

STANDARDS OF JUSTICE FOR GODLY GOVERNMENT  
EXODUST-DEUTERONOMY

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Perhaps the biggest news item this week, at least for people living outside of Texas, was the impeachment trial of President Trump. Democrats and a few Republicans argued that the president's message on January 6 incited the mob that assaulted the Capitol building, resulting in the deaths of five people. He was claiming that the election was stolen. He told the audience members to fight. Then when the riot and invasion of the Capitol happened, he did not intervene to try to stop it.

Most of the Republicans argued that there was no basis for having the trial in the first place, since the point of the impeachment clause in the Constitution is to remove high officials from office. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was even unwilling to preside at the trial. Also the president in his speech told the audience to be peaceful in their protest. Witnesses were never called. An investigation never happened. There is evidence that agitators had planned to cause trouble before the rally was ever held on January 6.

The issue in this whole matter is justice. What is just? Some point to the US Constitution as a basis for justice. That document certainly has political value. But in the end it is only a document that is representative of our political tradition. Some point to conscience as a basis for justice. That may have some value. But consciences differ in their ideas about justice. What we need is an objective and ultimate standard.

In a Breakpoint commentary a couple of weeks ago (2/8/2021) John Stonestreet pointed out, **“Our culture in particular is full of demands for justice of all kinds: social justice, economic justice, LGBTQ justice, environmental justice, racial justice, even ‘reproductive justice.’ At the same time, it’s not always clear what is meant by justice. Too often, demands for justice are undergirded by radical and idiosyncratic [ideas] about right and wrong, about fairness, about the human person, and --- thanks to the wide application of critical theory --- about power dynamics.”**

Meanwhile, across the ocean in Russia a Moscow court rejected the appeal of Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader who was almost killed by a poisonous nerve agent. He was charged with violating the terms of his probation in leaving the country. He had gone to Germany to receive treatment for a poisonous substance that was given to him and which almost certainly came from the Russian government. This former atheist told the court that he had come to believe in God. He said that he believes the Bible when it says that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. He told the judge, **“Even though our country is built on injustice and we all face it, we also see that**

**millions of people want righteousness. They want the righteousness and sooner or later they will have it.”**

The ultimate standard for justice and righteousness is God. For He is our Creator and sovereign Ruler and ultimate Judge. In Psalm 89 v. 14 (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 89:14) the psalmist declares, **“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.”**

Our particular interest on Sunday mornings recently is civil government and what a just and righteous government looks like. The best measure of that is a divine standard. We saw last week that God chose Abraham to be the object of His special blessing. National governments today would be wise to remember the promise of God in Genesis 12 that God would bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants and curse those who curse him and his descendants.

We made a leap forward in the Biblical chronology to look at what happened at Mt. Sinai when the Lord met the descendants of Abraham and the recently released slaves from Egypt. I suggested that God established a model government at that point. The Lord Himself became the political ruler of this nation. Thus we read the declaration of Moses in Deuteronomy #4 v. 8. (DEUTERONOMY 4:8) There Moses says, **“And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?”**

So the plan today is to survey some of those statutes and rules to see what standards of justice the Lord provided for civil government and how they might apply today. What we learn will hopefully help us in being effective in praying for our governing officials, in voting wisely, and in knowing when to object to what government does or doesn't do.

I.

Consider then THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE APPLICABILITY OF OLD TESTAMENT LAWS TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT. (I. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND...) We left off last week with the fugitives from Egypt arriving at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness in the third month after their escape. In #19 we saw the Lord offer the Hebrews the opportunity to have Him as not only their spiritual leader but also their political leader. In v. 8 they agreed to this arrangement, to this covenant, and they promised to obey its rules. What follows in #20 is the statement of the Ten Commandments. The chapters following that give further explanations for these ten rules.

A.

So let's consider ITS LIMITATIONS. (I. A. ITS LIMITATIONS) What are the limitations that this set of rules has for us today? Are there some things about the Ten Commandments and its corollaries that should not be applied to us?

The thing which we need to understand is that the Lord is not just the spiritual leader of all of these people. He is now becoming the king of the nation of Israel. Some of the

laws which He proceeds to explain relate to God's role as Israel's spiritual leader. Some of these rules are not expected to be followed by all civil governments in the world.

