

Exodus 23

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Given at Beth Messiah
Sydney
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Working out daily justice

[\[Biblical text and other notes at the end of sermon for those online\]](#)

Introduction

Mordecai Vanunu was arrested here in Sydney 18 years ago and spent nearly the last two decades in an Israeli jail, in Shikma Prison in Ashkelon. 16 of those years he was in solitary confinement. This is for the crime of treason, selling nuclear secrets that were top secret to the press. Justice was meted out, and this week Vanunu was released from prison. He is the talk of the Jewish community and the subject is justice. When is it enough? Was this enough time? What about the solitary...was this necessary? Is this necessary for anyone?

This week the Muslim separatists in the south of Thailand continued their military campaign. In fact, there is mounting evidence that the violence that left 113 dead this week is part of a renewed separatist rebellion.

What is the role of government in stopping this slaughter. When is enough, enough?

The other day I was in front of the Dowling Centre, where the courts are on Liverpool Street. We were out on a sortie, telling people about the love of God in Y'shua. Others were nearby, wielding video cameras and boom microphones to capture the thoughts and

impressions, actually any sight and sound byte, to air on their evening news. They wanted to get a word from someone exiting the tribunal, someone with a thought or two on justice in our day, or at least in their day.

We as humans long for justice in our land and in our lives. This is especially true of Jewish people, I think. And if we had our ways, we would bring justice to the planet. It's an ache in our hearts, it seems, for a system of fairness and rightness.

Today's lesson from Exodus 23 then is part of that longing being fulfilled. On the typically Mosaic wide-angle discussion, justice might be the overarching principle. It's a series of various and sundry laws for the Jewish community. It's about maintaining our diaries and watching what we eat. It's about false gods and how change happens. This is all under the rubric of justice. Let's see what Moses and if you are willing to bear it, what God has to say to us today.

You shall pursue justice (.1-9)

לֹא תַטֶּה מִשְׁפָּט אֲבִינֶךָ בְּרִיבוֹ :

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute. .6

Crowds can be very demanding. If you watched the scenes in the movie *The Passion* or if you have seen other mob scenes in person or attended a rock concert or a political rally, you know how the individual has very little voice. You might consider yelling an opposite opinion, but it won't be long before either your voice is gone or you are.

God says here a fuller explanation of the 9th commandment about bearing false witness. Remember the story of the high school boys?

The story is told of four high school boys who couldn't resist the temptation to skip morning classes. Each had been smitten with a bad case of spring fever. After lunch they showed up at school and reported to the teacher that their car had a flat tire. Much to their relief, she smiled and said, "Well, you missed a quiz this morning, so take your seats and get out a pencil and paper." Still smiling, she waited as they settled down and got ready for her questions.

Then she said, "First question--which tire was flat?"

We could make this an individual consideration of not lying to our boss or to our wives or parents. And this is true and a good way of reading it. However, as is often the case with Torah, and Bible in general, individualism is not in view. How you live this out in the wider community with others is more the biblical tack. In other words, do you lie in public? Do you lie to gain favor with others in courts or in meetings or ...better to think this way. Do you make yourself look better than others when reporting?

"What upsets me is not that you lied to me, but that from now on I can no longer believe you." [Friedrich Nietzsche](#).

Obviously one of the serious consequences of lying is the creation of a society without faith. Victor Hugo said, "Men hate those to whom they have to lie." Abraham Lincoln said, "No man has a good enough memory to make a a successful liar" and my favorite quote on lying is from Austin O'Malley who said, "Those who think it's permissible to tell white lies, soon become color blind"

Listen to the warnings in the opening verses of today's chapter.

1. Don't bear a false report.
2. Don't join with others in lying about a situation.
3. Don't shout your agreement with others who lie.
4. Don't lie about things to make crowds do what you want.
Tell the truth.
5. Don't be partial to the poor man.

Wait a minute, this doesn't seem to fit. Does it? Especially here in Australia we want everyone to have 'a fair go' and that would include the downtrodden. Didn't we learn that last week, that the poor and needy need our attention? Isn't this partiality good for the poor person, then?

Not at all. The poor and the rich alike should have equal treatment under the law. No court should see the wealth of a man's wallet before he sees the truth of the matters at hand. In fact, he should never see the size of the wallet, Moses teaches us here. Why should the rich lose out in equity? Why should the poor be advantages? Be blind, oh justice.

