

LIVING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO IS COMPLETELY JUST

Leviticus 24:10-23

INTRODUCTION

Up to this point the book of Leviticus has been a fairly straightforward explanation of how the people of Israel are to relate to God through the rituals associated with the tabernacle. God just finished explaining to Israel the seven holy days and weeks that they were to observe in the land of Canaan and how the priests were to keep the lamp in the outer chamber of the tabernacle lit and the twelve loaves of bread on the table in that outer chamber week by week. But now, out of nowhere, the instruction manual is interrupted with a story about this mixed race person, a man with a Jewish mother and an Egyptian father who uses God's name in cursing a Jewish guy he was fighting. What is going on here? Why is this story reported and why is it reported here? If you took this story out of Leviticus, nothing would be lost. In fact, it would make more sense as chapter 25 is more instructions on how God wants Israel to live when they get into the land of Canaan.

There are at least three reasons for why God through Moses records this story at this place in this book of worship instructions for Israel. First, this story reminds us that this entire book is part of a much larger story. This book is not simply a list of rules but is part of this story of God's entering into human history. These laws are a part of this larger story that begins with the creation of the universe and human beings and their fall into sin and God's choosing of Abraham and making his descendants a great nation, promising to bless all nations through them and delivering them from Egypt and bringing them to Mt. Sinai. This story is God's story. Everyone and everything is part of this story that God is writing. It is not just a story about a nation but includes the stories of all the individuals in that nation as we see here. God sees and knows and cares about what a mixed race man says in the heat of a fight. Do you know this about your life? Your life is part of God's story, the story he is writing. The story of your life fits into and is part of this grand story that God is writing. He is paying attention to the details of your life. You are not living your life in anonymity but right in front of God and he has something to say to you and about you.

Second, look at the story itself. Here we have a man whose mother is Jewish. We know her name and can trace her ancestry as a member of one of the Jewish tribes descended from one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Her name is Shelomith. Her dad's name is Dibri. She is a member of the tribe of Dan. But we also know that this unnamed man has a father who is not Jewish. He is an Egyptian. He is one of those Egyptians who came out of Egypt with Israel who is mentioned in Exodus 12:38. He came out with Israel because of his marriage to this Israelite woman. This son of a Jewish mother and an Egyptian father gets into a fight with a Jewish man in the camp of Israel. The word used here refers to a physical fight, a fistfight. In the course of their fight the racially mixed man used God's name in a curse. We don't know if he cursed God directly or if he cursed his opponent using God's name. Regardless of the details, he broke the third commandment, which says we are not to take God's name in vain. This was a public fight and thus a whole bunch of people heard him utter this curse. The people who heard him curse brought him to Moses and explained what had happened. Verse 12 tells us that neither the people, nor Moses knew what they were supposed to do with him. Why not? Why didn't they know what to do with the man?

The reason they didn't know what to do is because he was not fully Jewish. If the man would have been fully Jewish they would have known that he deserved to die. However, the question they have is this: do the laws God has given to Israel, including the Ten Commandments, apply to racially mixed or fully Gentile people who live among the people of Israel? The fact that Moses did not know the answer to this question shows that he and all of Israel recognized that this law was not directly universal in its application. Moses and the people of Israel knew that this law was for them alone out of all the nations of the world. They knew it was not God's will for Israel to seek to get all other nations to obey this law. Rather, this law applies only to Israelites and as God tells them in this story, those Gentiles who come to live among Israel (vv. 16 & 22). The law against

blasphemy does apply in the case of this mixed race man, not because it is a universal law but because he has come to live among the Israelites. He has joined himself to the people of God and thus he is subject to this law and its penalty.

Third, this story is located here because God wants to remind Israel and us, the readers of this book, that though he has graciously made a way for sinful humans to live with him, we can never forget that his grace does not contradict his justice. He is always a just God who must punish lawbreakers. He is a righteous judge and is able to live with criminals like us, not because he suspends his justice but because he has made a way to be both just and the one who declares guilty people not guilty but perfectly righteous. God is able to live with us, not because he has decided that he doesn't care about sin but because he has made a way to make guilty sinners fit for his presence through Jesus as symbolized in sacrifice and priest and holy days. This story, coming at the end of the instructions regarding the tabernacle, sacrifices and priests reminds us that God's forgiveness of sinners does not contradict, nor repudiate his justice.

