



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

True Servanthood

Reverend Scott Johnson | February 8, 2026 | Exodus 21:1-11

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 21, verses 1 through 11, Exodus 21, one through eleven. And this is the inspired, the inerrant and infallible word of God. Let's hear God's word.

Now, these are the rules that you shall set before them. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single. If he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her masters and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, I love my master, my wife and my children, I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to God and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl and he shall be his slave forever.

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has broken faith with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing without payment of money.

New Testament Reading

And now turn to Mark's gospel, Mark chapter 10, verses 42 through 45 for the New Testament reading. Mark 10, 42 through 45.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them and their great ones exercise authority over them, but it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The Fine Print of God's Covenant

You may turn back to Exodus chapter 21 for our Sermon Text this morning. Today, we are beginning to look at what you might call the fine print, the fine print of God's covenant with his people Israel. The major aspects or parts of that covenant have been made very clear. The Lord has promised to his people, Israel, that he will be their God. And by his loving them, by his hearing their cries, by redeeming them from their bondage in Egypt, God has made them his people.

And the Lord has made his commandments very clear to the people of Israel. In fact, he has made them terrifyingly clear. With his own voice that thundered from the top of Mount Sinai, with his own finger by which he inscribed the words of the Decalogue upon the tablets of stone, the Lord has given to the people of Israel his 10 commandments. And he has told the Israelites what they must do to be faithful to this covenant that he has brought them into. They must keep his commandments, keep his law.

But now the Lord has called Moses back up to Mount Sinai. And with our passage this morning, he begins to give to Moses all kinds of laws and instructions dealing with the day-to-day lives of the Israelites as they were going to live together as a nation, as a society. So he says in verse one of chapter 21, now, these are the rules that you shall set before them. And these rules begin here in chapter 21, verse one, they go all the way to the end of chapter 23. And these are the rules that I'm calling the fine print of the covenant that God made with Israel.

And that's because these rules are very detailed. And if I may say so, with all due reverence to the word of God, when we come to these various laws and rules, we find them to be a bit

tedious to read. I imagine it's about here in Exodus that a lot of people start to flame out on their Bible reading plan through one year because they get bogged down in these arcane, seemingly irrelevant rules and laws. We're tempted to just pass over the section, kind of like when we have to download an app or software of pages and pages of terms and conditions that we're supposed to promise that we have read. We just scroll down through that and we never read it. We're tempted to kind of just skim past this section of the Bible as well.

But these chapters are all part of the word of God. And as we consider these detailed laws that God has given to his people of Israel, we'll see that there are important lessons for us, for Christians today that we can take from these various laws. Our passage this morning, as you have heard, has to do with the laws that governed the practice of slavery among the people of Israel. And so first we'll consider how these laws applied to the people of Israel, and then we'll consider how or what these laws have to say to us as Christians today, as the new covenant people of God, as the church today.

Observations on Biblical Slavery and Law

But before we look more closely at our passage this morning, before we begin to unpack these laws and all of their details, I want to make some general comments about our passage, but also about how we are to understand all of the laws that God gave to the people of Israel, all of these laws that govern the life of the people of Israel.

So first of all, my first observation or first comment is this, that when it comes to slavery, that's what our passage is about today, but when it comes to slavery, the Bible condemns the kind of slavery that once existed in our nation. When we read the word slave in the Bible, when we see that word anywhere really, but when we read in the Bible our minds naturally envision the institution of slavery that we are most familiar with from our nation's history and that is that race-based chattel slavery that existed in the American South for so many years and of course we think of all of the horrors, the evils that were wrapped up in that institution. And we wonder how can the Bible, how can God permit such a wicked thing as slavery to exist even among his own people?

But we need to understand that the slavery that existed in the American South was an entire institution that was based on a practice that the Bible explicitly condemns, and that is the practice of stealing people in order to sell them or to make them slaves.

