

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 21

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 21 opens the so-called “Book of the Covenant” (21–23), the first extended legal corpus in Israel’s history, immediately following the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. The chapter divides into two major sections: laws governing the treatment of Hebrew servants (vv. 1–11) and laws governing personal injury and violence (vv. 12–36). The servant laws establish that even the most economically vulnerable Israelites — those who have sold themselves into debt-servitude — retain dignity, rights, and a guaranteed path to freedom. The injury laws introduce the *lex talionis* (vv. 22–25) and extend principles of proportionate justice across a wide range of cases: homicide, assault, kidnapping, harm to parents, accidental injury, injury to pregnant women, injuries among servants, and damages caused by animals. The governing logic throughout is not vengeance but proportionality — each injury or wrong carries a measured, bounded response calibrated to the actual harm done and the actual relationship involved.

This Text — Intent

God is not simply cataloguing ancient Near Eastern law. He is forming a people whose communal life visibly embodies His character — a people who do not exploit the weak, do not escalate violence, and do not allow power differentials to nullify human dignity. The intent is formational and revelatory simultaneously: these laws are meant to shape Israel into a covenant community that looks different from Egypt and from Canaan — where the powerful consumed the powerless — and to reveal what justice looks like when it flows from a God who is both sovereign and righteous. The deeper intent is to press Israel (and every reader) toward the recognition that God cares about how human beings treat one another in the most ordinary, painful, and vulnerable situations of common life.

Subject Sentence: God establishes proportionate, dignity-preserving justice as the covenant community’s social foundation.

Primary Claim: God is forming a people who image His character by treating every human being — especially the vulnerable — with justice that is measured, bounded, and dignity-preserving, because a redeemed people must look different from the world they left.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Servant Laws (vv. 1–11): Slavery or Regulated Servitude?

A significant modern interpretive controversy concerns whether these laws endorse chattel slavery or regulate a fundamentally different institution. Some readings — particularly those shaped by nineteenth-century debates and contemporary social criticism — treat these laws as morally embarrassing accommodations that Scripture merely tolerates. This reading fails to account for the text’s own logic. The Hebrew *eved* in this context refers primarily to debt-bondage — a socioeconomic institution in which a person unable to repay debts could enter service for a defined period. The laws of vv. 1–6 are not permission to enslave; they are *restrictions* on what creditors could do with debtors: the term was bounded (six years), the release was mandatory, the servant’s family situation at entry had to be honored on exit, and the option of permanent attachment was voluntary and self-determined (vv. 5–6). The laws governing the female servant (vv. 7–11) are particularly striking: they forbid her resale to foreigners, require that she be treated as a wife if taken as one, and mandate her release if those obligations are not honored. The text’s own direction is toward the *restriction and humanization* of economic power over people, not its endorsement.

The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition has rightly emphasized the dignity dimensions of these laws, and that emphasis is worth retaining. Where that tradition sometimes overreaches is in reading these laws as straightforwardly abolitionist, anachronistically projecting a modern category onto an ancient regulatory context. The Reformed reading acknowledges genuine accommodation — these laws meet Israel where it is, in a world where debt-bondage was universal — while insisting that the direction of the accommodation is *away from* exploitation and *toward* dignity, pointing forward toward Galatians 3:28 and the fuller freedom of the gospel.

The Lex Talionis (vv. 22–25): Literal Retaliation or Legal Principle?

The *lex talionis* (“eye for eye, tooth for tooth,” vv. 24–25) is among the most misread passages in the Old Testament. A common popular misreading hears it as a license for personal revenge. This misreads both the literary form and the legal function. In ancient Near Eastern legal context (attested in the Code of Hammurabi), *lex talionis* was a *limiting* principle: it capped the penalty at equivalence to the injury. You may not demand more. The surrounding context (compensation paid to masters for the death or injury of servants, v. 32; release of servants for injuries, vv. 26–27) consistently shows the laws being applied via payment and judicial process, not personal retribution. Jesus does not abolish this principle in Matthew 5:38–42 — He fulfills and radicalizes it, moving from legal restraint on retaliation to the positive command of absorbing wrong for the sake of the kingdom. This is development, not contradiction.

