And now He's showing them how to live as free people. How to live as people who are no longer enslaved. And this way of living will mean that as they're obedient to what God says, then they will enjoy the blessing of God in their life with Him.

But God didn't just save them and then demand their obedience and then leave them to get on with it. No, God wanted a permanent relationship with them. And so He promised to be with them and to lead them forward into the future. And we see this at the end of chapter 23. So let me read chapter 23, verse 20 to 23.

See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him. He will not forgive your rebellion since my name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Ammonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. So what's God saying? Well, God's saying that he would be an enemy to the enemies of his people if they obeyed him. And as God's people worship God alone, then they would know his blessing. And then they would come to possess the land that God had promised to them. And so God demanded obedience from his people in the present, not simply because of what he had done for them in the past, but because of what he was leading them onto and into in the future. And so their obedience to God was an indication of their commitment to the covenant. It was how they'd enjoy this ongoing relationship with God and the blessings that flow from it. And it makes sense when you think about it.

So just let me take marriage as an example to try and illustrate this, since marriage is also a covenant relationship. If you want a happy and long-lasting marriage, then obviously there are things, certain things that you should do and certain things that you shouldn't do, like you shouldn't commit adultery.

That's the principle. But of course the principle is helped if it's fleshed out in practice. And so, well, you shouldn't even get too close to or too familiar with somebody of the opposite sex.

[17 : 33] There are boundaries that you must not cross. There are rules you must not break if you want your marriage to last. And of course a marriage is not all about rules. It is a loving relationship.

But what makes the loving relationship work is the certain rules that there are that are there, not to be a hindrance, but to help the full flourishing of a healthy marriage. And so when God tells his people to obey his laws, it is for his people's benefit, for his people's blessing, for a healthy relationship with him. And that's why obedience to the book of the covenant by the Israelites was evidence of their faithfulness to God. In this covenant relationship, they proved to God their faith in him and their faithfulness to him by doing what he said.

And of course, this applied to God's particular people in a particular place at a particular time. And we understand God's covenant better now that Jesus Christ has come. But God's covenant has always been a covenant of grace. It is not salvation by works where God accepts us if we obey. God's people obey because they've already been accepted. Where obedience is the appropriate necessary expression of our love for God. And that's why we shouldn't get so bogged down in the specific practices here that we miss the underlying pattern of obedience to God. Obedience to God is a response to his grace towards us, whether for the Israelites back then or for followers of Jesus today.

We obey what God says, not to earn our salvation, because it's his people, it's already ours, but to live out that salvation daily in our lives. And that's why obedience encompasses all of life and how we relate to God and in how we relate to others. Because for Israel, there was never any kind of privatized religion where you just keep your faith to yourself. No, it was always public. And for Israel, there was never any divide between the sacred and the secular. So, well, it's only just about how you worship God. It doesn't really matter about how you live in the world. No, their covenant with God impacted all of life. That's why we get all of these specific rules. It wasn't just confined to the vertical relationship with him. It impacted the horizontal relationships with those around them. And it's the same with us. If we want to live in faithfulness to God, if we want to live out the relationship that we have with God, that he's given us in Jesus Christ, then it's going to impact everything to do with our lives. So, what goes on in our home with our family will be impacted.

[20 : 46] How we treat our colleagues at work. What God says will impact that. The way we respond to injustice in the world. How we spend our time. What we do with our property and our possessions and everything else. What God says is to impact all of life. In his commentary on Exodus, Alec Mateer tells the story of Lord Melbourne, who was Queen Victoria's first Prime Minister. And when Lord Melbourne went to church one day and he heard a sermon, he's reported to have said, these things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of private life. He was complaining about the sermon that was said, saying it's a bit too much, expecting people to live for God outside of church on a Sunday.

And apparently, Lord Melbourne was a well-intentioned, nice religious man who did go to church every Sunday. But he didn't want that kind of religion to spill out into everyday life. A wee bit of religion on Sunday was enough. And yet, that is not the kind of life that God is asking for his people, is it? Not here in Exodus or in the rest of the Bible. Because living a life of obedience to God isn't just about showing up to church on a Sunday, though that is a good thing to do. But living a life of obedience to God is worked out in our behavior every day of the week, in every moment, and in every situation.

