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Exodus 21:1-11

Forty-second Message

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WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

The Prophetic Vision of Community

The Book of the Covenant reminds us that one of our chief callings as the people of God is to be equipped with the skills of creating communities of shalom as we go about our daily life. God's desire is that we be so relationally sensitive that wherever we go as his witnesses, we will not only be imparting the light of truth, but also the warmth of relationship. It is essential that we know the art of connecting with people in significant ways. In this valley where we live, that requires bridging vast cultural divides. When the prophets Micah and Isaiah wanted to stir Israel's imagination with the kind life that would be established in the messianic kingdom, they used the images of all nations and cultures making pilgrimage to Zion in unison and returning home in shalom:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. (Micah 4:1-4; Isa 2:2-4 NIV)

One can hardly imagine a more blissful sight: nations of every kind pouring into Jerusalem like a flood, eager to learn God's way for living life. As they listen attentively to his word it so transforms them that upon returning home they reallocate all their resources, from building bombs to constructing hospitals and schools. The changes wrought are so deep and everlasting that at dusk, everyone can be found sitting out peacefully on their porches, sipping iced tea and lemonade, and when they retire, no one locks their doors. In the early Church, after the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out without measure, the fragrance of this new community united in mind and heart became one of the most effective tools for evangelism.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32-35; cf. 2:44-47)

As the pagan world witnessed these early Christians taking their meals together and sharing their possessions with all who had a need, it was the sign to them that the future that the prophets had written about was now breaking into the present. Today, our world is so fearful and fragmented that the need for safe, nurturing communities could hardly be greater.

The Theme of Slavery

After dealing with guidelines about authentic worship, the first relational concern that God addresses in the Book of the Covenant is the care and treatment of "debt slaves." The reason for the priority of this material is that slaves were the most vulnerable members of ancient society and thus the most susceptible to exploitation. To the casual reader, this entire section might seem utterly irrelevant, since for most of us educated in the West, the mere thought of considering a human being as one's property brings revulsion. America's bloodiest war put this matter behind us long ago. The fact that God would even suggest guiding principles within such an evil institution has caused more than one scholar to question the wisdom of this material and its claim to inspiration. Brueggemann, for example says, "The careful, if not tortured, reasoning of these laws indicates that Israel cautiously and uncertainly explored a troubled area of public life. Clearly the law wants to set limits to the practice of debt bondage. But it is equally clear that it goes about the problem in a cowardly way, submitting the claims of human dignity to the realities of the economy."¹

I would submit, however, that the text claims divine inspiration and unequivocal authority. If we are patient and thoughtful, with its proper application we will discover a wellspring of relevance and uncanny wisdom. It's easy for Christians to hold up ethical ideals to a corrupt world, but very few of us are as "wise as serpents" when it comes to transforming our culture in the direction of those ideals. One reason for this is the overt hostility of the world around us. Over the past half century, it seems as if every center of influence, whether it be the universities, schools, civic governments or businesses, has aggressively pushed Christian ethics further and further outside the mainstream of our lives. Once commonly held tried and true virtues, such as sexual abstinence before marriage, are now viewed as archaic relics of some long lost civilization. Therefore it is not without reason that most of us have difficulty integrating the ethics of our faith with school or work. It is much easier to be quiet and get your work done than to speak out and be ridiculed as a fool by the masses.

The beauty of the Book of the Covenant lies not only in the ideals it affirms, but also in the methods it uses to implement those ideals in a less than perfect world. As God steps into the culture of the Ancient Near East, we find him not only setting forth holy concerns for his people, but also through his "judgments" and "ordinances," sowing seeds of change that will sprout with counter cultural roots and grow against the prevailing winds of the culture, until hopefully some day the ideals are reached. Even as these seeds begin to take root we find his guidelines changing with the new situation. God is keenly aware of where people are and the cultures they live in. With great skill he knows how to take people from where they are to where they need to be to fully reflect his character. We on the other hand are often so impatient and black and white in our approaches that we insist on having all or nothing – and when you insist on all or nothing, you always end up with nothing.

