

How Do we Respond to Authority?: Commandment 5

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[0:00] Imagine that there are a few raised eyebrows and heads being scratched.! These are the kind of verses in our Bibles, aren't they, that make us tense up or cringe when we come across them.

What's all this to do with slaves and people selling their daughters and people falling out with their parents and being put to death? It's so far removed from our lives, we think.

Doesn't that all belong to a dark, distant past that we've washed our hands of? If we live in a better society without slavery, well, what's it doing in God's law?

And added to that, perhaps we wonder, hasn't God moved on? This is what God's people used to live like, but Jesus came and fixed all that. He gave us better values to live by so that we don't have to worry about these laws in the Old Testament.

Isn't that why he came? In short, we wonder, what do these commands have to do with us? Well, last Sunday we started this deeper dive into the Ten Commandments as part of our long-running series in Exodus.

[1:11] And we saw that what Exodus is doing at this point is slowing down and taking some time to unpack the Ten Commandments for God's people.

Now, if you're a lawyer or you're studying law, this is bread and butter for you. There's legislation that's passed by Parliament for almost every part of our lives.

But the legislation itself doesn't tell you what to do in each and every situation that you might come across in life. Life is more complicated than that. And so, lawyers or judges or people involved in that world rely on other real-life examples of similar cases to compare it with.

You know, what were the main factors or ideas that affected the outcome of this trial? Or how was this clause applied in this situation? And how was that different in that situation?

Legal precedence, or case law as it's known, presses the law into the nitty-gritty of real life. And it shows how it works itself out in the often confusing mess of our everyday.

[2:29] And the Lord is concerned to do that. His law is not aimed up here over our heads. His law is aimed down here into our lives. He cares about reality as it is for us today.

And that's what the Lord is doing here through Moses, giving his people back then, in chapters 21 to 23, legal precedence.

He uses the word in verse 1, rules or rulings, judgments. These things don't have the same legal status as the Ten Commandments or words.

They are judgments on situations. Real life, work through examples of what it looked like on the ground for God's moral law, the Ten Commandments, to be followed by his people, not in some hypothetical world, but tomorrow morning or next week.

Oven ready, you might say. And so in one sense, we're right to ask the question, what do these rules have to do with us? Yes, they are speaking very deliberately into the national life of Israel 3,500 years ago in the desert.

[3:43] And how we deal with slaves isn't something that we have to get up and handle tomorrow morning. But in another sense, they must hold some value for us, because they are spelling out the implications of the Ten Commandments.

Thankfully, we don't have to think about slavery tomorrow morning. And yet, all of us in our different spheres will have to respond to authority.

Whether that's authority that has been given to us in our role at work or in our families or church, or whether that's authority that God has put over us at work, in our families, at church, in the state, the

police, the tax man, and so on.

Because these judgments are unpacking for us today the implications of the Fifth Commandment, honor your father and mother. That might not seem obvious, but fast forward to Deuteronomy, and the way Deuteronomy handles this commandment is about national life.

Judges, prophets, priests, kings. What Exodus is doing is looking at domestic life, our life at home, and how that works itself out.

[5:04] There are examples here, aren't there, to do with husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, in the most kind of messy and complicated combinations, at the extreme.

But these are fit instances that we, as they could, can work backwards from to arrive at sound judgments about how we deal with authority in our day-to-day.

So to help us get on our way, get underneath this a little bit, we're going to use the same three questions we asked last time, beginning with this one. What do these commandments preach?

Last Sunday we saw God's law preaches God. What do these laws then preach about God? Well, first and foremost, they preach God's loving lordship.

Again, that might not seem obvious at first glance, but look closer, and we can see his loving kindness, not only in the individual commands, but in the whole shape of this section.

[6:13] Did you notice, for example, that as the Lord begins to unpack the fifth commandment, the people he speaks to first and at most length are those who hold authority?

Not slaves, but those who buy slaves, verse 2. Not daughters, but those who have daughters, verse 7. Not wives, but the family she marries into, verse 10.