And so there's no point singing your head off at church on a Sunday if you're going to bad-mouth people all through the week. And there's no point being all spiritual around other Christians if you can't lift a finger to help your neighbor. And so can you see how a relationship with God ought to impact every sphere of our existence? And that's the second point, why God gives them. It's for living life. So what God gives, why God gives them, and then thirdly, how to obey loving God and loving our neighbor. Okay, so just to recap, throughout Exodus chapters 20 to 24, God outlines his covenant obligations in the Ten Commandments, Exodus chapter 20, and then in the book of the covenant, chapter 21 to 23, and obedience is how Israel would enjoy a relationship of blessing with God. And so for us today,

God requires obedience, not because it's how we enter into a relationship with him or attempt to earn his favor, but God requires obedience because that's how we enjoy a relationship with him, a relationship of blessing. And so how are we to obey? Well, it's not by trying to figure out which

particular laws here apply in the book of the covenant and which laws don't. And that's not to say they don't matter.

Everything God says matters and has a purpose. But it's to grasp that God is not after simple obedience to rules. God is after a relationship. And these rules point us to the gracious and loving God who welcomes us into a relationship with himself. And what he requires is that we relate to him as we should and relate to others as we should. And Jesus summarized this as loving God and loving our neighbor. When an expert of the law tested Jesus by asking, teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the law? Jesus replied, love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Jesus said that loving God and loving your neighbor summarizes the very essence of the law. And so the Ten Commandments and all of these other laws that flow from them, as well as everything else in the New Testament, Jesus says is summed up as love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. That's what God requires of his people.

[25 : 27] And so God is not telling us to do more stuff for him. He's not saying be more religious, be more moral, be more ethical, and if you're good enough then you can enter into a relationship with me. His desire is that we love him. And so the question is, do you love him? Do you love the God of the Bible, the God who has revealed himself to us perfectly in his Son, Jesus Christ? Do you love him? Because if we truly love him, then obeying him will be a delight. It will never be a duty. And Jesus wants us to love our neighbor.

Do you love your neighbor? That is anyone who comes across your path on any given day of the week. You see, what God requires of us is extremely challenging, isn't it? Which of us would dare to claim to have loved God 100%? 100% of our lives? No one. And which of us would claim to have loved our neighbor or other people 100% for 100% of our lives? Nobody. We can't. It doesn't come naturally.

It doesn't even happen if we try very hard. It's impossible for us to obey. We can never do enough, whether religiously or ethically or morally, to fully love God and love other people.

Which means that we have broken God's law. Which means we have failed to keep his rules, his commandments. And like any kind of law-breaking, there are consequences for breaking it.

And yet the good news of Christianity is that Jesus came to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. Because Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God. So Jesus fulfilled all the law's requirements. Jesus is the only one who fully loved God and who fully loved his neighbor. Which means Jesus fully loves you and me too, because we're his neighbor. And he loves us because Jesus not only satisfied the demands of the law for us by keeping them perfectly, but Jesus on the cross also satisfied the curse of the law for us. In other words, Jesus died as the punishment for our law-breaking, for our sin, for our failure to keep God's commands. And so Jesus, by his perfect obedience and by the sacrifice of himself, has done what we could never do. And so all that God requires of us now is faith in Jesus. So have you put your faith in Jesus Christ? Do you look to him as your Savior and as your Lord? There's no other way to get to God. Living a good life, keeping lots of religious rules, being moral, being ethical, being nice, will never make it. Only faith in Jesus, the one who fulfilled the law for us because we never could, and the one who was condemned for our law-breaking in our place. If you don't have faith in Jesus, then will you put your faith in Jesus? Because when you boil it right down, that is all that matters in this life, there is absolutely nothing that is more important. And it's only when we see how Jesus obeyed for us and how he was sacrificed for us and we put our faith in him, only then can we be accepted by God. And so obedience to God's law was never meant to be the way to enter into a relationship with him. But then when we have that relationship with him, obedience is how that relationship flourishes. And then through the help of the Holy Spirit, our desires change. And so our greatest desires become to love God and to love our neighbor. And so how are we going to do that in this coming week?