

The Lord's Release

Last week we had an opportunity to talk about financial giving. I said I don't try to talk about that subject more than the amount given in Scripture. Well, today we're going to talk again about financial giving in some sense again; based on the passage that we've come to today in our series through Deuteronomy. Though, today, the focus will be a little different.

Last week's focus was more on giving in general to the work of the church. We talked about tithing, as you might recall. Though the end of the last week's passage, chapter 14, verse 28, did raise the concern for caring for the underprivileged in society. People like the orphans and widows and strangers. People who may be in need for various reasons. Well, *this chapter* then turns to address this as a bigger subject. It turns to address how God's people are to treat the needy people among them. And so this passage will have something to say about how we give, even financially, to those in need. It obviously has applications to the diaconal work of the church. This is a passage that will call us to show concern for the poor and needy. And the concern in this passage is *particularly* for caring for those in need among the people of God; among fellow brother and sister Israelites. And so by extension, we'll be reminded of a particular concern that we as the church should have for those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. And as we analyze this passage, we'll again get to see how the gospel of Jesus Christ is foreshadowed even here in this passage.

And so let's dig into this passage. Let's begin by considering Israel's financial picture. Let's think about the economics in the Promised Land for God's people. We see two different pictures in this passage. One's the ideal picture. The other's the more realistic picture. Let's look at the ideal picture first that's painted here. Look at verses 4-6. The ideal picture is one where Israel has widespread prosperity. Actually, that's not saying enough. It's of total prosperity. The translation of verse 4 might seem a little clunky, here, but it's basically envisioning a time where there will be no more poverty in Israel. The two aspects of poverty addressed in this passage are debt and servitude. Verse 4 envisions a day when these things will not afflict Israelites. It envisions a day in the Promised Land, when for Israel, these things will no longer exist.

Now, this is not to say that there won't be debts or servants. Look at verse 6. Verse 6 sees Israel one day lending to the nations and ruling over them. Talking of their prosperity, verse 6 says, "You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you." These opening verses paint the ideal picture for Israel. They envision a day when poverty in their ranks has been completely wiped out. Instead, they become as a nation economically and politically advantaged over all the other nations. The peoples of the other nations will be in debt to them, but no Israelite will be in debt. The peoples of the other nations will serve them, but no Israelite will be in such servitude.

This is the ideal picture of Israel's finances. But this ideal picture painted here is not a prophecy, per se. It's rather hypothetical and conditional. Verse 5 is the condition. They must carefully obey all God's commandments for this to be realized. In Deuteronomy 28 when all the covenant blessings and curses are listed in detail, this is actually one of them. The blessing is that they will have financial prosperity and lend to the nations. The curse is that they will be in

debt to the world. Blessing for obedience; cursing for disobedience. Of course, we know Israel as a nation never realized the full blessings described here in verse 6 or in chapter 28.

Instead, this passage goes on to paint a second picture of Israel's finances. The passage goes on to assume, and even predict, the continued existence of the poor. This is the more realistic picture. Verse 7 assumes the existence of the poor Israelites who will fall into debt. Verse 12 assumes the existence of poor Israelite who will become a bond servant of other Israelites. Verse 11 predicts this poverty will always be present in Israel. "For the poor will never cease from the land." Those are rather humbling words in light of the ideal picture that was just painted. If you first hear of this ideal picture, you could be getting excited. You could think that this covenant you have with God, and this Promised Land you are entering, could result in the end of poverty. But then moments later Moses essentially shuts the door on that hope, saying, that you will always have the poor among you. In other words, Moses is predicting that the people will never so fully obey God so as to earn the blessings of complete financial prosperity envisioned in verses 4-6.

And yet notice that there is still a distinction going on here in this more realistic picture. There's still a distinction between Jew and Gentile. Look at what's going on here. The ideal picture is essentially ruled out. This more realistic picture is given. But Moses is then explaining how to deal with the more realistic picture. They are to show gracious generosity toward the poor in the land. Verses 7-11 talk about this generosity toward those falling into debt. Verses 12-18 talk about this generosity toward those falling into servitude. But notice that the full measure of this generosity is mandated here only toward the Jewish people. These are provisions for the poor Israelites. These verses specifically distinguish between how you treat the poor Israelites, from the poor Gentiles. Verse 3 excludes the foreigners from benefiting from the release of debts that is to happen in the 7th year. Verse 7 talks about showing concern for your poor "brethren." The word brethren is talking about their fellow Israelites; remember the nation was all made up of one family; all descendants of Father Abraham. They were all brothers. Verse 12 talks about how to treat specifically Hebrew brothers who have to become bond servants; it's not mandating how to handle Gentile servants. Even though Israel wasn't going to reach the ideal picture painted here, this is God's way to show that there is a benefit to being part of God's people. They were to recognize a distinction here between God's people and the pagan nations. Their gracious generosity to the poor in their midst, was to be focused on their Israelite brothers. Now, yes, they were still to treat the Gentiles fairly in their economic dealings with them. But the provisions in this passage aren't describing strict economic justice. They're talking about how God's people should show undeserved kindness to the poor among God's people.