Listen to this just section from verse 4. If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.

Here's another shocker. We often hope for tsuris to malaffected the bad guys in our lives; we want pain to be present in those who mistreat us. But here, God says, if you find property that belongs to your enemy, return it to him. Don't just release the poor animal, or shoo it on its way...actually go out of your way and return it to him. The Hebrew is emphatic.

הַשָּׁבָת הַשְּׁשִׁיבָנוּ לָנוּ :

The last thing most of us want to do is to assist those who resist us. God says, that's what you do to commune well as a family, and as a nations, and as neighbours.

Calendar maintenance (.10-17)

The next section of our text today relates to maintaining our diaries. We have one weekly and three annual holidays. Each should be regarded as not only an optional reminder of God who did and does good things. We should also obey these commands so that we can remember who God is, when all around us, people are forgetting or worshipping other gods.

Maybe that's why Hallmark invented so many holidays. Can you get through a year without sending birthday greetings or anniversary cards, cards for boss' day or secretary's day or Father's Day or... the list is endless. But each 'special day' is a chance to remember something that otherwise we might forget. We take much for granted, and a special day helps us put things of value back on the mantle of our memory, and give them special place.

That's what these festivals and the weekly Shabbat are to do for the Jewish people. If on the one hand we are told not to lie, here immediately we are told to collectively tell the truth. We are to remember what God did and does for us; that's the truth.

We bring special foods to the place of the Almighty, we sing songs and gather together. This was and is God's plan. God wants to get this in our collective memory. Praise the Lord.

Watch what you eat (.18-19)

So then God moves in the text to our stomachs. What does justice have to do with eating? Eating seems such a private affair, doesn't it? But here the Bible gives us a couple bits of advise related to our kitchen and dining room experience. I'm glad God has rights over all our lives, over every room of our house, and we shall see that in Torah. If He is not Lord of every area, He is not really Lord, is He?

So in these two verses we see something about Passover and eating things leavened, then we see this troublesome text about milk and meat.

Let's talk about milk and meat. Abraham certainly ate these together and served the visitors/angels of Genesis 18. I believe the words of this text when applied to diet miss the point.

The NIV commentary here is right when it says

The prohibition of cooking a young goat in its mother's milk (see also 34:26; Dt 14:21b) has been explained since 1933 by a reference in a broken passage of a thirteenth-century B.C. Ugaritic text called "The Birth of the Gods Pleasant and Beautiful" (text 52, line 14). It is generally agreed that the reference is to a fertility rite that entails boiling a kid in milk; but there is no sure reference to the milk of its mother in the broken Ugaritic text. The matter is basically that the young dead kid is being cooked in the very milk that had sustained its life.

It's about family. It's about preserving community. It's not about having a cheeseburger. I don't mind those who argue for a separated diet of milchik and fleishik foods. But to get that from this text (and the other two (Ex. 34.26, Dt. 14.21) is unwarranted and bad theology.

No false gods (.20-26)

The first commandment is of course the fulcrum of all commandments. And here we listen to the echo of that again. He doesn't even want to hear the sound of a foreign god on the lips of any of his people. (.13) God wants singular worship, not mixed, not once in a while; he is a jealous God. And when you enter the land, tear down the foreign gods, and if you have to, tear down the foreigners, so that their influence will not persist to taunt and influence future generations of Jewish people. (.32-33)

Change happens slowly (.27-33)

Finally today we learn a huge principle from the Bible. Change is never easy, and we have spoken about it often at Beth Messiah. Verse 30 tells us how God changes things.

הַעֵט הַעֵט

Little by little. The principle is there in verse 29. He will not do things in a single year lest it strip the whole land too soon. Beasts would ravage the land and nothing would grow again too soon. But little by little he will make changes in us and we will bear fruit for God.

A word from a Jewish believer

I received an email from a young Jewish woman who has been a believer for years. I performed her Bat Mitzvah and have known her family for 19 years. Now she is graduating university and setting her sights on a career in law.