Dispensational readings sometimes treat the *lex talionis* as belonging entirely to the Mosaic theocratic economy with no hermeneutical traction in the New Covenant. This overreaches in one direction; readings that read Matthew 5 as abolishing proportionate

justice in civil law overreach in the other. The Reformed reading holds together continuity and development: the principle of proportionate justice in civil governance (Romans 13:4) reflects the same character of God expressed in Exodus 21, while the kingdom ethic of Matthew 5 governs personal discipleship, not magistrates.

The Unborn (v. 22): Abortion Debate Exegesis

Verse 22 has become a contested proof text in contemporary abortion debates. One reading (found in some evangelical and Reformed sources) understands “no serious injury” to refer to the premature birth of a living child — so that the *lex talionis* of vv. 24–25 covers harm to the child, implying full personhood. Another reading (found in some translations and historically in the LXX tradition) reads the text as distinguishing between the death of a “formed” versus “unformed” fetus, with different penalties for each. The Hebrew text most naturally supports the reading in which two men fighting cause a woman to give birth prematurely (*yeled*): if there is no further harm (to the woman and/or child), a fine is paid; if there is serious injury (*ason*), the *lex talionis* applies. The text does not resolve every contemporary question about personhood, but it does establish that the life of an unborn child is not a matter of indifference to God’s legal framework — harm to that life incurs real legal liability. It should not be pressed as a full systematic statement on abortion, but it should not be evacuated of its witness either.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 9:6** — “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.” The foundational grounding for the homicide laws of Exodus 21:12–14: human life bears the weight of the *imago Dei*, and therefore its violent taking demands proportionate response.
- **Leviticus 19:18** — “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The relational principle beneath the legal specifics of Exodus 21: the neighbor’s body, dignity, and economic vulnerability are not abstractions — they are objects of covenant love.
- **Deuteronomy 15:12–18** — The servant-release laws elaborated and deepened in the Deuteronomic context, explicitly grounding the release of servants in Israel’s own redemption from Egypt: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you.” The motivation for humanizing treatment of servants is gospel-shaped: because you were freed, you free.
- **Matthew 5:38–42** — Jesus engages the *lex talionis* directly, not abolishing it but radicalizing it from legal restraint to kingdom generosity. Establishes the trajectory from Sinai to the Sermon on the Mount without erasing the continuity of the underlying principle.
- **Galatians 3:28** — “There is neither slave nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The eschatological destination of the direction already begun in Exodus 21

— the full equality of persons in Christ fulfills what the servant laws were pointing toward in embryonic form.

Aim: To demonstrate that God’s law in Exodus 21 is not a relic of ancient Near Eastern custom but the first installation of a dignity-and-justice ethic that flows directly from His character and finds its fullest expression in Christ — and to summon the covenant community to embody that ethic concretely.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Introduction: “these are the laws (<i>mishpatim</i>) you are to set before them”	Connects directly to the Decalogue; <i>mishpatim</i> = case laws/ordinances
2–4	Hebrew servant: serves six years, freed in seventh; wife status on entry determines wife status on exit	Six-year term echoes Sabbath rhythm; freedom is built into the structure
5–6	Voluntary permanent attachment: servant declares love for master and family; ear pierced at doorpost	Permanent attachment is voluntary and relational, not coerced
7–9	Female servant taken as wife: cannot be sold to foreigners; must be treated as a daughter if not married by the master	Her dignity as a person precedes her economic vulnerability
10–11	If master takes another wife: first wife’s food, clothing, and marital rights must be maintained; otherwise she goes free	Marriage creates binding obligations that economic transactions cannot override
12–14	Intentional murder: death penalty; unintentional manslaughter: designated city of refuge; premeditated murder: no sanctuary at the altar	Distinguishes intent; justice is calibrated to culpability
15	Striking a father or mother:	Assault on parents is an

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	death penalty	assault on the covenant community's generational structure
16	Kidnapping: death penalty	Human trafficking treated with same gravity as murder
17	Cursing a father or mother: death penalty	Words carry weight; dishonor of parents is not merely a family matter
18–19	Assault resulting in injury but not death: assailant pays for lost time and medical expenses	Civil liability; no prison — compensation to the victim
20–21	Master who strikes a servant to death: must be punished; servant who survives a day or two: no punishment (property loss is penalty)	The servant's life has legal weight; the ambiguity of v. 21 is part of the accommodation structure
22–25	Injury to a pregnant woman causing premature birth: fine if no further harm; <i>lex talionis</i> if serious harm results	<i>Lex talionis</i> as limiting principle, not license for retaliation
26–27	Master who injures servant's eye or tooth: servant goes free	Physical integrity creates grounds for legal freedom; the body matters
28–32	Goring ox: death for ox; owner's liability increases with prior knowledge; servant gored: thirty shekels to master	Prior knowledge creates culpability; thirty shekels later echoes Zechariah 11:12–13 and Matthew 26:15
33–34	Uncovered pit causing animal death: pit-owner pays	Negligence creates liability; failure to protect others bears a cost
35–36	Goring ox that kills another ox: share the loss if no prior knowledge; full restitution if prior knowledge established	Proportionality calibrated to knowledge and intent