By the way, as a side note of application to our church's diaconal ministry, it's passages like this that help inform the priority of our diaconal service. Our concern for helping financially those in need is rightly first and foremost for those of the household of God. There's a place for helping all. But there are passages like this and others in both the Old and New Testaments that support the priority of helping those in the church first.

But getting back to Israel. Looking at Israel's financial picture has an important message for us. You see, we've talked about what Israel was in the Old Testament. Their situation in the Promised Land had some aspects that made it typological of heaven. But if something is a type of something, that means only certain aspects are like what it pictures. Other aspects show that it's not at all like what it represents. And so Israel's financial state here is typological of heaven.

Israel's *ideal* situation is closer to what heaven will look like. At that point, God's people will be in full financial prosperity, possessing the riches of heaven. In heaven, God's people will have something in the spirit of verse 6, but frankly even far better than this ideal pictured for Israel. And yet in the old covenant, this ideal was only going to be fully received in Israel through obedience. That would suggest, at first glance, that heaven itself could only be received through obedience. If this ideal picture of Israel's finances, was typological of heaven, but Israel couldn't even realize the earthly ideal, how could they have any hope of realizing heaven? Well, the tension in this passage between the ideal and the realistic looks forward to the gospel. For it's in the gospel where this financial prosperity will be fully realized. The better-than-the-ideal will be realized one day by God's people. God's people will realize heaven and all the prosperity that comes along with it. Poverty will ultimately be destroyed. But this will not be received by our own obedience. It will be received by grace. Christ's obedience will earn this blessing for us.

And so the fact that Israel will never in the old covenant meet the ideal pictured here, reveals our problem with sin. This passage gives us a picture of God's desires for his people, and ultimately his plans for his people. He doesn't want his people in poverty or debt or servitude. The unmet realities here for Israel are because of sin. This passage shows God's concern to address poverty temporarily among Israel. But this passage looks to God's ultimate solution for poverty. It's his plan of redemption. This plan will ultimately solve the problem of sin itself. That happens through Christ. Again, poverty among God's people will ultimately be solved by God's grace given in Christ.

We see this ultimate solution foreshadowed in this passage by how God tells them to deal with the two issues of poverty mentioned in this passage. God announces a program of grace to be operating in Israel. Debt is to be met with grace. Bond servants are to be met with grace. Each is to find freedom essentially in seven years or less!

Freedom from financial debt is described first. This is beginning in verse 1. This is describing the year of release. At the end of every seven years every Israelite is to release his fellow Israelites from their debts. This would have coincided with the seven year cycle for farming the land; In Exodus 23 God said that Israel was to give the land a Sabbath every seven years; literally a release for that year where they wouldn't farm the land. Well, here this is applied to the people's debts. Certainly this is a function of grace to the people in debt, and ultimately of God's grace. For notice how verse 2 describes this. It says that it is the "LORD'S release." The people were required to give the debt release, but God gets the ultimate credit for the release. It's God working freedom among his chosen people; freedom even from debt. We hear a lot today about debt relief, don't we? Well, here in the old covenant, God had a sort of divinely-sponsored debt relief plan.

Now there have been two different interpretations about this debt release. Some have thought this release of debts was to only be a temporary release; like how the land was given a one year release in farming every seven years. And so if you are of that school of thought, this was basically God's provision to buy the person an extra year to pay off the debt. The idea would be that since the farm lands were to take a year off, how could they afford to work off any of the debt that year anyways? Well, that's one school of thought. The other interpretation is that this was to be a permanent release of debts. That on the seventh year, whatever debt remained was wiped clean. This is the view I favor. The word for release seems to refer to a more general release, not a temporary one; though some have argued for that. Certainly verse 9 is all the more pointed if what's described

here is a permanent release; that you could be tempted not to loan money to your brother if you knew that debt would be wiped out completely; that it would most likely become a gift to them and not a loan. If the loan repayment was only to be delayed a year, that might not be such a hard decision for you. Certainly in light of the permanent freedom given to the bond servants, the parallel here would suggest a permanent freedom from debts being mandated. And a very similar and related parallel in Leviticus 25 calls for a Year of Jubilee after seven of these of seven cycles. In that Year of Jubilee, all the land that was sold during that time was given back to the original families. That was without debate a permanent return of the land to the original families. And so all of these things would suggest that we understand this release of debts to be a permanent release.