With each of these laws we need to consider four aspects of interpretation. First, what was the social and cultural context of the original law? Second, what was God's fundamental concern behind the law? Third, what changes occurred in the law through Israel's history? And finally,

how did the New Covenant community in Christ apply the same ethical concern? We could call these the four C's of interpretation: *context, concern, change*, and the *New Covenant*.

Our text this morning has two parts; the first gives guidelines for male "debt slaves" (21:1-6), while the second concerns female "debt slaves" (21:7-11).

I. Care and Protection for Male "Debt Slaves" Exod 21:1-6

A. Placing absolute limits on debt (21:1-2)

"These are the laws you are to set before them: If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything." (Exod 21:1-2 NIV)

The main reason for the existence of slavery in Israel was financial. It was common practice in the Ancient Near East to pay off unresolved debts through servitude. If you were unable to pay, you could sell yourself or a member of your family to your creditor as payment. But God's concern is that financial obligation should never lead to financial exploitation, which is very destructive to community. Therefore, God commands that all debt is to have limits. A "debt slave" could serve his creditor for six years, but on the seventh year he was to be set free, with no payment of release. In God's economy, people are more important than money; therefore no debt should rob a person of his entire future. There should always be an opportunity to start over.

B. Inserting relational components in the administration of debt (21:3-4; Lev 25:39-40)

And unlike other cultures, Israel was not to treat her slaves like slaves, but with the respect and dignity of a hired hand or as a foreign guest in the home:

"If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you." (Lev 25:39-40)

This new ethic had its roots in the bitter memory of Israel's painful servitude in Egypt. For four centuries, Israel felt keenly what it was like to be scorned because of race and occupation (Gen 43:32; 46:34), cast off as an outsider (the term "*Hebrew*" = "one from beyond, from the other side"), ridiculed as inferior, and relegated to menial, painstaking labor (Exod 1:13-14). Now that her people were free by God's saving acts, it would be a disavowal of her history and new identity as sons to turn around and, like miniature Pharaohs, use their freedom to abuse others.

Rather than creating oppressive work conditions, creditors were responsible during a slave's period of service to create a family atmosphere, where their servants could enjoy life's pleasures of marriage and the raising of children.

"If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free." (Exod 21:3-4)

In order to teach a debtor the "real" value of the money or the property he had lost, God yoked him to his creditor to serve him for up to six years. Under that yoke he was no longer his own but served his master and contributed to the welfare of his home. In the process he got to know his master in the most intimate details of his daily life. And his master in turn was commanded by God to create an atmosphere in which the servant's life was not put on hold, but he could actually marry and raise children. Thus the world of business becomes the stage for family bonds to develop.

We can see God's uncanny wisdom in this as the community reaps multiple benefits. Individuals learn to take full responsibility for their choices; debts are limited so that individuals are protected from being permanently wiped out; and to our amazement, strong relational bonds are created between classes. Impersonal contracts give way to grateful service, and generosity replaces wages. Imagine what strong bonds would be created if having fallen into debt, we had to live under the protection of our creditor and contribute to the welfare of his home for six years. Think how this would radically change our work ethic and the value we would attach to whatever he gave us.

I did my undergraduate studies in economics. Economists are always talking about the "real" value of money or things, which takes into account that with inflation, the buying power of money changes over time. A good economist attempts to describe the "real" value of what today's money means in terms of tomorrow. But I discovered there is something dreadfully missing in their analysis, something that can't be measured in numbers. It's what I call the "R" value of things. In God's economy, things have value only in terms of *relationship*. The "real" value we attach to our wages or possessions is the "relational" components they represent, not necessarily the dollars we paid for them. If I could offer my economics equation for "real" value it would be: $R = M + T + L$; where R = real value; M = memory; T = amount of time in personal labor; L = love. I think if you look around your homes and consider the things you would rescue in a fire, you'll discover the equation holds.

