

Exodus 21-23  
God shapes his people

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Just a few weeks ago Keren, Hudson, and I had the privilege of going over to the house of a family in our church. It was our first time getting to know them and we had a really great time. They told us about their home and how long they lived there. I got the story on a few of the deer hanging on the wall. They had three young girls who were running around and were absolutely precious and adorable. We sat down to eat in the dining room and ate delicious hamburgers. They told us about how much they loved their life group. The wife told us about how she had recently had the chance to pray with someone at work. As a pastor that was music to my ears. Then I looked up and I saw this: **PICTURE**. There in their dining room they had their last name written, and a value or characteristic next to every one of the letters. Do you remember when we were going through Ephesians and were encouraged as a church family to do that? They took it to heart. And as I looked at this sign and read it, I thought, how blessed are these three little girls to get to grow up in a home like this. Certainly, their parents aren't perfect, but this is the vision set before the family. Every day when the girls walk by this sign, what are they reminded of? You are a Stevens! This is who we are. This is what we do. As a family, this is what we are about.

That's what God is doing for the people of Israel in the book of Exodus. For 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. So they lived on the Egyptian calendar, worshipped Egyptian gods, and embraced Egyptian culture. Like most people, they were shaped into the image of the culture they were a part of. But they have been redeemed; they've been set free. And in chapter 19 God established a new covenant with them and brought them into his family. God said, "I want to be your God, I want you to be my people, my treasured possession. I want you to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." And the people said, "Yes, that's what we want, too! We don't want to live like we used to live, we don't want to live like the Egyptians. God, we want to honor you, and we want you to teach us how to live!" So God begins to instruct his people. In chapter 20 God gave them the Ten Commandments. With the first four commandments, he taught them how to honor him (Have no gods before me. Don't take my name in vain). With the last six commandments he taught them how to honor others (Honor your parents. Honor your neighbor's life, spouse, their possessions.) Those were the ten big things God's people needed to know.

In that respect, the Ten Commandments function like **the Bill of Rights**. For those of you who remember your high school history class, the bill of rights are the first ten amendments to the constitution, they were ratified in 1791 and assured American citizens had the right to worship, the right to free speech, the right to bear arms, the right to possess property. Ten big picture laws. Since 1791 we have added a lot more laws to our land. Today, we have more than 5,000 laws on the books that are criminally enforceable, and those 5,000 laws have about well over 100,000 regulations to them, detailing the different ways they are to be applied. Every year, congress adds more and more to the list. Now clearly 5,000 seems a bit excessive, but it goes to show that sometimes we need more than just the big picture, and overview laws. You need to get down into the weeds and explain how those laws get worked out in real life scenarios. And as we continue reading in Exodus, that's what we are going to see today. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Exodus 21. In chapter 20, God gave his people Ten Commandments. Over the next three chapters, God gives them 42 more regulations, each of which helps them understand, in greater detail, how to honor him and honor others. Though there are a lot of commands, they're not pointless.

I don't know if you saw the news from two weeks ago about **Lee Ann Walker**. She was on the LPGA tour for years. After taking some time off she came back for a tournament here in Indiana. In the short window of time she had taken off from golf, a new rule had been added to the game. She didn't know

about it, and she broke that rule on almost every hole on the course. So after two rounds, she was assessed a whopping 58 penalty strokes. Needless to say she didn't finish in the money. It was all because of a small little technicality she didn't even know about.

That's not what the commands of God are like!! He is not trying to weigh his people down, catch us in a small, little technicality, and yell, "Gotcha!" He's trying to teach us what it means to be a part of his family. **God's commands always flow from God's character.** His commands aren't random, arbitrary, and pointless. They are a reflection of his character. A helpful tool to use anytime you read a command that God has given is **Precept, Principle, Person.** Let me give you an example. God might say: Don't steal. That's the precept. What's the principle behind it? We are not supposed to be people who take from others but who give to others. We are not supposed to be greedy but rather generous. And this is ultimately rooted in the person of God. The Bible says that God is a Father who loves to give children good gifts. Giving is essential to God's nature. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. God is a giver! God is not conspiring how he can get things of value from us but how he can give things of value to us. So, as God's people, as children in his family, God wants us to be like him. We are not looking for ways we can steal from others, but how we can serve others, not ways to defraud people but how we can develop people. When you read the Scriptures, you are not reading random, arbitrary rules. Everything God says flows from his character, helps us become like him, and therefore helps us represent him to the world.

