



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Holy Nation

Reverend Scott Johnson | March 1, 2026 | Exodus 22:16 - 23:9

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 22, verse 16, through chapter 23, verse nine. So let's give our attention to God's word. This is God's inerrant, infallible, and holy word.

If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride price for virgins. You shall not permit a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death. Whoever sacrifices to any God other than the Lord alone shall be devoted to destruction.

You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him for you are 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 money lender to him and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbor's cloak and 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, and 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.

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit siding with the many so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it. You shall rescue it with him.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

New Testament Reading

Our New Testament reading is 1 Peter, Chapter 1, 13 through 16, 1 Peter 1, 13 through 16. Therefore, preparing your minds for action, be sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. Since it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Holiness Amidst Peer Pressure

There is no kind of pressure like peer pressure. We all experience it and we've all succumbed to it. There's something within us that really wants to be like everybody else, something within us that wants to do what everybody else is doing. We don't want to stand out as odd or different or not with it. And when it comes to spiritual and moral concerns, this desire that we have within us to conform, to be like everyone else, to be like the world around us, this can lead us into all kinds of trouble.

The Lord knew that the people of Israel were going to struggle with this temptation to want to conform to the world. He knew that after he brought his people into the promised land, after they settled there, that they would naturally see the nations around them and that they would want to be like those nations around them. And so one of the purposes of the many laws that God gave to Israel was to teach them that because they belonged to the Lord, they were not to be like the nations around them. They were not to be conformed to the world, but they were to be holy. They were to be a people who were distinct from the rest of the world in their life and in their worship.

And this call that the Lord gave to his people to be a holy people, a people belonging to a holy God, this is, really the unifying theme in all of these laws that we just read. We've been going through the various civil laws that the Lord gave to the people of Israel from Mount Sinai. He gave them to Moses. Moses gave them to the people. Our passage this morning reads kind of like a laundry list, like miscellaneous laws. There are various statutes and rules here that cover a large variety of subjects, but one thing that we can say that they all have in common is this, that in these laws, the Lord was calling his people to be a holy people, a people different from the world, a people set apart from the world to belong to God and to reflect that holiness, separateness in the way in which they lived and worshiped. They were not to be like the pagans, the unbelievers that would surround them.

And so we'll look at these laws today with that in mind. And as we look at these laws, we'll proceed in the same way. Hopefully it's become familiar to us by now. First, we'll consider how these laws, what their significance was for the people of Israel when Moses gave them to them. And then we'll consider what lesson can we learn from these laws for us as believers in Christ today.

Laws Regarding Sexual Purity and Capital Offenses

So first, what these laws meant for Israel. So we'll just go through these laws and draw some lessons from them and consider what they meant for the people of Israel. Also, we'll draw some lessons, what they mean for us today as well.

Verses 16 and 17 are laws that gave, or the Lord gave to the people of Israel to preserve the sanctity of marriage by forbidding men and women to have sexual relations with one another outside the bonds of marriage. And we won't get into all the nitty-gritty details, but the gist of

these laws is that there would be serious consequences for an unmarried man if he seduced an unmarried woman and slept with her. The man in that case, he would be guilty of stealing her virginity. And thus, not only would he bring dishonor upon her and her family, but in that social context, he would have rendered her virtually unmarriageable. And so he'd have to compensate the family. He would have to pay the family what is called a bride price or an engagement present.

And if her father consented to the marriage, he would have to marry this young woman whom he slept with. If her father did not consent to the marriage, he would still have to pay that same amount as a bride price as a way of compensating her and her family for the harm that he had done to them by seducing this young woman. And so this law, along with the seventh commandment that forbids adultery, and along with all of the other laws that we read in the Old Testament that condemn various kinds of sexual immorality, these laws together, they taught the Israelites that one thing that holiness means is sexual purity. As we saw when we consider the seventh commandments, any kind of sexual activity outside the covenant bond of marriage that was sinful, that was forbidden by the Lord for his people.

And from what we know of the pagan nations that would surround the people of Israel, the Israelites, if in fact they did live according to these laws, if in fact they were sexually pure, they would have been very, very different from the nations that surrounded them. The pagan nations, the pagan peoples in those days were very much engaged in all kinds of sexually immoral practices. Now today, this exact law doesn't apply to the Church. We don't transfer this law and apply it word for word to the Church today. However, it is still very much the will of God today for His people, for us, that sexual relations take place only within marriage, only within a biblical marriage, one man and one woman. Anything other than that is sin.

