

Sermon 84, How to Be God's People: Introduction to the Book of the Covenant, Exodus 20:22-23:33

Proposition: The Book of the Covenant reveals the righteousness of God by shaping His people toward justice and piety.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are about to move into what many Christians consider to be the worst, or second-worst, part of the Pentateuch. It's a whole bunch of laws and regulations, elaborate cases ("When so-and-so does such-and-such..."), and cryptic pronouncements ("You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk"). What possible value could there be in such a miscellaneous listing of stuff? The answer is that these things reveal the character of the living God. Do you want to know God? Then pay attention to what He revealed in the Book of the Covenant, this short section after the Ten Commandments to which Israel had to assent in order to be in covenant with God. These laws are not all applicable in the same way; I agree with the ancient tradition of the church, as crystallized in Thomas Aquinas, that some of these precepts are moral, some civil, and some ceremonial. The civil and ceremonial laws are not

directly applicable to us; they were for Israel during its residence in the land. Nonetheless, they are important. They are worth preaching through because we look behind them and say “What sort of a God would make this sort of a law? What is our God like?” What we’ll see, as we try to get an overview of the Book of the Covenant today, is that He is a God of justice. The civil and moral laws orbit around this theme of justice, as exemplified in the “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” precept that we find in this section of Scripture. The ceremonial laws orbit the theme of piety — the reverence and worship due to God. God is about justice, and His covenant people need to be about justice and about worship too. That’s the lesson of this “Book of the Covenant”.

I. The Structure of the Book of the Covenant

The first thing to look at when we try to wrap our minds around this book of the covenant is its structure. It is written in a mirror pattern, called a “chiasm.” This mirror pattern is not perfect, but the passage clearly starts and ends with the same topic: the Mediator and no other gods — moral precepts that define what it is to be in covenant with the LORD. The book centers on the experience of being a stranger, though, with its twice-repeated command not to mistreat or oppress a stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. In other words, the outer frame of this discourse on justice and piety is based on the command to love God; the inner frame is based on the command to love your neighbor. Piety is love for God; justice is love for neighbor.

Suddenly, as soon as we understand the structure, the book of the covenant no longer looks like a bunch of random precepts that may or may not have anything to do with us. Instead, we see that it is a carefully worked-out meditation on the meaning of being in covenant with God. Being in covenant with God affects your whole life, from how you graze your stock to how you handle the immigrant next door to when you take your holidays. And it all starts and ends with the Mediator who puts you in touch with the one God.

By the way, we know that this passage is “the book of the covenant” from ch. 24, where Moses reads it to people and announces that it is the book of the covenant. The people then ratify it. So that’s where I’m getting this delineation of the passage.

A. Outer Frame: The Mediator & No Other Gods, 20:18-26

We saw the role of the Mediator in the passage we looked at together last Sunday, which describes the people’s response to the proclamation of the Ten Commandments. They wanted to stand back; they demanded a Mediator. God’s response was to provide Moses for them, and then to outline how any Israelite could come into His presence with the simplest of altars — nothing more than a pile of dirt, surrounded with field stones. No need for elaborate carvings and attempts to impress your neighbors.

Now, that is a pretty cool passage, as we saw last week. God provides a Mediator who allows His people to draw near in worship. But what gets even cooler is to see that the book of the covenant ends with the same topics in the same order. We’ll get there in a minute.

B. The Judgments, 21:1-22:20

Well, after the introduction that speaks of love for God, of fear and piety and altars, we move directly to a section headed “the judgements.” These are rulings made by a judge, *mishpatim*

made by a *shaphat*. Various English versions have “ordinances,” “decisions,” “laws,” “judgements,” “regulations,” and “case laws” as translations. How are we to understand these? The majority of them present a detailed scenario in a “if” clause, with the decision to be made and/or the penalty to be inflicted in the “then” clause. One thing to note is the personal touch — many of them are formulated in the second person, rather than third person like other ANE law codes and law codes today. Thus, look at this very first law: “If you buy a Hebrew slave.” The judgment is addressed to “you,” to the Israelite who is in covenant with the Almighty. The judgment is not addressed to the impersonal “John Doe”. It’s addressed to you. God is talking to you in His judgments.