Consider the Fourth Commandment. (EXODUS 20:8-10) In #20 vv. 8-10 God says, **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...”**

Skip forward several chapters to #31. There in #31 vv. 12 & 13 (EXODUS 31:12-13) we read, **“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.’”**” In the same way that circumcision was to be a sign of the Hebrews' connection to the Abrahamic Covenant, Sabbath keeping was to be a sign of the people in the nation of Israel of their adherence to the Mosaic Covenant. It would be the failure of the Jews to keep the Sabbath which would later be a basis for judgment by God upon them. I don't find anywhere in the Scriptures where the Lord expected other nations to observe this sign.

I don't even see that He expects this of Christians. In Colossians #2 vv. 16 & 17 (COLOSSIANS 2:16-17) the Apostle Paul writes, **“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”** He is saying that Christians are not obligated to follow these aspects of the Mosaic Law. He makes reference not only to the Sabbath but also to festivals. For the Mosaic Law commanded that the Jews not only observe the Sabbath, but they also observe certain feast days and certain other religious rituals. Three times a year all of the males were supposed to show up at the tabernacle or temple to observe certain feasts. Such observances are nowhere commanded to be followed by other civil governments, or even by Christians. This is not to say that it is a bad thing to have a day of rest, or of worship, in a nation's weekly calendar. Good arguments could be made that this has value for the flourishing of any society.

B.

Consider then ITS POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS. (I. A. B. ITS POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS) What value does the Mosaic Law, including the Ten Commandments, have for us today? Andy Stanley, the pastor of a megachurch in Georgia, writes in his book *Irresistible* (p. 137), **“The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None. To be clear: Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments.”** A bit later he adds, **“Even a pinch of the old covenant will corrupt the taste and texture of the new covenant.”** (p. 144)

It seems to me that this is an extreme overreaction. The Old Testament law provides expressions of God's standards of righteousness. Some of these are moral standards that have timeless and universal application. They provide guidance for wise government. They provide standards for marriage and the family. They describe God's

standards of justice concerning murder and stealing and lying and even coveting. Our particular concern now is looking for standards of justice that should be adopted by good government and thoughtful citizens in all places and at all times.

II.

So we are going to consider THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL ISSUES. (II. THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS...) The sixth commandment, described in Exodus #20, is "You shall not murder." That commandment is further explained in #21.

(EXODUS 21:12-13) In vv. 12 & 13 God says, "**Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.**" So right here we begin to see divine distinctions made in matters of killing. God's sense of justice is that premeditated murder should result in a penalty of death. Homicides that were not planned in advance have a lesser penalty.

In Numbers #35 the Lord will later set aside six cities of refuge. People who are involved in involuntary manslaughter or unpremeditated killing are required to go to these cities and remain there until the death of the high priest. There is perhaps a parallel with modern imprisonment for such crimes.

There is a further emphasis upon the horrible nature of murder in Exodus 21:14 (EXODUS 21:14): "**But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.**" This reinforces the idea that we found in Genesis #9 that murder is a crime deserving capital punishment. Civil government has a responsibility to enforce this judgment.

In v. 16 of this chapter we find another element of God's sense of justice regarding criminal law. (EXODUS 21:16) God says, "**Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.**" We call this kidnapping. It might be regarded as relating to a violation of the commandment about stealing. But this verse appears in the midst of a larger section which has to do with killing and personal attacks. Kidnapping seems to be regarded as an additional assault on the image of God. God's sense of justice is that it deserves the death penalty.

This prohibition and penalty has implications for slavery, which is still an issue in some parts of the world. Often kidnapping is involved in slavery. In our own American experience Africans were typically kidnapped on that continent and sold to slave traders who took them to other parts of the world. According to God's standard of justice those who sold those slaves and those who possessed them were deserving of death.

Stealing is referenced in Exodus 22 v. 1. (EXODUS 22:1) God says, "**If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.**" The focus in the Mosaic law is restitution rather than imprisonment. There is also an additional proscribed penalty.

Verse 6 of #22 (EXODUS 22:6) addresses property crime: **“If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution.”** Again the focus is upon restitution rather than imprisonment. Since it involves negligence rather than intention, there does not seem to be an additional penalty.