Now my application that I'll draw today from all this will apply either way, but it becomes all the more heightened if indeed this is a permanent release from debts being granted. For my application to Christ is this. This Year of Release is a picture of what God does for us in Christ. This typologically looks to a benefit Christ would bring to us. Christ brings the "LORD'S release" to us. We were in a debt of sin that we couldn't pay back. We had a record of wrongs that we had committed that we had no real way to make right. But at the right time Christ came to secure release for us. Colossians 2:14 uses this sort of language. The ESV translation of that verse really captures the literal debt nuance of the Greek. It says that God was, "Canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Of course, this is the language of the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts." Literally in the Greek the language is debts. We have a debt to God that needs to be dealt with. It's been forgiven, released, at the cross. We have true freedom from debt, ultimate debt relief, in Jesus Christ. This Year of Release in Deuteronomy looks forward to the release of debt God would bring in Jesus Christ.

But let's not miss the second picture of grace that's foreshadowed in this passage. There's freedom for servitude announced here. Verses 12-18 describe this program under the old covenant. If a Hebrew brother or sister becomes your bond servant, it's to be for six years. The seventh year you must set them free. Not only that, but you must send them away bountifully, not empty handed. This would enable them to have a fresh start, to hopefully not fall back into poverty. By the way, this doesn't appear to be tied to the seven year cycle for debt release and letting the farm lands have a Sabbath. Basically the clock would start ticking from the time they become a bond servant. Though the Year of Jubilee, per Leviticus 25, also set people free from their servitude as well, which means that someone could actually serve for less than their six years. But, normally, they would have served six years, and be released on the seventh. This is instead of them being stuck in a lifelong slavery.

Again, this is a measure of God's grace, especially in the call for them to be sent out bountifully. It was a picture of God's grace shown through the people. This picture is reminded to them in verse 15. "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 thing today." This is the reason the people were to treat the Hebrew bond servants like this. God had redeemed them from slavery. And when he did, he didn't send them out empty handed. You might recall how God plundered the Egyptians and sent them out full. And then God placed them into a land of milk and honey. All of this was so that the people could start out in a new prosperous life. So, the people were to treat their Jewish brothers the same way when they were granted their freedom in the seventh year.

Again, this freedom for Hebrew servants was typological of a benefit we have in Christ. At the end of the day, God doesn't want his people in slavery. He brought

them out of Egyptian slavery for freedom. The same is all the more the true in Christ. Christ brings us out of slavery; out of slavery to sin and death. All the "redemption" language in the New Testament is the language of freedom from slavery. We've been redeemed in Christ from slavery to sin. Just look at passages like Romans 6:6 and 6:17 for starters. We were slaves to sin, but no more! Christ has set us free. A great passage on this is in Luke 4. There Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah. He reads about how God promised freedom to captives and to those oppressed; how God was proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. That prophecy of Isaiah is believed to be using in part the idea of slaves being set free under the old covenant. This was the idea described here and with the Year of Jubilee. But when Jesus read it, he said that that prophecy was fulfilled with his reading of it. That's because Jesus had come to announce the freedom for slaves that was ultimately foreshadowed from this passage in Deuteronomy. Jesus would bring that freedom through the cross where he died to sin to set us free from sin.

And so this passage describes two kinds of releases. Freedom from financial debt. Freedom from servitude. Both looked forward typologically to freedom we have in Christ. And yet don't miss the fact that these two programs of freedom in the old covenant were only for God's people. They were something extended only to the Jews. That's part of the message being communicated here too. This freedom; this underserved grace, is something that only God's people get to truly experience. That was true in the old covenant. But it's all the more true in the new covenant. You can only experience freedom from your debts of sin, if you are a Christian. You can only experience freedom from your slavery to sin, if you are a Christian. These are benefits only for God's people. But the good news is that you can become a Christian even today. The bible says turn to Christ in faith. Acknowledge that you're a sinner and need this freedom. Trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. If you do this today, then you have the freedom that was foreshadowed here and realized in Christ.

