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## Exodus 21-23 (read 21:28-36) “Personal Responsibility”

Intro. Our society is loosing the concept of personal responsibility. Part of the problem is due to an ever increasing number of government programs that promise to take care of us from the cradle to the grave. Our legal system is geared toward making someone else responsible for anything bad that happens to you.

I read about a man who was suing a hospital. A doctor had performed staple surgery on his stomach to help him lose weight. A couple of days after his operation, he raided the hospital refrigerator and stuffed himself with everything he could find. This tore open the staples and forced another surgery. He was suing the hospital for having a refrigerator near his room. He claimed the temptation was too great. Thus, his complications were not his own fault but the hospital’s fault!<sup>1</sup> Or so he claimed.

What is your attitude regarding personal responsibility? When you see a need, do you say, “It’s not my problem. I’m not responsible.” If you cause someone to experience a loss of some kind, do you tend to deny any responsibility for what happened? If so, this message is especially for you.

Well in our text today we will consider some of the laws that God gave Israel. One common theme in these laws is the concept of personal responsibility. Cain said to God a long time ago, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In other words, he was asking, “Am I responsible for my brother?” God says that we do have certain responsibilities toward other people, and other people’s property. The laws listed here do not cover every possible situation but give practical examples that make it easier to decide what God wants us to do.

Personal responsibility means that we should think before we act, and consider the consequences of our actions upon others. We are responsible to treat people as we would want to be treated.

This morning I want to share with you five different areas of personal responsibility from these laws found in chapters 21-23. As we deal with others, we should keep the principles of these laws in mind. First of all, we have responsibility:

### I. REGARDING THE SAFETY OF OTHERS

In 21:28-36 we have a number of related laws regarding taking responsibility for the safety of others. We are to take steps to prevent injury or death to people or animals. In v.28 God says, “If an ox [or bull] gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned....” This is taking responsibility to prevent such a dangerous animal from killing anyone else. Now look at vv.29-31, “But if the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. If there is imposed on him a sum of money, then he shall pay to redeem his life, whatever is imposed on him. Whether it has gored a son or gored a daughter, according to this judgment it shall be done to him.” The Law is clear

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Leininger, Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2005.

that the owner was responsible to see that his animal didn't injure or kill people. A dangerous bull with a record of attacking people had to be kept penned up. If he wasn't and he killed somebody, the owner was responsible, and both the owner and the animal were put to death. Human life was to be protected, for we were created in the image of God.

Then in vv.33-36 God says, "And if a man opens a pit, or if a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls in it, the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money to their owner, but the dead animal shall be his. If one man's ox hurts another's, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the money from it; and the dead ox they shall also divide. Or if it was known that the ox tended to thrust in time past, and its owner has not kept it confined, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead animal shall be his own." Here we see that God held people responsible for protecting animal life as well, because these animals were so important & valuable to the livelihood of people in those days.

We are responsible to do what we can to prevent dangers to others. This means drive carefully, and watch your speed. Watch out for hazards at home or at work, and correct any problems you find. If you have a dog that is prone to attack people, you are responsible for keeping it pinned up, especially if the preacher is coming to visit!

Next, I want us to consider our responsibility:

## II. REGARDING RESTITUTION

We should take personal responsibility for making restitution if we cause someone to experience a financial loss. It is interesting to me that the Hebrew word translated "make restitution" is *shalam*. It's root meaning includes the idea of making peace. When someone causes a loss, they make peace by restoring what was lost. It takes more than confession of guilt for an offender to make things right; it also demands effort on his part to compensate the people who were hurt. Only then can the torn fabric of relationships be mended. Making restitution not only helps heal relationships, but also discourages criminal or irresponsible behavior.

Can you think of someone who has caused you to suffer a loss of some kind? How do you feel about that person? When we bought our house 4 years ago, a list of repairs were to be made. By the time we moved in, everything was done except replacing 4 windows. Well, they never came back & made it right. I know who was ultimately responsible, and until he makes things right, our relationship will not be at peace. If he's not going to fix the windows, he should pay the value of the replacements.

If you cause a loss of property, you need to make things right. For example, right here in chapter 22, there are several laws regarding the fact that a thief should make restitution. That is mentioned in 22:12. In most cases the restitution should exceed the amount that was stolen, as we read in vv.1-7. Restitution, not a jail sentence, was God's way of punishing the criminal, & protecting the victims.