The other thing to realize is that these are not the Ten Commandments, which simply present moral principles, full stop. These are worked examples for specific situations, in which the high-level moral precepts are brought down into the nitty-gritty of less-than-perfect scenarios. When several things have gone wrong, when we are deep in the soup, when “love your neighbor as yourself” seems impossible to figure out, God has given us these examples to help us learn to think about moral questions. We will spend some time looking at these over the next few weeks. But notice that they deal with the mishaps and sins of daily life: fire breaks out in the field. Somebody gets mad and strikes his neighbor. And so on. God is telling us what it looks like to love our neighbor in these scenarios.

Were these actual cases compiled from the judgments of Israelites? Probably not. Rather, they seem to be fictional examples made up by God Himself as a way of communicating with us what His requirements are. Did judges use these to make decisions? We simply do not know. The Bible never records an example of a judge or king going to this law code and making a decision based on it. But it does tell us about wicked kings who violated various provisions — e.g., Ahab stealing Naboth’s vineyard.

C. Inner Frame: Do Not Mistreat or Oppress a Stranger, 22:21-23:9

Well, the inner frame of the book of the covenant begins and ends with the same verse — an exhortation not to mistreat a stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. In between these two exhortations come statements about justice towards widows, orphans, and the poor, and piety toward God. Just as you are not allowed to mistreat a stranger, so you are not allowed to mistreat the animal of a man who hates you. Justice and piety, toward God and toward man, is at the center of this frame. And it’s personal, because it is addressed to you and based on your suffering.

Scholars point to the 18th century as the dawn of the idea of the morality of sentiment, that feelings could tell you what’s right and wrong. That’s true so far as it goes. But here, in the Bronze Age, God reminds His people of their own neediness, their own past. You were a stranger. Remember that. When you are doing something to someone else, evaluate that action based on how you would want to be treated if you were in the other person’s place. The morality of sentiment has such major limitations as to be almost worthless, but the morality of the golden rule is analogous to it in some ways — and is quite obviously present here. How would you want to be treated by the Egyptians when you were sojourning there? That’s how you should treat the

immigrant, the person who is in your country and not the country of his birth. Again, justice and piety are both present in this section as God tells His people how they ought to live.

D. Days of Worship, 23:10-19

God then transitions to the second-to-last section, in which He talks about days of worship. The calendar is organized around the works of God, from the weekly cycle of creation to the yearly cycle of feasts of redemption. How you eat, how you celebrate, how you work, all needs to be based on God's work of creation and His work of redemption. And the final verse, by speaking of bringing the firstfruits into the house of God, transitions seamlessly to the final section, on the worship of God. How can you come into God's presence at His house?

E. Outer Frame: The Mediator & No Other Gods, 23:20-33

Oh right: through the Mediator, the Angel of Yahweh who carries Yahweh's name in Him. Again, the text speaks of the Mediator, though now it is not Moses but the mighty Angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ. God moves straight from introducing the Mediator to sounding the theme of having no other gods once more, with a reminder that Israel will inherit the land through His good gift. The book of the covenant ends as it began, with a reminder of piety toward God through the Mediator.

The structure is rich with meaning, folks. We see the righteous character of our God, who demands justice toward one another and piety toward Himself.

II. The Meaning of the Book of the Covenant

So what does this book mean? Why is it worth preaching on to New Testament Christians? Because it shows us what our God is like. He is righteous. He demands justice from us towards one another, and piety towards Him. The Ten Commandments tell us what our God is like; the book of the covenant continues to tell us what God is like. Of course, we already know that Exodus is the book of the knowledge of God. It's all about who Yahweh is, from the beginning where Pharaoh says "I don't know Yahweh" to the end, where Yahweh comes to dwell permanently with His people. The book of the covenant is another encyclopedia article that reveals the justice of God.