For example, on the screen there is a photograph of a small night stand. What is its value? For one thing, I could tell you it was hand crafted over seventy years ago of pure maple hardwood. It belonged to my older sister, who passed it down to me with a matching chest of drawers when I was ten. After a couple of years, I had it stripped and refinished in black, along with the rest of my bedroom furniture. When Emily and I were married, we had very little money, and my mother graciously gave the furniture to us and we transported it 400 miles to Palo Alto. As it sat in our new bedroom, I regretted the fact that I had covered the beautiful natural grain of the wood with a lacquered black finish. The father of one the junior high boys I was disciplining was a master craftsman, so I hauled the furniture to his garage and he taught me the art of refinishing furniture. Together we stripped and sanded the wood, and then applied three coats of varnish. That was thirty years ago, and the finish is still as good as new. This little night stand is laden with memory, time and love. Yet, what gives this piece exponentially more value to me is that in 2001, both the father and son, whom I loved like family, were tragically killed in a car accident. Now the little night stand sits in the entry hall of my daughter's home. Perhaps some day I'll tell my three grandchildren all that it means to me.

C. Over time the Law becomes more relational (Deut 15:9-10)

Tracing this legislation through Israel's history, we find that the relational aspect of the equation becomes stronger and stronger, so that in the end it transcends the contractual agreement ("R" value = 100%). When the law is expanded in Deut 15, God further instructs the creditor that as the seventh year approaches, rather than begrudging the loss of income with his servant's departure, he should be generous and send him out with a significant gift. Now the master contributes to the welfare of the servant, like a father would to his departing son.

Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. (Deut 15:9-10)

D. Relational ties become the driving force in career choices (Exod 21:5-6)

What happens to the slave's wife and children when the allotted time is up? The governing principle was that, whatever the slave brought into the creditor's home he left with; whatever he acquired while being in the master's care he had to leave with his master for that was his property. Such a law that places personal property rights over family ties jars our sensibilities. But we must remember that these values were deeply ingrained in the culture in which Israel was living. To press for the ideal too quickly might threaten the social fabric of that society. So rather than tearing the social fabric, God plants powerful relational seeds designed to subvert it. Once they sprout and take root, they will transcend the old culture and make it obsolete.

But if the servant declares, "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free," then his master must take him before the judges (or "to God" meaning "the sanctuary"). He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life. (Exod 21:5,6)

If after six years a servant is driven by love for his master, his wife and children, he is free to remain under his master's care and protection all his days. If that is the case, a public ceremony is to take place before God² and witnesses. First, the servant is required to make his commitment known ("declares *emphatically*") to his master. Then his master is to take him to the sanctuary where, presumably before God and witnesses, the master drives an awl through his earlobe into the doorpost, thus piercing his ear. The ear was chosen as the organ symbolic of "hearing," and thus "obedience" (Deut 6:4). The permanent mark on the slave's ear will serve to show that he has freely waived his right to his freedom. He is now permanently bound to his master's house as one who serves out of love. The effect of this provision in law would be to nullify the social hierarchy in the ancient world. Anytime you saw a man with his ear pierced, you knew that there was one who considered his family more important to him than his freedom. It's interesting that investing in relationships always comes at a price. Today, it is wonderful to see a man who, because of his commitment to his family, chooses to limit his freedom within his career in order to create a more loving and stable environment in home.

In September I attended the funeral of Bruce Cairns, one of the former elders of PBC Palo Alto. Bruce was a man of impeccable integrity. He had a love for people that was second to none. The church was packed with multiple generations of friends, family and neighbors who had been touched by his life. After over two hours of stories, slides and tributes, the two words that rang out as clear as a church bell were the testimonies of his children and his neighbors. To see a man's entire family on stage giving thanks for how appreciative they were that their dad chose not to climb the corporate ladder of success, but instead spend time with them, is a rare delight in this age. One felt these children and grandchildren felt valued beyond measure. The service was sealed by the kind words of Bruce's neighbors. One said that when noise originates from someone's yard and invades one's solitude, neighbors usually complain, but not in Bruce's neighborhood. He said he was thrilled when he heard the voices of scores of teenagers emanating in song and laughter from the Cairns home week after week; he knew these teenagers were finding a safe place to nurture their souls. Perhaps now that Bruce is in heaven, God has rewarded him with a much-deserved earring.

