

The unfolding of your words gives light.

The Neighbor-Loving God

Exodus 23:1-9

Introduction

One day while I was performing the dual role of auto mechanic and toddler overseer, my two-year-old charge called to me from inside the garage where he was playing. “Dad, help!” he said. You have to understand that this is the eighth child. By then you learn to distinguish voice inflection: “Help, I’m being attacked by a mountain lion!” sounds very different from “Help, I can’t fit this square peg in a round hole.”

This was the latter type of voice. I paused my alternator extraction procedure and called back, “Elijah, what’s wrong?” He said, “My hand is stuck.” I pulled myself from the engine compartment of the mini van and went to the garage. The child had found one of his favorite treasures: a container of old paintballs. He throws them all over the driveway and then stomps on them. He does the same thing if he can find eggs, except eggs need no stomping. The child has a passion for watching little explosions—he’ll probably grow up to a prairie dog hunter.

He had visions in his head of what would make him happy, but the size of his fist full of treasure was larger than the mouth of the jar. Like the proverbial hunted monkey, my son had his hand, full of paintballs, inside the plastic jar, unable to get both hand and contents out of the container. Rather than let go, he stubbornly held his prize and called for help. I pulled his hand from the container and gave him some paintballs to smash. A few minutes later when all the paintballs were dispatched, I again heard my son’s voice calling—you guessed it—“Dad, help!”

You may hate my parenting style, but this game went on for awhile. The two of us had a fundamental communication problem. Each time I instructed him in the proper way to dump the paintballs out and then pick them up. Each time he was satisfied only that I rescued him from the jar. The trouble was not intellectual. The trouble was that his desire blinded clear thinking. He had no ability to keep my command because he thought he could only be satisfied by one thing. What he needed was my way of looking at things. I could not give that to him because he is not me and because his desire clouded his reason.

We are all like that. The living God gives us commands. We break them. We experience the painful consequences and become prayer warriors. When the temporary deliverance comes, our hands are right back in the cookie jar (or paintball jar). The trouble is not that we are dumb; the trouble is that we are blind.

The commands of God reveal the character of God. We lack the character of God, so we cannot keep his commands. We are about to look at a section of commandments in Exodus 23 that are very difficult for us to keep in our condition.

You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

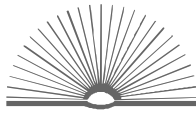
If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty.

You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.

You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:1-9)

A message by Steven L. Svendsen, Sr.
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Commandments Reveal the Character of God

What you need to see in this passage is that the God of the Old Testament is not austere and demanding, in contrast to the God of the New Testament, who is loving and merciful. These verses drip with mercy. They not only expand upon the sixth and ninth commandments, they show us a God who actually cares for people. They show us a God who expects his people to reflect that care for other people.

What did Jesus mean when he said, "A new commandment I give to you...love one another"? I know you may be of the opinion that there was some kind of major change in the way God works after Jesus came but, believe it or not, God the Father did not change a bit when Jesus died. The Old Testament unfolds a vision of the attributes of God that forms the basis for the events and commands recorded in the New Testament. You need to see that the things the Most High commanded his people to do are a reflection of his own character to the world. The text we are studying now is an example of that.

It may not surprise you to know that there are more than ten commandments in the Bible. There are, in fact, 613 commandments in all of the Old Testament. What you may not know is that the ordinances for the people, the laws regarding personal injury, laws about property rights, and what have been labeled "sundry laws" all fit within the boundaries of the Ten Words or the Ten Commandments.

For example, while Exodus Chapter 20 records the Ten Commandments, chapter 21 records this commandment: "He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death." This command falls within the category of the sixth command of the Ten Words.

Not only does the Scripture expand upon the Ten Commandments, it also defines the heart issue behind the breaking of each of the commandments. What starts as "you shall have no other gods before me," continues identifying the many ways we replace God. For instance, a self-righteous person may think he has never stolen something simply because he has never taken an item from a store or a house or robbed a bank. But the Scripture paints a very different picture. You may think I am going to take you to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew. We'll get there, but you need look no farther than the tenth commandment. Coveting is not an external sin. Coveting is heart stealing.

Now we get to Matthew. Not a murderer? Have you been angry with your brother? Then you are a murderer. Anger is heart murder. Not an adulterer? Men, you who have looked at a woman lustfully, have already committed adultery with her in your hearts. Lust is heart adultery.

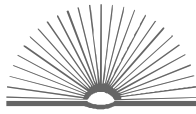
Anger and Murder

If you accept the connection I've made between the Ten Commandments and various laws like the ones before you, you should be able to identify which commands are being expanded upon here in Exodus 23. Look at verse one. It says, "You shall not bear a false report." That is an easy one. What is the ninth commandment? It tells us not to bear false witness against our neighbor. But you will notice as you read on through Exodus 23 that bearing false witness is not the only command in view. It is also murderers who follow the masses in doing evil. It is also thieves who follow the masses in doing evil and oppress others.

Certainly gang violence fits in this picture. But the passive anger, to which we are all prone, is also in view. You may never openly harm your enemy or your rival. You may, however, seek to do harm in "harmless" ways. This text gives us a picturesque example.

Picture a donkey lying on the road. It is overloaded. Its legs are buckled. It has your enemy's brand. Your enemy is nowhere in sight. Does God know us, or what?

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Your heart says, “Don’t kill your enemy. Just let him get hurt in other ways. It’s not like murder, is it?” Why, yes, as a matter of fact, it is.

Most of us do not have enemies who own donkeys. Most of us do have anger and hatred in our hearts. When you have the chance to even a score, show mercy instead. That is the character of God he desires for his people.

When you gossip or exaggerate in an attempt to discredit a rival, you break more than one command. Bearing false witness has evil siblings. Not only can you murder someone in your heart with the bitterness of your false witness, you can with your words steal the favor of others from them. Become very suspicious when a group is talking about one person. It is the verbal form of gang violence. The command certainly applies in a court of law, but the applications are much broader.

Leadership

A good portion of this text applies to those who are in powerful positions. They are not to take bribes or pervert justice in any way. They are to choose honor over the things that benefit themselves personally. Whether you are a judge or simply someone on the street with an opportunity to either welcome or oppress an outsider, Scripture reminds you of a time when you were an outsider.

Summary

The sixth century B.C. prophet Micah understood the heart issues behind the commands of God. He spoke of the requirements of God in terms that reveal the hearts of men. He said, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” There is a way to get a heart that hates lying and murder and loves truth and mercy. **Here are three facts you need to remember:**

1. God does have standards. He is the Lord. He not only sets the standard, he is the standard.
2. His standards reveal his character. We need to look back to Exodus 3 and consider the self-sufficiency of the great I AM. His goodness relates directly to the way he treats us and to the way we should treat others. Because he is all he needs, he does not need to be “bribed” into giving us something. Because we know he is all he needs, we do not need to find satisfaction in being bribed or hurting others. The commands he gives reveal the kind of God he is.
3. The only way you can obey this set of rules is to possess his character. These commands are not just arbitrary rules. This brings us to the cross. His people can be holy—entirely “other”—because he is holy, but we are not naturally holy. Paul Tripp said, “You are not as righteous as you think you are and the grace of God is much more glorious than you think it is.” The need of the hour is a fundamental transformation from self-serving neighbor-haters to God-like neighbor lovers.

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