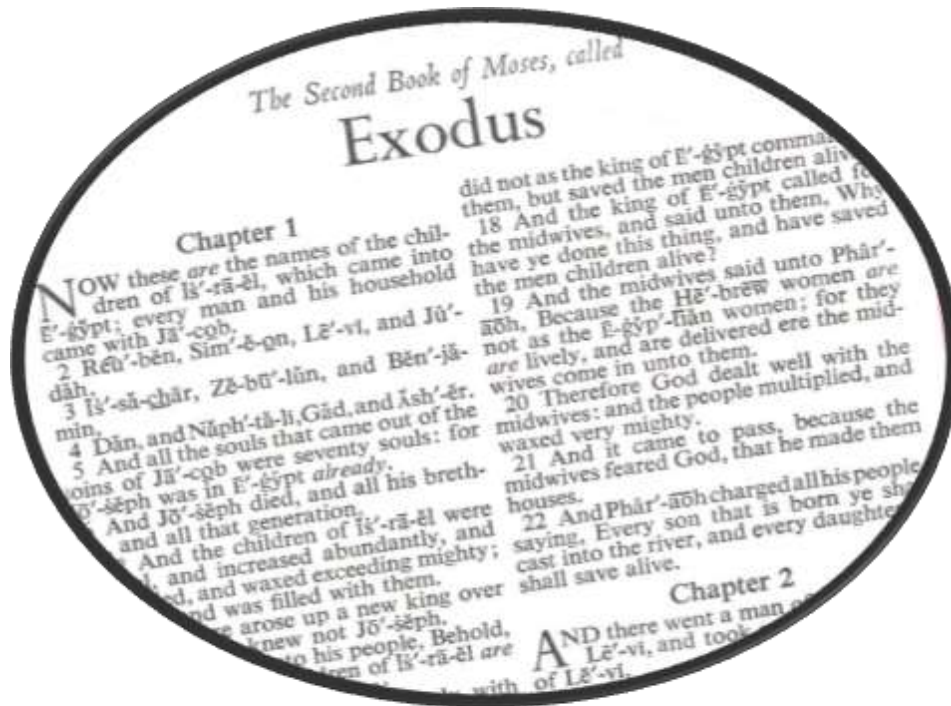


EXODUS – WEEK 21

GOOD THINGS TO USE FOR GOOD OR BAD



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 30:17–32:6 – Good Things to Use for Good or Bad

God designs things, the bronze basin in this case. Then He designs recipes, for the anointing oil and the incense. Then He designs people, to make everything.

Thus the LORD completes the specifications for His tabernacle. Then, just as He's filling in how they will keep the Sabbath holy, the people lose it and start worshipping a golden calf the made with their own hands. Really.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

Exodus 30:17–32:6 – Good Things to Use for Good or Bad
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1 Exodus 30:17-21 (NIV)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it. Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants for the generations to come.”

Imagine this sign in a restaurant bathroom.

“Employees must wash their hands before returning to work – so that they will not die.”

Signs like this are common (without the death clause, of course). They sometimes include a reference to a state law at the bottom. I’d love to see one with the full text above. They could put the reference, “— Exodus 30:21” at the bottom. At least it would get folks to look up the verse.

So, God’s wants His priests to wash up. You got a problem with that? Restaurants want the same thing. The capital punishment bit is extreme, but it’s His tabernacle and His rules. Is that really too much to ask?

But there’s an interesting aspect to this that most folks don’t think about. It’s not really capital punishment because it’s not really killing. All life is from God. God taking away life isn’t killing; it’s ceasing giving. As soon as God stops sustaining a life, that life ends.

It’s like they die of natural causes.

This “God as the sustainer of life” perspective is relevant to us in many ways. For example, we pray a lot for healing. Variations on this theme dominate most prayer request emails. There’s nothing wrong with that. God is the great healer.

But I wonder if we’re not coming at this the wrong way. We think of God fixing us like the way we think of a surgeon fixing us.