In summary, we have uncovered some everlasting principles in the guidelines for male "debt slaves."

1. People are always more important than money.
2. Debt can be a doorway to exploitation and dehumanization that destroys the life of a community; therefore absolute limits should be placed on debt.

3. The way to attack debt is to introduce strong "relational" components within its administration.

4. The goal of debt management is for those in debt to learn the value of hard work and responsibility in the midst of a caring community.

5. The goal for the creditor is to learn that cultivating "sons" is more fulfilling than getting rich, and that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

6. The benefit for the community is having strong families and the gradual removal of class distinctions.

II. Care and Protection of Female "Debt Slaves"

Exod 21:7-11

If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as men-servants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money. (21:7-11)

A. The greater vulnerability of female slaves

For female slaves, several more guidelines are added. The first is that, in contrast to the male slaves, a female slave is to be given her freedom only under special circumstances. The reason for this stipulation was to protect the rights of daughters, who were extremely vulnerable to exploitation. It seems clear that rather than merely being sold into "service," she was also given as a "bride" to her master. So rather than going free after six years, she was to remain under the care and protection of the master's family, with certain rights and privileges. When the law is reiterated later in Israel's history, no distinction will be made between the male and female slave: "If a fellow Hebrew, *a man or a woman*, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free" (Deut 15:12).

B. Increased protection for female slaves

To grant her protection from possible exploitation she was given full freedom if any of three conditions was met. First, if her master was unsatisfied with her for some reason, he was to permit her family to redeem her, and was not to profit from selling her to foreigners. The term "broke faith" with her means to "deal treacherously, act faithlessly." God views this act by her creditor as a breach in covenantal, relational terms; it is not mere business or contractual dealings. Thus, God acts as her advocate, pronouncing sentence on the master who has violated the integrity of the young woman by breaking his commitment to her. Second, if she is given in marriage to his son, she is to be treated with the full status of a daughter, which perhaps implies a right to an inheritance and an end to her service. And third, if the master takes another wife, she is not to be displaced by the new bride and deprived of her marital status that entitles her to food, clothing and sexual intercourse.

In our world this has tremendous implications for the protection and care we ought to provide single women and working mothers who often find themselves vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation in the workplace. The Church needs to be a safe community where women who are outside their father's care can find refuge, protection and healing from men who violate covenants for personal gain.

Comparing the two examples of the male and female slave, I am amazed by the importance of covenantal relationships transcending business relationships. In the case of a male slave, because of his love for his master and family, he waives the right to his freedom; while in the second, because of the breach of covenantal love for a female slave, the master waives his right to her service. In both cases, such a strong

relational component was introduced in the administration of their debt that relationships became the determining factor of their futures, rather than the pursuit of profit. And in the end, each slave was fully freed from the burden of debt and united into a community that loved them. It doesn't get much better than this!

III. "Debt Slaves" in the Modern World

In contrast, consider how impoverished and impersonal we are in the way we care for those in debt. Our world of big business has removed the fabric of relationship out of all our economic transactions. Because once small, personally owned businesses have almost all been replaced by humongous corporate warehouses, we have no knowledge from whom we are buying from or where our products are made. We have no idea what natural resources were used or whose hands actually crafted our purchase. This means that when we bring home our boxed goods and sale items from Costco or Kmart, they have an R-value of 0. Then with the invention of the credit card, we are encouraged that we don't have to wait until we can sufficiently save to buy what we want. We can have whatever we wish now by paying with money we don't have ($T = 0$). And because the debt is transferred to an unknown financial institution, our creditor has no face ($L = 0$). And finally, when we get the bill, rather than encouraging us to free ourselves from debt, we are urged to go further into debt by deferring the principle and just paying the interest. Because my creditor has no face, the "R" value of my goods still equals zero.