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–11	The Dignity of the Vulnerable: Laws Governing Servants
2	12–17	The Weight of Human Life: Capital Offenses
3	18–27	The Cost of Injury: Personal Violence and Proportionate Response
4	28–36	The Reach of Responsibility: Negligence and Animal Liability

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God establishes proportionate, dignity-preserving justice as the covenant community’s social foundation.

Primary Claim: God is forming a people who image His character by treating every human being — especially the vulnerable — with justice that is measured, bounded, and dignity-preserving, because a redeemed people must look different from the world they left.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what “law” is for. (*Mind/belief*) Most people — including many Christians — read legal texts in Scripture as either embarrassing relics or binding rules to be applied or discarded. Exodus 21 resists both responses. These laws are not bureaucratic regulations; they are a portrait of a God who cares about the hired worker who can’t make rent, the pregnant woman caught in someone else’s conflict, the servant whose master knocked out his tooth. The first application is cognitive: stop reading God’s law as arbitrary command and start reading it as revelation of His character. Every case law in this chapter is a window into what the God of Israel cares about — and He cares about proportionality, dignity, and the protection of the vulnerable in the most ordinary moments of common life.

2. Recognize the direction of the law — always toward humanization. (*Mind/belief*) One of the most significant things to understand about Exodus 21 is its direction. It does not arrive at a destination called “perfect justice” — it moves Israel *away* from the exploitation of Egypt and *toward* a dignity-shaped community. The servant laws do not abolish debt-bondage; they humanize it, limit it, and build release into its structure. This is accommodation moving in a specific direction — and that direction finds its destination in

Galatians 3:28 and the full freedom of the gospel. The application is this: wherever you encounter structural accommodation in Scripture, ask which direction it is pointing. The God of Exodus 21 is always moving His people toward greater dignity for the vulnerable, and that movement does not stop at Sinai.

3. Take seriously the weight your power places on others. (*Affections/worship*) The laws of Exodus 21 are almost entirely about what happens when power is unevenly distributed: master over servant, creditor over debtor, employer over employee, the physically stronger over the physically weaker. God assigns legal liability precisely at those points of power asymmetry. The application is not merely cognitive — it is a matter of the heart. Where do you hold power over another person's wellbeing — as an employer, a landlord, a parent, a creditor, a stronger body? God is watching those relationships with particular attention. The response He is seeking is not merely compliance with legal minimums but a worshipful awareness that the image of God in the vulnerable person before you places an obligation on you that no contract can fully capture.

4. Let your redemption shape your treatment of others. (*Affections/worship*) Deuteronomy 15 makes explicit what is implicit in Exodus 21: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you — therefore I give you this command today." The motivation for humanizing treatment of the vulnerable is not utilitarian calculation or social contract theory — it is gospel memory. You were the servant. You were the one without rights, without recourse, without a path to freedom. God freed you. The affectional application is this: let the memory of your own redemption produce in you a felt tenderness toward those who are now where you once were. Christians who treat their employees, tenants, or debtors harshly have forgotten something essential about themselves.

5. Stop excusing small injustices because they seem too ordinary to matter. (*Will/behavior*) Exodus 21 assigns legal weight to an uncovered pit (v. 33), a goring ox whose owner was warned (v. 36), a quarrel between men that injures a bystander (v. 22). God is not only concerned with spectacular evil — He is concerned with the ordinary failures of care, foresight, and responsibility that produce real harm in real people's lives. The behavioral application is this: identify one specific area where your negligence, inattention, or assumption that "it's not that big a deal" is producing harm to someone in your sphere of responsibility. Exodus 21 will not let you call that small. God catalogued it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 21 reveals that the God of Israel is not indifferent to the structures of ordinary human social life. He legislates with precision about the most granular situations — a slave's tooth, a pregnant woman caught in a brawl, an ox with a history of violence — because He is the God who governs *all* of life, not merely its sacred moments. The chapter teaches that justice is not retribution unbounded but retribution measured — the *lex talionis* is not a floor ("at minimum, this") but a ceiling ("no more than