And just like the Israelites would be very different from the people around them if they kept these commandments, so we too, as the people of God, insofar as we are faithful to honor God in keeping the seventh commandment, keeping the marriage bed undefiled, protecting the marriage bond as the one place in which sexual activity takes place, insofar as we are faithful to do this, we are going to be very, very different from the world around us as well. And this is one way, by the grace of God, that we will demonstrate that we are a holy people, that we belong to a holy God.

Verses 18 through 20 list three separate offenses for which the guilty party was subject to capital punishment. He would have to be killed. Sorcery, bestiality, and idolatry. And all three of these practices were characteristic of the nations that existed at this time that would surround the people of Israel. And so this would be one area in which the Israelites would feel that peer pressure. Everyone else is doing it. We should as well. But these were sins against God that were so heinous. They were practices so dangerous that the spiritual or they were so dangerous to the spiritual health of the people of God as a whole that the penalty for them was death. The death penalty for those who committed these sins.

Now today, of course, God does not will the church to put anybody to death for anything. Israel, as the church then was a political entity, a nation, a geographical, a national kingdom, but the Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual kingdom. Therefore, we do not put anybody to death. However, when a person in the church is guilty of a serious sin and that person refuses to repent of their sin, then the church, after pursuing formal church discipline, must declare that that person is no longer a member of the church. They are no longer able to take part in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And this action on the part of the church today, this is called excommunication. They are no longer able to commune with the people of God in the Lord's Supper because the church declares them to be no longer part of God's people.

And this is the spiritual equivalent of what was then the death penalty. However, thankfully today, with excommunication, unlike with the death penalty, there was always the hope of restoration, that the offender, although he or she is guilty of grievous sins and has been excommunicated, nevertheless, that God will bring them back to repentance and faith. And so we pray, of course, that the Lord would bring back one who has been excommunicated back into full communion with the Lord Jesus, back into full communion with the church. But the concern both for the people of Israel then, the concern for the church today behind these laws and behind this penalty of excommunication, the concern is the holiness, the purity of the people of God. Those who have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have been called out of darkness to belong to Him, we cannot, we must not engage in the sinful, the evil practices of the unbelieving world. There must be a distinction. And therefore the church at times must carry out this kind of discipline to declare this person excommunicated from the church until they repent and come back to faith.

Concern for the Vulnerable and the Sojourner

And so holiness is involved in all of that, but there is more to holiness than just avoiding these kind of flagrant, blatant sins, like sorcery and idolatry, but holiness is also a matter of showing love and compassion to those who are weak and vulnerable. And that is the concern of the laws in verses 21 through 24, and in chapter 23, verse 9. The Israelites were not to oppress or to exploit or take advantage of the sojourner, the widow, and the fatherless. These were all classes of people in the ancient world who were liable to be trampled upon by others. They were weak. They were defenseless. The Israelites knew themselves all too well from their recent history what it meant, what it was like to be oppressed, to be taken advantage of, to be trampled upon. They suffered at the hands of Pharaoh, the taskmasters. They were sojourners in Egypt, but they were to be different when they were the ones who were in a position of more power or authority. They were the people belonging to the Lord and the God who saved them was a God who had special concern for the weak and the vulnerable. Therefore, the Israelites were not to mistreat the strangers and the widows and the orphans in their midst.

Now, we need to take a little bit of time, a minute or two, to look at verse 21 especially, in our current political situation. I think it's important for us to hear what this verse is saying and what it's not saying. So I'll read verse 21. You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. Now, in the immigration debates that are kind of raging right now in our current context, this verse is often appealed to. However, this verse does not say a thing about how the United States government should go about pursuing an immigration policy that is just and wise, a policy that is in the best interest of the nation as a whole. This verse does not prescribe any specific kind of immigration laws or immigration policies for any nation today. So it's not saying that.