But a surgeon isn’t the original life giving force. He/she is just an outside agent. Conversely, God doesn’t “fix.” He restores. He creates. He blesses. He’s not external to the situation; He’s the creator, owner, and Lord of everything.

None of this necessarily changes the wording of a prayer request. We normally plead for a particular outcome; we don’t tell God how He should do it. This concept just changes how we view God’s relationship to the thing we want to see fixed.

The difference is that we’re asking God to change His “pride and joy.” He’s a stakeholder. He doesn’t care about you the way a surgeon cares about you.

His love goes much deeper than that.

2 Exodus 30:22-33 (ESV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, 250, and 250 of aromatic cane, and 500 of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils and the basin and its stand. You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. And you shall say to the people of Israel, ‘This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people.’”

The copyright on this recipe for anointing oil is so strong that anyone who violates it *shall be cut off from his people*. That’s similar to excommunication except that there’s a sense of being removed from the family tree. Such a severe consequence for such a seemingly minor infraction may seem unfair.

There are many similar situations in life where the penalties for breaking a rule are disproportionately severe. “Don’t run out in the street in front of cars.” “If you see a snake with a rattle on its tail, don’t play with it.” Are the consequences for violating these rules unfair?

Of course not. Life is full of easy ways to kill yourself. The “punishment” in those cases doesn’t seem to fit the “crime.” Yet, no one complains that this is unfair. It just is.

The rule about the oil would be unfair if God didn’t warn people about what to avoid, or didn’t explain what the consequences would be. This passage is that warning; God makes the rules and the consequences perfectly clear. While avoiding all sin is beyond our skills set, some of God’s commands are easy to obey.

This is like the classic doctor’s office skit:

Patient (stretching his arm behind his back) – “*Doc, it hurts when I do this.*”

Doctor – “*Then don’t do that.*”

This is why children’s education is so important. There are many things in life, and in understanding Christianity, that are simple. Yet without proper instruction, no one could figure these things out on their own.

Children need teachers. Their teachers need your prayers.

Their task is to teach them the incredibly important, yet often incredibly obvious (to adults) rules of life.

3 Exodus 30:34-38 (ESV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you. And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the LORD. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”

Just as we saw with the anointing oil, anyone who uses this incense recipe for a common purpose *shall be cut off from his people*. Intriguingly, these passages don’t say who will do the cutting off. Are the Israelites instructed to cut someone off who they catch doing this, or is this saying that God will cut them off?

It’s God. There are many prohibitions where the offender is *cut off from his people* (Israel). In some cases the LORD specifically says that He’ll be the one doing it.

“I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.” – Leviticus 20:3-6 (ESV)

In many of these other cases, it would be difficult to prove that someone committed a violation. Also, no rules for judging these cases are given. So, it appears that getting cut off is a judgment of God.

That’s worse. It means expulsion from the covenant and from His blessing.

Praise God that He transcends rules like these through grace. One of the prime ways the modern church models this is through prison ministry. Always pray for those ministries. They need them more than most.

And don’t forget to pray for the prisoners too. Some are very serious believers. Others are very serious unbelievers. They range from the most encouraging to the least.

But if God can turn Saul into Paul, no one is beyond hope. Ask the LORD to work in their hearts. Ask God to help us minister to them effectively and, most importantly, to minister in a way that glorifies Him.

That’s just a start. Consider getting educated about prison ministries in your area – educated enough that you give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to call you in this direction.

That call doesn’t have to happen – it didn’t with me – but you’ll know enough to pray detailed prayers.

4 Exodus 31:1-11 (ESV)

The LORD said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.”

This is a new twist. Instead of just telling people what to do, God gave gifts to people so that they can do it themselves. This is a magnificent foretaste of the spiritual gifts he gives to us.

But there’s an implication here that every Christian should think hard about. If God has specifically given Bezalel and Oholiab the ability *to devise artistic designs*, then what’s going to happen if they pray to Him and say, “O LORD, please tell us what this piece is supposed to look like.”?