this”). It further reveals that God’s concern for the vulnerable is structural, not merely sentimental: He builds their rights and their dignity into the legal architecture of the covenant community rather than leaving them dependent on the goodwill of the powerful. Most profoundly, it reveals that human beings made in God’s image — even in conditions of servitude, even as economic assets, even as parties in a lawsuit — retain a dignity that the law is designed to protect and honor.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 21 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of the *third use of the law* — the law as a guide for the grateful living of the redeemed community. These laws are not given to earn God’s favor; Israel has already been redeemed (Exodus 12–15) before a single *mishpat* is delivered. They are given to shape a people who have been freed so that their freedom produces a community that looks like their Redeemer. This is the covenantal logic: redemption precedes obligation, and obligation flows from redemption. The chapter also anchors the Reformed insistence on common grace and civil order: the principles of proportionate justice, negligence liability, and human dignity embedded in these laws reflect God’s design for human society and are not limited to Israel’s theocratic context. Calvin’s reading of the Mosaic law as containing general equity applicable across cultures and eras is directly supported by the kind of reasoning on display here. Finally, the servant laws of vv. 1–11 demonstrate that the covenant community’s treatment of the economically vulnerable is a theological matter — a failure here is not merely a social failure but a failure to image the God who said “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (20:2).

Main Takeaway

God’s law in Exodus 21 is not a primitive legal code to be embarrassed by — it is a portrait of a God who assigns infinite weight to human dignity, builds protection for the vulnerable into the legal structure of His community, and holds the powerful accountable for harm that might have been prevented. A redeemed people cannot claim to worship the God who freed them from slavery while treating the people under their power as expendable. Stop reading this chapter as ancient history. Read it as a description of your God and a claim on your life.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as hermeneutically inaccessible.** The most common pitfall is simply skipping Exodus 21 or treating it as a curiosity of ancient Near Eastern legal history with no homiletical traction. This fails the passage entirely. Every

section of this chapter rewards sustained exposition and generates live application. The temptation to say “this doesn’t really apply to us” should be recognized as a failure of hermeneutical imagination, not a hermeneutical conclusion.

- **Using the servant laws to either endorse or anachronistically condemn slavery.** Both moves misread the text. The laws of vv. 1–11 are regulating a specific institution (debt-bondage in a specific cultural context), and they do so in a direction that consistently humanizes and limits it. To read them as endorsing chattel slavery imports a category the text does not use. To read them as embarrassingly backward fails to see their direction — they are moving Israel away from Egypt, toward Galatians 3:28. The preacher’s job is to hold the accommodation and the direction together.
- **Reading the *lex talionis* as a license for personal retaliation.** This is the most common popular misreading. “Eye for an eye” was not permission — it was a ceiling. The surrounding legal context consistently shows compensation and judicial process as the mode of application, not personal vengeance. Failing to correct this misreading leaves congregants with an inverted understanding of one of Scripture’s most important legal principles.
- **Flattening Matthew 5:38–42 against Exodus 21 as though Jesus is correcting Moses.** Jesus does not say “you have heard it said by Moses, but that was wrong.” He says “you have heard it said... but I say to you.” This is fulfillment and radicalization, not contradiction. The preacher who treats Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount as a repudiation of Exodus 21 has misread both texts. They are in the same direction — one is the seed, the other is the flower.
- **Preaching only the individual application and missing the structural/communal dimension.** Exodus 21 is not primarily addressed to individuals — it is addressed to the community as a whole, building a legal architecture that protects the vulnerable by design. Applications that stop at “be kind to your employees” have captured one dimension but missed the chapter’s structural ambition. The passage calls the covenant community to ask whether its *institutions* — not just its individuals — reflect the dignity-preserving character of God.
- **Missing the redemptive-historical grounding of the servant laws.** The reason Israel must treat its servants humanely is not social contract theory or general benevolence — it is because Israel was itself a servant people and the LORD redeemed them (Deuteronomy 15:15). Preaching these laws without that grounding produces moralism (“be nicer to people who work for you”). Preaching them with that grounding produces gospel-shaped community formation (“because you were freed, you free”). Don’t let the motivation drop out.