God is giving commands to the head of household, the one who holds the power in the relationship. And every ruling he gives here is to protect the vulnerable one in the relationship.

Slaves, young women, girls. It's interesting, isn't it? Perhaps we think of Jesus' teaching as a kind of corrective to the harsh and the strict hierarchy or the patriarchy of the Old Testament.

Isn't it the Lord Jesus who turns all that on its head? You know, the meek shall inherit the earth, and the first will be last, and the last first. Well, yes. But he said it long ago in his law.

[7:18] Long before Paul wrote, Masters, stop your threatening, Moses wrote that unhappy masters shall have no right to sell innocent slave girls across borders to the highest bidder, verse 8.

That he shall deal with her as a daughter, verse 9. That he shan't diminish her food, clothing, marital rights, verse 10. The Lord is here ruling from his throne in heaven to shelter the powerless and vulnerable under his legal protection.

Thousands of years before we in the West learn to speak about human dignity and freedom and rights. Well, God was already legislating for the rights and dignity and even equality of slaves with their masters.

Just look again at verse 2, for example. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing.

See what he's saying. You might have someone work for you, but you will never own that person. There is a time limit on his time working for you.

[8:35] The default is that he will be free. After six years, he won't be yours to work or sell anymore. He'll be his own man. Deuteronomy even says he won't go out empty-handed, fill his pockets, make sure he's got enough to live, to do business with.

Think about it. Knowing that that was only ever a medium-term arrangement totally transforms that relationship, doesn't it? This man is not my property to use and abuse as I see fit.

He is born free, created my equal, and once he's finished working for me, he'll naturally default to those things in society.

He's my brother first, and my bondservant second. Now, the idea of those kind of rights existing alongside slavery might seem really strange to us, but it was even stranger and weirder at the time. In the time when slavery was part of every culture and society, laws like these, that treated slaves not as property but as people, were totally unheard of.

[9:49] The idea, the very idea of restricting a master's authority or preserving a slave's basic human dignity was completely upside down in the ancient world.

And we, in our day, might look back and wonder, well, why then didn't God just sweep away slavery completely? But remember that these rules are not about a hypothetical ideal world, but how to deal with life tomorrow morning.

God is interested in speaking into how they deal with reality for them then. In a pre-capitalistic economy, you didn't apply for jobs.

You either had land to work or you worked for somebody who had land to farm. And say you had a bad crop one year, there was drought or famine or it all went wrong for whatever reason.

You might become someone's slave for a few years until you could build yourself back up again and try again. And God's law here makes that a voluntary thing and a temporary thing.

[11:00] And so the brutal slavery of Egypt, which remember must have been in the back of these people's minds, is turned upside down and transformed by God's law into a social safety net.

Needless to say, as we come to these verses and others like them, that this is a million miles from what we most often think about with slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean.

I found it really striking this week reading these verses to think that those who own slaves and would have called themselves Christians so clearly break God's law, broke God's law, even in the way that they went about that.

Think about it. Those men and women were kidnapped from across the Atlantic. Verse 16 says that's punishable by death. Again, the rest is history.

Who's not listening to it yet? They've done a four-part series on the founding fathers because of the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. George Washington, the first president, is famous partly for having stopped any slaves that he owned from being sold if it would separate them from their families.

[12:16] But that is the exception that proves the rule that most slave owners would have broken up families anyway, which verse 3 in our passage clearly condemns. If he comes in single, he'll go out single.

If he comes in married, his wife will go out with him. One commentator I read this week said that God's laws are so unlike that the transatlantic slave trade, so unlike slavery at the time, that in practice, they abolish slavery in all but name.

In these verses, though very different from our 21st century world, we find the ethical foundations of things like workers' rights, paternity leave, the welfare state, domestic abuse laws, women's rights, children's rights, human rights.