However, what it is saying is that Christians, the people of God, we must treat those from other nations, those who are in our midst, who have come here from other places, we must treat them with fairness, with justice, and even compassion. So often immigrants, no matter how they came here, they are vulnerable. They are vulnerable to mistreatment, to oppression, because they are strangers living in a foreign land. But having said that, as Christians, we can certainly support immigration laws, we can support immigration restrictions, we can support the enforcement of those laws. We can do so without wrongdoing, without wronging or oppressing the foreigners who live in our country, or even those who want to live in our country. And so verse 21 does not

mandate what our nation's immigration policy is supposed to look like, but it does tell us as Christians what our basic attitude should be toward the stranger who is in our midst.

Our basic attitude should be to carry out what Jesus taught us, what we call the golden rule, that we are to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And we can apply that same rule to all sorts of people in our society, not only those who are from other nations living in our midst, but also those who are more vulnerable to oppression or exploitation. Think of the forgotten, the lonely elderly among us. Think of children who have no families, have no homes. Think of the unborn children who are at risk of abortion. If we were in their shoes, how would we want to be treated by others? That is how we should think of and how we should treat those who are in positions of weakness.

And God is the same God today who gave these laws to the Israelites back then. God still has a special concern for those who are weak and vulnerable in society. And he declared just how strong his concern was when he told the Israelites that if they did wrong and mistreat the vulnerable in their midst, that he would carry out a very severe judgment against them. Look at verses 23 and 24. The Lord says, 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. And so we as the people of God, we too should have the same concern, the same care, the same mindset of compassion to those in our midst who are weak and vulnerable and know that God has that concern for them and that he watches over them in a special way.

Fairness, Respect, and Justice in the Community

Moving on in our laws here, verses 25 through 27 are also concerned with the fair treatment of the weak. But this time the concern is with the poor. The Israelites were not to act like loan sharks towards their brothers when they needed a loan, they needed money. They were to lend their money to the poor and not charge interest to them. And they were not to take away some vital piece of property of theirs as collateral. For example, the cloak that they used to sleep at night, they were not to withhold that from them. What else were they going to sleep in at night, the Lord says. So they were to show mercy towards their poor brothers in loaning money to them.

And then in verses 28 to 31, the subject of the law changes to the proper respect and worship that is due to God. The Israelites were not to revile God. They were not to revile any God-given ruler that was set over them. And they were to faithfully bring to the Lord their offerings from their wealth. And they were to consecrate to the Lord their firstborn sons, both human and animal. For their firstborn sons, and for certain kinds of animals, they would consecrate to the Lord by redeeming them with money. But for other kinds of animals, they were to be sacrificed to the Lord. The Israelites were not to eat the flesh of animals killed by other animals. We might call this the roadkill law. They were not to eat any dead animal that they saw on the side of the road that may have been killed by another animal. And insofar as the Israelites obeyed these laws, they demonstrated that they were set apart to the Lord as a holy people, a special people.

In chapter 23, verses one through three and six through eight, the concern there is with upholding justice, upholding justice both in their general dealings with one another and also in a court of law. There are so many ways that we can pervert justice. We can spread lies about other people. We can bear false witness in a courtroom. We can go along with popular opinion just because it's popular and we don't want to swim against the tide. We can show favoritism towards the poor just because they are poor. We can show favoritism towards the rich just because they are rich. And all of these ways of injustice are either explicitly or implicitly forbidden in these laws to the Israelites. If the judges of Israel accepted a false charge or condemned the innocent to death or accepted a bribe, they would be perverting justice.

And so part of the holiness of Israel was that in all of their dealings with one another, whether it was just in the general life situations that emerge or whether it was in a more formal court of law, the Israelites were to be very concerned that they dealt with one another in terms of justice, fairness, equity, what was right, what was true, and to the degree that the Israelites upheld justice, they, again, would have been distinct from their pagan neighbors. In that way, they would have reflected the holiness of God. We know all too well, just from our own observations of the world, that the default condition of societies in this fallen world is that the justice systems in our nations are very far from perfect. They are very flawed. There is no perfect justice in this world. And yet the Israelites were to be different. They were to uphold what is true, what is just, what is fair in all of their dealings with one another.

Love for Enemies and the Distinctiveness of God's People

And then finally, in verses four and five of chapter 23, the Lord commanded the holiness of his people in the most demanding way, and that is his people were to show concern even to those who were their enemies. If an Israelite saw his enemy's ox or donkey wandering away from his home, he was to lead that animal back to the home of his enemy. Or if he saw his enemy's donkey collapse under the weight of his load, and his enemy was trying to help his donkey up, but he wasn't able to get him back up on his feet, the Israelite was to go out and to help his neighbor, even if he was at odds with him.