In 1 Timothy 1, Paul gives a list of various sins that are typical of the unrighteous, the ungodly, those whom he calls the lawless, the disobedient, the ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane. And among other things that characterize the acts of these unrighteous, ungodly people, he says that they are enslavers, enslavers. And the word in Greek refers specifically to those who take people captive, kidnap people, steal people in order to make them slaves or to sell them into slavery. The King James Version uses the word men-stealers for enslavers in First Timothy.

And of course, that's exactly how slaves were obtained by the slave traders. They got their victims from Africa. Then they would go on to sell them on the other side of the Atlantic. And by and large, they were people who had been kidnapped and then sold as stolen property. And in the chapter that we're looking at now, in Exodus chapter 21 and verse 16, it says this, it affirms what we read in the New Testament. Verse 16, chapter 21 says, whoever steals a man and sells him and anyone found in possession of him, he shall be put to death. And so both the Old Testament and the New Testament clearly explicitly condemn the exact practice that was the basis for the institution of slavery in the American South. And so we can't transfer what we think of that institution into the Bible and read that into the Bible when the Bible speaks of slavery. As we'll see in our passage this morning, the slavery that is described in the Bible is much different from that. We need to keep that in mind as we read these verses so that we can get a better grasp of what these verses actually meant to the people of Israel then and to hopefully disengage from our minds these preconceptions of what slavery is like in all times and all places.

A second general comment is this - these laws in the Old Testament are not God's prescription for an ideal society. So on the one hand, these are laws even to the very details of all these laws, they were given by God, they were given to Moses by the Lord who is infinite in wisdom and justice and goodness and truth. And so all of these laws are inherently good and just. But on the other hand, in giving his laws to the people of Israel, we know that God accommodated, he made room for the weakness, even the sinfulness of his people. In other words, God gave these laws not to create an ideal society, but to govern and to regulate a society of sinners, of fallen people, flawed people, who inevitably would try to hurt and take advantage of one another.

And we know that this is true of the Old Testament laws from the teaching of Jesus. You remember when the Pharisees asked Jesus about why Moses commanded them to give their

wives a certificate of divorce in certain circumstances? Jesus corrected the Pharisees. He says in Matthew 19, 8, because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so. In other words, what Jesus told the Pharisees is, what you call a commandment, that rule that you find in the scriptures, was actually a concession. It was a concession to the hardness of your hearts.

God gave you that law to regulate an evil practice because God's will for marriage is that once a man and a woman are joined together in holy matrimony, they are to remain married until death do them part. But because the Lord knew that the people of Israel were fallen, they were sinful, that they would seek to divorce, he gave laws to regulate, to minimize, or to regulate that practice, to minimize the hurt and the evil that might result from it. And so sometimes God gave laws to his people to constrain them in their sinful ways, to ensure that an evil practice would not do more harm than it otherwise would. And these laws then, they don't represent God's blueprint for a perfect ideal society on earth.

You see that in verse 10 of our passage. If you look at verse 10, it says, if he takes another wife to himself, well, this doesn't mean that God condoned or sanctioned or approved the practice of polygamy. We know that God does not approve of polygamy for the same reason why Jesus told that God does not approve of the practice of divorce, because from the beginning, it was not so. From the beginning, it was not so. God created Adam and Eve. Their marriage was normative for all marriages to follow. One man, one woman, and a lifelong union between the two. And so when you read of laws such as these, these laws this morning that regulate a system of slavery or indentured servanthood, that doesn't mean that the institution itself was part of God's design or blueprint for a perfect society for his people. So that's another thing to keep in mind as we read this passage and other passages that follow from it.

A third general comment related to that is this. These laws are not meant to be directly applied to societies and nations today. And why is that? It's because unlike the nation of Israel, the church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual entity. The church is not a political body. It's not a geographical nation with borders and lands and an army and all of that. Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world. And so when Jesus Christ came into the world, the people of God from that point on were no longer constituted as a nation state with, again, borders and land and various laws governing the civil, the judicial life of the nation.

And so with the end of the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God came the end of these civil and judicial laws that governed their people as a nation. They no longer apply to the church, not directly. They no longer apply to nations today. Now, there are principles enshrined in these laws that should inform the laws of any nation, but the laws themselves, there's not an immediate transference of the laws from the Old Testament to what should be the laws of nations today.