Here is the moral foundation, if you like, that whole nations have been built upon. 250 years ago, it was considered revolutionary to write, we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights among these life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But because of our sin, that isn't self-evident. It hadn't been, and it still wasn't. It took a civil war 100 years later and a civil rights movement 100 years after that.

[13:45] For even that principle to be put into practice in that nation. And yet it's been here all along in God's perfect rulings on the fifth commandment.

They reflect the heart of a master who has very recently fought for the freedom of slaves under the harshest oppression and tyranny and the heaviest workload.

He tells those in authority not to be mini pharaohs, but imitators of him who has all authority in heaven and on earth and uses it to set captives free, to redeem them as his own sons and daughters, to feed and clothe his bride.

He who stretched out his mighty arm not to crush the vulnerable, but to lift up the weak and carry them home to himself to become their God and Savior and Master.

I'm certain that not every Hebrew slave could say, as in verse 5, I love my Master, but the Lord here is expressing that he is a Master that his people could truly love and not wish to be free of his authority, but gladly belong to him and serve him forever, because his law preaches that he is a loving Lord and a merciful Master.

[15:13] That's what they preach. But what does this command point out? Well, as we've already touched on, secondly, these commands point out that we do dishonor and degrade each other.

Why does the Lord have to spell out in his word that his people are not to treat other people like possessions? Why do we, even as recently as 2025, need the government to produce policy papers with titles like Freedom from Violence and Abuse, a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls, the Modern Slavery Act passed in 2015, or the Smacking Ban in 2020? Because as enlightened and progressive as we think we are, our hearts are just as prone to stray towards abusing, misusing, and refusing authority.

There's loads we could say here, isn't there? More than time allows. We could talk about our work. Those of us who manage others in the workplace, do we overstretch that authority beyond work time into home life, into holiday time?

If you work for someone else, do you waste their time? Looking at your phone, not answering emails, or not meeting deadlines. There are loads of ways that we in our society have normalized the dishonoring and disrespecting of not only people who are over us, but also those who we supervise.

[16:55] The Bible standards when it comes to authority are therefore massively counter-cultural and challenging for us. At one point, as a student, before I went away to my shift at work, I would sit down and read these verses.

I found them so helpful. I was reminded this week that I ought to do it more often now. Paul writes to Christians in the church in Ephesians, Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ, not by way of eye service as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.

verses worth us coming back to this week, aren't they? If Paul could write that to slaves, how much more should we use our freedom and rights to love and serve Christ by respecting and working hard for our managers and employers?

And he goes on, masters, do the same to them and stop your threatening, knowing that he, who is both their master and yours is in heaven and there is no partiality with him.

If you're someone's boss, he says, don't forget, you have a big boss in heaven. Don't overstep the line, but love and serve Christ by dignifying and dealing gently with those under ye.

[18:30] The Bible would ask, are you the kind of boss people want to work for or do people run at the first opportunity? Think about people you've had in your home to do work for you, plumbers, and builders or decorators.

Are we rude to them? Do we argue with them? Or do we dignify and value their work, their plans, their persons? Here's a challenge for us.

If you work, if you're going to work this week, read over these verses from Ephesians and just see in yourself first and in others how much dishonoring goes on in our work every day.

but it's worth us focusing in on the categories that Exodus 21 gives us to do with our home lives and the life of the household of God as Christians.

Mums and dads, how easy is it for us to provoke our children? children. I ask myself that first and foremost. When we are inconsistent and fill them up with chocolate because we are too tired to be bothered to tell them no and then they come back another day expecting treats and we tell them not to be so greedy.

[19:48] we're happy, aren't we, going at their pace and being patient with them when we have nothing to lose, nowhere to be. But when we have somewhere to get and we are flustered and stressed, we hurry them to get ready faster, we lose our temper with them when they can't get their shoes on in time when they're just going at their normal speed and that's as quick as they can go to get their shoes on.

When we speak ill of them to others, what a burden they are, how difficult they get on our nerves. Someone told me once that their main memory of the main way that they felt when their children were young, their main emotion was resentment.

