The Law Applied (1)

Exodus 20:18-22:15

 This March Mary and I visited Korea to celebrate our 30 years’ anniversary. In my hometown Kyungju we stopped by the famous rich Choi’s family town. The rich Choi’s family was not a ‘Crazy Rich Asians’, but a compassionate and noble family whose richness had lasted for six hundred years until the Japanese government confiscated all their properties. By the gate of the town there were the very impressive six instructions as their family motto:... Receive travelers as well as visiting guests with warm hospitality. Never let anyone within 20 miles radius starve to death…” After reading these instructions I came to know why the Choi’s family had become rich and how their richness had lasted for several hundred years. They were generous for others. These instructions showed us their ancestor’s compassion for the poor, mindfulness for travelers, and respect for human rights and so on.

 In today’s passage the LORD God gave several detail laws which support the Ten Commandments to the Israelites through Moses. They were the laws on Hebrew slaves, homicide, personal injuries, and rights of personal property. Through these laws we learn who God really is and why he gave these laws to his people. God is the law-giver. When we study what the laws are, we come to know who the law-giver is.

First, God is holy (18-26) Look at verses 18-21. God gave the Ten Commandments to his people through Moses while he was on Mount Sinai. When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and asked Moses to not let God speak to them directly, but through Moses because they were afraid of death. (19:12, 20:18,19) Moses told them, “***Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning***.” (20) The Israelites didn’t have to fear for God’s presence because the fear of God was to keep them from sinning. As we know, sin separates us from God (Is 59:2). Sinning makes us hostile to God. (Ro 8:7) God prohibited his people from touching the foot of the mountain because they were sinful men. (Ex 19:12). God is holy. The only way for them to come to God was through Moses, the mediator.

We give thanks to God for our mediator Jesus Christ. Because of our sins we couldn’t come to God. But because of Jesus and his death on the cross for our sins, we come to God with confidence and freedom, calling Him ‘*Abba*, Father’ (Ro 8:15). Jesus opened the way for us to come to the Holy God. Hebrews 4:12 says, “*Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* “Hebrews 10:22 continues, “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water*.” Jesus is the mediator and the High Priest who intercedes between God and sinners! Praise Jesus who enabled us to come to God with confidence and assurance. Amen!

Verses 22-26 teach us about God’s laws about idolatry (22-23) and altar worship (24-26). God forbade idolatry, which would mislead them to idols when they enter into the Promised Land. In the land of Canaan there were detestable Baal worshipers, who would steal the hearts of the Israelites under the name of Baal, the god of fertility and prosperity. But God told them again that they shall have no other gods before him. The LORD God is the only one whom they must love and worship.

Next, the LORD God instructed them how to build the altar and how to worship there. Let us read verse 24b. “***Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you.***” Through these words God taught us how to worship. We must worship God so that his name may be glorified. God removed the limit of time and space for his name to be glorified. He will be wherever his name is honored and glorified. He is with us when we worship Him. He is with you when you sing hymns and songs at home. He will bless you when you glorify his name through sharing the gospel. Wherever God’s name is glorified, he will come to us and bless us.

Jesus said in John 4:24, “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth*.” We must worship God in the Spirit and in truth. We must worship God through the Holy Spirit and for Jesus because Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. (Mk 2:28) Wherever we cause the name of Jesus, His Son, to be honored, God will come to us and bless us. Indeed, Jesus said in John 5:23, “*that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever (does not) honor the Son (does not) honor the Father, who sent him*.” When we honor the Son Jesus and worship him, we honor the Father God and worship Him. Let us glorify the name of Jesus through our worship service so that God’s presence and blessing may always follow us and our ministry! Amen.

Here we learn that God is holy and he wants us to be holy, too. In the beginning and from the beginning, we were created differently from other animals. We were created in God’s image and his likeness. As he is holy, we also should be holy. We can grow in his holiness like Jesus and participate in the divine work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, God’s law on Hebrew slaves: God is compassionate: (21:1-11) When Moses received these laws, there was no slavery system among the Israelites. These laws were given to them for the future of the Israelites after they entered the Promised Land. People became slaves for several reasons, but many became bonded slaves when they were not able to pay back their debts. For example, when Joseph was the second man in Egypt next to Pharaoh, he sold food to the hungry Egyptians in the time of famine. When they couldn’t pay back their debts, they sold themselves to Pharaoh. (Ge 47:25, Ex 22:3) Even though men made this slavery system, God had compassion on slaves. God told the Israelites to let Hebrew slaves work for six years and go free after seven years. If a slave wanted to serve his master because of his wife and children, he was allowed to serve his master for life. (6) If a daughter was sold as a bride and was not pleasing to the one who bought her, she had a right to go free with food, clothing, and her marital right. She must not be resold to foreigners. (8)