We don't have time to read all three chapters and unpack each of the 42 laws, but we'll look at quite a few of them and see how each of them point to the person of God and flow from his character. For example:

### **God values life**

**21:12 "Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. 13 However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate. 14 But if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death.** There are a lot more explanations like that, which explains what to do if someone is either purposefully or accidentally killed. But the main point behind it all is that your neighbor's life matters. It has worth and value. We are to treat other people's lives as sacred.

### **God values truth**

**23:1 "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness.**

**23:7 Have nothing to do with a false charge.** The Bible says that God is the truth, that his word is the truth, and that he never lies. In him there is no darkness. Because God always speaks the truth, he wants his people to always speak the truth. There is no darkness in him, so he wants there to be no darkness in us.

### **God values justice**

**23:2 "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd.**

**23:3 Do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit**

**23:6 Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.**

God is a just God who always does what is right. And he wants us to be just people who always do what is right. Just because the crowd is doing one thing, yelling and worked into a frenzy, doesn't mean we are supposed to bend to their will. We are supposed to do what's right, even when it's not popular. If you have a poor person who is in a lawsuit against a rich person, you can't side with the poor person just

because they are poor, but you also can't side with the rich person just because they are rich. Do what's right; give justice to everyone.

### **God values mercy**

**22:21 Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.**

**22:22 Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless.”**

**25 If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.**

God said: When you find someone who is vulnerable, a foreigner, a widow, an orphan, someone who is impoverished, you are never, ever to exploit them. You are to lend a helping hand. God is merciful and kind to us when we are vulnerable and in need. That's what we are to do for others. God is teaching his people not only the golden rule: Love your neighbor as yourself, but the rule that is greater than the golden rule: Love your neighbor...as I have loved you.

### **God values worship**

**23:13 Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.**

**23:14 Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.**

**23:19 Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.**

Do you remember the very first commandment? You are to have no gods before me. Don't worship other gods; don't give the allegiance and devotion that rightly belong only to me to others. God is now helping them know how to keep him first...Worship him through the festivals. Festivals were like their way of coming to church, listening to the Scriptures, praising God for his work in their lives. The first fruits were like our tithing. God doesn't want us to spend almost all of what we make and then drop a twenty in at the end of the month as a nod to him. He wants us to take the best that we have, the firstfruits so at the beginning of every week, or every month, and before we spend anything on ourselves we bring our offering to him as an expression of thanks and worship.

Now we could keep on going, but for the sake of time we won't look at all 42 commands. However, I think we are catching the heart behind each of these. Every command flows from the character of God; every precept is rooted in the person of God. God is teaching his people what it means to be a part of his family. And that is such an important distinction to make. *God is not teaching them what they need to do to become a part of his family; he is teaching how to live because they are a part of his family.* This is such an important concept for us to grasp! I like to think of it in regards to three specific words.

**Redemption, Relationship, Righteousness.** Religion tells you that you have to work from the bottom up, that you have to live a righteous life and keep a long list of rules, in order to have a relationship with God, and once you have done enough good things (while avoiding bad things), then you will find redemption, then you'll be saved. That's how religion works. That's not how God works; that's how grace works.

Think about what we have read in the Exodus story. God's people were slaves and did nothing to earn or merit their salvation. God chose to redeem them because of his love for them. After they were redeemed, God invited them into a relationship with him. Once they said yes, then God began to show them how to live a righteous life. When you try to work your way up the ladder, spiritually speaking it is both exhausting and debilitating, and leads to burn out, legalism, pride, self-righteousness. No one looks at the life of someone trying to climb their way up this ladder and says, Wow! Look at the change God has made in their life, I need that in my life, too. No! Transformation is not found in working your way up the ladder, but in working your way down the ladder. When you work your way down the ladder, instead of exhaustion Jesus says you will find rest for your souls. Instead of legalism you will find freedom. Instead of pride you will posture yourself beneath others and become a servant to whomever God places in your life. And self-righteousness will no longer exist, because you'll know that salvation has come not *because*

of your best efforts, but *in spite of* your best efforts. The Bible says we are saved by grace, not by works so that no one can boast.