(EXODUS 22:7) Verse 7: **“If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man’s house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double.”** (EXODUS 22:8) Verse 8: **“If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property.”** There were no banks in this era in which people could keep their money. The thief in this situation was required not only to make restitution but to also pay an additional penalty. Notice that there is also a role for judges to play when the integrity of the homeowner is questioned.

The Mosaic law also recognizes the importance of standards of evidence. (DEUTERONOMY 19:15) In Deuteronomy 19 v. 15 we are told, **“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”** Thus we have recognition of the need for protections for the accused.

We have an additional aspect of justice described in Deuteronomy #19 v. 18. (DEUTERONOMY 19:18 & 19) There Moses writes, **“The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”** We have laws against perjury. They are not always enforced well. God’s sense of justice is to go to the additional extent of punishing the false accuser with the penalty that was involved in the false charge. God sees that as serving the purpose of minimizing false accusations.

III.

We come next to THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS STANDARDS FOR MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND SEXUALITY. (III. THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS...) We can do only a brief survey of these various standards. We can notice here that most of these rules can be connected to the seventh commandment which speaks against adultery. Such is the safeguard placed upon the marriage unit.

In Leviticus #20 v. 10 (LEVITICUS 20:10) we find the penalty established for adultery. The Lord says, **“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.”** At the very least good civil government should promote the sanctity of marriage. It is essential for the flourishing of society, There was a famous British anthropologist by the name of J. D. Unwin who researched the historical decline of 86 different civilizations. He found that no society flourished for more than three generations without “strict marital monogamy.”

He wrote, **“In human records there is no instance of a society retaining its energy after a complete new generation has inherited a tradition which does not insist on prenuptial and postnuptial continence [i.e. abstinence from sex outside of marriage].”** (Unwin, *Sex and Culture*)

So should good government institute the death penalty for adultery? There is a famous incident recorded in the New Testament in John’s gospel where a woman was brought to Jesus who had apparently committed adultery. The scribes and Pharisees asked if she should be stoned. Jesus replied that the one without sin should cast the first stone. When they all left, Jesus told the woman that He did not condemn her, but she should go and sin no more.

In Leviticus #18 v. 6 (LEVITICUS 18:6) the Lord says to the Hebrews, **“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord.”** Uncovering nakedness is a euphemism for having sexual relations. Jews are encouraged to marry within their faith and among their countrymen, but there is a warning in the verses that follow about incest. There is a recognition that there will be a problem with too much inbreeding.

In the same chapter (LEVITICUS 18:22), #18 in v. 22, the Lord further says, **“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”** Such is the prohibition against homosexuality. A society which endorses gay marriage is only creating problems for itself. Mark Regnerus is a sociology professor at the University of Texas who has been researching children who were raised in homes with gay parents. As a result of one of his studies he found that the products of these relationships were more apt to report **“being unemployed, less healthy, more depressed, more likely to have cheated on a spouse or partner, smoke more pot, had trouble with the law, report more male and female sex partners, more sexual victimization, and were more likely to reflect negatively on their childhood family life, among other things.”** (*World*, 6/15/2012) Good civil governments will protect and support Biblical marriage and families.

IV.

(IV. THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS...) Consider then THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS STANDARDS FOR THE FORLORN OF SOCIETY. In Exodus #22, beginning at v. 21 (EXODUS 22:21-22), we are told, **“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. (EXODUS 22:23-24) 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.”**

Certainly national governments have a right and a responsibility to screen out immigrants who are drug traffickers, cartel members, sex traffickers, and other criminals. But in a nation where most all of us are descendants of immigrants from other nations we need to be careful about not mistreating immigrants. The Old Testament also frequently warns the people of Israel about mistreatment of widows and orphans.

Deuteronomy #24 describes one means to be used to sustain people who fall into this category. (DEUTERONOMY 24:19) Beginning in v. 19 the children of Israel are told, **“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.** (DEUTERONOMY 24:20) **When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.”** This is called gleaning. Notice that it is not a free handout. Aliens and orphans and widows are expected to collect this stuff themselves. There is some work required on their part.

In Deuteronomy #14 vv. 28 & 29 (DEUTERONOMY 14:28) we read, **“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. (DEUTERONOMY 14:29) And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.”** Again provision is made for the widows, aliens, and orphans.

While good government may make provision for these forlorn members of society, we should remember from our recent study of 1 Timothy that in #5 the Apostle Paul says that families and the church have primary responsibility for care of widows in their midst.