Months go by and then years, but with no sense of relational responsibility. Debts keep mounting, and our best friend, called "denial," keeps us from facing our responsibility that what we have really isn't ours. Buried under a mound of debt we lose our freedom and become slaves to work. We get up earlier and go to bed later. Husbands take on more responsibility and work longer hours to keep earning more, while wives often have to secure another source of income to keep the home afloat. As covenantal love is displaced by sheer survival, tenderness and romance are gutted from the marriage, and the toll on children who grow up with parents who are not relationally present is unimaginable.

IV. Time for Some Free Advice

A. Time to Take an Inventory on the Past – Whose slave are you?

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1)

Paul originally wrote this verse in the context of legalism, but I would suggest it aptly fits the way most of us are enslaved to debt. When I speak of debt, I'm not speaking of debt on appreciating items or investments like a home, but depreciating items and expenses we have expensed on credit, from our automobiles to our toys. If you are in debt, you are endangering your future freedom to be a bondsman to Christ, not to mention depleting your present joy in the things you own. If you are buried under a mound of debt, I have two words for you. The first is to attack debt with the same resolve you would fight a war, and then be ruthless to simplify, simplify, simplify! Secondly, without inserting a strong relational component into the administration of your debt, I doubt if you'll ever find the freedom Israel's "debt slaves" did. Debt is practically impossible to overcome in isolation. So take an inventory of the past and place yourself under the yoke of a community.

Once you've taken an inventory of the past, it's time to get a vision for your future.

B. Free yourself with a vision for the future

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. (Rom 13:8)

Paul's vision for the people of God was to be governed by no debts except the debt owed to love one another. What vision to have of retirement, freedom to indulge out of selfishness or freedom to serve out of love? Let me prod with two model examples in our congregation, Marty Mathiesen and Don Wong. Both of these men lived in this community for most of their lives. They worked hard, raised loving families and paid their bills. Upon retirement, Marty used his teacher's pension to minister for five years in a school for missionary children in Romania. This very week, Don Wong is on his fourth trip to China. Currently he is "flying beneath the radar," in the mountainous region of northern China, teaching 200 bright young leaders a New Testament Survey course over the next two weeks. So impressed was he by the work going on in one church that has trained and supports 300 full-time evangelists, he offered to give 100 scholarships (\$30 each) for those who could not afford to come. Because of his debt of love, the class enrollment doubled.

Our retiring years ought to be our best years living in the freedom to serve others, going places we never dreamed possible, and imparting to a new generation the gifts that were freely given to us.

C. Don't wait to start loving, the future is now!

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

Did you know that one entire book in the New Testament addresses our theme of caring for a "debt slave"? It is the book of Philemon. In a masterful combination of skilled rhetoric, word plays and brotherly affection, Paul writes to Philemon, announcing that he has canceled the debt of his runaway slave, Onesimus (lit. "useful"), making him a free man. The ground of his freedom, however, is a harder currency than "cash": it is the blood of Christ that has transformed this former *useless* slave into a *useful* "brother." Behind Paul's words we catch the subtle but penetrating rebuke to Philemon. This man though he was living in the age of the Spirit, when there is neither "slave or free," since God's Spirit has been poured out "even on my male and female slaves" (Joel 2:29; Acts 2:18), but he did not act like it, as evidenced in the treatment of his slave, Onesimus. Though a leader in the church, Philemon did not treat his "hired" help with the dignity they deserved. He may even have been so harsh as to cause Onesimus to steal from him and run away. In any case, Paul offers to repay any cost to Philemon, but subtly reminds him whose debt Philemon is in (verse 19), and appeals to him to receive Onesimus back as a brother.

The point is, we don't have to wait for the future to arrive to start reaching out in love; the future is already here. As the people of God, we should be like Paul, reaching across social divides, transforming waiters, grounds keepers, checkout clerks, gardeners and security guards into full members of the new community. For the good news is out: all debts have been paid!

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:862.

² "Judges" – the NIV translates 'elohim as "judges," which is a possible but rare rendering for 'elohim; its more natural meaning is given by the NASB as "bring him to God," meaning the sanctuary.