Our confession of faith puts it this way, when it speaks of the judicial, the civil laws that God gave to the people of Israel, it says that these laws have expired together with the state of that people, not obligating or not obliging any other now further than the general equity thereof may require. And so what that means is, for example, the government of the United States is under no divine obligation to take these laws that God gave to the people of Israel when they were a nation state and to make them the laws of our nation. Now, in a more perfect world, our government would always seek to make laws that are moral, that are just, that are good according to the general teaching of the word of God. But these Old Testament laws are not meant to be a divine law code that nations today must adopt as their own. And so that's another thing to keep in mind as we read these laws from the Old Testament.

But having said all that, these laws are still a part of the inspired word of God. In 2 Timothy, when Paul says that all scripture is God-breathed and profitable for us in different ways, he says earlier that the scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation. That includes all of scripture. That includes the passage that we're looking at today, these laws that God gave to the people of Israel. And so they are worthy of our time. And so we'll consider how these laws apply to the people of Israel, and then we'll draw some lessons for us as the church today.

Detailed Laws for Hebrew Servants

So, first, let's just walk through these verses and try to understand what these laws are saying. Look at verse 2. So this is verse 2, chapter 21. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing. Again, we hear that language and our minds immediately think of those horrendous drawings that we have seen of slave auctions, of people being sold as if they were livestock or something like that, but that's not what's happening here. When you buy a Hebrew slave, that means something like when you purchase the right to a man's labor with his full consent. And when that was the case, when one person purchased the rights to a man's labor with his consent, the one who had the right to that man's

labor, the master, he had the right to that labor, not for a whole lifetime, but for six years, only for six years. In verse two, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing.

And so if a servant or the slave, if he worked hard and learned a skill, after six years of this kind of indentured servanthood, he would be in a position in which he was able to make a living, to provide for himself, to provide for a family. This was an arrangement that could especially benefit a young man who was desperately poor, or perhaps he was deep in debt, or maybe he had simply lived unwisely, irresponsibly, or all of the above. But this was an arrangement by which he could get his feet back on the ground, he could learn a skill, and after six years, he could make a living, become a productive member of society. So this was a way that, actually, this would be a help to some people in the society then.

And in verse 3, the Lord ensured that this arrangement would not break up families. In verse three, we read this. If he comes in single, he shall go out single. If he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. But then verse four addresses a different situation. Look at verse four. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her masters and he shall go out alone. Now what's assumed here in verse four is that the woman that the slave marries, that she herself is also a servant belonging to the same master. And the reason for this law was to protect the interests of the master. The master had rights to her service, whether she was committed to him to be his servant for a period of years or whether for life, it wouldn't have been just if she was taken from him without fulfilling that commitment.

But this law in verse four doesn't mean that the husband just abandoned his family. Presumably, this freed slave, he would find some other way to continue to be the husband and father to his family. Perhaps he had the option to purchase the freedom of his wife and family. We just don't honestly know enough about how all of this worked to say for sure. But we can safely say that verse four, the intent of it was not to break up families. We know that is the case because that would contradict what the Lord said in verse 3, and it would also contradict everything that God has revealed of the scripture concerning marriages and families.

And there was one option open to this slave who would be freed, who had married in the meantime, that given the right circumstances may have been very attractive to him, and that is he could decide to remain a servant of his master for the rest of his life. So look at verses 5 and

6. But if the slave plainly says, I love my master, my wife and my children, I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to God and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl and he shall be his slave forever.

This is, it strikes us as a kind of strange thing, this ceremony that the Lord gave to the people of Israel to make this person the permanent servant of his master. There's at least a couple of reasons for this ritual of ear piercing. First, it would have kept the servant from making a rash commitment. You would have to be pretty committed to this course of action to be willing to undergo this ceremony, which your ear would be pierced with an awl against the doorpost. But also because it was a lifelong commitment, the ritual, the pierced ear, would serve as an enduring public testimony of that commitment. And so from that point on, neither the master nor the servant could ever say, I never made that promise. I never made that arrangement to be a servant here in your house forever. The master could not say, I don't want you in my house anymore. You have to leave. No, they could both, either one could point to the pierced ear and say, no, this is a reminder to us that, yes, we both entered into this commitment, this arrangement.

