

EXODUS—WEEK 17

RULES FOR LIVING



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Moses' Descent from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments by Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680) on display at the Royal Palace, Amsterdam

Here we get more laws and rules. They support good family and neighborly relationships. However, they hold Israel to a higher standard. Even the land should have a Sabbath. Even appearances before the LORD matter.

Jesus expanded on these rules—commanding us to care for (and about) the poor and even our enemies.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Exodus 22:16–23:19 — Rules for Living
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1 Exodus 22:16–20

“If a man entices a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall surely pay the bride-price for her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money according to the bride-price of virgins.

“You shall not permit a sorceress to live.

“Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death.

“He who sacrifices to any god, except to the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed.”

Once again, we see the law favoring women; the responsibility for pre-marital sex lands entirely on the man. The bride-price is very steep (more than a year’s wages), and the girl’s father can call off the wedding and still get the bride-price. This should make any man think twice.

However, if the woman is betrothed, this is equivalent to adultery and the penalty is much worse.

“If a young woman who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he humbled his neighbor’s wife; so you shall put away the evil from among you.

“But if a man finds a betrothed young woman in the countryside, and the man forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die.” — Deuteronomy 22:23–25

God’s law doesn’t shy away from capital punishment. This stuff is important to Him—much more important than long lives for disobedient people. The last three verses in today’s passage also reflect that.

These things are nowhere near being capital crimes in our society.

These harsh punishments seem to only make sense from God’s point of view. Too bad that’s beyond our vision. We’re stuck in our human, temporal perspective, which sees these punishments as too severe.

Part of the process of growing in Christ is maturing our perspective. Even though we can’t understand God’s ways, we can come to appreciate them and be comfortable with them. Still, that’s a big change.

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, — Romans 12:2a

Conversion can’t be the only part of our growth in Christ that’s transformative; Romans was written to Christians. So, what is Paul telling us to do in Romans 12?

Ask God to transform you. Sanctification is hard work, but it’s not entirely our hard work.

2 Exodus 22:21–31 (ESV)

“You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

“If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

“You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

“You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

“You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.”

Note that these laws don't include any schedule of punishment—there's no “he shall pay double,” no “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” Suddenly, the law shifts gears, and, for these offenses, God is going to execute judgment when He *hears their cry*. Why are these laws different?

They aren't civil laws; they're rules for godly living. They set a higher standard than what is required for the functioning of a civilized society. While God promises to execute severe penalties for breaking some of these rules, that's up to Him. And, these rules are strictly for Israelites; foreigners are exempt.

This starts a pattern that will carry through the whole Old Testament, and often seems puzzling—God holds His people to a higher standard. He frequently punishes Israel harshly for minor offenses while letting other nations off (or punishing them similarly but for much greater crimes).

This is actually a blessing, but it sure doesn't feel like one.

Christians also get this “higher standard” treatment—and can be just as annoyed by it. Unfortunately, there are some preachers who think we aren't held to a higher standard. They preach “health and wealth.” This contradicts Jesus's warnings, not to mention Acts, the epistles, and all of church history. We know being a Christian isn't a picnic, but do we appreciate it? Are trials frustrating or an honor?

They're both. It's reasonable to be frustrated by seeing others not held to a high standard. We're like a child who complains, “Timmy's parents let him ...” We don't appreciate God's “parenting.”

Ask God to help you see the struggles we face for what they really are. Ask Him to mature your attitude about the challenges of practicing the kingship of Jesus.

3 Exodus 23:1–9

“You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice. You shall not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute.

“If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.

“You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous.

“Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

As with the previous passage, these are not laws with specific schedules of punishment, but rules for righteous living.

And, again, these rules hold Israel (and us) to an even higher standard than that. Even your *enemy’s* ox must be rescued in times of trouble. The same rule holds if *you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden*. This pushes people into being better than they usually feel like being.

Also, we must treat the poor fairly. *You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute*. So, how do you apply this in modern America? We don’t have the kind of poor that existed back then.

Extreme poverty, unlike anything we see, exists in many other countries. For example, there’s a “neighborhood” known as “the black hole” in the middle of San Jose dos Compos, Brazil. At night, the black hole is totally dark, and the rest of the town is a lighted ring around it.