Now, obviously, this is the exact opposite of what anybody would naturally do in that situation. It's not hard to imagine an Israelite looking out of his window one day and smiling with perverse pleasure as he sees that neighbor whom he can't stand trying to get his donkey up back on his feet. And he's just watching, enjoying the spectacle, but that's not what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to go out and to help his enemy get his donkey back up again. And of course, Jesus taught the same teaching. He says, you have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And insofar as the Israelites kept that commandment, to do good to their enemies, to love those even that they were at odds with, that they showed themselves to be holy, that they were people who belong to the Lord.

So the general theme of all these laws is this: I am the Lord who is holy, you are my people, therefore you are to be holy. You are not to be like everyone else in the world, but you are set apart, you belong to me, and this is what that holiness will look like in your day-to-day life as my people.

So let's consider now what the significance of these laws are for us as believers today. I've said this before, I'll say it again, it's worth repeating. We do not take these laws from the Old Testament that were given to the people of God under the old covenants. We don't take these and apply them word for word for the church today. We don't take them and say, these are the laws that the nations of the world today should have as their laws. Again, Israel as a nation was a political kingdom. It needed these laws, but the church today is a spiritual kingdom. We have laws to be sure. Christ is our lawgiver, but it is not these specific laws. So they do not apply to us in the same way that they did to them.

However, having said that, insofar as these various civil laws are faithful applications of the 10 commandments of the moral law, then they do show us how we are to conduct ourselves as the

people of God. And these laws will help us, even as Christians today, to see that God's will for us today is that we are a people who are holy, a holy people.

Living as a Holy People in a Pagan World

So listen again to what God says to us in 1 Peter. This is the passage that I read from 1 Peter earlier. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you as holy, you also shall be holy in all your conduct. Since it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy. So Peter was writing to Christians who were Gentiles. And before they came to faith in Christ, they were the pagans who were living lives that were far from holy. They lived according to the passions of their former ignorance. They were unbelievers. They lived according to their sinful desires and passions. And they weren't all that different than the pagans who surrounded the people of Israel under the old covenant. But once they came to know Christ, they were called to live holy lives. And as they were faithful to do so, these Christians in the first century that Peter was writing to, they would have also set themselves apart as a holy people. They would have been distinct from their neighbors, from the world in which they lived.

And what was true for the Israelites in the Old Testament, what was true for the Christians in the New Testament, the early Christians, is also just as much true for us today. We are living, we live in a world that by and large does not acknowledge God, does not worship God, is not seeking truth and holiness and righteousness. We are living in a society whose values and beliefs and practices are far more pagan than they are Christian. And so we find ourselves in the very similar situation as the people of God have always found themselves in. There are so many ways in which our culture denies fundamental biblical truths. The truth that God is the creator. We are the creature. The truth that God rules over this creation by his sovereign power and wisdom and goodness. The truth that there is an absolute right and wrong that is given to us by a transcendent Lord. The truth of the reality of sin. The truth of the reality of the coming judgment of heaven, of hell, of salvation in Jesus Christ.

These are all truths that our society, that our culture denies or suppresses. They seem like quaint religious ideas from a distant past. And as a result of that, we find ourselves living in a world in which we are enshrouded in great spiritual darkness, in which we are immersed in great moral confusion. But you, as the people of God, as those who belong to Jesus Christ, are called to holiness. You are called to worship the true and the living God and to live according to his

word. And if there is any silver lining to the sad reality that we are living in a society that is increasingly pagan in nature, it is this, that to the degree that we as Christians, by the grace of God, reflect the holiness of God in our lives and worship, to that degree, the truth of Christ will shine all the more brightly in that moral and spiritual darkness that surrounds us.

We can put it this way: that God causes the light of his own holy character to shine in the world through his people whose lives he is making to conform more and more to his own image, to reflect his holiness. And so God's own light, his own holiness is reflected in his people as we are faithful by the grace of God to serve and to worship him. And so Jesus said to his disciples, you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. We are the light of the world because we belong to God and we reflect his holiness. And insofar as we do that, we are reflecting nothing other than the truth of God's character, which is light, which is holiness and righteousness.