However, there are other situations where we should make restitution, such as when we cause a loss due to negligence on our part. For example in 22:5 we read, "If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed, and lets loose his animal, and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard." These words do not refer to willful injury, for the Hebrew Word does not mean to drive in, but simply to let loose, set at liberty. Thus, God is referring to injury done from carelessness, when any one neglected to take proper care of a beast that was feeding in his field, and it strayed in consequence, and began grazing in another man's. In those days, the boundaries of fields were

marked by stones at the corners and not by fences around the tract (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10). Grazing animals wouldn't know one field from another anyway and would wander wherever the grass was available. The owner was supposed to act like a good neighbor and keep watch. If he didn't, compensation was demanded from the best of his field. Restitution shouldn't be something we get away with cheaply. Then in v.6 God says, "If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fire shall surely make restitution." During the dry season, there was always the danger of fire in the fields that could destroy the grain. It was only right that whoever caused the fire should compensate the people who were deprived of their grain.

As we look on down to vv.7-15, God's law deals with situations where one lends or rents property to another, and the property is not returned, or not returned in the same condition. Do you have any personal responsibility to make restitution in such cases? Yes indeed. If you ask me to guard your money, material things, or animals, I should faithfully do my job. So God gives at least 2 situations where restitution is required. First, if it can be determined that the borrower or renter stole the property, then they should make restitution. Second, if a loss is due to negligence, or a trespass of some kind (v.9), then restitution should be made. This negligence could even apply to a situation where a person made their neighbor's property easy prey for a thief, for v.12 says, "if, in fact, it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to the owner of it."<sup>2</sup> For example, I plan to borrow a church member's power washer pretty soon. If I leave it out in my front yard over night, and someone steals it, I would need to pay the value of the power washer if I cannot recover it in good condition from the thief. I am not responsible for the sin of the thief, but I am responsible to take measures to prevent a thief from stealing someone's property that I have borrowed.

However, the owner is *not* to expect the borrower or renter to make restitution in the following cases: First, if the borrow or renter did nothing to cause the loss. As we see in v.11, if it is determined by oath or otherwise "that he has not put his hand into his neighbor's goods... the owner of it shall accept that, and he shall not make it good." Second, if a borrowed animal was properly cared for, and the borrower can furnish evidence that it was attacked by a wild animal, then the borrower does not have to make restitution. Such evidence also would show that the borrower chased after the predator.<sup>3</sup> Such acts of nature could happen at any time to any one, and the owner is responsible for absorbing the loss. Now notice v.15, "If its owner was with it, he shall not make it good; if it was hired, it came for its hire." This seem to suggest that if you hire someone to do some work for you, & they suffer a loss to their equipment while working for hire, they are responsible for the loss, not the one who hired out the property. The rental fee should cover the loss in such cases. Also, even if the borrower or renter used the animal or equipment, the owner who was present could see if the damage was due to any negligence on the part of the borrower or renter.

Is there anyone that you owe money to, and you are behind in making your payments? Have you caused property damage to someone and you never gave any compensation? You should not need a court order to pay restitution. You should just do the right thing & pay it. Take responsibility for your actions.

Next, I want us to consider our responsibility:

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob said to his father-in-law in Gen. 31:39, "That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night."

<sup>3</sup> In 1 Sam. 17:34-35 David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth...."

### III. REGARDING THOSE IN AUTHORITY

There are two examples of those in authority that are dealt with in our text. First, we have responsibilities toward our:

A. Parents – In 21:15 God says, “He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.” The word translated “strikes” means “to strike, smite, hit, beat, slay.” Here, it probably does not mean to strike to death, but it refers to any kind of striking that would bring injury. Then in v.17 God says, “And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death” (cf. Lev. 20:9). Likewise, Dt. 27:16 says, “Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.” A parent is not to be treated with disrespect. The cursing of parents is placed on a par with smiting, because it proceeds from the same disposition; and both were to be punished with death, because the majesty of God was violated in the persons of the parents. Both of these commands are specific applications of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother...” (20:12).

One reason God gave these commands is this: Children who have no respect for their parents usually have no respect for any other authority and want only their own selfish way.

Children, God holds you responsible for showing proper respect to your parents, and you are never to do or say anything that is disrespectful or harmful to your parents.

B. Rulers – In 22:28 God says, “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.” There are times when “God” (*Elohim*) refers to human rulers, as in vv.8-9, where *Elohim* is translated “judges” (cf. also Psalm 82:6). Hebrew poetic parallelism tends to favor this use of the term. However, most modern commentators believe that the God of Israel is referred to here. But there is a connection. Rulers & judges are to enforce the laws of God, and so when you revile, disrespect, or curse a ruler, you are also reviling God, who has established human rule to punish evildoers for the good of society (Romans 13). 1 Peter 2:17 says, “Fear God. Honor the king.” Furthermore, contempt of God consists not only in blasphemies openly expressed against Him, which were to be punished with death (Lev. 24:11ff), but also disregarding His law & threats of punishment, as we see in the context.

