

END OF DAYS, PART 15: LAWLESSNESS

Matthew 24:12, Exodus 21 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

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Years ago when I was in England to study at the C. S. Lewis Summer Institute I had a wonderful week of fallow time at the home of friends, Pastor and Mrs. Dennis and June Hill. At the time he was pastoring the Holmgate Evangelical Church in Clay Cross near Chesterfield. Dennis had been in my church in Pearl River, New York, while he was at Alliance Theological Seminary, and was a member of my staff for a while.

I had spent a lot of time thinking, reading, praying, and writing, interspersed with walks. On Friday I decided to walk all around the village in the afternoon, I would eat in one of the local establishments, and then walk home before it got dark. Clay Cross is a quaint village which once served coal miners as their home base. There were homes, pubs, some shops, and the usual village library and post office. Everything seemed to be well-kept and orderly--until I got to the part of town with the pubs. In that part of town, the sidewalks were teeming with young adults, some of whom looked like they were in their late teens. Everyone seemed to have a pint of beer in his or her hand, and the sexes were more or less evenly mixed. There was lots of carousing and some minor scuffles even though it was still early.

Then as I was making a detour around that section, I heard a very loud car approaching along with some wild screaming. Flying past me came a typical European compact car, but this one had no muffler and only three tires. The fourth wheel, in the back, was dragging down the pavement in a shower of sparks. The car careened into the area crowded with young adults, bouncing up over the curb and slewing back and forth. One fellow threw himself part way into the open window of the passenger side, another jumped on the back and grabbed the roof rack. The driver continued back and forth through the village at an ear-splitting volume, with fellows jumping on and off, shooting sparks and nearly hitting people again and again.

At one point I had to leap out of the way to keep from being struck. The crowds on the sidewalks considered this all great fun, hooting and calling out to the young fellows who kept getting flung off the car as it spun around. I wondered that no one had called the police, and finally two blue and white patrol cars came driving up—but they drove right on by, as if the spectacle was normal and not worthy of police attention. As I watched the car gradually getting destroyed by bouncing off solid objects, I concluded that my plan to walk and dine should be scuttled. There was a danger and a wildness in the environment which was not to my liking. I returned to my friends' home, grateful for a safe place to go, and they kindly provided me with my supper.

LOVE DOWN, LAWLESSNESS UP

It all seemed a long way from the image of proper English society, but those of us on this side of the pond need to appreciate that hooliganism and mob behavior has become a regular part of life there. I had seen wildness and mobs in urban environments in America, but I was unprepared for it in that quaint English village. It made me think of Christ's prediction about the end of days in Matthew 24:12, **"Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold."** This is a most general type of

sign of the end, and I do not say that we are there yet, but surely we can see the fulfillment of this prediction from afar as love in our time goes down and lawlessness goes up.

I think also of the often misunderstood verse which reads in the King James version: "**Where there is no vision, the people perish**" (Prov. 29:18). A much better translation reads: "**Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law**" (Prov. 29:18 ESV). The term for prophetic vision is also translated "revelation." The prophets saw the truth of God by way of revelation. They could see what God wants from people. Where this truth is lacking there is no shaping of human behavior into what God wants, and heartless lawlessness is the result.

Western forms of government rest on this principle of the inward restraint of the people. You cannot have a representative republic or a democracy without it. And without the prophetic vision, those who make laws will have no guide for the law of the land except their own wayward and fallen thinking. My experience in Clay Cross served to make the advance of lawlessness plain to me in a personal way. Internal, personal lawlessness led to group lawlessness which bloomed under the total lack of external restraint by the police. We have the same here in America, just with a different flavor.

CONCRETE TESTS OF LOVE AND LAWFULNESS

A willingness to follow the laws of God and man is a kind of love, because it expresses a care for the well-being of others. Conversely, an utter unwillingness to be bound by law is a clear expression of disregard for others. In all this we need some concrete way to test the state of love and lawfulness in people's lives. The word of God is the right place to start, and we need only a sample to give us a good measurement. A look at Exodus 21, some of the first instructions God gave to the nation Israel, is as good a place as any. This chapter is also a *locus classicus* for some of the greatest principles of law which are recognized worldwide.

Immediately after giving the Ten Commandments, the Lord began to list specific regulations for godly behavior among his people: "**Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: 'If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,' then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently'**" (Exod. 21:1-6).

The Lord did not establish slavery, but he regulated it to minimize the negative consequences. In a world with no "safety net" from the government, it was quite likely that if your farm or business failed, you would end up as a slave or servant. Before the time of the kings there were few slaves in Israel who were taken by force. So the Lord here sets up a system by which those who have fallen into slavery can live with some measure of dignity and even hope. If you ask me why God did not simply command its complete cessation, I will say that this probably would have caused many people to die of starvation and exposure. On balance, slavery to a kind master was a vast improvement over a life of perpetual want and danger.

And we can see in this passage the Lord giving regulations to prevent the development of the

kind of abusive slavery which occurred in the days of the kings of Israel and much later in America. The first kindness was the hope of release. Every seven years Hebrew slaves were to be set free. Obviously, this was dependent on the godliness of the owner and may not have happened all that much, but we see the intention of the Lord. In effect, the Lord restored the person's opportunity to make it on his or her own. This is surely one of the great founding principles of our nation.

We see here also a difficult balancing of slaves' and owners' rights. Family whom you brought with you are to be released when you are released, but those whom the owner gave you stay with the owner. All of this sounds miserable, but beneath it all stands another of the great ideas of law in the West, that your rights end where another person's rights begin. And in a wise move to keep families together, the Lord established the pathway for someone to stay with his or her loved ones. For some, the best thing they could do in life is make a commitment to serve their master in perpetuity and thus stay with their families. This is a special kind of freedom we all have: freedom to make a wise personal sacrifice for a greater good. This is a choice for both love and lawfulness.

The next section focuses on fairness to female slaves: **"If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money"** (Exodus 21:7-11).

Female slaves had additional protections due to their vulnerability. And if she should be married to the owner's son, she is no longer a slave but a wife and a daughter-in-law. She would be protected if the son chose to abandon his marriage vows. Just as in the case of slavery, God never established divorce as part of his will for mankind. It is the result of the fall. He regulates it to limit the damage which the sinners are inflicting on one another. In this case, the slave woman who has become a full-fledged wife is released from her marriage to the owner's son if he purposes to violate his vows.

Three examples are given. First, she is free if he refuses to feed her. Again we have the hard case that God hates divorce, but divorce is better than starvation. Second, she is free if he refuses to clothe her. I take that to be a *synecdoche* for exposure which threatens her life and well-being. It may include housing. Thirdly, we are given the example of the deliberate denial of marital or conjugal rights. These are simply three examples of ways the owner's son has said: "I refuse to fulfill my marriage vows." Without getting into a long exposition of this situation, let me remark that our church wedding policies on the local and national level have never admitted that there are many ways to destroy a marriage beyond recovery, not just one or two.

How is the West faring with lawful marriage? There are communities in America where almost no one is married. There are plenty of children, but no family covering, no provision, no guidance, no sacrificial love and apparently, an almost random satisfaction of physical desires. Entire nations in Europe and Scandinavia are going this way. The principle could be stated this way: "Never mind what God said, we are going to do whatever we want—no matter who it hurts." Lovelessness and lawlessness are rocketing forward in our time.

The next passage helps us interpret one of the ten commandments: **"He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die"** (Exod. 21:12-14). Here we see the almost universally accepted distinction between murder and manslaughter. We also have repeated from Genesis 9:6 the idea that in cases of genuine premeditated murder, the Lord expected Israel to follow a careful process of jurisprudence, and if the accused was found guilty, he or she would be executed. Banishment was not a permanent solution, and there were no jails in Israel. By contrast, safe havens were to be established in cases of unpremeditated manslaughter. All of this to protect the sacredness of human life.

Crimes against the family and kidnapping are next lumped together: **"He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death. He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death"** (Exod. 21:15-17). The punishment for these crimes seems severe, especially those against the family. I think they reflect the Lord's view that the family must be sacrosanct. It is the basis upon which all other aspects of culture are built. Many homes in the West are more like dormitories. The adults abandon the sacrifice of parenting, children become unrestrained, and chaos is the result. This is surely one of the reasons for falling educational standards in America. How can any child study in a chaotic family environment where, as the majority of students experience before graduating high school, the family may blow apart completely? We seem to be losing the family.

The Lord also regulates the sin of fighting, and these regulations lead to the statement of one of the great principles of jurisprudence, namely, that the punishment must fit the crime. The text reads: **"If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed. ...If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"** (Exod. 21:18-19, 22-25).

The last verse is known as the *lex talionis*, or the law of retribution. It limits the punishment to prevent wild damage to one another in a fit of rage. This is a key principle of the Judeo-Christian West, but not the Muslim world. There one's hand can be chopped off for stealing, and one's tongue may be cut out for saying the wrong thing. Women in particular suffer the worst abuse for violations which seem to be made up out of whole cloth, for things like driving a car, going to school, or failing to wear a head scarf. This type of Islamic law is called *shariah*. It has arrived in Great Britain, many European countries, Canada, and is coming here soon. In *shariah* the punishment need not fit the crime.

This passage has been used in the past to argue for abortion, since it seems to show a woman who is struck and loses the baby. But the context is clear that there is **"no injury,"** and that if there is injury then the *lex talionis* covers the case.

Again we see a troublesome case, this time of the beating of slaves which seems to be regulated

rather than prohibited outright: **"If a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod and he dies at his hand, he shall be punished. If, however, he survives a day or two, no vengeance shall be taken; for he is his property. ...If a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth"** (Exod. 21:20-21, 26-27). This is a powerful limit on striking a slave indeed. One stroke too hard and the slave gains his or her freedom. Never let it be said that the Bible approves of slaves and beatings. Rather, it regulates something which is the result of the fall of man and grants as much dignity as possible to the slave.

Next comes what scholars call the "law of the goring ox": **"If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him. Whether it gores a son or a daughter, it shall be done to him according to the same rule. If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall give his or her master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned"** (Exod. 21:28-32). Here we find the important principle of proximate cause, which works in two directions. If we permit a danger to another knowingly and it causes their death, we are held to be responsible. Conversely, proximate cause limits the excuses an accused person is allowed to make, such as the argument that the boy who killed someone to get his leather jacket should not be held accountable because he had experienced very serious poverty. Poverty does not provide any legally defensible cause for murder.

Finally, we conclude with sundry provisions for adjudicating some things which can happen in the course of working: **"If a man opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall give money to its owner, and the dead animal shall become his. If one man's ox hurts another's so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide its price equally; and also they shall divide the dead ox. Or if it is known that the ox was previously in the habit of goring, yet its owner has not confined it, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead animal shall become his"** (Exod. 21:33-36).

In these last regulations we see the great principle of personal responsibility at every point. There are many ways this principle is being violated in American life to our great harm. Abortion is the separation of the responsible choice to engage in sex from the natural result of pregnancy. Letting people out of government sponsored college loans has become an epidemic. Who should pay for you education if not you? Giving welfare to people who can work but who choose not to kills the sense of personal responsibility. Government bailouts of banks and businesses teach business people a terrible lesson that if they have the right contacts in government they can act irresponsibly in the conduct of their business. Finally, allowing mortgages to be sold to others in pieces cuts the cord of responsibility for making a good loan, since you no longer care if it gets paid back.

We are seeing the advance of lawlessness and lovelessness as never before. Is this the end? At the least we can say that the signs of the times are becoming more clearly consistent with the signs of the end. Watch for things which never used to be legal but which are now. I see them everywhere. Use the word of God as your standard. And watch for the loss of the sweetness brought to society by love. Christ is not far behind. Come, Lord Jesus!