

The Seriousness of Sin Exodus 21-24

How serious should we take sin in our lives after we become Christians?

This morning we are picking up where we left off two weeks ago in Exodus 20 where God was establishing a covenant with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai – a very important part of redemptive history and key to understanding the Old Testament. God had chosen to reveal himself to the world through the people of Israel. He delivered them from Egypt and brought them safely to Mount Sinai where we would form a covenant with them in which he would prescribe how their relationship with him was going to work.

God had a purpose for them and a purpose for the covenant. He told them in Ex. 19:4-6 *"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* God had chosen to enter a covenant with them to bless them and use them to reveal himself to the nations. So this is very important.

We saw two weeks ago that God himself actually descended upon Mt. Sinai to form the covenant with them and when he did it was a terrifying experience. They had to prepare for it by consecrating themselves and they were given strict instructions not to go near the mountain or they would die. When God descended on the mountain it was a powerful demonstration of his glory and might and when he spoke the first ten commandments directly to the people it was too much for them to bear. They trembled with fear and begged Moses to be their go between – to speak with God on their behalf and then tell them what he said.

This morning we are going to continue the story and look at the terms of the covenant and how it was sealed or ratified. And the thing I want to draw our attention to is an underlying issue that had a major influence on why the covenant was created, what the terms were and how it was ratified. When God descended on Mt. Sinai it was intensely terrifying and we might ask ourselves: Why did God reveal himself in that way? Why stir up fear? This is what we read two weeks ago in Exodus 20:20: *"Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God*

has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." In other words, God has given you a glimpse of his terrifying power and glory so that you would know to fear him and not sin. And if you get that, you have no reason to fear.

This is the first time that sin is mentioned in relation to the people of Israel, and in that context – after just hearing the Ten Commandments spoken by God – they would have understood sin to be disobeying God's commands. Moses told the people that God was revealing his terrifying power and glory so they would not sin. Sin would be a major problem for a community of people who were adopted by God and called by his name and this morning I want us to see why. Why is sin such a problem for God's covenant people?

We need to see this because we are God's covenant people today and there are times when I think we take our own sin a bit too lightly. One of the glorious truths of the gospel is that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, all our sins are forgiven – past, present, and future. His blood covers them all. That's a gospel truth that is meant to give us great joy, assurance and gratitude for the sacrifice of Christ.

But one of the things it can also do is give us a lazy attitude toward sin in our lives. We might think that if our sins are already forgiven, we don't really need to worry too much about them – maybe the really bad ones that hurt other people or make us feel guilty and ashamed, but other sins aren't that big of a deal. This morning I want us to think about how serious sin is in our lives and specifically the sins we commit after becoming Christians – after we're already forgiven. How seriously should we treat sin in our lives today?

After the Ten Commandments were given and the people begged Moses to be their mediator, Moses went back up to the mountain to meet with God to begin to receive the terms of the covenant. The initial terms can be found starting at Exodus 20:23 and going through the end of chapter 23. And I want to kind of do an overview of these terms. They contain several commands that the people of Israel were to obey followed by several promises of blessing if they obeyed them. I'm not going to read them, I'm going to summarize and I want us to see some important things.

The first commands are in Exodus 20:22-26 and have to do with instructions for worship. The way they worshipped Yahweh mattered. God did not want them to worship the same way other nations did. They would create idols and set them up for people to worship and offer sacrifices. But Yahweh forbid that kind of practice in these first few commands. He was nothing like the other gods and there was no idol that could represent him in any way. Therefore, Yahweh forbid them to make any kind of idol. Instead of idols, they could erect a simple earthen altar on which they could present their offerings, but no idols, ever. By obeying these commands they would reveal the glory of God through their worship, but if they disobeyed they would dishonor him and mar his glory. That's an important concept behind all of these commands.

The next series of commands start at the beginning of chapter 21 and they have to do with slaves. In that culture there were times when people would sell themselves into service to pay off debt or work their way out of poverty. It was a normal practice – different than what we think of slavery, but also different than just going to work – something in between (Like what Jacob did when he worked for his uncle Laban). But slaves were often taken advantage of, mistreated and abused, and Yahweh would not permit that to happen among his people who were called by his name. Yahweh was a God of justice and righteousness and wanted his people to reveal that to the nations. So when it came to slavery he gave them commands about how slaves were to be treated. He also commanded that after six years of service every slave must be set free. By obeying these commands, they would reveal the character of God to each other and the nations. But if they disobeyed and sinned, it would be a defamation of his character and bring dishonor to his name.

The commands continue in chapters 21 and 22 to focus on justice and retribution. If someone caused injury or harm to someone else or their property, they were to either be punished justly for intentional or negligent crimes or they had to pay restitution to cover the unintentional harm. Again, obedience to these laws would reflect the moral character of God while sin would do the opposite.

Chapters 22 and 23 contain other commands about moral issues related to sexual immorality, occult practices, idolatry, stealing, lying, and more. These too were in alignment with the character of Yahweh so that obedience would demonstrate who he is while disobedience would bring dishonor.

And the commands end in the middle of Chapter 23 with regulations for sabbath rests and ceremonial feasts. The sabbaths and feasts revealed things about God and the mighty deeds he had done for them in delivering them from Egypt. They honored him in the community of Israel and shone his light for other nations to be able to see and know him.