MAIN POINT

The holy God who has made a way to live with his people is a just God, therefore...

I. All people are accountable to him (vv. 16 & 22 with Romans 1 & 2)

One of the things that is very clear in this story is that God is the final determiner of what is just and what is not just. The people who heard the man curse did not know what justice required so they brought him to Moses. Moses did not know what justice required and so he had to seek God. Then when God speaks he pronounces what is just in the case of this mixed race person and he announces a whole series of laws and their punishments, thus showing that he alone is the Judge. He alone has the right to decide what is just and what is unjust. His pronouncements cover not only the people of Israel but people of all nationalities who come to live among Israel.

While it is true that these particular laws only directly apply to Israel and those who have come to live among them, yet the fact that God sets forth the principles of justice by which both Jew and Gentile are to be governed does indicate his universal right to judge all people. Since he can choose one nation out of all nations and give them specific laws to obey, he has the right to hold all people accountable. The right of God to judge all the nations, even though he has not given any other nation his law can be seen throughout the biblical story from Genesis up to this point. God gave no law to Sodom and Gomorrah and yet he asserts the right to destroy both of those wicked cities. In fact, if you will remember, in Genesis 18 when God tells Abraham that he is going to destroy the cities, Abraham argues with him. He tells God that because he is the judge of the whole earth that he has to do what is right. Thus, Abraham argues, God cannot destroy the cities if there are righteous people living in those cities because it would be evil to kill the righteous along with the wicked. So he proceeds to negotiate with God, asking him if he will destroy the cities if there are 50 righteous people? God says that if there are 50 righteous people he will not destroy the cities for their sake. In a highly formal conversation, Abraham establishes the fact that God will not kill righteous people along with the wicked because he is a just judge. God destroys both of these cities after rescuing Lot and his wife and two daughters out of them, thus showing that by God's standards there are no righteous people living in these two cities.

Here is the question that his destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah along with his destruction of many other non-Jewish peoples raises: Since God never told Sodom and Gomorrah what he required, what his law was, how can he justly punish them? On what grounds does God hold people to whom he has given no laws accountable? It's easy to understand how he holds people accountable after he gives them his law. This mixed race man, living among the Israelites knew that God had said to not take his name in vain, thus it is clear that he knowingly sinned and should be held accountable. But how does God justly condemn people who do not know his law? Or to ask it another way, how is it just for God to condemn to hell people who have never heard about Christ? The apostle Paul gives two answers to that question in Romans 1 & 2.

First in Romans 1:20-21 he says, “For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen; being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse. For though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God or gave thanks to him...” Every human being, on the basis of the created order knows that there is a Creator who has eternal power and a divine nature. When we look at this glorious creation we all know that a far more glorious Creator exists. Every human being has this knowledge and knowing that this glorious creator exists we also know that we ought always to be taken up with his glory. When you admire a beautiful piece of artwork you do not praise the paint and the canvas, you praise the artist. When your heart is stirred by the beauty of a mountain we all know that the mountain does not deserve praise but the one who made it deserves the honor. In addition, we all know that we ought always to give thanks to him for we realize that all that we have and are comes from him. He alone deserves our admiration and our gratitude. However, how do all humans respond to this knowledge? Paul goes on to say that all of us, though knowing about this glorious creator refuses to glorify and thank him but rather we glorify and give thanks to created persons and objects. We love creation, we glory in it and give thanks to creatures, not the creator, thus God is just in condemning us.

Second, Paul says those who have not heard his law are guilty because, as he says in Romans 2:14-16, even those who do not have his law have a conscience. Every human being has a moral standard by which he judges others. There is no human being, not even the most hardened criminal or convinced relativist who does not regularly make moral judgments. All of us say as we look at the behavior of others, “They ought not to have done that...” or “they ought to have done this...” Every time you or I make a moral pronouncement we are declaring that we have a standard of what constitutes moral behavior. What Paul says is that God is not going to judge those who have never heard his law by his law’s demands. Rather, he will judge each person who has not heard his law by their own standard. C.S. Lewis says it is as if each of us has a tape recorder around our necks that only records the moral pronouncements we make. This is the tape God will use to judge those who have never heard his law, his gospel. No one ever lived up to their own standard, let alone God’s standard. God will justly hold people accountable to what they knew, not to what they did not know. All people, everywhere have a moral standard and so God will display the justice of his condemnation by showing that no one lived up to their own standards. God justly condemns those who know his law and do not obey it and he justly condemns those who do not know his law because they refuse to glorify him, give thanks to him and they refuse to do the good that they know.