His answer should be something like, “I gave you the skills. You decide.”

This is an important category of answered prayer – one we often don’t think about.

For example, consider prayers for guidance that are “yes/no” questions. There can be three answers: “yes,” “no,” and “You need to decide this on your own.” God may want you to face a tough decision without Him bailing you out. (Note: one exception is when you’re looking for a confirming sign.)

And the stark truth is that His plan may include you making the wrong decision so that you can learn and grow. The process of sanctification can be brutal, especially when big progress is being made.

So, when you pray for guidance, consider allowing for all three possibilities. For example, you usually shouldn’t want to flip a coin so that heads means you do something, and tails you don’t. That leaves out the third possibility and forces a yes or no answer. Would you really expect God to honor that?

Do not test the LORD your God, as you did at Massah. – Deuteronomy 6:16 (NIV)

Of course, you may not be able to put this into practice today; prayers for guidance only happen when you’re facing a big decision. But when the time arrives, think about how you could pray about this wrong. Get clear on what prayers would fence God in. Then figure out how to pray properly, and do that.

5 Exodus 31:12-17 (ESV)

And the LORD said to Moses, “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’”

Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths. Above all? What? Is He with the union or something? Why would giving everyone a day off every week be above all?

Note, this does not contradict Matthew 22:37b, where Jesus names the greatest commandment. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* (ESV)

In fact, this is part of it; honoring the Sabbath is essential to loving God.

The Sabbath structures all of our lives – even those of atheists. There are lots of folks who want to erase any hint of Judeo-Christian tradition from our culture. Fine, let them promote an eight day week.

Good luck with that. The concept of a seven day week – with a work week and a weekend – is so central to the structure of civilization that it never occurs to anyone to rebel against it.

OK, so we all get that, but many Christians don’t realize how important honoring the Sabbath is. It’s essential to loving God because it structures our lives.

Each day is known by its position relative to the Sabbath. If we treat the Sabbath as just another day, the whole week loses its bearings. We may honor God for a moment but that stops being the pattern.

Actually, my description of the Sabbath as “a day off,” is offensive. It’s a day of rest, but so much more. Those who do not honor the Sabbath are acting as if they consider themselves more qualified than God to determine how it should be spent.

If He really is the Lord of our lives, we should live like it. Sabbath worship in the morning is not enough; the whole day should be set aside and made holy.

“Holy” means “separate to God.” That’s what the Sabbath is.

6 Exodus 31:18-32:6 (ESV)

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

OK, this takes first prize in the “You’re kidding, right?” category. They actually said, of the golden calf they had **just made** (long after crossing the Red Sea), “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*” The stupid thing is made out of their earrings for crying out loud. How could they think, even for a minute, something that goofy?

Seriously, all fun and games aside, this is a real question that needs a real answer. Sure, sin makes us stupid, but if it can actually make us that stupid we need a warning label or something.

In their defense, having been raised in a polytheistic culture, they haven’t caught on to this monotheistic thing just yet. So, they don’t understand that this violates any rules, or even that it violates common sense.

But that’s our common sense. Common sense in ancient Egypt is that each aspect of life has a God in charge. So, who’s the God of sea crossings? Making one up seems silly to us but not to them.

This explains why Aaron’s reaction to their declaration is so mild. *When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.”*

Neither Aaron nor the people saw this as an outrage so, rather than throw a tantrum, Aaron tries to gently move their focus back towards the LORD.

Leave it to Moses to throw the tantrum.

Worship services must appeal to a range of audiences, while never violating God’s designs. This is tricky. Some people are offended by the very things that others find most uplifting.

Pray for your worship team. Their time and talents are a sweet offering to the LORD.

Without their contribution, what would you do?

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When thinking of Jesus as Lord, what does “Lord” mean?
2. What “rules of life” seem most unfair?
3. Would you hire an ex con
4. When has God helped you make a decision?
5. Does the Sabbath start the week or end it?
6. What aspect of our culture makes it difficult to worship God the way He prescribes it?

Items for prayer: