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You Shall be Consecrated to Me Exodus 22:18-23:19

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Have you ever heard someone describe Christianity this way: They'll say something like, "Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship." This idea has been around for decades. It got a big boost a couple of years ago thanks to a popular YouTube video. Then there was a book, *Jesus > Religion*, not long after. At its best, the motivation behind this concept is an affirmation of the Protestant principles of "grace along", "faith alone", and "Christ alone"—that we don't earn our way into God's good graces by the things we do, but instead we receive his mercy and grace as we trust in Jesus. But in recent years, this whole thing has become increasingly skewed. The *solas* of the Protestant Reformers have been forgotten and "relationship" increasingly means that you can do Christianity however you want (or not do it at all) so long as you love Jesus. And this is utter nonsense, but it's wildly popular.

What's interesting about this phrase is that it downplays "religion" as something bad and then describes real Christianity using this word "relationship" that isn't even in the Bible. Brothers and Sisters, "religion" isn't inherently bad. God calls us to be "religious". The question is whether our religion is good or bad. You see "religion" is simply our service to God. Good religion serves and honours him on his terms. Bad religion dishonours him and attempts to serve him on our terms—or not to really serve him at all. It might dishonour him by being devoted to a false god. It might dishonour him by attempting to honour him in ways that he has prohibited or that misrepresent him to the world. We can't escape "religion". The issue is whether our religion is good or bad. Listen to what St. James writes in his epistle:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
(James 1:26-27)

Jesus might have said it this way: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

This, too, gets at the "relationship" the Bible describes between God and his people. It's not just "relationship". That's a very mushy modern term that can mean almost anything. It's especially troublesome in our age when "relationship" has almost nothing to do with commitment. We ditch our friends if they dare not to affirm our every poor choice. We write people out of our lives when we find them difficult. We dump our spouses when things get rocky. But James hits on something when he speaks of "religion that is pure and undefiled before *God the Father*". You see, when the Bible speaks of the relationship between God and his people, there are two specific sorts of relationship that dominate the discussion. The first is that God's people are his sons and daughters. We have a familial relationship with him. There is no stronger relationship, no more firmly bonded relationship that we can know than that children and parents. He loves us no matter what. Good or bad, he loves us. Even when he has to discipline us, it's because he loves us and wants what's best. And as sons and daughters, we have an obligation to honour our Father, to represent him—and our family—well.

The second sort of relationship the Bible describes is one of covenant. God enters into covenant with his people—into a bond in which he pledges himself to them and they pledge themselves to him, in which he makes promises and they make promises. Both of these come together in Exodus as Israel reaches Mount Sinai. The Lord enters

into a covenant with Israel. The Decalogue and this "Book of the Covenant" we've been working through spell out Israel's obligations—the promises of the people—while he obligates himself to Israel. It's summed up in his declaration: I will be your God and you will be my people. And what does that look like? Remember the Lord's word to Pharaoh when he called on him to let his people go? "Israel is my firstborn son." So, through the law given by Moses, the Lord is showing how his covenant children are to serve him. This is what "good religion" was to look like in Israel. This is how the Lord's children were to show their love for him and to represent him (and their family) before the watching eyes of the nation. So let's pick up where we left off, at Exodus 22:18 and we'll go through to the end of the Book of the Covenant. This part addresses what we might call "religion".

"You shall not permit a sorceress to live.

"Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death.

"Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction. (Exodus 22:18-20)

This section begins with a stern prohibition against pagan religion and its practises. I am your God and you will be my people—and that means shunning the ways of the pagans. Death is the penalty. The land to which the Lord was taking them was his. The land of Israel was never Israel's land. It belonged to the Lord, who brought them to live with him and that invitation was contingent on their covenant faithfulness. Corporate unfaithfulness ended in exile, but there were some very serious offenses by individuals that removed the guilty from the land through execution. None of the Lord's people was to engage in sorcery. The Jewish commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra explains that the text singles out female sorcerers because the practise of sorcery was dominated by women. That doesn't mean the death penalty didn't also apply to male sorcerers. The problem with sorcery is that it denies the sovereignty of God over his creation and attempts to manipulate it directly through

mechanistic means. Bestiality is then condemned amongst God's people. Israel's neighbours engaged in bestiality in some of their religious practises, re-enacting the escapades of their gods, Baal and Ishtar, as part of fertility rites. Not only is the practise itself an abomination, but like sorcery, such practises deny the sovereignty of God over his Creation. And, third, there is to be no sacrificing to the gods of the pagans in Israel. The Lord has promised to care for his people. The Lord makes good on his promises. The Lord expects his people to live in faith. He has rescued them from Egypt, he has taken them through the Red Sea, he has drowned Pharaoh's army, he has fed them in the wilderness with manna and with water from a rock. To sacrifice to other gods, to hedge their bets with the worship of other gods, is to deny what the Lord has done for them and what he has promised.

Now from what we might think of as overtly religious subjects we move to something that we might today put under the heading of "social justice". But the Lord doesn't make that distinction. To serve him isn't just something his people can relegate to certain spiritual categories. It involves all of life. Look at verses 21-27:

"You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

"If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

To serve the Lord means to show justice to the weak and powerless and the Lord begins by reminding his people who they were. They are not to take advantage of or to otherwise wrong the "sojourner". The Hebrew word, *ger*, refers to someone who has left his homeland and now finds himself a foreigner in a place where he has no rights to property or to marriage or to the local legal or religious systems. What does that look like? It looks like Israel in Egypt. They were a nation of sojourners and the Egyptians made slaves of them. God's people are to remember their roots, to remember how desperate they once were, and to treat the sojourner as God has treated them: with kindness, with mercy, with justice.

The same goes for widows and orphans—those who have no one else to look out for them. As God rescued Israel when she was weak, Israel is to look after the weak in her own midst. We get a sense of just how far this is to go and why as the Lord warns his people against charging interest to the poor. There's nothing wrong with interest, but God's people should be generous with those who are in need. There's this interesting illustration about not keeping a poor man's cloak overnight. Imagine how poor you'd have to be if your cloak was the only thing you could give as collateral for a loan. And the Lord says, don't hold it overnight. Don't leave your neighbour shivering in the cold for the sake of a loan. The Lord had been generous with his people and they ought to be generous with each other. There's a reminder here again that the land was not theirs; it was the Lord's. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, but it all came from his hand. If they saw a fellow Israelite in need—someone who, for some reason, had missed out on the bounty—they weren't to squeeze him for more, but to share from the abundance the Lord had provided.

And the Lord warns, when he cries to me, I will hear. Oppress the sojourner, the widow, the orphan and my wrath will burn, leaving your own wives and children widows and orphans. This is serious business. I'm reminded of

Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. The king forgives him a gazillion dollar debt, but he goes out into the street and accosts a fellow servant who owes him a small debt and has him thrown in to prison for not paying. When the king heard of it, he had the first man thrown into prison. "I showed you great mercy, but you refused to share that mercy with others." God has shown his goodness to his people and his people are to witness him by sharing that goodness with each other, particularly when it comes to caring for the poor and the weak—just the Lord had delivered them when they were poor and weak.

Now, with verse 28 we switch back to what we might think of as more "religious" matters—a reminder that a godly life is all-encompassing.

"You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

"You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

"You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs. (Exodus 22:28-31)

To revile God—the Hebrew word means to declare something worthless or insignificant—is forbidden. The same goes for the way the people were to speak of their rulers, who were called by and represented the Lord. God was good. They knew it. Again, they'd been there in Egypt and at the Red Sea. They'd collected the manna. They knew the Lord was good. They had no business reviling him. Instead, they were to honour him and to do so before the nations, that they too might know the Lord's goodness.

The people acknowledge the Lord's goodness by giving the firstfruits of their harvest and their firstborn to him. It was a way of acknowledging that he

was their provider. Their firstborn were sacrificed to give him glory, or in the case of sons (and some kinds of animals) redeemed or bought back from the Lord.

Verse 31 is a reminder: the people are to be consecrated to him. The Lord has declared them holy and as an example of what that looks like—or, better, doesn't look like—they are not to eat carrion. Carrion was unclean and unclean animals ate it. In one sense, the Lord is reminding them that he will pour out his bountiful goodness on them. When you live in the Lord's house, there's no reason to eat roadkill, so to speak. But the main point here is that a people consecrated to the Lord should keep themselves clean—a concept instinctive to their culture and that will be elaborated later in the *torah*.

Now, as we slip into Chapter 23, the Lord switches back again to issues of justice in Israelite society. Let's look at this big chunk all at once, verses 1-9:

“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

“If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

“You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

The Lord takes his people into the courtroom. You shall not lie to pervert

justice. You shall not side with the many or take the popular side when you know it's wrong. By the same token, you shall not side with the poor man just because he's poor when you know he is in the wrong. A few verses further on the Lord again warns his people to be impartial and not to take bribes. Do not kill the innocent or the righteous.

Now, most people are unlikely to ever be in that sort of situation, but right in the middle he smacks us—well, the Israelites anyway—right between the eyes: If you see your enemy broken-down on the side of the road, you shall not keep on truckin'. You shall pull over and help him. How often are we tempted to gloat, to have a perverse *schadenfreude* when we see something bad happen to an enemy. Most people wouldn't blame us one bit. But the Lord says “No!” Your enemy is your brother. I love him as I love you. As Jesus would say, “Do good to those who hate you”. Doing good to your enemies has a funny way of bringing reconciliation—something else God's people ought to be witnessing to the world around them.

Verses 10-12 call God's people to observe the Sabbath. We'll skip those today as we've already covered that topic and we'll pick up at verse 13:

“Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.

“Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD.

“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or

let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. (Exodus 23:13-19)

At the close of the Book of the Covenant, the Lord calls his people back to loyalty towards him. He is their God and they are his people. He has delivered them and he will continue to care for them. They are to worship him and him alone—and this worship extends beyond mere ritual to a communal life built around his sovereignty and faith in his good character and his sure promises. And so he gives them three festivals to celebrate his provision. The first—the feast of Unleavened Bread, otherwise known as Passover—celebrates the Lord's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. But there are two other festivals, the feast of “harvests” and another of “firstfruits” that celebrate the Lord's continued provision for his people and at those times they bring their offerings—to thank him for his care and, giving what came first rather than waiting to see what might be left-over, they show their faith in his promises in a very real way.

Finally, as this section began with a warning not to engage in pagan practises, it ends with another. This warning not to boil a kid in its mother's milk has long been a bit of a mystery. Jewish and Christian commentators have often read it as prohibiting something inhumane and unnatural, boiling a young goat in the very liquid its mother produced to give it life. And there may be something to that. But in the 1920s a trove of ancient religious texts was discovered at Ras Shamra in Syria. And in those texts we've discovered a reference to this practise as part of a fertility ritual.¹ So, once again, God's people are not to resort to magic or to appeals to pagan fertility gods in their desire for prosperity. God has promised to care for them and he's

¹ Cited in Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Skokie, Ill.: Varda Books, 2005), p. 305.

given them every reason to trust that promise, even when things look desperate.

Now, this is Israel's law. As I've said before, it doesn't apply to us directly, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from it. The Church doesn't bear the power of the sword. We don't execute church members for practising witchcraft or worshipping pagan gods—although excommunication serves a symbolically similar function as it puts them outside the family, the people of God in the hopes that doing so will move the person to repentance. We don't engage in pagan fertility practises, like ceremonially boiling young goats in their mother's milk. But our culture has its own pagan pitfalls into which we sometimes fall. What's called "Word of Faith" or "prosperity gospel" teaching runs wild in some sectors of the church, but it's nothing more than paganism couched in language borrowed from the Bible. It's focus is using thoughts or words as expression of faith in order to manipulate the natural world, our circumstances, and even God himself. Christians have no business with that sort of thing.

False gods are still all around us. The ancients may have personified things like wealth and sex and power in their gods. We think we're better because we no longer do that, but we continue to worship and to put our faith in the very things those gods personified. We say we believe in God, but we really trust in our bank accounts or in our jobs or in our power and authority—or we grasp at these things when we don't have them, hoping they'll make us secure. Just as the Lord knew the Israelites would be tempted to do, we give to him from our time, our talent, and most of all our treasure, what we have left over rather than giving him the firstfruits in faith. We gloat when we see our enemies in trouble. We turn blind eyes to the poor and to the sojourner. Our nation kills roughly 100,000 unborn children a year before they're even born and we do little or nothing lest our friends cease to think of us being respectable.

But, Brothers and Sisters, I think the single biggest takeaway here is what I said at the beginning, what St. James tells us: True religion isn't just about loving God or being spiritually good or positive in some way. True religion doesn't allow us to serve or to worship God on our own terms, as if Christianity is about nothing more than a relationship or about loving Jesus. True religion, first, comes to God on his own terms, not ours. True religion requires repentance. It requires that we give up everything that is not Jesus. It requires that we let go of every source of security that is not Jesus. So that we can take hold of him with both hands in faith. It means that we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures that we might know what is that the Lord expects of us. It means that if, through Jesus, we are God's sons and daughters, we join with this family called the Church—fully committing ourselves to each other, sharing our gifts, and sharing the bounty that God has given us: sharing love, sharing grace, sharing mercy, sharing materially. It means that we not only proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord, but we live it out in tangible and meaningful ways in our own lives and in our collective life as the people of God.

Come to the Table this morning and recall the death and resurrection of Jesus. Remember the goodness of the Lord, how he gave his own Son for the sake of his people. Remember the promises that he made to you in your baptism—promises of forgiveness and of new life and of a future hope. And leave the Table with your faith renewed and strengthened that you might go out to do justice and to love mercy, that you might go out to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. Brothers and Sisters, let us go out into the world to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and may we live in such a way that our faith in that proclamation is evident to everyone we know.

Let us pray: Lord, as we affirmed in today's collect, you have stretched out your right hand to help and defend us, you have given your Son for the life of the world, you have given us your Spirit

to renew our hearts and minds. Strengthen us we pray in our faith that we might offer you true religion, that we might serve, worship, and honour you as you desire, loving you with heart, soul, mind, and strength—loving you with all of our being—and loving each other as you do. Through Jesus we ask. Amen.