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- *And therefore...*

II. All who despise him deserve death (vv. 13-17, 21, 23 with Romans 6:23 & Ephesians 2:3)

This story is shocking to our modern sensibilities. God commands that this man be killed by stoning because he cursed. He used God’s name in vain. He treated God’s name with contempt. Treating God’s name with contempt is no different than treating God himself with contempt. We are not told exactly how he misused God’s name. The most common way that God’s name is misused, especially when we are angry with another person, is to declare that God is going to send your opponent to hell because of what he or she has done. When you damn a person to hell in God’s name you are blaspheming God and deserve to die because you are treating God with contempt. How does this treat God with contempt?

There are several ways that cursing in God’s name treats God with contempt. First, you, a mere man, are presuming to speak with God’s authority. You have not been given God’s authority to condemn this person and yet you speak as if you have his authority. You act as if you have the right to speak for God when no such right has ever been given to you. If I went to the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C. and began telling the ambassador to China that the U.S. was declaring war on China, how would the U.S. government respond to me? I’d be in big trouble because I do not have that authority. Second, you not only claim to have God’s authority but you are also claiming to possess God’s knowledge and wisdom. Judgment can only be rendered by the

judge who knows everything there is to know about a particular person. When you curse in God's name you are declaring that you possess that knowledge when you do not. Third, you are using God for your own ends. You are angry and you want judgment to fall on a person and so you invoke God's name for your purposes. You forget your place. God does not live at your behest. He is not your servant. He does not exist to do your will. Rather it is the other way around. You exist by his will and for his will. Fourth, the bottom line is that when you curse you are treating God as if he either does not know what you are doing or cannot do anything about it. In the whole experience you are treating God as if he is insignificant. You are acting as if he is a nothing and a nobody. You are more than his equal as you declare his judgment on a particular person.

It is this despising of God that all human sin has in common; whether it is the sins committed by those of us who know his law or those sins committed by those who do not know his law. At the heart of all disobedience is contempt for the glory and greatness of God. Just think about the first sin, which is the prototype of all sins. Adam and Eve believed the promises of the serpent instead of the promises of God. They chose their will over his will. They preferred the pleasure of eating the fruit to God himself. In every way you can imagine, their sin was scorn for God. This is why sin deserves death as its penalty. At the creation, every sin merited death. But in Israel not every sin required the death penalty. The Law of Moses is an expression of God's grace in that not every sin requires death and there is mercy available in and through priest and sacrifice for some sins. Ultimately the sacrifices and priest and tabernacle point ahead to the grace of God that covers over all sins through Christ. But the death penalties within the law are that ongoing reminder that this truly is what all sin deserves. It is even stated later in the law, in Deuteronomy 27:26, "Cursed is everyone who does not do everything written in the book of the law." Cursed means that those who do not perfectly obey the law deserve God's eternal condemnation in hell. In the NT God says through the apostle Paul, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) and that all people, Jews and Gentiles, those who have the law and those who do not have the law are objects of God's wrath due to our sin (Ephesians 2:3).

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III. The church is to be a place of justice and mercy (vv. 16-22 with Matthew 5:23-26, 38-42, 7:1-5 & 1 Corinthians 5:12, 6:1-8)

God uses the occasion of this man's blasphemy to restate the law of just retribution, which he stated before in Exodus 21. The reason for the restatement is to show that his principle of justice is to be applied not only to Israelites but also to all non-Jews who live with them. God's principle of justice is that the punishment must fit the crime. It is the principle of retribution and recompense for wrongs done. Despising God by cursing and by murder requires the death penalty. Property damage, that is, you accidentally kill your neighbor's animal, requires replacement of the damaged property, animal for animal. Then the principle is generally stated: "If anyone injures his neighbor, what he has done must be done to him." This is followed by a restatement of the principle in very famous language: "...fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured." It is doubtful that this was ever literally obeyed in Israel. Rather it seems to have been a graphic way of stating the principle: You cannot require a greater punishment to be inflicted than what was done to you and the perpetrator cannot suffer less than what he did to the other. This law of just retribution was to be carried out by the judges within Israel. It was never intended as a justification for revenge taking.