All these slave laws reveal God’s compassion on the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. God did not allow the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable to be mistreated, abandoned, ignored, or manipulated. His heart was broken when he saw them. This is because the LORD our God is the compassionate God. Jesus did not pass by the blind. He stopped and opened their eyes. He did not reject the lepers. He had compassion on them and healed them all. He heard the cry of a widow and raised her dead son. The Prophet Isaiah talked about this compassionate God, saying, “*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory*.” (Is 42:3, Mt 12:20) I pray that God may help us to practice God’s compassion to those who are weak, sick, and poor around us. A few weeks ago I attended the graduation ceremony of Paul Lee. I was so impressed and was thankful for such a godly and gospel-centered graduation ceremony. I also had compassion on those who were working hard for young children under unfavorable conditions, compared to other rich and luxurious private schools. I pray that God may provide all things necessary for this school and help us to support it in all possible ways.

Third, God’s laws on homicide and physical injuries (Our God is just) Have you ever visited the courthouse for any reason? Did you see pictures of scales in the hallway or in the courtroom, which are called ‘scales of justice’? These scales of justice symbolize judgment and fairness. God gave the Israelites the laws on homicide and personal injuries based his justice and mercy. If anyone killed or injured others intentionally or deliberately, he should be punished. But if anyone killed and injured others by accident or unintentionally and unknowingly, he was allowed to flee to a refuge place to save his life. He should stay there until his case was set up. God allowed an opportunity for them to be redeemed. If some injured or damaged others by their animals, they should compensate with restitution. All the amounts and the process of compensation also should be done fairly and justly without any involvement of revengeful intention. In verses 24-25 the words are said, “***Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.***” These laws were given to prevent overlaid revenge from the victim so that the accuser and the accused might be treated fairly. We have revengeful spirits when we are mistreated unfairly or injured badly. If we are punched one time, we want to punch back two times or three times until our enemies are knocked out. Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-45. “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles…You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*.” Jesus did what he taught his disciples. On the cross he prayed for his enemies who had nailed him to the cross, “*Father. Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*” (Lk 23:34) It is not easy for us to love our enemies who harmed us, insulted us, mistreated us and persecuted us. But Jesus asked us to love them and pray for them. How difficult it is for us to practice mercy and justice at the same time! Even though we know that we must forgive those who harm us, it is not easy for us to forgive them and accept them as our brothers and sisters. We just do not want to see them. How difficult it was for God to practice his justice and mercy at the same time when we sinned against him. How hard for him to love sinners and show his mercy on those who deserved to be punished! But God did it through Jesus. Romans 3:25-26 says, “*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood---to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished---he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*” Justice and mercy are opposite words. If we practice justice, we must deny mercy. If we show our mercy, our justice cannot be done properly. But God did this through Jesus by punishing him in our place and showed mercy for those who believe in him and trust in him. Hallelujah!

Fourth, God’s law on property rights (22:1-15) Last Thursday one of my neighbors asked me if I parked my car by his driveway. I didn’t park my car by his driveway? We have many parking spots along the streets of the Bible house. He got mad against the one who parked the car at the edge of his driveway. I understand his anger because anyone whose property right was not respected will get mad like him. If you drive cutting off others, you will be severely scolded by other drivers because you did not respect other’s right to use the road. God’s laws on property rights are more familiar and common to us than laws on personal injuries. When we hit another car by accident, we call our insurance company because the company will pay back in our place. In 22:1-15 the word ‘restitution’ appears several times. Restitution is a payment to compensate the victim. Restitution must be fairly made and paid. For example, if a fire breaks out and spreads into other houses or fields, the one who started the fire must make restitution whether it was by accident or not. (6) This is the same way we have to compensate the driver who was hit by us whether it was out of our control or not. Our God is just and he is fair. He does not show favoritism. We have to learn how to be responsible for what we do whether it was right or wrong. We must be honest in dealing with all kinds of conflict among brothers and sisters, and even neighbors. We also respect other’s rights, human rights, property rights, even rights to use the road.

 In today’s passage we learn who God really was and why he gave the laws to his people. When we know who the law-giver is, we know what the law was supposed to be. God gave the laws not to restrict their freedom, but to protect them from the injustice and evilness of men. Our God is the compassionate and merciful God. He practices justice because he is righteous. When we fear God and respect others, we don’t need all these laws. When we love God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, we don’t need all these laws. Paul said that love is the fulfillment of the law (Ro 13:10). He meant that when we love, we fulfill the law and overcome the world (Gal 5:14). May God make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and make each of us a royal priesthood and a holy nation for the whole world. Amen.