

Jubilee and Jesus

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 21, 2024 AM Sermon

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Leviticus 25: 8-13, 23-28, 35-43

On Tuesday of this week I was preparing my sermon and someone came into my office. “Peter,” he said, “I’m reading through the Bible in one year!” “Great!” I said, “how far are you?” “I just got thorough the first five books. I finally managed to slog through the end of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, and that’s why I’m here. What am I supposed to do with those books? All those strange laws and rituals. How do I understand them!”

This member isn’t the first person to have that reaction. These books are hard. Leviticus for instance, the book I’m going to read opens with elaborate instructions about how to make sacrifices. This is the part of the sacrifice you burn on the altar and this is the part of the sacrifice you take outside the camp. This is how you handle the blood; you sprinkle some here, you pour some there, and you put some on your right earlobe, some on your right thumb and some on the big toe of your right foot. Later the priest gets very precise instructions about examining skin diseases: if there is a white swelling on the skin that has turned the hair white, and if there is raw flesh in that swelling, the priest shall pronounce them unclean. You can see how this might not make for inspiring devotional reading. This is definitely not part of the Bible that gets put in a frame on your desk as a source of daily encouragement.

But Leviticus is God’s word too! As Paul says in 2 Timothy, ALL scripture is useful for teaching, correcting and training in righteousness. So today we will dig into one of the chapters from this book to see what these old strange laws might have to teach us about our God and our life.

Specifically, we will look at chapter 25 and a remarkable piece of God’s law called the Year of Jubilee. Every 7 years God’s people celebrated a Sabbath year, a year of rest. But after 7 Sabbath years had passed, the people celebrated the year of Jubilee. The year of Jubilee was more than a year of rest; it was a year of new beginnings and second chances. And, as we will see, it was a year of second chances especially for the poorest of the poor who had fallen on hard times.

When Israel came into the promised land, every family was given a land. Every tribe had a region and every family in the tribe was given their portion, their inheritance. It was a little bit of real estate they could use to make a living for themselves. Sometimes though, a family fell on hard times. Maybe Dad got sick, maybe the business went bad. In those cases, if the debts got big enough, sometimes an Israelite family would have to sell their portion of the land. If the poverty became especially deep, sometimes the family had to sell themselves as well; they would sell themselves as slaves to their creditors as a way to pay off the debt. Parents and children would be forced into servitude. The year of Jubilee was a celebration directed especially at those people. Let’s hear God’s instruction for the year of Jubilee. Read Leviticus 25:8-13, 23-28, 35-43

What a remarkable piece of social legislation! Did you all get a sense of what God is commanding? For 49 years, as the ordinary Israelites lived their life. As they did business, as they bought and sold and reaped and sowed, there would inevitably be winners and losers. Some would prosper and become rich. Their lands would increase. Some would fall on hard times. They’d become poor. Some would lose their land. Some would be forced into servitude. But on this 50th year there would be an enormous reboot. All the slaves would go free. Everyone who was forced to sell their land would get it back. Roughly once in every person’s lifetime, everyone would get a do over. Every hard luck Israelite would get another chance, a mulligan for their life.

There’s something wonderful about this, but it also raises questions. This law would have caused an absolutely enormous amount of change in a short period of time. How would that all work? What would all this redistribution do to the Israelite economy? Is forcing people to give back land a good idea? And how are we supposed to hear this law for today? Does this law have an application for us? Does the year of Jubilee mean that we should we consider repatriating lands to their original owners? Does the year of Jubilee mean that we should consider returning Manhattan to the Lenape tribe after the Dutch bought it from them? That doesn’t seem very practical, nor does it seem likely. Would it be any more likely that landowners in Israel would just willingly give up their lands like that?

In fact, it's not clear that they ever did. If the Israelites ever kept the year of Jubilee, there is no record of it in the Bible, and based on what I read this week, there's no record of it anywhere else either. But that doesn't mean this law doesn't have anything to teach us! The fact that Israel managed to ignore part of God's law doesn't make that law less binding! Of course, we can't just take this old law and simply attempt to apply it today; like many of the Old Testament laws and especially like the laws from Leviticus, we don't just enact them in the present. We read these laws in light of Christ and the New Testament. But that doesn't mean we just ignore them. This law like all the others reveals something about what God values in this world and what he wants from us.

A couple of things here. First: These laws show that God loves liberty. It sounds very 4th of July when I say it like that, but of course it's right there in the text: "Have the trumpet sounded...Consecrate the 50th year and proclaim liberty throughout the land." God loves liberty. The other way of saying this is: God hates slavery. God does not like it when his people are in servitude. God does not like it when poverty and failure put human beings in a position of subservience. He doesn't like it when people are in a place of continual dependence and need. God wants people fully alive. And for God, a person who is fully alive has both freedom and enough wealth and capital, in this case land, to use their freedom to grow and produce and create and imagine. The human being fully alive is not a servant, but a productive, creative soul who has some resources and uses them to produce useful goods and services.

This all has echoes of the garden of Eden. You could say that the year of Jubilee tries to return every Israelite family to the position of Adam and Eve in the garden. In the garden, God Gives Adam and Eve a bit of land. A portion. And God says, "Here you go! You have dominion over this garden! Be fruitful and multiply and fill it with good things!" At Jubilee, everyone returns to the goodness and dignity of that absolute beginning.