In Dublin, Ireland, I couldn't shake the image of the homeless man I passed on Thames Street while grasping 75 euro in my pocket. In New York City, I was struck by the compassion of my boss, a youth pastor, who gave his best guitar to a recovering drug addict. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, I worked past sunset to help free a Burmese girl from forced prostitution. On Philadelphia's affluent Main Line, I was aghast at the world's indifference toward genocidal violence in DR Congo. In North Philadelphia, I was inspired by Lawanda, a single mother of three and a survivor of domestic violence, who started her own shelter for battered women. In Israel, I wept for the separations between my people and the Arabs, reinforced by long barriers, tanks, helicopters, and suicide bombs.

In four years on four continents, I have learned numerous lessons. Most relevant, I believe, is the realization that the world is full of injustice. Fortunately, I serve a God who hates injustice, and calls me to work in His strength to seek justice for the oppressed, the orphaned, and the widowed. I follow a Messiah who reached out to prostitutes, criminals, tax collectors, and beggars. I read a Bible that tells me all people are created in the image of God, and that I should love them with as much passion as I do Him.

This young woman, whom I will call Monica, has learned, and she will now enter a field of law and justice, helping others get their human rights. Her course of study officially begins in September, but she has already been in class, hasn't she? May we be in class with her, learning to bring justice to those in need, learning to daily trust Messiah Y'shua for His instruction and His life in us. May His will abound in your life and in all the house of Israel, and let us say, amen.

Lessons learned

I believe we should see applications from our chapter today.

- 1) God's concerns for society to run smoothly required an honouring of each other by each citizen
- 2) Lying both individually and corporately has severe consequences which are never good for society
- 3) Y'shua brings true justice to the earth, and those who follow Him can learn His ways
- 4) Noting things on a diary is beneficial for those you remember as well as for you

New Testament connection

Who better to know about corporate responsibility than Y'shua, who in His dying for us experienced this crowd/mob mentality. Y'shua was dobbed in by a friend, then brought before a mockery of a trial in the Sanhedrin, arrested by the Romans and taken into a courtyard where hundreds if not thousands of pilgrims were. They shouted out to crucify him and the nails took aim at the Messiah.

From the cross Y'shua offered forgiveness and grace to those who had even nailed him there. He sought greater than justice, he wanted to take the lost oxen and sheep back to the Maker, back to God, one person at a time. The thieves were there; the soldiers, the people.

Y'shua certainly maintained the calendar as this took place on Passover, when others were worried about kosher lambs, Y'shua died as the Lamb of God for us all.

He wanted and still wants no one to have other gods; He is alone to be worshiped.

And yet, all the while, He well knows that change is slow. He longs for us to know Him and to grow in Him. He longs for all His

people worldwide, in prison in Ashkelon or in suits at the ASX to know Him. He longs for you to come to believe in Him and to follow Him each day. He wants you to be alive and forgiven.

Invitation

So, if you are not yet a believer, let me ask you a question. Have you met Jesus, the One who welcomes weak links; the One who forgives sins and who tells us to forgive others? Do you know the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost, and that was you? Will you become a follower of Y'shua today? Will you choose to line up with God's choices and give your life to our Messiah today? Will you believe...will you trust God, and not yourself, or will you compromise what is true for your own conveniences? He wants to change you from the inside, and to give you release from your own bondages to sin and self-centeredness.

I want to offer you the choice to join us, to identify with and confess Y'shua as your Saviour. If you would like to be delivered from your bondage, this time to sin, then pray this prayer and receive His love and grace. Father, forgive me in the name of Y'shua for all my sins. He was the Saviour and the fulfillment of all prophecies about Messiah. He is the one and the only one who can save me from my selfishness, from my sin. I acknowledge Y'shua as that one who wants to free me, and who alone can free me. I repent of my sin and accept Y'shua as my deliverer. By faith I am now born again by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, please talk to me after the service is over, [\[or email me if you are reading this online\]](#) so we can talk about growing in this knowledge and this relationship with God.

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Actual text

Ex. 23.1 ¶ “You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow a multitude in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

Ex. 23.4 ¶ “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him. You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty. And you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just. And you shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Ex. 23.10 “And you shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves. Now concerning everything which I have said to you, be on your guard; and do not mention the name of other gods, nor let them be heard from your mouth.