And I think if we're honest, that's probably true of more of us than we'd be willing to admit. I imagine none of us withholds food and clothing from our kids, but do we diminish or neglect their spiritual nourishment?

Do we expect Christian behavior from them without regularly taking time to spend pointing them to Jesus, praying with them and for them, reading the Bible with them?

God has given us authority over their young lives. We as parents have it in our power to make that easy or hard for them. We can make the fifth commandment desperately painful and frustrating for our children by being parents who are difficult to please or impossible to predict.

[21:20] Or we can make the fifth commandment something they look back on gratefully because they knew our delight in them and our desire to do them good in the way that we disciplined them.

Flip it over, boys and girls who are in the room, teens, summertime. mine. Great for this, isn't it? Boys and girls, do you listen when mum and dad speak to you?

Or do you ignore them? Do you follow their instructions or talk back to them? How do you speak about mum and dad to your friends? How do you think about them, feel towards them? Are you grateful to them? It might not seem like a big deal to us, might it? Again, our 21st century society has erased much of this, but the Lord's punishment in these verses for striking or cursing your mum and dad is the death penalty.

To be clear, that is not the punishment that we have today. And I can explain more about that if you'd like me to. Here it says striking, as in striking to harm or kill or cursing, kind of wishing death upon them.

[22 : 36] That's the extreme end of hostility, isn't it? Still a bad thing, even if no one's going to put you to death. But actually, if we dishonor our parents' authorities and don't think that's wrong, don't ask for God's forgiveness and change our attitude at home, we are in danger of coming under God's eternal death sentence because our hearts are set against his law.

A guy called Philip Ryken writes in his commentary, God intends the family to be our first hospital, first school, first government, first church.

If we do not respect authority at home, we will not respect it anywhere. And brothers and sisters, how common is it in churches, church families like our own, to find us brothers and sisters in Christ bossing each other about, forcing our way, our will, taking advantage of others' kindness and humility, overstepping the line.

I don't know about you, I'm always shocked to hear about reports of bullying in churches, especially among church leaders, and it is shocking, but friends, God knows us better than we know ourselves.

He knows that our hearts grasp after authority that isn't ours, and mishandle the authority that he has given to us. The number of people who have suffered and carried church hurt testifies to that, doesn't it?

[24 : 14] And of course, how common is it in churches to find sour or bitter attitudes against leaders? Christians, again, brothers and sisters, who assume the worst rather than thinking the best of those who have been given authority to lead.

Friends, pick any part of life, any part of life, and whoever we are, a careful examination of this commandment will show that we have fallen short of it every day.

In more ways than we could list, we dishonor those God has put over us, and we degrade those who God has put us over. We fail to love our neighbor as ourselves, and so we dishonor the God in whose image they are made, and we sin against him who has set authority over us for our good and his glory.

These commands preach that we have a great God, and they point out that we are great sinners. Where do we go from here then?

Well, as Paul points out in the verses we read in Ephesians, this is the first command that comes with a promise. What is that promise? That it may go well with you, and you may live long in the land.

[25 : 36] Thirdly then, the promise of these verses. I don't know if you've noticed, preachers love the letter P. It's a word that lots of good words kind of alliterate in your sermon points.

Someone pointed out to me this week that we could have a fourth P. Preach, point, promise, plan. Because they said the plan of God is that this command would be kept.

Notice even in the promise, honor your father and mother so that your days may be long in the land. We might wonder then who it will possibly go well with because we have broken it, but there is one who hasn't.

We read in Luke's gospel of a time when Jesus, as a 12-year-old child, went missing. Mom and dad had taken him up to Jerusalem for Passover. On the way home, he cannot be found.

They travel a day in the wrong direction before going back the way to look for him, and find the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple talking to the teachers. What he says next and does next is very telling.

