

## Moral Commands, Divine Judgment

Exodus 22:18–24, Matthew 25:31–46

President Clinton made a proclamation in 1999 that June would be “Gay and Lesbian Pride Month.” You’d have to live in a cave not to notice. It’s on billboards, corporate advertising. There’s great pressure to conform. There are rainbow flags in front of businesses, homes, and even churches. The rainbow, a divinely-ordained symbol of God’s mercy and deliverance, has been co-opted in the service of evil.

The underlying philosophy of Pride Month is “There are no moral absolutes.” The Bible teaches that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. No president or legislature can change that. “There are no moral absolutes” is a lie, a declaration of insubordination, defiance against God and his moral law. A rainbow flag on a church is an open declaration that it is *not* a true church of Christ. It is an announcement to the world that “*our* king is the Devil—Christ is *not* Lord here.” If you see a rainbow flag on a church, it is *not* a true church. It is no part of the church of Jesus Christ.

As Christians we know that we—all of us alike—are sinners. We know that all people struggle with temptation. Christians bring the message that God loved us and sent his Son to die for sinners. Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved—hallelujah! We don’t hate anybody. We don’t hate gays and lesbians. We want our dear neighbors to be saved, to experience the abundant life in Christ and to become his worshippers.

But no honest reading of our text this morning could conclude that there are no moral absolutes here! Here is God’s truth, and it is vital that we understand it.

I have three points this morning: (1) Moral commands, (2) Divine judgment, and (3) Application. First,

### 1. Moral commands

As we’re going to see, today’s text contains both moral commands and divine judgments. Consider the moral commands we read about in our Old Testament text: Don’t permit a sorceress to live. Don’t lie with an animal. Don’t sacrifice to any god except the LORD. Don’t mistreat or oppress a stranger. Don’t afflict a widow or fatherless child. Here are *moral* commands that forbid wicked behavior. These commands were not intended for ancient Israel alone but express universal duties binding upon every member of the human race. To break these commands is *sin*, not just for Jews under the Old Testament, but for all people everywhere.

These are applications of the *moral* law. The Westminster divines (godly ministers and elders who penned the Westminster Standards) cite Leviticus 20:6 (“[turning] to mediums and familiar spirits”) in their list of violations of the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” and Deuteronomy 18:10–12 (“[practicing] witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who

calls up the dead”) in their list of violations of the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.”<sup>1</sup> Put another way, practicing witchcraft or sorcery is an abomination to the LORD, a sin against both the first and third commandments—violations of *moral* law.

When our Exodus text prohibits lying with an animal, it is clearly an application of the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” which requires sexual purity. When it prohibits sacrificing to any god except the LORD, it is referencing the second commandment, which prohibits bowing before religious images.

The prohibitions against mistreating or oppressing a stranger or afflicting a widow or fatherless child are related to the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” which has to do with interpersonal relations. The general rule is succinctly stated in Ephesians 4:32, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” God has been kind to us, his people, in sending his Son to save undeserving sinners. And because he is kind, we, his people are to be kind as well.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19, helpfully differentiates between “the moral law” and “judicial laws” (we’ll define these in a moment). I’ve quoted the relevant section in today’s bulletin:

“4. To [the people of Israel] . . . as a body politic, he gave sundry *judicial laws*, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

“5. The *moral law* doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.”

Note the contrast between the moral law, which is binding upon every member of the human race throughout history, and the judicial laws which were given to the people of Israel as a “body politic,” and which expired when the Jewish state came to a definitive end in AD 70. As I summarize in today’s bulletin, the moral law expresses “*universal standards of human behavior, summarized in the Ten Commandments, rooted in the character of God, written in the hearts of men, and inescapably binding upon all men and nations everywhere.*” What this means is that the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is binding upon all men and women everywhere, throughout all time. No one can evade responsibility to God’s moral law. It is the standard by which everyone will be judged at the final judgment, when all men appear before the judgment seat of Christ. No one can say, “I never knew,” for this law is written on human hearts. As the apostle Paul teaches

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<sup>1</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism 105 and 113 (<https://opc.org/documents/LCLayout.pdf>)

in Romans 1:18–20, man intuitively knows the truth that there is a God, and that man is responsible to that God. God’s holy character is “clearly seen” by man the creature. God has written the knowledge of himself on the human consciousness, such that men are “without excuse.” Even the Gentiles “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness” (Rom. 2:15).