In the NT this language of justice is transformed. First of all, as we have noted before, we do not kill people for any of their sins. We cannot petition the civil government to kill people for cursing God and parents because the Bible says so. What we are to do in the church is to help each other fight against our sins and if someone refuses to fight while calling themselves a Christian then we are to exercise church discipline and remove them from the church. We remind each other of what sin deserves and call each other to repent of sin and to follow

Christ. Second, this story shows us that we are to exercise the principle of equality or non-partiality in the church. We do not favor the rich over the poor or the poor over the rich. We do not respect educated people more than uneducated people. The things that the world reveres and honors are of no consequence in the church. We are all brothers and sisters, joint heirs of Christ, members of God's household. There is no place for prejudice of any kind in the church. We don't play favorites based on worldly standards of any sort. Third, we do not demand that justice be done for ourselves. This is the point that Jesus makes when he quotes Lev. 24:20 in Matthew 5:38-42. We let others win the argument. We do not retaliate or seek revenge. We do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult. We do not make people pay for the wrongs they do to us in our personal relationships, especially in the church. We recognize that Jesus has suffered the just punishment due to us and so we suffer loss and insult rather than requiring others to pay us back. When we confront evil and wrongdoing it is never for the purpose of personal retribution but always for the purpose of protecting others or for the good of the perpetrator. If you are acting out of a spirit of revenge or to make others pay for what they have done, then you are acting contrary to the gospel.

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IV. We should fear his judgment and flee to Christ (v. 23 with 1 John 1:5-2:2)

Imagine with me that you were one of those who witnessed the fight and heard this man curse God. Then, after God tells Moses what to do you go outside the camp and you put your hands on his head, signifying either that the guilt you incurred by hearing the curse is now upon him or that you are adding your testimony to confirm that he committed the blasphemy. Then you join with the rest of the congregation to throw stones, killing him. If you are a person who has been paying attention as God has been speaking from Mt. Sinai, what is going to be going through your head? "I've cursed God. I deserve to have this done to me as well." Every humble person who is participating in the death of this blasphemer knows that they have committed this same sin, maybe not in such a public way, but there is not a human being who has not cursed another person in God's name. In fact, Paul says this about human beings in Romans 3 as he quotes a list of OT verses proving that all humans are sinful and under God's judgment. He quotes Psalm 10:7 which says, "There mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." Isn't your mouth full of cursing and bitterness? All of us should read this story and say to ourselves, I've done this and I deserve this same treatment. This is one of the primary ways that the entire law of God should affect us as we read it. I'm guilty. I deserve to die.

However, the other thing that this knowledge of our sin and how right it would be for us to die for our sins ought to provoke in us is a fleeing to Jesus. We see in Jesus our perfect substitute. He is the sacrifice for our sins. This death we deserve for cursing God was suffered by Christ in the place of everyone who trusts in him. This story confronts us with how hopeless it would be for us to approach God on our own. At the end of the ages when we stand before God as our judge, if we are by ourselves, what hope do we have? Just think about this one thing that you have done. You have cursed God which deserves death. How can you hope to approach God by yourself and not have him condemn you to death? But now you can approach God with Jesus Christ at your side as your defense attorney, your advocate. He is perfectly righteous. He never cursed God but always blessed God and treated him with the honor due him. God will accept him because he obeyed. Also, he is the atoning sacrifice. He took the wrath due to me upon himself and so when the Father condemns me for my cursing, my Advocate says the condemnation has already fallen on him. God's wrath is fully satisfied. There is no anger left for me but only the same love that the Father has for the Son because I am in the Son and the Son is in me by the Spirit, through faith. When your conscience assails you for your many failures to live as you ought and when you hear God's word, his law and feel how miserably you have failed in love to God and man then go to Christ and cling to him. He promises to receive all who come to him, all who trust in him and not

their own merits. Jesus is the only one who can rescue you from the stones of God's wrath, so flee to him and hold fast to him.

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