Laws as an Expression of God's Character

And one thing that that means is that these laws that God gave to Israel back then, the laws that he gives us today, the Ten Commandments, the moral law, that these are really an expression of his own holiness and righteousness. You know, we read these laws and sometimes we get the impression, or sometimes we ask, why in the world did God give this law to his people? Sometimes we might even think this seems like such an arbitrary law. What's the purpose? What's the point of it? But these are not arbitrary laws. God did not give these laws to his people just because he could, because he is God. But these laws made up a pattern of holiness and righteousness that would be an expression of the righteousness, the character of God himself.

And so because God is pure, because God is a God who is infinite in purity, in righteousness, in goodness, we are to be pure in sexual matters. Because God is the one true and living God, because there is no God beside him, his people then reflect that insofar as we give worship and service and obedience to God alone. Because God has a special concern for the weak and the vulnerable, we manifest the character of God as we show special concern and compassion towards the weak and the vulnerable. And because God is perfect in justice, we are to be just in all our dealings. And because God loves his enemies, because God so loved us when we were his enemies, he so loved us that he gave us his son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins, so we too are to love our enemy. We are even to go out of our way to help our enemy when he is in need.

And so one thing that these laws mean for you as a Christian is this: they reveal to you the holy character of God, that you might better reflect in this world his holiness, that God might be glorified through you in this world, in this world of darkness and confusion. As you continue to serve and to worship God, you show forth the truth, the light, the righteousness of God, who He is.

Holiness, Communion with God, and True Happiness

But the issue is really deeper than that. God wants us to be holy, not just so that His truth may shine more brightly through us, which is true, but it's also true, and this is even perhaps an even deeper truth, and that is, it is only in holiness that you can enjoy true communion with God. Only as you are pursuing the holiness of God can you enjoy that communion, that fellowship with God that he created you to enjoy forever. This is why Jesus Christ came into the world. He came into the world to make us holy so that we might have communion with God.

And Jesus Christ makes us holy in two ways. First of all, he makes us holy by giving us his perfect righteousness. We are sinners by nature. We have broken God's commandments. In us, in our hearts, there is no inherent holiness, righteousness, purity, but the opposite, there is corruption, immorality, there is sin. But God came into the world in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, in order to live a perfectly righteous life for us, in order to bear our sin and guilt for us upon the cross, so that by coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you receive as a gift His perfect righteousness, His holiness, and that is yours now and forevermore. As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are already holy, you are already sanctified, you are already righteous because God looks at the righteousness of Christ and He counts it as your very own. And so Jesus makes us holy in that way.

But the second way that Jesus came to make us holy is to give us His Holy Spirit so that He might work within us, that we might grow in personal righteousness, personal holiness, so that we might become more and more what we already are in the sight of God. And this is your sanctification. This is growing in holiness, growing in righteousness, and only to the degree that you grow in this holiness by God's grace, only to that degree will you enjoy the fullness of joy and peace in spiritual life.

We could put it this way: happiness follows holiness. Happiness follows holiness. And that is why if you are a Christian, and I trust we are all believers here, that is why as a Christian, you

will not find joy in Christ as long as you are engaged in sexually immoral conduct. You will not have joy in Christ if you devote yourself to any other person or thing as an idol. You will not find joy in Christ if you only live for yourself, if you show no concern for helping others or serving others in need. You will not find joy in Christ if you are not living for him a life of self-sacrifice, self-giving. You will not find joy in Christ if you are not dealing with others justly and fairly. You will not find joy in Christ if you do not love your enemy, forgive your enemy. If you harbor bitterness and resentment in your heart, you will not enjoy the fullness of that life and peace that Christ came to give us.

And so God calls you to holiness in all of these ways expressed in these laws so that you might enjoy that fullness of life, that fellowship, that communion with the Lord. That is why God created us. That is why God saved us, that we might know Him and know life, eternal life, and be filled with that joy and peace in knowing Him. But we only enjoy that to the fullest as we are pursuing the holiness to which He calls us. And so holiness, at the end of the day, doesn't mean being holier than thou, but it means growing in Christlikeness so that the life of Christ may abound in you.

And I'll end with these words from our Lord Jesus. He says, if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I've kept my father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Let's pray.