All of these commands had one thing in common: by walking in obedience to them, the people would be revealing the glory, character, and attributes of God. That was their deepest purpose. If Yahweh was going to be their God and they were going to be his people, and if he was going to adopt them to himself and have them be called by his name, they must be a people who revealed his glory and character. They weren't doing that before and neither were any of the other nations on earth. Everyone had turned away from God and forgotten him. And now as Yahweh was revealing himself to the world again through the people of Israel and entering into a covenant with them, these commands were an integral part of that covenant for a very important purpose. Obedience would reveal the glory of Yahweh, sin would mar that glory and dishonor his name. That's the underlying purpose behind the commands.

After giving them, God continued to spell out the terms of the covenant at the end of chapter 23 by giving Moses promises of blessing to give to the people. God had wonderful things in store for them if they would obey him. Not only would they reveal his glory, but in doing so, they would be richly blessed. Here are the promises:

- He would send an angel before them to guard them and bring them to the land he had promised them.
- He would be an enemy to their enemies and fight for them like he had done against the Amalekites in the wilderness.
- He would bless their bread and water and take sickness away from them.
- No one would miscarry or be barren and he would give them long lives.
- He would put fear and confusion in their enemies and they would flee from them.
- He would drive out the Canaanite nations from before them until they came to fully possess the land he promised to give them.

These were conditional blessings: blessings would accompany obedience. If they walked in his ways and obeyed his commands, and revealed his character to the world, God would richly bless them and they would prosper. And he doesn't go into it at this point in the covenant, but if they did the opposite and disobeyed him and brought dishonor to his name, there would be punishment and curses. So again we see the importance of walking in obedience.

Those were the initial terms of the covenant that Moses was to present to the people and that brings us to chapter 24 which is where the covenant is agreed upon and ratified. I want to read a few verses here so you can see what happens.

Read Exodus 24:3-8.

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

What happened here was unique, but similar to some of the covenant making practices of that time between regional Kings and the people groups that were in subjection to them. According to Bob Beasley in 101 Portraits of Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures, in order to ratify a covenant between two parties and make it a binding agreement, they would slaughter an animal and sprinkle the blood on the ones entering the covenant. It was a blood oath that signified that if they broke the terms of the covenant, the king had the right to put them to death.

That's what this meant for the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. They were presented with the terms of the covenant – the commands and promises – and they agreed to the terms. So Moses had the young men slaughter the oxen and he threw half of the blood on the altar and half of it he threw on the people. The Expositor's

Bible Commentary says, *“The division of the blood points to the twofold aspect of the blood of the covenant: The blood on the altar symbolizes God's forgiveness and acceptance of the offering; the blood on the people points to a blood oath that binds them in obedience.”* It was very clear by this bloody ritual that the punishment for sin and breaking the covenant would be death.

So by the sprinkling of blood the agreement was made and the people of Israel were bound in a covenant with Yahweh. Throughout the rest of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, God gives many more detailed instructions and commands that were part of the covenant, but this was the point at which it was agreed upon and entered into.

There's one more thing I want us to see before we talk about what this means for us. I don't remember ever seeing this before. After confirming the covenant, Moses and seventy of the elders of Israel were allowed to go up to the mountain – they had been invited by God earlier in the story to go up and worship him. This was similar to the celebration meals that took place between two parties after covenants were formed.

Read Exodus 24:9-11.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

I don't ever remember reading these verses before, but they're really awesome to think about. They were allowed to have fellowship from a distance in the presence of Yahweh and they were allowed to see a visible manifestation of the feet of God, and live. He didn't lay his hand on them. They were in covenant together. He was their God and they were his people.

This covenant is extremely important and as we've looked at it, you can see this underlying issue of sin and the importance of ongoing obedience as part of the covenant. They were the people of Yahweh, chosen, delivered, rescued from slavery, set free and brought safely through the wilderness, set apart to reveal

him to the world and it was critically important that they live in such a way as to reflect his goodness, mercy, justice, righteousness, and holiness.

There was one thing that would ruin that and that was sin. Disobedience to God's commands would mar his glory and bring dishonor to his name and that would destroy the purpose for which he had chosen and saved them. They were to no longer live the way they used to live or like any of the other nations who had turned away from God and forgotten about him. They were to be different.

We are the covenant people of Yahweh today and obedience to his commands is just as important now as it was back then for the very same reasons. Yes, through faith in Christ our sins are forgiven – past, present, and future. But no, that doesn't mean our sins don't matter that much after becoming a Christian. Sin is a huge problem for God's covenant people because we've been called by God to reveal his glory and be a light to the world and when we live in sin, we destroy that purpose and bring dishonor to Christ. It says this in 1 Peter 2:9-12: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (This is talking about Christians!) ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."*

It also says in 1 Peter 1:14-16: *"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." We must not have a lazy attitude toward our sin if we carry the name of Christ. God does not want us to live in sin because it defames his character. When John was writing to his readers he made that point time and time again. In 1 John 2:1-2 he writes: *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."**

We need to praise God that our sins are paid for in Christ, but we also need to make it our aim to cease from sin so that we can be salt and light to a world that's lost in sin. We need to despise our sin and fight against it. God is not pleased with us when we willingly allow sin in our lives and at some point he's going to step in and bring discipline to bring us to repentance, but it will be very unpleasant. Jesus had to die to pay the penalty for our sins, let us not profane his sacrifice by continuing to live in them.

So I urge you to renew your fight against sin. One of the leaders in our denomination has often said that every day, without exception, he prays that he would be bothered deeply by even the smallest sin in his life and I think that's a good idea.

Let us live our lives in such a way that God is honored and glorified in us and through us so that the people around us can see who he is.