

Exodus 20:1-21: The Law of God Leader Guide



PLEASE NOTE! – In the coming weeks, Summit Church will be studying Exodus 19-34 during corporate worship and in small groups. While the small groups will study these texts in order, the sermon may not correspond to the precise chapter week by week. However, the themes that pervade both sermon and small group will overlap considerably over the next several weeks. On Sundays and throughout the week, the goal is to grow in our understanding and respond rightly to the Holy God who appeared at Mount Sinai.

Context: As Exodus 20:2 reminds us, the first part of Exodus (1-18) is about God saving the people from Egyptian slavery. After they are freed, God brings them to Mount Sinai where He will establish His covenant with His people. This is the setting for the rest of Exodus (19-40). Exodus 19-24 records the specific stipulations of the Covenant. In chapter 19, God stated His reason for choosing them and His role in bringing about the Covenant. In chapters 20-23, God gives the laws, which are the people's responsibilities in this Covenant. He speaks the Ten Commandments to all the people directly and then gives Moses many more laws in 21-23, when they are on the mountain speaking privately. Chapter 24 records the people's response to this Law, including a ceremony where they agree to follow these stipulations under penalty of death (blood covenant).

Note that the first 4 of the Ten Commandments have to do with Israel's relationship to God. The last 6 concern their relationship to each other. Many rules follow (chapters 21-23) about worship, social justice, and righteous living, but all of them fit neatly into Jesus' summary of the Law: "love God and love your neighbor." Jesus' summary helps us keep perspective on the Law- that its purpose was to communicate truths about, and establish boundaries in, our relationship to Him. God establishes these boundaries so that the people will know God, understand how to please Him, and live in line with His character. The Psalmist called God's law "a delight" (Psalm 119), and for centuries, Jewish/Israelite scholars pointed to their Law as proof that God had, in fact, revealed Himself to Israel. Who else could have come with more beautiful laws or a better set of ethics?

Theme: Though modern Western people have the tendency to think that Law and love are incompatible, the Bible speaks about God's love in a way that combines the two. God shows that He is patient, forgiving, and loving to people "where they are at," but He also loves people too much to leave them in their broken, unrighteous state. In this study, we will discuss the ways that the Law is connected to the Gospel. After all, the Law's main function was to reveal God's character, and as John Piper would say, "the Gospel is ... God!!" Here are 4 ways that Exodus 20 relates to the Gospel:

Gospel Theme #1 Salvation before Law: Verse 2 reminds us that God saves His people first, and then He gives them the Law. Here is the clear statement that a person cannot, in any way, earn their salvation. God freed the Israelites when they still had false views and conceptions about God, and when they had grumbling, disbelief, and slavery in their hearts. Every other religion teaches its morality and ethics as a way to attain salvation, whereas Christianity teaches that morality and ethics flow out of an appreciation for one's salvation.

Gospel Theme #2 Need for a Savior: Though the people agree to follow the stipulations and confirm the Covenant with blood, it is painfully obvious that the Israelites, and everyone else, will not be able to keep this Law. Just days after these 10 commandments are given to the people, they break the law (Exodus 32). This puts the entire covenant in jeopardy! Even the most righteous and well-meaning people have broken some of the 10 commandments, and when Jesus further explains that any lust is adultery and even internal hatred is murder, it is clear that this standard is unattainable. The Israelites needed salvation from sin much more than from slavery.

Gospel Theme #3 The Glory of God: In Exodus 20:4-6 we find the 2nd commandment and some commentary to go with it. No one is to make an idol that is supposed to represent God's glory. How could the glory of God be contained in a wooden or metal image?! Rather, when Moses asks to see God's glory in chapters 32-34, God tells Moses that He is both compassionate- forgiving to the thousandth generation, and just- not letting sins go unpunished (very similar to 20:4-5). But how can God be both compassionate and just, especially when He has committed Himself in relationship to a people who are rebellious and sinful? He can do this because Jesus paid the penalty for all sin, and thus a just God can forgive and show patience to all who are covered by Jesus' blood.

Gospel Theme #4 Need for a Mediator: The cloud thunders, lightning crashes, the horn sounds, and the glory of God dwells on the mountain in an awesome display. The people who experienced this moment and heard God's Ten Commandments were very afraid. They understood immediately that they needed a mediator (20:19). The glory of God was too much for them. So Moses charges forward to receive the further instructions from God and later to plead with God on behalf of the people. Moses' roles as mediator and intercessor point forward to Christ, who fills these roles on a more permanent basis for all who call on Jesus' name.

Aim: To see the Law, not as a burden, but as an expression of our appreciation to God for saving us. He has described what good, righteous living is in His Law. We trust that His Laws are good and we long to please Him because of His great love for us. Therefore, let us begin to see the Law of God as a delight, and a gift to help conform our behavior to that of Christ.

Study Questions:

From this Sunday's sermon from Exodus chapter 34, what did you learn about the glory of God?

[20:1-21]

Are there any themes from the sermon that relate to Exodus 20?

Based on the Ten Commandments and your study of Exodus, why do you think God cares about how Israel acts?

First, Israel is supposed to be a Kingdom of Priests that will help all people enter into relationship with God. Therefore, they needed to be holy to fill this sacred role. Second, if they were to help others understand who God is, they needed to put His character on display by living according to His Law. Third, the laws promote a just and loving society, and these laws will promote the well-being of His Nation

How did the people react to God's Law when they first heard him give it? Why do you think they agreed to live by these laws?

The thunderous Presence on the mountain has clearly made an impression. The people are afraid, tremble, and they ask Moses to go up to the mountain rather than hearing from God directly. They may not have felt like they had a choice, but they also probably recognized the importance of what was happening.

Why do you think David calls the Law "a delight" in Psalm 119:77 and a source of "comfort" in Psalm 119:52?

Opinion question, but be sure to talk about God's love and how boundaries are a normal part of healthy relationships.

Everything God does in Exodus is to reveal His character and deepen His relationship to His chosen people. How does the Law accomplish those purposes?

Greater understanding of God and of self comes as a result of meditating on the Law. We learn what God enjoys and what God does not tolerate, and this gives us glimpses of His personality. We find that God's standards are too high for us and that we are less righteous than we dared imagine. We think of ourselves as "good," yet we soon find out that we are really Law breakers and we end up offending God on a regular basis.

What elements of God's character would you say are revealed in the Ten Commandments?

Justice, Mercy, concern for the people's welfare.

Why would God give a law to His people that He knows they cannot keep?

To display the need for a Savior. God pulled the people out of slavery in an instant, but to pull the slavery out of the people will take lifetimes. The process begins with righteous laws to describe what a good and perfect life is. We need the Holy Spirit to help us be regenerated into people who are able to follow the law. Most of all, we need a Redeemer (1 Peter 2:4-10) who conquers the greater problem plaguing Israel (and everyone else)- sin!

Do the Ten Commandments still apply to Christians? If so, how? If not, why not?

God's personality and ethics have not changed. The customs of how we worship have changed since the Cross. We do not need priests, lamb's blood, and proper garments to make us clean. We have been made "ceremonially clean" by Christ. Since the Ten Commandments concern ethics, they still apply to us.

Jewish communities came up with all sorts of ways to make sure that they did not even come close to breaking some of these commandments. For instance, some Jewish communities today will not turn on electricity on the Sabbath. Is this response to the Law commendable or outlandish?

Do the Ten Commandments inspire you to live a more holy life? Why or why not? Are there other things that inspire you to become more righteous?

What are some ways that you attempt to become a better person? What are your motivations for becoming a better person?