Then in Deuteronomy #15 v. 12 (DEUTERONOMY 15:12) we come to this additional provision: **“If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.”** Additional verses indicate that when individuals found themselves in desperate financial straits, they could sell themselves to wealthier Hebrews to pay off their debt. This was a kind of indentured servitude. It was not slavery as we might think of it. These people were guaranteed certain rights and protections. After seven years they were to be set free, and they were to be sent off with extra material blessings. Such is a brief summary of the standards that this model nation were to follow in regard to the forlorn of society.

V.

(V. THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS...) Next we come to THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS STANDARDS FOR PRIVATE PROPERTY. Leviticus #25 deals with a situation of poverty. But it also makes assumptions about private property. (LEVITICUS 25:25) Verse 25 of #25 says, **“If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.”** Four verses later reference is made to private ownership of houses (LEVITICUS 25:29): **“If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption.”**

The point here is that in the Biblical model for government the right to private property is recognized. The commandment about not stealing assumes that people have the right

to their own property. So also, in a sense, does the tenth commandment which deals with coveting. You can only covet something when it belongs to another. This may seem obvious and foundational to us. But in the last century we dealt with a philosophy and economic theory which denied the right to private ownership. In the *Communist Manifesto* (Chapter 2) Karl Marx wrote, **“The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: abolition of private property.”** (Ironically that is not really a sentence.)

VI.

(VI. THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS...) Consider finally THE MOSAIC LAW AND ITS STANDARDS FOR FUNDING. What kind of tax laws should a model government have? In Leviticus #27 v. 30 (LEVITICUS 27: 30) we read, **“Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord.”** In v. 32 we learn that this tenth part is to come not only from crops but also from animals. (LEVITICUS 27:32) **“And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman’s staff, shall be holy to the Lord.”**

We earlier made reference to the third year tithe, which was to go to Levites, aliens, widows, and orphans. The rabbis of Jesus’ day seem to have generally taught that there were three tithes. There was the yearly tithe for Levites and priests. There was an additional tenth that was to be set aside yearly for a communal meal at the temple or tabernacle. Then every third year there was the additional tithe, on top of the other two. It seems doubtful that Jews universally paid these three different tithes. Not everyone interpreted the tithing laws in this way.

The point for our purposes to consider is that there does not appear to have been a graduated income tax. God’s sense of fairness was that everyone was to pay the same rate. Also there were no loopholes by which people could get out of paying that same rate. There were certain offerings that people were required to make that varied according to the income of the giver. Wealthy people were required in some situations to bring sacrifices of a bull or goat or sheep. Poorer people could bring just turtle doves. Thus when Mary and Joseph went up to the temple after the birth of Jesus, they brought turtle doves for Mary’s cleansing, rather than more costly animals.

In our day the cry is for the wealthy to pay their fair share, which means that many are not expected to pay any income tax. Now everyone does pay the same Social Security tax. But the Tax Policy Center said that in 2018 44% of all Americans paid no federal income tax. Theoretically voters could make higher income people pay for all of the extra benefits provided by the national government without bearing any of the direct costs for themselves. God’s sense of fairness, as we see in this early national model, seems to be that everyone should pay the same rate. (PROJECTOR OFF)

No civil government that is operated by human beings is ever going to be completely just and fair. Given the sinfulness of human beings, our expectation should be that we are never going to have complete justice this side of heaven.



Now we Americans are blessed to have civil government that is fairer than most. Still we have inequities. Last year the cry of injustice from some was "I can't breathe." Those were the last words of George Floyd, who died at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis.

We Christians always have an advocate and a model and a hero to whom we can appeal. He is always just and righteous. Yet he became a victim of a government that was unjust and evil. He was executed on the basis of false charges which were lodged against Him. Religious leaders and pagan Gentiles conspired to have Him executed. We know that victims of Roman execution suffered terrible pain not only as the result of the wounds in their ankles and wrists but also from the tremendous pressure placed upon their chest cavities as they kept trying to exert energy to keep breathing. Eventually they died as a result of asphyxiation. The thought upon Jesus' mind may well have been: "I can't breathe."

But because of His willingness to endure injustice and to die on the cross in our place, we have the opportunity to experience forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The only requirement is that we place our trust in this Jesus and what He did for us in dying upon the cross.