Laws Regarding Female Servants

Now, things were a little different with the female servants. Look at verse 7. Again, we've got to understand that this verse is not saying what it sounds like it may be saying to us. It's not picturing some terrible situation in which a father heartlessly sells his daughter into slavery because he's more interested in the money he can get for her than being a father to his daughter. What this verse is actually describing is something more like an arranged marriage. The daughter would be given to this other family, presumably a family with more means, a wealthier family, with the idea that she would likely end up marrying one of the master's sons or perhaps one of his servants.

It's important to remember that in this society, it was not like today where a single woman could go out and make a living, have a career and so on. That just really wasn't an option for young women living in Israel in these days. And so this arrangement was really meant for the good of the daughter. It wasn't for the profit of the father, but that she might be married and find security, stability in that. And we see how the Lord ensured that this daughter who was given to the master had certain rights, rights that could not be violated.

So look at verse eight. If she does not please her master who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has broken faith with her. So if for some reason her service did not please the master, he couldn't just willy-nilly sell her to pagan slave traders. That would have been contrary to God's will. Rather, he had to let her be redeemed. That is, her family had to have the opportunity to purchase her freedom so that she could return back to her biological family. And if this was the case, for some reason, this was an indication that the master had failed. If this whole arrangement fell apart and she was redeemed by her family, it says in verse eight that the master has broken faith with her.

This female servant continued to have rights if she did marry one of the master's sons. So look at verse nine. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as a daughter. In other words, if she marries a son, she shall be like a daughter to the master. She would be fully adopted. She would no longer be considered just a servant, but a daughter in the family. And then if the son took another wife, which, again, would be contrary to the will of God in terms of his creation design for us, but again, he gave this law to regulate the practice of polygamy, if the son took another wife and failed to fulfill his obligations to his first wife as her husband, she was free to leave.

So look at verses 10 and 11. If he takes another wife, that is, if the husband that she married, a son of the master, if he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing without payment of money. And so these then are some of the fine print, the laws that God attached to his covenant with Israel. One way to think about these laws is to see them as specific applications of the Ten Commandments. One way or the other, the Lord is saying, this is how you keep these moral laws, these Ten Commandments in the specific situations that you will encounter in your life together as a nation. But you can see that God's concern was that the vulnerable, the poor, would not be exploited by the rich, by the powerful, with some kind of ruthless practice of slavery, but that there would be guardrails, regulations, ways to ensure that that practice would be kept from becoming something very exploitative and hurtful to others.

The Paradox of Christian Freedom and Servanthood

Now, if we step back a minute and think about the bigger context in which we find this passage, if we think about the situation in which the Israelites found themselves when God gave them

these laws, a striking picture emerges from that. First of all, we need to remember that the Israelites, as a people, they were a free people. It was not so long ago that the Lord had redeemed them from Egypt by His mighty power, by an outstretched arm, with signs and wonders, and all of the things that we saw in the Exodus, the Lord brought his people out of Egypt. He made them his own. He gave them freedom. He liberated them. They were no longer slaves to Pharaoh. They were no longer slaves to his ruthless taskmasters, but they were truly now at the foot of Mount Sinai, a free people, a free people having been freed to serve and to worship the Lord.

But even in their freedom, some of the Israelites at least, some of them would be servants, even slaves of others. And so for some of the Israelites, they would be at the very same time both free, free in the Lord, but also servants of others. The words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians really described the situation of some of these Israelites. He says, for he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. And so it was possible to be both free and a slave at the same time.

And this describes you and me as believers in Jesus Christ. As a believer in Christ, as one who belongs to Christ, you are both free and you are a slave. Martin Luther, in one of his tracts, one of his little booklets, he put it this way. He said, a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. But he also said, a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. Sounds paradoxical. How can these two things be true at the same time? But they are true. As a Christian, you are the free lord of all. And you are free, you are the lord of all, even because you have the promise from God that God in His almighty power, His sovereign rule over all things, that He is working out all things for your ultimate blessedness, salvation, for your good.