So through this law, God is showing what he values. He wants people to flourish. In ancient Israel, and in 2024, God does not like it when people are poor, dependent, and have no resources. Jubilee takes people who were dependent on a human master, and turns them back into neighbors with dignity and agency. When we read this law, we see that God's will is done and his law is honored when we restore people to a position of dignity and agency and freedom.

Second: The year of Jubilee shows us that restoring people fully and fighting poverty takes more than a handout. Restoring people fully means empowerment. That's why in the year of Jubilee, the slaves weren't just set free; they were given land. If you were a Hebrew slave and all you had was your freedom, but no land, what could you do? In that society, without land to work, there would be no way of supporting you and your family. You would have to resort to begging. You would almost certainly end up in servitude again, because then at least you had food. Jubilee didn't just give the handout of freedom; it gave the empowerment of land. It gave the freed family the means to sustain themselves and produce and grow. This pattern of giving more than a handout is consistent throughout God's law. Deuteronomy 15 has another law about setting slaves free, and there too, simply setting them free isn't enough. Here's what the law says, "When you release them, do not send them away empty handed. Support them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor, your wine press." Not just a handout, empowerment.

In our world, the approach to charity has changed over the last 50 years or so. People have realized that if all charity consists of is handouts, giving food or donating goods to the poor, it's not enough. In fact, sometimes it's a negative thing. If charity is just handouts, handouts, handouts, it can create dependency. Even though the handouts are well intended, and while they might help the needy person survive in the short term, they don't help them get back to full personhood. It keeps them in servitude. Now instead of mere handouts, people talk about community development. Community development means investment in communities. Things like micro-loans and long-term training, long term counseling, long term health support. Not simply giving them a meal to survive today, but the means for them to create a life for themselves tomorrow. That's a Jubilee model. That's a Jubilee approach. Jubilee doesn't just give the handout of freedom; it gives the empowerment of land. Just to be clear, that doesn't mean handouts are bad. Clothing handouts, food drives; these are good things especially for emergency, short-term needs. Jubilee charity is deeper than that. Jubilee charity costs more than that. It takes long term investment and deeper sacrifice. It takes longer and costs more.

So, summing up, while I don't think this ancient law from Leviticus calls us to return Manhattan to the tribe which sold it to the Dutch, I do think it calls us to some other things. The Jubilee suggests 3 things about how we live in the world.

One. It calls us to have the heart of God when it comes to the poor. Like God, we hate it when we see a neighbor who is in a state of dependency, servitude and need. Like God we want them to experience full active personhood.

Two. It calls us to a charity that is more than handouts for our neighbors. Instead, it calls us to empower them and give them the means to flourish.

Three. And finally it shows us that this deep empowering charity will cost us. The people in Jesus day gave up land and servants for the sake of Jubilee. That's a high cost. We should expect modern Jubilee charity will cost us too.

I said that there is no evidence in Scripture that the year of Jubilee was ever practiced. That's not completely true. Do you remember that story at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke? It's the first time Jesus publicly teaches in Luke's gospel. He preaches a sermon in his hometown synagogue. He gets up in front of the congregation and he reads these words from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has appointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind. To set the oppressed free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he sat down and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

The year of the Lord's favor. All the commentators that I've ever read on this passage (John Calvin included!) agree that Jesus is referring to the year of Jubilee. So when he says that the scripture is fulfilled, he's saying that in him the Kingdom has come, he's announcing the age of Jubilee. He's saying that his kingdom will bring the forgiveness the release, the empowerment, the redemption of Jubilee.

This is the beginning of his ministry; does the rest of Jesus' ministry embody that? Yes. He embodies all three of those Jubilee principles I just mentioned.

One, Jesus sees the suffering of the poor and the outcast and he hates it. He moves towards them and helps them.

Two, he wants them to have full and active person hood. He heals their soul and forgives their sins - centrally important. But he also heals their diseases. He sets them free. He also calls those who have strength to lift up the poor. He celebrates when Zacchaeus gave away half his money. He asks the rich young man to sell everything he has. He preaches the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the parable of the Good Samaritan, both which call for a Jubilee approach to our neighbors.

Three, he did this all at tremendous cost to himself. For him inaugurating the age of Jubilee didn't require the surrender of a little money, it cost him everything.

And so as we celebrate Easter and it's power we don't just celebrate his saving work in our soul and his triumph over the devil and his washing away of our sin, we celebrate the age of Jubilee announced at Nazareth and confirmed in his resurrection. And if you look carefully, you can see Easter Christians living out the age of Jubilee. If you were at our church's foot spa on Tuesday, you would have seen a whole group of Easter people not just feeding our neighbors, but receiving them as friends and trying to help them with their long-term foot health; literally getting them back on their feet. A little Jubilee. When you drive past one of those low cost housing developments, the ones put together by a local Christian organization, homes built so that low income families could have a bit of land where they can build a life, you are seeing a little bit of Jubilee. When you see our church's deacons not just paying the outstanding bills of a needy person, but walking alongside them, sometimes for months, so that they can find their feet, you are seeing a little bit of Jubilee. No one is sounding a trumpet and declaring a year of liberty, but the Spirit of God is there nonetheless, moving powerfully in people's lives, bringing joy. Bringing Jubilee.

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