Ex. 23.14 “Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

Ex. 23.18 ¶ “You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leavened bread; nor is the fat of My feast to remain overnight until morning. You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the LORD your God. You are not to boil a kid in the milk of its mother.

Ex. 23.20 ¶ “Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. But if you will truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them, and break their sacred pillars in pieces. But you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

Ex. 23.27 “I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets ahead of you, that they may drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate, and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land. And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not live in your land, lest they make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

A joke on lying: Rather it should be said, this is an anecdote.

While pursuing a story about equivocation in high office, I was told, "He gave an if-by-whiskey speech." My source, asked about his curious compound adjective, said he thought it was a Florida political expression possibly borrowed from a Minnesota Congressman. That triggered a call to Richard B. Stone, now a Washington banker, but a former U.S. Senator from Florida familiar with that state's political patois. He immediately recognized the phrase, meaning "calculated ambivalence," and provided the following anecdote:

Fuller Warren, Florida's governor in the '50s, was running for office in a year that counties were voting their local option on permitting the sale of liquor. Asked for his position on wet-versus-dry, he would say: "If by whiskey you mean the water of life that cheers men's souls, that smooths out the tensions of the day, that gives gentle perspective to one's view of life, then put my name on the list of the fervent wets. But if by whiskey you mean the devil's brew that rends families, destroys careers and ruins one's ability to work, then count me in the ranks of the dries."

William Safire in New York Times Magazine.

Lying seems to be a way of life for many people. We lie at the drop of a hat. The book *The Day American Told the Truth* says that 91 percent of those surveyed lie routinely about matters they consider trivial, and 36 percent lie about important matters; 86 percent lie regularly to parents, 75 percent to friends, 73 percent to siblings, and 69 percent to spouses.

Daily Bread, August 28, 1992.

Famous American Fibs

- The check is in the mail.
- I'll start my diet tomorrow.
- We service what we sell.
- Give me your number and the doctor will call you right back.
- Money cheerfully refunded.
- One size fits all.
- This offer limited to the first 100 people who call in.
- Your luggage isn't lost, it's only misplaced.
- Leave your resume and we'll keep it on file.
- This hurts me more than it hurts you.
- I just need five minutes of your time.
- Your table will be ready in a few minutes.
- Open wide, it won't hurt a bit.
- Let's have lunch sometime.

- It's not the money, it's the principle.

Bits & Pieces, December 9, 1993, pp. 12-13.

From the French Enlightenment essayist, Michel de Montaigne, based on a proverb traced to the fourth century church father Jerome:

Lying is indeed an accursed vice. We are men, and we have relations with one another only by speech. If we recognized the horror and gravity of an untruth, we should more justifiably punish it with fire than any other crime. I commonly find people taking the most ill-advised pains to correct their children for their harmless faults, and worrying them about heedless acts which leave no trace and have no consequences. Lying -- and in a lesser degree obstinacy -- are, in my opinion, the only faults whose birth and progress we should consistently oppose. They grow with a child's growth, and once the tongue has got the knack of lying, it is difficult to imagine how impossible it is to correct it.

[On the Father Front, Winter, 1992-93, p. 4.](#)

Writing letters of recommendation can be hazardous--tell the truth and you might get sued if the contents are negative. Robert Thornton, a professor at Lehigh University, has a collection of "virtually litigation-proof" phrases called the Lexicon of Intentionally Ambiguous Recommendations, or LIAR.

Here are some examples:

*To describe an inept person--"I enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever."

*To describe an ex-employee who had problems getting along with fellow workers--"I am pleased to say that this candidate is a former colleague of mine."

*To describe an unproductive candidate--"I can assure you that no person would be better for the job."

*To describe an applicant not worth consideration--"I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment."

[Larry Pryor in *Los Angeles Times*.](#)

One never errs more safely than when one errs by too much loving the truth.

Augustine.

The kings of Italy and Bohemia both promised safe transport and safe custody to the great pre-Reformation Bohemian reformer, John Hus. Both, however, broke their promises, leading to Hus's martyrdom in 1415. Earlier, Thomas Wentworth had carried a document signed by King Charles I which read, "Upon the word of a king you shall not suffer in life, honour, or fortune." It was not long, however, before Wentworth's death warrant was signed by the same monarch!

Today in the Word, April, 1989, p. 16.