The judicial laws given to the people of Israel as a body politic expired with the state of Israel, but there are general principles of justice, called “general equity,” expressed in those laws, which remain binding. For example, the judicial law requires two or more witnesses to prove guilt, and provides that witnesses may be cross-examined. These are part of the general equity. Moreover, capital punishment by stoning might arguably be carried out by hanging. Godly judges must weigh these matters.

While the moral commands that we find in our text today are expressed negatively, they require positive duties. “Don’t permit a sorceress to live” means: devote yourself to God’s revealed truth. “Don’t lie with an animal” means: practice sexual purity. “Don’t sacrifice to any god except the LORD” means: delight yourself in the pure worship of God. “Don’t mistreat or oppress or afflict a stranger, a widow, or a fatherless child” means: show kindness and do good to the vulnerable members of society as God gives you opportunity. There are plenty of moral duties to reflect on as we meditate upon today’s text. The bottom line: the commands in this section are moral commands, binding on all members of the human race.

Second, consider

## **2. Divine Judgment**

Not only are there moral commands, rooted in the character of God, there are also *penalties*. Note the language of our text: “shall surely be put to death . . . shall be utterly destroyed . . . I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.” Under God’s law there are blessings for obedience and sanctions for disobedience. We call these penal sanctions. As I note in today’s bulletin, penal sanctions are “appropriate punishments for criminal behavior to be meted out by human judges, anticipating eternal punishment at the hand of God himself.” God wills that violations of his moral law be visited with penalties both temporal and eternal. For example, the premeditated murderer is to receive capital punishment at the hands of the state, and if he is unrepentant he will undergo the penalty of eternal hellfire. Similarly, when our text requires that a person convicted of practicing sorcery be “surely put to death,” that sentence is to be carried out at the hands of the state, but an unrepentant sorcerer, like the unrepentant murderer, will also undergo the penalty of hellfire forever. Likewise with the person convicted of committing bestiality or idolatry. These were heinous crimes under Old Testament law. If unpunished, others would be encouraged to commit similar

crimes. This would tear the very fabric of society. As Solomon observed, “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl. 8:11). Speedy public execution at the hands of the state deters crime but also warns evildoers of eventual hellfire. A criminal may or may not receive public justice at the hand of man, but unless he flees to Christ for mercy, he will surely be cast into what our Lord called “unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12).

In our text, those who mistreat strangers or afflict widows or orphans may get off scot-free at the hand of man, but ultimately receive perfect justice at the hand of God himself: “If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

As we saw a few moments ago, under Old Testament law, Israel was a theocracy (a “body politic” to which were committed “sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people”). *Theocracy* is defined as *government of a state by immediate divine guidance*.<sup>2</sup> This was the kind of government that Israel possessed under the law. Godly king Jehoshaphat instructed the Levites in his day, “Amariah the chief priest is over you in *all matters of the LORD*; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for *all the king’s matters*” (2 Chron. 19:4). Here we have “matters of the LORD” (the church) and “the king’s matters” (the state). But in practice, church and state were all but identical in Old Testament Israel. Such is not the case today. The general equity of Israel’s judicial laws requires appropriate punishments that fit the crime, but follow-through in our day is spotty. Civil punishments may or may not be administered by the state, but eternal punishment is certain

Punishment: temporal and eternal: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10 ESV).

Here is a warning for each and every one of us. We may or may not get caught in this life, but there is no avoiding accountability in the future. Our only hope is to flee to Christ, not just to avoid eternal punishment, but because we love him and want to spend eternity with him—the lover of our souls.

“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

“The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theocracy> accessed 6-5-25

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. . . . For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:9–10, 13).