**A right relationship with God never begins with righteousness, but it always leads to righteousness.** God is telling his people how to live. Last week we talked about how hard that is for people like us to hear. We prioritize autonomy and we don't want to be told what to do and how to live. Do you remember the quote from the Chicken Soup for the Soul author Jack Canfield? **"People today want spirituality without morality. They want transcendence but they don't want to be told how to live."** That may be the sentiment today, but that is not the sentiment of the Bible. You open up this book and God is going to tell us how to live and what to do. But it's not rules for the entire world and it's not rules to earn his favor and blessing. These are God's instructions for his people, and we don't keep his instructions to earn his grace, we keep his instructions because he's already given us grace. Now that we are adopted as sons and daughters, we want to know what it means to be a part of this family.

I was down in Florida a few weeks ago. I did a little bit of snorkeling. I was out about 100 yards, floating, looking for fish. I was out there for about 15-20 minutes. When I came up to the surface and looked back, I was looking for my wife and son—they were a hundred yards away from me. My instinct was to say, "How did you get all the way down there?" But they hadn't moved. I had. The tide pulled me west. That's what our culture does. If we are not grounded in God's word, if we are not focused on his will and his righteousness, we get pulled into the world. And instead of looking more and more like Jesus, we look more and more like the culture around us.

That's why Romans 12:2 tells us: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** That phrase, "**conform to the pattern of this world**" is in reference to taking wax or melted down metal, pouring it into a cast or a mold, and then having the substance take the permanent shape of that cast or mold when it solidifies. Our lives are malleable. They can be shaped and formed. God doesn't want us to be shaped and formed so that we look like the world, but so that we look like him. How are we doing on that though? Most of the nationwide surveys show that statistically speaking, there is almost no difference between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to non-prescription drug use, pornography use, giving to charities, divorce, and remarriage. There's a difference, but it's like 5%, 2%, 7%, not the 50 or 60 percent that you'd expect. Our hearts are malleable, and we will either be shaped into the image of our culture or into the image of Christ. Is our culture trying to pull us a certain direction! Yes, but think about it, only dead fish swim with the stream. We are not dead! We are alive in Christ, and though we are in the world, we are to be different than the world.

How do we become the sort of people who become truly different than the world, who search the Scriptures, discern God's will, and then actually reflect the character of God? I think it comes down to one word: **Humility**. Pride convinces us we are okay just how we are. Pride convinces us that no one has the right to tell me what to do. Humility says I need help. I need wisdom from outside myself. Humility says, "I'm willing to take direction, God, whatever you want me to do is what I want to do."

Humility requires we deal honestly with the condition of our heart. Malcolm Muggeridge has said, **"The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact."** Look around, the fallen condition of our hearts is as obvious as can be, but no one wants to look in the mirror and admit the truth. Teddy Roosevelt has said, **"If you could kick the person responsible for most of your past troubles, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a month."** Humility says we don't deny our desperate condition and we don't blame others for our desperate

condition. We cry out to God, give him control of our lives, and even if he wants to make some very uncomfortable changes, we say, “God, you are in charge, not me. So teach me how to live like you.”

Many of you will remember what happened in our nation on January 28, 1986. Seventeen percent of all TV’s in our nation were turned in to watch **the Challenger Space Shuttle lift off from Kennedy Space Center**. What looked like a successful take-off turned to tragedy when after only 73 seconds into the flight, at 46,000 feet of altitude, **there was an explosion**. The nation watched in horror and disbelief, knowing the lives of all those on board were almost certainly ended. This fear was later confirmed. After a long investigation, experts determined that the cause of the explosion was faulty O-rings, which NASA was warned about. Many of their engineers warned them of the problem, but feeling invisible, they ignored the warnings. Listen to what NASA engineer Allen McDonald said, “NASA fell prey to the oldest and most basic sin: pride. We had become too successful. We had gotten by for a quarter of a century and had never lost a single person. All of this success gives you a little bit of arrogance you shouldn't have.” Do you see how relevant that is to our culture? Do you realize how relevant that is to our individual lives? We’ve had so much success, that even when there were warning signs, even when we have an expert authority speak to us and caution us to make a change, we stubbornly refuse and push forward with our agenda. And the result is oftentimes catastrophic. If we humble ourselves before the Lord and seek his wisdom, seek his righteousness, and let him shape us into His image, we can have a different story.

The Christian message isn’t that we need to try harder. Because we know that even when we try our best we fail again and again. No! We place our hope and our faith in Jesus Christ, the only one who has lived a truly righteous life. We trust his death on the cross for our sins, and we invite him to come into our lives and make us new from the inside out. The Scriptures say that Jesus is our older brother. The Father tells us what it means to be a part of his family, Jesus shows us what it means to be a part of his family. And as we follow him, we slowly but surely, one step at a time, we take on the family likeness.