To this very day this biblical injunction is enforced in our courtrooms. That judge in the black robe stands in the place of God, and we rise in respect of that judge, and we speak to the judge with respect, or pay the consequences. We need to apply this to other leaders as well, especially our President. I know that quite a few disagree with President Bush, but many people today are violating this command, and not giving President Bush the respect he should have. Even some in Congress are failing in this regard.

Next, I want us to consider our responsibility:

### IV. REGARDING STRANGERS

In 22:21 God says, “You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The word translated “mistreat” also means “to oppress, treat violently.” The synonym translated “oppress” literally means “to squeeze.” Likewise, God says in 23:9, “Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Then, as you look down to v.12, you will see that the

benefit of a Sabbath rest was to extend to the “stranger” as well. We should consider the feelings of the immigrant. It is not easy coming into a new environment where you feel alone and out of place.

A nation can certainly benefit from being kind to strangers. Immigrants who find good living conditions encourage other immigrants, and law-abiding immigrants increase the strength of a nation. And believers should be interested in immigrants, that we might be a witness for our Lord to them. Let us look for opportunities to be good to such people. Our Judeo/Christian heritage explains why we have successfully assimilated so many immigrants into our country.

When Cheryl was in college, she reached out to students from other countries. One was from Iran, a Muslim. We had her in our home, and she even attended our church several times. Another was from Costa Rica. Another was from Porto Rico. We should send missionaries to other countries, but we should also be missionaries to those who are coming from other countries to live here.

These commands have become very relevant in the last 20 years. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of immigrants, both legal & otherwise, who have entered into our communities.

## V. REGARDING YOUR ENEMIES

Think of someone who has made themselves an enemy, who really doesn't like you, or who opposes you, or is out to get you. Now suppose you found their purse or wallet in the seat of the restaurant where you have been seated. What would you do? Would you return it, or keep it, or put it in the floor for someone else to find & possibly keep? If you would consider doing anything less than returning it to it's owner, that shows that your heart is not right with God. In 23:4-5 God says, “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.” The ordinary course, which the natural man adopts, is to leave an enemy to take care of his own affairs, without helping him in any way. But here we see that one is not to allow personal animosity to destroy one's willingness to be of assistance in a time of need. We are to do for an enemy the same thing we would do for a brother (see Dt. 22:1-4). We are to be kind and merciful even to our enemies. In fact, Jesus said in Mt. 5:44, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you....” So we see that the command, “Love your enemies” is not a sentiment found only in the New Testament.

I want you to understand that you are responsible for treating people right, even if they have made themselves an enemy. Don't take vengeance in your own hands. Trust God to take care of your enemies. In fact, look down at v.22, “But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.”

Next, I want us to consider our responsibility:

Conclusion: Have you been accepting personal responsibility for the safety of others? Have you been accepting personal responsibility for making restitution for any loss you have caused, even for mere negligence? Have you been accepting personal responsibility for showing respect to those in authority? Have you accepted your responsibility to help others in their time of need, including an enemy, or the immigrant?

These laws guide us in right living, and I want to encourage you to remember these laws in your dealings with people in the days ahead. But these laws also reveal that we are sinners, for we have all fallen short. Perhaps you were negligent, and someone was injured. Perhaps you have never fully paid restitution for a loss due to theft or negligence. Perhaps you have not shown proper respect recently to those in authority. Perhaps you have failed to help someone in need.

We all fall short. The bad news is that our sins have condemned us to a devil's hell. The restitution we owe God is greater than we can pay to secure our deliverance. But I have good news. God saw that we were in grave danger. So Jesus Christ, God's Son, left heaven and paid the price of our salvation. He secured our peace with God. Even when we were enemies of God because of our sin, God helped us in our time of need (Romans 5:10). Even when we were strangers, outsiders, separated from God's people, God has reached out to us. God's mercy & grace is greater than our sin. So if you have realized that you are a sinner, and that you need the forgiveness offered through Christ, I encourage you to turn in Christ today, and trust in Him as your Savior. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary* (accessed from *Online Bible*), completed by 1832; Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 439-458; Stephen Felker, [\*Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible\*](#) (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2007; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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