We've talked a lot so far today about how this points to God's program of grace. God showed his immediate grace in the old covenant by helping those in financial need. He showed his long term plan of grace in Christ by solving our ultimate needs. But don't miss how God's work of grace used his people. God wasn't showing this grace in the old covenant directly; he would when he sent Christ. But here he was calling his people to be the means of showing his grace. They were called to show love from the heart for their poor Israelite brothers and sisters. Now we have no record of whether Israel ever in its history actually practiced these things. We don't know if they really showed God's grace like this, as he was commanding them to here.

Just notice the way God appeals to their hearts here. God appeals to the people's hearts to show forth God's own heart of grace. In loaning money to the poor, God says twice, "Open wide your hand," verses 7 and 11. He tells them not to harden their hearts toward this poor brother. They need to beware the temptation that would come in all this. If their brother was in need and asked for a loan, they could be tempted to say no if the year of release was fast approaching. God calls that a wicked thought and a sinful action in verse 9 if you withhold from them for that reason. No, God tells them to not be grieved to give in this situation, verse 10. See how God appeals to their heart and attitude here? The same is true for the releasing of the servants on the seventh year. They weren't to lament according to verse 18 when they send the servant away. Instead they should generously shower upon him blessings, remembering how God had redeemed them in the Exodus. God says in both situations, this heartfelt love to their neighbors was blessed behavior. Verses 6, 10, and 18 all use that language. God promised to bless the people as they showed this kindness and grace to the needy Israelites.

God called them to have this heart toward their brothers. And he calls us to have this same generous heart toward our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need. And how can we harden our hearts towards our fellow believers in need, when we realize how God has already loved us? When we realize that this heart God calls us to have for others, is the same heart that God showed us by sending Jesus to us. Jesus has richly given to us; he's not just made a loan to us; because we know we could never repay Christ for what's he's given us. Christ has freed us from slavery, and did not send us out empty handed. No, he gives us the riches of heaven, and even his Holy Spirit. This is God's heart to his people. He showed it in types and shadows here in this passage. But he's shown it all the more clearly now with the coming of Christ. This certainly challenges our hearts. It calls our hearts to in turn show the love of God to others. If Christ has given us such grace for our eternal life, how can we not in turn show grace to our fellow saints who have needs in this life?

There's a part of this passage we didn't mention yet. Verse 17. This gives the opportunity for those servants who are being set free to instead remain with their masters voluntarily. This would happen because the servant had fallen in love with his master and his household. That's he recognized the prosperity he's had in serving him. In that case, he could go through a ceremony to have his ear pierced and be his servant for life. Well, brothers and sisters, what a beautiful testimony for how our attitude should be to Christ. And I hope it's one we all can call our own. Christ has set us free. He's liberated us. He's redeemed us. But let us not leave him. Let's spiritually speaking, put our ears to the door. Let's spiritually speaking get our ears pierced for Christ. Let's become lifelong servants of Christ our master. May it be our delight to call ourselves bondservants of Christ all our days, both now and into eternity. Indeed, if you have been baptized into Jesus Christ, this is essentially what you've done. Baptism marks us out externally as belonging now to Christ. And his Holy Spirit working inside us marks us out on the inside as belonging now to Christ. We're his bondservants forever; those who've been set free from sin, that have put our lives into the hand of Christ. It's our delight to serve Jesus.

And if that means we serve Christ, then that means he will call us to serve others. God called the people in the old covenant to be the means of God showing grace to the poor and needy in Israel. Now God calls us in Christ to be the means of showing grace, even through financial provision, to those poor and needy among us. The early church gave radically not only for the work of the church, but so that each would have according to his needs. This means that we must each work hard now in our earthly jobs so that we'll have something to share with others. This obviously is something our diaconal ministry officially heads up in the church. Giving to the diaconal offering is one important way to live out this call of Christ. But it's too easy just to write a check to the deacons, get a tax break, and think we're done having concern for those in need. No, may our contributions to the diaconal fund just be a starting place. Let's treat our fellow brothers and sisters generously in every way we can. With our time; with our friendship; with our love; with our concern; with our talents; and even with our money. May we love generously. And may this love especially be concerned for those with the least among us; those in the most need. Let us give, not looking to get back from others; nor to receive earthly recognition and praise from others. But looking to serve our Master in heaven to whom we owe our entire lives. This is one who has showered upon us heavenly riches, and has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. Amen.