And so what that means is that all things are your servants. All things work together for your good. God makes all things, he puts everything into the service of your salvation and your eternal bliss and glory one day. And so you are the free lord of all, subject to none, but you are at the same time the servant of all, because as a Christian, you are called to love your neighbor in the very same way that Christ loved you, as a servant, freely, willingly, gladly. Paul applies this to himself, this status of being both free and lord of all, and at the same time, a slave and subject to all. He says in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 19, for though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all.

Serving Out of Love for the Master

And in this passage, the Holy Spirit gives us a beautiful picture of what true Christian servanthood looks like. In verse five, we have a servant who truly wants to stay with his master. He wants to serve his master. And not just because it's a good place to make a living, it's comfortable, it's okay, but because he loves his master. He says in verse five, I love my master, my wife, and my children. I will not go out free. And in a sense, this describes the way that we should see ourselves as those who are servants of Christ. It is out of love to Him, out of love for our Master, that we ought to serve Him. The people of God are our family. It is out of love for them that we ought to serve them, because Christ loved them and made them His own. We, too, ought to love those whom Christ has loved.

The servant in verse five in our passage, he's fulfilling what the Apostle Paul would say in Galatians 5:13, through love, serve one another. And so the slave had been set free, but he, in his freedom, chooses to be a slave, to be a servant, to serve his master whom he loves, to serve the family whom he loves. He gave up his personal freedom because he knew a greater freedom, the freedom to serve out of love for his master and for his family. Is that the way that you view yourself as a Christian serving Christ? I hope that you do not see Christ as a hard taskmaster. I hope that you do not see Jesus as one who places upon you these burdens that are too heavy to bear. To serve the Lord is burdensome, it is difficult, it is joyless. That's not how we ought to be as believers in Christ. We ought to serve Christ because we love Him. We serve Him because we love Him for what He has done for us, because He has first loved us.

The Bible says His commandments are not burdensome. His yoke is easy. And when we truly love Christ for all that He has done for us, for who He is as our Savior, then serving Him is something we want to do, we love to do, because He has made us His own. And what's more, this servant in chapter five is also a shadow of the greatest servant who ever lived, that is Jesus. Just as the servant presented himself in this passage to his master whom he loved, he presented himself to him. He devoted himself to him, to his service forever. So in his coming into the world as man, Jesus presented himself to his heavenly father, to his master, to do the will of his father forever and ever, to be his servant.

And out of love both for his father and for us, Jesus made himself our servant. And that service came to its greatest expression when Jesus willingly went to the cross out of obedience to his father, but out of love for his father, out of love for his people whom he would redeem. He went

to the cross and there bore the pain, the shame, the curse of God, that terrible agony of soul and body that we cannot even begin to fathom. He bore that judgment that we deserved for you and me, that our sins might be forgiven, that we might receive the gift of eternal life.

And so if your trust is in the Lord Jesus Christ, He is your Savior. He came not to be served, but to serve for your salvation. But He is also your Lord. Yes, he came to serve, but he is also one who is to be served by you, those whom he has redeemed. And for that same reason, we ought to be servants of others for the sake of Jesus. Jesus set for us an example of service. He washed the feet of his disciples. He even laid down his life for us. And this is how we ought to serve others, by making ourselves the servant of others, by taking the lower place.

Listen to how Martin Luther describes in the same booklet that I quoted from earlier. Listen to how he describes what should be the attitude of every believer in Christ. He says, he ought to think, although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure free mercy, so that from now on, I need nothing except faith, which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart and with an eager will, do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see as necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.

This should describe our service as those who belong to Christ, our service to our master, our service to others for the sake of Christ. Jesus said, the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many. There is nothing more like Christ than to voluntarily serve your neighbor for his good. And nothing pleases God more than when you do this out of love for Christ, because we love him from the heart for all that he has done for you. Let's pray.