That is the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation. You show that you have true faith in Jesus Christ by becoming his willing worshipper. As the Psalmist said, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Ps. 122:1). If you don’t desire to worship Christ, as he has appointed in his Word, then where is the fruit of your faith? If you are still self-centered and live in your sins, that shows where your heart is.

We have considered (1) Moral Commands, and (2) Divine Judgment; thirdly, consider

### **3. Application**

At the beginning of this message I made the point that the underlying philosophy of Pride Month is “There are no moral absolutes.”

Speaking as a minister of Christ, let me say, I’ve got news for you: there ARE moral absolutes! They are rooted in the character of God himself, and they are revealed in the Holy Bible. Man may not like them, but he cannot annul them; he cannot get around them.

There is no moral uncertainty with God! We listen to the news, and we wonder what to think. What we should really be interested in is: what does *God* think? Ultimately, that is the only thing that matters! Our text today confidently asserts that certain behaviors are sinful, and it imposes appropriate punishments for them—punishments that are specified in law and carried out by faithful civil judges. There is no ambiguity in our text today. This is the eternal will of Almighty God.

Dear congregation, you have assembled here today because you love God and want to hear his voice. You want to know that which is unchanging, certain, and sure. The passage before us tells us exactly what God thinks. We will focus on the latter verses of our text, beginning with the verse: “He who sacrifices to any god, except to the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed.”

Notice the requirement of pure worship. The person who sacrifices to a false god, rather than the LORD, shall be utterly destroyed. This commandment requires that all persons worship the true God *truly*, that is, we are to assemble with his church and worship in the manner that God himself appoints. We must not worship according to our own desires, but according to the Word of God. We must worship with a faithful church, that is, one that preaches the gospel of God’s grace in Christ, that administers the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper as taught by Christ, and that exercises discipline, receiving those who make a credible profession, to the Lord’s table, while excluding those who do not profess Christ.

Sadly, many churches use images and icons, which, according to the Word of God, amounts to sacrificing to a false God. When Moses stayed up on the mountain to fellowship with God for forty days and nights, and the people became impatient, Aaron made for them a cast-metal calf and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD” (Ex. 32:5). Aaron did what the people wanted, but the worship of the molded calf was not the worship of the LORD, but idolatry. Make no mistake: the God of heaven does not want to be worshipped with idols.

Sadly, among many churches that have the gospel do not have biblical worship. Rather, they have what amounts to “a concert and a TED talk.” Their people go, not to worship, but to *observe* worship—but it’s not the kind of worship God intends. We must not sacrifice to a false god—a god of our own imaginations—but worship the true God in Spirit and in truth, in the manner that he himself appointed. That is the only kind of worship that pleases him.

Lastly, consider the closing verses of our text: “You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.”

As we noted a few moments ago, what God requires in this text is *kindness* of the sort exemplified by Christ, who came into the world to save unworthy sinners.

Yet consider the world in which we live—a world that is constantly at war. Sadly, the U.S.’s biggest export is war and killing. This is not a partisan issue. Both major political parties are complicit. We have a Congress that under our Constitution has sole power to declare war—a power that has not be used during my lifetime. The last time Congress declared war was during World War II—before I was born. Yet the U.S. is constantly at war. All recent presidents, both Democrat and Republican, have launched bombs against other countries, killing innocent noncombatants, including women and children. Arguably, the U.S. military machine is the greatest widow- and orphan-maker in the world. No matter which party is in power, no matter which candidate wins an election, nothing changes. This past week there were multiple attacks on Russian bombers parked on Russian soil, hundreds of miles apart, and it is not clear who ordered these attacks, which were almost certainly carried out with U.S. help. There are reports that President Trump may not have known in advance of these attacks. If the President did not order them, who did? Who is trying to take us to the edge of nuclear war?

In other places in the world we hear of deliberate attacks on civilians, even those in refugee camps or those lining up to get food aid, and the weapons that were used to kill innocent men, women and children made in the image of God were supplied with U.S. tax dollars. How can we not be complicit?

Here is the word of the living God: “You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child.” This is his moral law, and we dare not turn a blind eye to it. God have mercy upon us!

Clearly man cannot save himself. Only Christ can save! We must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and beg his mercy. Amen.