

Training for Reigning

12th Sunday after Pentecost: August 23, 2026

Exodus 23:1-13, Matthew 5:43-46

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Think about how you have matured since being a child. Or for those of you that have helped raise children as parents, aunts & uncles, friends or childcare think about the progression of training that was needed.

SLIDE - Take for example the stove. As the little one begins to toddle around the kitchen upright, getting big enough to reach the knobs or pan handles, the rules are very clear. Stop! Don't touch!

Children are curious, of course, because they see others at the stove daily. Yet they are told, don't touch. Because we only want the stove to ourselves? Because we like ordering children around? No, because of love! A child who does not understand what the stove does or how to use it, can get very hurt. A child who has very little motor skill is not ready to use a stove to cook a meal.

As they mature, the rules mature too. We show them how to stir the soup or flip the pancakes. We teach them how to set the temperature high to boil water, then lower to cook the pasta. They begin to remember that touching the element is off limits.

But not only the rules change, the relationship matures too. Trust is built. Because even after we have learned to use a stove, we might hear, "Stop!" as we are learning to navigate roadways. And we need to be able to trust the one speaking.

We are in a section of Exodus where God is teaching his redeemed people how to live. Because they have been in slavery. Survival mode under the oppression of the rules of others. God is building with them a new way to relate to Him and to one another. They need to start with the basics.

SLIDE - Those we find in the 10 commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me." "Don't murder." And the practical instructions that follow in sections like this:

Don't spread a false report or join a crowd in doing wrong.

Don't testify falsely or take a bribe.

Don't exploit your enemy or show favouritism because of someone's status.

Don't take a bribe, or oppress the foreigner.

Don't work without ceasing, and don't forget to rest.

Practical rules to begin to build not only the rhythms of community, but also the trust in God for when "Stop! Don't touch!" is needed, the people can learn to listen.

A second foundation that we need to see is that the Hebrew people did not obey these commands in order to become God's people. They obey because God has already made them his people. They have already been rescued, and now they are being formed.

SLIDE - And that is also the pattern of the Christian life. We are not saved because we have developed sufficiently good character. We are saved by grace, through faith, because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. We are baptized as sons and daughters of God. But our relationship with God isn't ended. The grace that saves us is also the grace that forms us. God doesn't simply rescue a people and then leave them to figure out what holiness looks like. He teaches them how to live as a people who belong to him.

The goal is not merely to believe the right things or behave morally, but to become the kind of people who can faithfully exercise authority, responsibility, and love under God's rule. CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, describes virtue as something that becomes a settled disposition through practice: we become just, courageous, or patient by repeatedly choosing those things until they become part of who we are, both personally and as a church.

SLIDE - God's people that begin with "don't murder" develop the character to take on "love your enemies." God's grace makes character transformation possible. We talk in the church of the means of grace - practices that open up space in our lives for God's grace to change us. I remember early in my ministry a young couple came to be married. I encouraged them to start attending worship, which they did often. After their second child was born they seemed to be even more regular in worship. The husband came to me one day and explained that they had decided to worship. No longer did they wake up Sunday mornings and decide whether they were going to church. Worship was going to be their default setting. Do you know how much easier it is to get here when the decision is already made?

We do not simply decide to become patient, loving, or courageous at will. We must train ourselves, with God's grace, through practices that form new habits and dispositions. The disciplines of prayer, solitude, fasting, service, generosity, obedience, Scripture, and community are therefore not religious achievements. They are **kingdom apprenticeships**.

Humanity was created to "rule" with God—to exercise wise stewardship over creation and participate in his purposes (Gen. 1:26–28). In Christ, that vocation is restored and ultimately fulfilled in the kingdom of God. The New Testament even speaks of believers reigning with Christ (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 22:5). Thus, present discipleship is preparation for a future vocation: **God is forming people capable of ruling without being ruled by sin, ego, fear, or appetite.**

This explains why character matters so profoundly. God's kingdom cannot safely be entrusted to people whose power exceeds their character. The central paradox is that we learn to reign by learning to serve. Jesus, the King, defines greatness through servanthood. The disciple therefore trains not to acquire domination but to acquire the character necessary to exercise authority **as Jesus does—with humility, wisdom, self-control, justice, and sacrificial love.**

Israel was going to live among nations with values, priorities, gods, and practices very different from those of Yahweh. And God tells them, in effect: **You belong to me. Therefore, you cannot simply take your cues from the culture around you.**

Israel was called to live *among* the nations while belonging distinctively to God. The church is called to do the same. Peter calls us "sojourners and exiles." Jesus calls us salt and light. We are to be recognizably different—but recognizably different as we become people who increasingly **look like Jesus**. And that means that every part of life is being brought under the lordship of Christ.

Our speech.

Our money.

Our work.

Our politics.

Our friendships.

Our treatment of immigrants and newcomers.

Our treatment of the poor.

Our treatment of our enemies.

Even our calendars.

God cares about all of it because God is forming a people.

SLIDE - End with a short story of one of the communities we visited while on course in Vancouver. Jacob's Well. Shared livingroom in downtown eastside operating for 20+ years. Small staff, a couple fulltime, a couple part time. All of whom live in the same postal code - unhoused, off the street, part of the group of 80-100 whose livingroom is Jacob's Well. Joben is the lead for the community.

Lots of stories that could be told, but Stephen showed up to volunteer. No. no one helps for 3 months. Go make a friend. But I came here to help! I can cook, or clean, bring pants or food. Frustrated, but stayed. Joben said several months later Joben asked Stephen to wash the dishes and he was a little frustrated because he was in the middle of talking to his friend. The church does friendship with self, and God and one another in a way no non-profit can.

Friendship says, "I will know your name." "I will listen to your story." "I will not reduce you to your circumstances." "I will show up." "I will treat you as a neighbour."

May God's grace form us into that kind of people—people who don't merely know the law of Moses or the what of what Jesus taught, but increasingly look like Jesus in the way we live, love, and serve. Amen.