

September 9, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Deuteronomy 15.

1. Why did God require the prescribed action for debts during the Sabbatical year?
2. How does God desire for His people to respond to poor people and why?
3. Describe the practice of slavery among the Hebrews.
4. According to I Corinthians 7:20-21, what is to be preferred to slavery?
5. How valuable do you think a perfect, blemish-free lamb, or goat, or bull would be?

THE LORD'S FAVOR **Deuteronomy 15**

We have determined that a major theme running throughout the book of Deuteronomy is the uniqueness of God's chosen people. Because God is distinct from the world that is sunk in sin, so His people ought to be distinct. This distinction is reflected, yeah determined, by the laws God gave to His people. Because God made a covenant to be the loving, caring Father of this nation, He had the authority to impose laws that reveal His loving care. God's laws for Israel mark them as unique people.

Many of the laws God gave through Moses apply to how the people should worship Him. We who have the advantage of reading the New Testament realize that the law God gave Moses is intended to show the great need all sinners have for the Savior's sacrifice. Because God is perfect, His law demands perfection. Read the first six chapters of Leviticus and realize that everyone in the nation of God's people from the High Priest down to the lowly shepherd in the field was guilty of breaking God's law all the time. Those many sacrifices connected with unintentional sins help us understand how easy and often fallen humans transgress the character and boundaries of the Holy God. Because He is holy, He required continual sacrifices to atone for the people's sins.

It doesn't take a seminary graduate to figure out that at some point there would have to be a particular, all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. How could humanity go on through generation after generation offering sacrifices that simply pictured the great need for a final, satisfactory sacrifice for sin? The glory of the New Testament is that it reveals how all those sacrifices for sin paved the way to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. His was the much longed for final sacrifice for sin. His was the holy sacrifice accepted by the holy God.

But, not all of the laws had to do with sacrifices for sin. Because God is holy and because He is the heavenly Father who cares for His people, many of the Mosaic laws governed interpersonal relationships. Unlike the mythical, manmade gods, the one true God is concerned about the welfare of people. He is concerned about how we treat each other. His holiness is not just about justice and remuneration for sin. His holy character also impacts how we treat each other.

To that end, God required His people to announce the year of Jubilee every fifty years. The law required, *You shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan (Leviticus 25:10)*. On the year of Jubilee, debts were forgiven, land was returned to the original family line, slaves were released. It was a time of great rejoicing. It was another one of those aspects of God's law that pointed to the work of the coming Savior.

You will remember from our morning studies in Luke that when Jesus attended the service at the synagogue in Nazareth, He read Isaiah's promise about how the Messiah would bring into effect the spiritual "year of the Lord's favor." He read, "*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn*" (Isaiah 61:1-2). Then Jesus boldly told the people that He was the fulfillment of that promise.

If we are followers of Jesus, shouldn't His character of caring for the needy be reflected in us? God's law required His people to reflect His concern for the poor and needy at least every seven years. Our ministry ought to reflect that same character of our holy Savior every day.

Credit and Provision for the Poor (vv.1-11).

According to God's plan His people were to forgive debts, or forego payments in the year of release (vv.1-4). This special year of the Lord's favor was every seven years. *At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release (v.1)*. This seems to be a reference to a seven year cycle. The "end" of that seven year cycle would most likely be connected with the Feast of Booths. This feast was celebrated on Tishri 15-21 which would be equivalent to the end of September to first of October on our calendars.

This feast coincided with the end of the harvest season. God's law stated, *You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress (Deuteronomy 16:13)*. The Feast of Booths was one of the three major feasts every adult male was required to attend. It was connected with the law of the Sabbatical year. The Sabbatical year law required that one year out of every seven the people had to refrain from tilling their land (Exodus 23:10-12; Leviticus 25:1-7; 18-22). This was to give the land a literal sabbatical.

That seventh year was also the year of release. Release of what? What was required (vv.2-3)? It appears that these verses teach that God's people were responsible to expunge the brother's debt. *And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed (v.2)*.

Actually the English word *creditor* contains two Hebrew words, *massa yad* which refers to a secured loan. That idea is further emphasized in that it was not unusual for a borrower to secure a loan with a valuable piece of collateral. We see that principle illustrated when Judah gave Tamar his staff, cord, and signet as collateral assuring her that he would send payment in the future for her "services." That means that what might be required here was simply the return of the collateral at the end of the cycle even if the principle of the loan had not been repaid yet.

However, at the same time, the wording does leave room to emphasize the creditor releasing the balance of the loan. But once again we need to view this law in light of the Sabbatical year principle. Because the law required that the land lay fallow the seventh year, it would have been virtually impossible for the poor person to repay the debt during that year. Therefore, it seems likely that the rule here is that the lender was not allowed to require payment on a loan during the Sabbatical year. Nor was he allowed to put pressure on the borrower to pay off the loan before the Sabbatical year.

This idea makes a lot of sense when we remember that these loans were not like you going to the local bank to secure a loan to buy an automobile. The typical loan in that agricultural society was more likely someone loaning a poor person seed to plant in the spring so that he could pay back the loan at harvest time, or maybe over several harvest seasons.