The black hole is a valley with no electricity, partly because it’s in a flood plain. The people who live there are poorer than what most Americans can even imagine. They have few possessions and little income. People like these frequently get hit by misfortunes and injustices.

This passage commands us to not add to that. God holds a special place in His heart for the poor.

Our poor may not be as poor as the folks that live in the black hole, but they’re poor enough. We are commanded, in no uncertain terms, to minister to them.

But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? — 1 John 3:17

If we don’t minister to those in need, people won’t be attracted to our message—
nor should they be.

4 Exodus 23:10–12

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed.”

The magnificent thing about this passage is that it gives the purpose for these practices—and the purpose is rest and refreshment. The rules sound like they are designed to honor the week of creation. Yes, but the text details reasons that are based on compassion.

A pattern is forming that is quite the opposite of the popular perception of Old Testament law. The groups that were typically downtrodden at that time (e.g., women, slaves, the poor, even livestock) are blessed by the law.

The Old Testament was dozens of centuries ahead of its time. Those who argue it should have been even more modern need to consider the limitations of communication. Concepts can be so advanced they make no sense to the listener.

You can't explain snow to a Bahamian and you can't explain Heaven to anyone. The Bible has to be written at a level the reader can handle.

Most folks think that Jesus instituted a new covenant that reversed (or at least radically changed) a lot of the old covenant. But what Jesus really did was understand the covenant, fulfill it, and explain it to us (just like what He did to Cleopas on the road to Emmaus).

The Old Testament law is a treasure trove of wisdom.

Praise the LORD that we even have the Old Testament. Imagine how difficult it was to preserve scripture before Gutenberg's invention of movable type. To the untrained eye, God's word never looked far from extinction.

Of course, God had this all planned out, but it's still a marvel to study. The Dead Sea Scrolls are a case in point. With all the fighting that has gone on in that region, their preservation is amazing.

Thank God for inspiring people to write His word down, and for giving us those dedicated saints who endured a lifetime of writer's cramp to preserve that word.

Also, be challenged to be the kind of saint who could have that level of commitment. If that scares you, good. It scares me too.

If you really allow God to use you, all bets are off. You can't know what's going to happen next.

That's pretty scary—and exciting.

5 Exodus 23:13–19

“And in all that I have said to you, be circumspect and make no mention of the name of other gods, nor let it be heard from your mouth.

“Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field.

“Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

“You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leavened bread; nor shall the fat of My sacrifice remain until morning. The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

These rules are all religious. None make any sense secularly. Because boiling *a young goat in its mother's milk* is so creepy, many think this must have been a pagan practice that God bans here. However, no evidence of this practice has turned up, so commentators don't recommend taking this expression literally. It's typically understood as a ban on eating meat and cheese together. Fish with cheese is fine though.

Importantly, God says, *“Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.”* Both YHVH and Adonai are used here. Other translations say, “before the LORD your God.” This is very specific and personal.

It means that each feast involves sacrifice before the LORD, in the tabernacle. While, *“None shall appear before Me empty,”* is in reference to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, in context it applies to all three feasts. Similarly, *“The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God,”* is a general rule, even though it sounds like it only applies to the Feast of Harvest.

These appearances before the LORD are more important than the celebrations they are associated with.

Appearing before the LORD is meant to be serious and intimidating. Yet we appear before the LORD every time we pray. Are you ever intimidated by that? Do you wonder if your prayers are proper?

Every Christian should periodically take stock of their prayer life. Am I praying regularly enough? Am I praying reverently enough? Is my prayer life edifying? What impact is my prayer life having on my spiritual growth?

This is a great topic to take up with your pastor or other spiritual mentor; they're sure to be helpful. Spiritually mature Christians invariably have a strong prayer life.

It has a lot to do with how they became mature.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever had a post-conversion experience that felt transformative?
2. What aspect of our “higher standard” matters most to you?
3. What’s the deepest poverty you’ve seen?
4. Can you imagine dedicating your whole life to making a copy of the Bible by hand? Do you know anyone who displays that level of dedication?
5. Have you found something that helps make your prayer life stronger?