

## **Exodus Chapters 22-23: The Role of the Law for Christians**

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Exodus

It can be a challenge for a Christian to draw a point from a verse in the book of Exodus or especially Leviticus, and then suggest how that lesson should be applied today. Anyone who tries this should be prepared for the comeback, “Sure, but the Bible also permits slavery and says we can’t eat bacon or shrimp!” Since this happens even within Christian circles, we should not be surprised to find difficulties when applying the Bible to the subject of work in the public sphere. How are we to know what applies today and what doesn’t? How do we avoid the charge of inconsistency in our handling of the Bible? More importantly, how do we let God’s word truly transform us in every area of life? The diversity of laws in Exodus presents one type of challenge. Another comes from the variety of ways that Christians understand and apply the Old Testament in relationship to Christ and the New Testament. Still, the issue of Torah in Christianity is crucial and must be addressed in order for us to glean anything about what this part of the Bible says concerning our work.

The New Testament’s relationship to the law is complex. It includes both Jesus’ saying that “Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law” (Matthew 5:18) and Paul’s statement that “we are discharged from the law...not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit”

(Romans 7:6). These are not two opposing statements, but two ways of saying a common reality—that the Torah continues to reveal God’s gift of justice, wisdom, and inner transformation to those he has brought to new life in Christ. God gave the Torah as an expression of his holy nature and as a consequence of his great deliverance. Reading the Torah makes us aware of our inherent sinfulness and of our need for a remedy in order for us to live at peace with God and one another. God expects his people to obey his instructions by applying them to real issues of life both great and small. The specific nature of some laws does not mean God is an unrealistic perfectionist. These laws help us to understand that no issue we face is too small or insignificant for God. Even so, the Torah is not just about outward behavior, for it addresses matters of the heart such as coveting. Later, Jesus would condemn not just murder and adultery, but the roots of anger and lust as well.

However, obeying the Torah by applying it to the real issues of life today does not equate to repeating the actions that Israel performed thousands of years ago. Already in the Old Testament we see hints that some parts of the law were not intended to be permanent. The tabernacle certainly was not a permanent structure and even the temple was demolished at the hands of Israel’s enemies. Jesus’ declaration about food—that it is not what goes into people that makes them unclean—meant that the specific food laws of the Mosaic Covenant were no longer in force. Moreover, in the New Testament the people of God live in various countries and cultures around

the world where they have no legal authority to apply the sanctions of the Torah. The apostles considered such issues and, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, decided that the particulars of the Jewish law did not in general apply to Gentile Christians.

For our purposes in considering the theology of work, the previous explanation suggests several points that may help us to understand and apply the laws in Exodus that relate to the workplace. The specific laws dealing with proper treatment of workers, animals, and property express abiding values of God's own nature. They are to be taken seriously but not slavishly. On the one hand, items in the Ten Commandments are worded in general terms and may be applied freely in varied contexts. On the other hand, particular laws about servants, livestock, and personal injuries exemplify applications in the specific historical and social context of ancient Israel, especially in areas that were controversial at the time. These laws are illustrative of right behavior but do not exhaust every possible application. Christians honor God and his law not only by regulating our behavior, but also by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our attitudes, motives, and desires. To do anything less would amount to sidestepping the work and will of our Lord and Savior. Christians should always seek how love may guide our policies and behaviors.