All of this relationship had theological implications because it was the declaration of the Lord's release. The Sabbatical year was all about the people recognizing God the Creator who rested on the seventh day. This God is kind and benevolent, showing mercy to the needy. By taking mercy on the debtor during the seventh year, God's people were showing Him honor in the sight of all their pagan neighbors. We call it testimony.

However, at the same time, we notice in verse three the people were expected to retain the foreigner's debt. *Of a foreigner you may exact it, but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release (v.3)*. No foregoing payment here. This is not a double standard. God's plan was for His chosen people to take care of the poor among them ("brothers"). We know from other statements of the law that they were not allowed to charge interest on their brothers' loans.

But any loans to non-Israelites would come with interest and no sabbatical. *You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it (Deuteronomy 23:19-20)*. Those loans were to be paid to the full.

Why did God require a "sabbatical" in connection with loans made to Jewish brothers? It is because God planned to show His kindness by having His people care for the truly poor (vv.4-8). What an incredible promise that there will be no poor if . . . (vv.4-5). The "if" part is very important. On one hand, the people could be sure that because of the Lord's blessing, no one would be poor. *But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess (v.4)*. That is pretty radical.

No poor sounds like utopia. That is what Communism, Socialism, and various other political ideologies promise but can never produce. It appears that Antichrist will promise this, and even appear to succeed for a season. But we must consider how this could possibly happen. The rest of the sentence, the rest of the promise reveals *for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess (v.4)*. The only way a society can be free from poverty is through the Lord's blessing.

That is precisely what God promised His special, chosen nation. But the very important part of the promise states that the Lord's blessing was contingent on obedience. There will be no poor *if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today (v.5)*. Oh.

That's not likely to happen. These chosen people had already proven they could not strictly obey the voice of the Lord. Their parents had failed continually and miserably and died in the wilderness because of it. And we too prove continually that we do not have the wherewithal to strictly obey the voice of the Lord.

However, there is a principle proven throughout history that as a society tries to live by God's principles and ethics it does enjoy God's blessing on greater levels. For example, it seems like the more a culture lives according to Biblical principles, the less poverty the culture experiences. Common sense teaches that if a culture emphasizes God's principles about honorable work, dependability, and personal responsibility, poverty will be less frequent. Those are principles we find taught repeatedly in both the Old Testament and New Testament.

God's ideal for His nation is to have no poor, and that Israel would never borrow from Gentiles but Gentiles would borrow from them (v.6). *For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you (v.6)*. If the people would follow after God, try to obey His laws, He promised to bless them. As a nation, they would be lenders not borrowers. They would rule over nations instead of being under the authority of other, non-chosen nations.

In reality, Israel as a nation has experienced very little of this. When a culture abandons God's principles, it reaps the consequences of sin as opposed to harvesting God's blessing. The harvest of sin is poverty, need, famine. So what should God's people do when less than "ideal" comes to pass? Be generous (vv.7-8). There are times when brothers do become poor. *If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you (v.7a)*.

There was a possibility of a brother becoming poor. Sometimes this was widespread because of famine or war. Here the hypothetical situation is individualized. Things like this happen even in a land of opportunity and plenty like America and Greenville. People lose their jobs through no fault of their own. People lose their health and cannot work. Sometimes an almost "Job" kind of dilemma overtakes a

family. When poverty is unavoidable for the brother, we are to open our hands.

God's rule: *You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be (vv.7b-8)*. God required His people to generously help the needy. Notice that this is the context of the "loans" that would be put on sabbatical for a year. That would indicate that even when helping the poor, there was to be an expectation of personal responsibility.

Proper attitude was very important (vv.9-11). Shrewdness regarding the year of the Lord's favor was not acceptable. *Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, "The seventh year, the year of release is near," and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin (v.9)*. Instead of being stingy, God wanted His people to be prepared to give freely (vv.10-11). The rule was, *You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him (v.10a)*. The good news is that God attached a promise to obedient activity: *because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake (v.10b)*.

That brings us back to reality. Poverty was a perennial problem in Israel just like it is in any culture. *For there will never cease to be poor in the land (v.11a)*. Jesus taught the same truth in His day. Because this is the case, the command was necessary. *Therefore I command you, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land" (v.11b)*.

It is important for us to make application of this principle to our circumstances. In our culture, the Church is expected to demonstrate this kind of open-handed, free, non-grudging giving to the poor. We regularly have strangers who appear to be quite needy showing up with their hands out asking for help. We must always respond with a balanced view of reality.

On one hand, experience has taught us that often these people are needy because they are lazy, irresponsible, addicted, or in conflict with God's plan for them in any number of ways. Experience proves that if you give them money, they will spend it on drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or other non-essentials or addictive things. That is their habit

and that is why they are needy. We are not interested in encouraging ungodly habits, nor will we facilitate addictions. We have discovered that when we expect personal accountability, most of these people go elsewhere looking for help.