[26 : 43] Didn't you know, he said, that I must be in my father's house? And when Mary and Joseph took him home, he came to Nazareth, Luke says, and was submissive to them.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. What did he do? He obeyed his heavenly father, he had to be in his house, and he obeyed his earthly mother and adoptive father.

We don't have time to dwell on that, but think about what it must have been like to have a perfect child at home, because he is a perfect person, the Lord Jesus. And so it went well with him. He thrived spiritually, physically in his relationships. But he didn't obey only for himself and his benefit. He lived for those of us who haven't honored our parents.

He was born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem us from under the law that we might be adopted as God's children. He had no sins of his own to die for, but he died on the cross for all who would trust in him, for our sins, that we might be clothed in his spotless perfection.

[28:02] He took our record of rebellion that we might have his record of righteousness. And so now clothed in Jesus' obedience, God gives us the promise of his blessing now and in the age to come, that the perfectly obedient Lord Jesus has earned our reward.

He gives the win to us. And covered by Jesus' obedience, we grow in obedience as we grow to be like him. God's plan is that his commands are kept first by Jesus and then us in Jesus.

But we wonder how can God promise that it will go well for us if we obey this commandment honoring authorities? Some of us will have suffered under authority that was abused at home, at work, at church.

Thousands live in abusive marriages, millions across our world under authoritarian regimes. To be clear, honoring those over us doesn't mean being silent about suffering.

We know from God's word we don't have to stay in that harmful situation. As the Lord says, in a case where a husband or a father or a master is neglecting or abusing those under him, he has in effect forfeited his authority.

[29:32] The girl in the example can just go home to her family without cost. If you need to talk about that, please do talk to one of the elders, myself, someone on staff.

We'd like to do that for you. And that is one way we see the Lord doing us good in our obedience. He promises, doesn't he, here in his law to deliver us and redeem us out of oppression.

He provides a way out from under controlling and overbearing authority without us needing to sin against him or against those he's put over us.

And so we can keep his commands free from the fear and anxiety that it's going to put us in a dangerous position. A proper and a right sense of self-preservation shouldn't cause us to sin in this area.

The Lord ensures that obeying him, honoring others, leads to his glory and our good. He is a loving Lord to serve and a merciful master. And yet lots of us will know, as I'm sure you were thinking even as I was speaking, of situations that haven't worked out like that.

[30:48] And somebody has suffered through many years or a lifetime at the hands of others. And yet the one who is speaking here is the Lord who saved his people out of the house of slavery in Egypt.

Generations of those who were oppressed, worked to death, killed by a serpent king. Will he not also save those who love him when he delivers them out of the hands of their oppressors into his promised land, into his presence, into a new heavens and a new earth in which there is no more sin or tears, suffering or death, where righteousness dwells.

Having paid the price for our redemption, bought us at a great price to belong to him, will he not have us to love and serve him forever in that promised land?

He promises that it will go well for us in the land he is giving to us, the world to come. And he always keeps his promises.

And so in whatever circumstances and under whatever authority we find ourselves, we can as his people show the fruit of a heart made new by Christ in the way that we honor those he set over us and in the way we honor those that he has set us over as we trust his promise in Christ that as we live in obedience to him, it will go well for us now but forever in the land that he will give to those who love him.

[32:37] Let's submit ourselves to him as we pray. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Loving Lord, merciful Master, we come before you and we confess that we do love you and we want to serve you and we pray, Lord, that you would forgive our sins of disobedience and help us renew in us a fresh obedience to your word this week.

Help us to trust and to dwell in Christ who himself was obedient to you, his father, in all that he did. Help us to look to him, his salvation, his teaching and example as we bear your name before others this week.

Help us, we pray, to become more like him by honoring others in our lives. And Father, we pray for those among us for whom that is a painful thing. Those who have or are experiencing hurt as a result of that.

Father, we trust in your deliverance and your salvation. We pray, Lord, that such brothers and sisters would find comfort among your people and help, Lord, where that is needed.

We pray, Lord, for their rescue out from the hand of oppression. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.