A. The Primary Meaning Is to Reveal God's Justice

1. God Provides a Mediator

Thus, for instance, God has made us for Himself. He made us to come into His presence, to draw near, to know Him. But in His justice, He provides a way for us to do that. No one can see God and live, so He shows only His back to Moses. No one can hear the voice of God and bear it, so Moses goes into His presence. No one can come into the Holy of Holies without dying, except through the sacrificial blood and rituals of the Day of Atonement. Again, all of this is driven by the justice of God. He is not one to make us, then cut us off from Himself. He makes us, and when we cut ourselves off through sin, He provides a Mediator through whom we can hear Him and meet with Him.

2. God Makes and Keeps Covenant

The other thing this book of the covenant reveals is that God makes covenants and keeps them. That should be rather obvious, but it's worth pointing out because we can get so hung up on the

details (“How many years does the slave serve?”) that we forget the overall point: God is going to keep His promise, entering into relationship with His people and delivering them from sin and to the promised land of Heaven.

In other words, not only does His justice apply to everyday things, like disputes over whose animal gets to graze where, but also to cosmic things, like who is allowed to come into His presence and dwell in His house forever. He keeps His word; He does what He says. That is a huge part of the meaning of the covenant. God has bound Himself to us with an oath, and He will never break that oath. He is too just to do so. He will never bear false witness or tell us to trust in something that He’s going to back out of.

B. Being in Covenant with God Orients Your Whole Life toward Justice

The covenant code makes it abundantly clear that no matter what area of life you’re dealing with, justice has to be a major consideration. Life is not about swinging things to your advantage in every deal, in every conversation, in every event. Rather, from celebrating holidays to loaning your property out or storing someone else’s property, God’s word applies to you. The claims of justice are not to be discounted or ignored.

1. Domestic Servants

Thus, the law code deals with domestic servants, both male and female — debt slaves and slave concubines and more. It tells us that God cares how we treat these people. The fact that they are enslaved does not put them outside the law; they are still protected by God’s code for His people.

2. Law Codes

Civil law in general is also not outside the purview of right and wrong. Legislators and judges can’t just make up whatever they want; they are responsible to God for their decisions.

3. Animals and Grazing

The same goes for where, when, and how you keep your pets and livestock. The way you graze your animals is subject to the law of God.

4. Loaning Property

So is how you make loans. When you have someone storing your property, or you store their property, that is not an opportunity for you to enrich yourself. That is an opportunity for justice.

5. Dealing with Immigrants

Same goes for dealing with immigrants. The Mexican next door — you’re not allowed to just think what you want to think, feel what you want to feel, hold the grudges or form the conclusions you want to form. How you interact with immigrants is subject to the law of the Lord.

6. Holidays

And that even goes for holidays. It matters to God how you celebrate the holidays of your culture. There is an ungodly way to celebrate Halloween, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and all the rest of them. Don’t do it.

C. Being in Covenant with God Starts and Ends with Worship/Piety

But not only does the book of the covenant address the requirements of justice, it also speaks to the demands of piety.

1. Keeping God's Holy Day

The book of the covenant speaks to the Sabbath. On pause day, what do you do? You perform the duties of piety. You keep your walk with God alive through the Sabbath.

2. Hearing God's Word

The whole passage is all words of God to His people. Though God doesn't say "Listen to these," the point is that His people need to listen to them. He's speaking; pay attention. This is one of the chief duties of piety — to listen!

3. Sacrificing to God

And finally, the passage is framed by commands to sacrifice to God. Offering Him expensive things, putting your life on the line and your wallet on the line for Him — this too is a key duty of piety that the book of the covenant highlights.

So know that God is a righteous God, and our response to that needs to be justice and piety. We can do it, because the Mediator has brought the Father near to us. In Christ, we can be pious. We can be just. And we can do it out of love for God and neighbor. Amen.