Even among God's people, our church, we try to encourage personal responsibility first. We are aware that people will find themselves in periods of physical, financial need. When we offer help, we want to be encouraging, useful, and generous. But at the same time, we emphasize personal responsibility even in times of need. We are concerned that a person or family not be in continual need because they fail to apply self-discipline by adhering to a workable budget. Scripture addresses this issue when God requires that *each will have to bear his own load (Galatians 6:5)*. Or as Paul pointed out to the Christians in Thessalonica, *For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)*.

Another Bible principle we bring into the equation as we offer help is the need for the extended family who profess to be Christians to help bear the load. *But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8)*.

These are difficult truths to apply sometimes. But, notice that now the text moves from difficult to more difficult.

Hebrew Slaves (vv.12-18).

Here we find rules for Hebrew slaves. Huh? Yes, God stipulated that slavery could last only six years. *If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you (v.12)*.

What did God require here? It is a case where an Israelite purchased a fellow Israelite to serve. This is not at all like slavery as Americans know it from our history. It was voluntary servitude probably because of poverty or a serious financial setback. That is not the same as being captured and forced into slavery. In fact, God

forbid that among fellow Hebrews. *If a man is found stealing one of his brothers, of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 24:7).*

However, at the same time, God's law allowed that while possessing the Promise Land, the Israelites were free to capture a Gentile woman or child and make him or her a slave. *But the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you (Deuteronomy 20:14).* That is just very hard to explain.

Now let's consider this rule of release for the slaves. We must remember that it falls within context of releasing of debt. Exodus 21:2-11 gives a little more expanded instruction on this relationship. The rule here required Hebrews to set Hebrew servants at liberty after six years of labor. This is not necessarily connected with the Sabbatical year rule. Rather it seems to be that regardless of when the servant was purchased, he or she was released at the end of six years. Or in the case of the year of Jubilee, the person was set free regardless of how long he or she worked. *If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers (Leviticus 25:39-41).*

When a Hebrew set his indentured servant free, he was to also give a significant severance package (vv.13-14). *And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him (vv.13-14).* It was not a matter of just giving the servant liberty, but giving the servant a jump start to restored freedom. This was part of the generous spirit God required.

Consider the principle behind release or retention. God desired for His people to remember that all of the nation of Israel had been slaves in Egypt. Therefore, they should always be sensitive to the plight of slaves. *You shall remember that you were a slave in the land*

of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today (v.15).

Furthermore, and very practically, the people needed to remember what a good deal they had. *It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired servant he has served you six years. So the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do (v.18).* The servant had served freely for six years. The owner's only cost was food, housing, medical, clothing. A right attitude promised God's blessing.

And sometimes (though it is hard to believe) a slave wanted to remain working for his owner. *But if he says to you, "I will not go out from you," because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same (vv.16-17).* God's law permitted a person to commit to slavery or servant-hood for life. Again, this is hard for us freedom loving, independent people to understand.

Making application of this principle could be a bit challenging. The 21st century western culture cannot fathom or accept some of the ancient customs surrounding slavery, indentured servants, or servant-hood. In both the Old Testament and New Testament slavery and indentured servant-hood is assumed. In the Roman empire (background of the NT) there were more slaves and servants than free people. The institution was not always as oppressive and wicked as the slavery in our nation's history is presented by modern commentators. In many cases, the servitude in the New Testament appears to be almost similar to employee/employer relationships in modern western culture. Some of you might consider that the person who determines your economic standard in life by signing your check is a slave driver.

Still the New Testament principle that God gave in a culture of servant-hood assumed that freedom was to be preferred. *Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity (1 Corinthians 7:20-21).* We concur that the only logical choice is freedom.

The Firstborn (vv.19-23).

Along with the idea of sacrificing the loan payment and sacrificing the slave, God required His people to dedicate the first and best to the Lord. This meant that the people needed to sacrifice the first to the Lord. *All the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock you shall dedicate to the LORD your God. You shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock (v.19).* The rule effected the first born of a particular ewe or cow or goat. It was simply a reminder to the people of how God spared the sacrifice of the firstborn at Passover.

But more important is that eating the sacrifice indicated fellowship with the Lord. *You shall eat it, you and your household, before the LORD your God year by year at the place that the LORD will choose (v.20).*

Speaking of eating, God's rule allowed for the people to eat second best at home. They were allowed to offer only the best as sacrifice. *But if it has any blemish, if it is lame or blind or has any serious blemish whatever, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God (v.21).* Obviously, that was a great sacrifice. In fact, relatively few animals would be born without a blemish. It was a picture of the coming perfect sacrifice of God's one and only unique Son. And what should they do with the blemished animals? If they needed them for food, they were free to eat at home (not going to Jerusalem). *You shall eat it within your towns. The unclean and the clean alike may eat it, as though it were a gazelle or a deer. Only you shall not eat its blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water (vv.22-23).*

The whole chapter stands on the fact that God is holy. God demonstrates His holy character in His laws. Sometimes we grabble with the old laws God applied to an ancient culture. But we need to embrace what we can understand and demonstrate His character in our relationships with others. Surely we can apply God's generous provision for those who truly need our help. Is it not true that Jesus taught that the world will understand that we belong to Him as they observe our love shown to each other?