

DEUTERONOMY

Lesson 19 - Chapter 15

Deuteronomy 15 continues with the Lord's laws concerning helping the poor and the disadvantaged. God's character is such that He places the needs of the poor as a high priority; but He also places the responsibility of caring for the poor on the shoulders of every individual in the community of those set-apart for God (with those **having** the most expected **to do** the most).

As we prepare to read chapter 15 take notice that the God-principle of **“release” or “remission”** is front and center; more specifically here in this chapter it is release from debt or bondage. We're going to examine this concept very carefully because “release or remission” is one of the principles upon which mankind's salvation rests. Release, **shmittah** in Hebrew, indicates a cancellation of one's indebtedness that often involved servitude in a very literal way in ancient times. And the NT emphasizes that by means of faith in Messiah we gain release from our debt to God due to our sins against Him, and from our servitude to sin itself. It is, of course, in the Torah where we find the principle of release thoroughly discussed; the NT fully expects the reader to already understand it.

Please also be reminded that what Deuteronomy actually is: it is Moses' sermon on the mount; it is Moses expounding on the law.....preaching if you would. Therefore Deuteronomy will take a stated principle or law (many of which we've encountered in earlier books of Torah) and then go on to explain it's meaning and intent and how the principle should be carried out. Sometimes things are modified slightly because the situation of living in tents out in the Wilderness was significantly different than living a settled life in villages and cities in Canaan.

Let's read Deuteronomy 15 all the way through.

READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 15 all

Within the first 18 verses we find a set of three provisions of the Law that are designed to properly care for and protect the most vulnerable and dependent of Israeli society; the poor.

And these laws deal with the things that vex the most needy of every society: their inability to obtain loans, and if they get a loan how to pay off that loan, and then how this can often end up in indentured servitude, which was often the only way a poor person had to pay back borrowed money or even to make a living.

This is not the first time in Torah that we have run across these provisions concerning servitude, debt, and release; we find ordinances about this subject in Exodus chapters 21-23, and in Leviticus chapter 25. It would make today's study too long to go back and examine and compare those passages with these similar ones here in Deuteronomy, so let me just make some general observations about them. First, the Exodus laws and the Deuteronomy laws are very similar to one another; but the laws of Leviticus on this subject are a bit different. The most outstanding differences involve WHO are subject to these laws, and in what situations the laws are to be applied.

Second, Deuteronomy and Exodus are concerned with the welfare of individual persons, whereas Leviticus is more concerned with the corporate welfare of family units and the nation as a whole. Israel was a tribal society with its structure consisting of family units called households, clans, and tribes. A household was the smallest unit and would equate to what we in modern Western society would call an extended family. It usually consisted of 3 to 4 generations of a single family living in a tightly knit economic and social relationship. The next level up was a clan that consisted of several branches of extended families that pointed to a common ancestor going back many generations. The level above the clan was the tribe; it consisted of a group of clans that could point back to a single founder of the tribe. Households had the closest blood relationships among the individuals; clans a little less so, and tribes the most distant.

Therefore while Leviticus is more concerned with the welfare and rights of entire clans and tribes, Deuteronomy and Exodus are more concerned with the individuals that formed households. It's in Leviticus that we get the laws of Jubilee that every 50 years Hebrew servants are to be completely released from service to their masters, land that has been sold is to be returned (remitted) to its original historical owner, and all monetary debts are to be cancelled. Yet, here in Deuteronomy, we find laws that cancel debts and release slaves from their servitude in a far shorter time cycle: every 7th year. The 50-year cycle of release is called the Jubilee cycle, and the 7-year cycle of release is called the Sabbatical year cycle.

Allow me to draw a picture of what kind of impact these laws have. If you can imagine the scenario whereby you loan money to a poor person in need, but the law says that at a predetermined point in time the entire loan MUST be forgiven and the debt cancelled, regardless of how much (if any) of the debt has been repaid, then you can also imagine that as the lender you'd certainly prefer that this forgiveness cycle only occurred every 50th year and not every 7th. On the other hand if you were the borrower, you'd much prefer that your debts were forgiven every 7th year instead of every 50th. So as you can probably also imagine the

Sages and Rabbis have had a field day since the Torah was written, trying to determine just how to reconcile the laws of release as stated in Deuteronomy and Exodus (that were based on a 7-year cycle), versus the laws of Leviticus that were based on a 50 year cycle, and which law would prevail under what circumstances of indebtedness and servitude.

Theologically speaking the apparent discrepancy between the laws of release of Leviticus versus those of Deuteronomy and Exodus presents us with a challenge to reconcile them. The standard method to make all these laws come into harmony (rather than conflicting) on their face has generally been to say that with 7 year cycle of release what is intended is NOT complete cancellation of the debt, but rather only that payments towards paying off that debt cannot be collected during the 7th year of each 7 year cycle; in other words the payments on the debt are just postponed for one year, but then after that year the payments are once again due. But after a series of 7 of the 7-year Sabbatical cycles (49 years), in the following Jubilee year (which is the 50th year), indeed debts ARE to be completely cancelled NOT simply the payments postponed. The logic behind that reasoning is that one of the laws of the Sabbatical year (7 year) cycle is that the ground is to be worked for 6 consecutive years and then in the 7th year it is to lie fallow in order to rest and rejuvenate. Since Israel would, especially when they first entered Canaan, be primarily a farming society it follows that a peasant Hebrew who owed money couldn't possibly pay it back during the year that he was, by law, forbidden to grow a crop. It would be like making a law in the USA that every worker was to be given a furlough without pay for one year in every 7, but still be expected to maintain his debt payments. A reasonably well-to-do person could plan for such a regular event by putting away 1/6th of each year's income so that in the 7th year he had sufficient. But a low income person who needs every penny to survive has no chance of saving up as much as would be needed.

The poorest of the poor who typically didn't own land, and who had to glean their food from the corners of the fields belong to others, were in an even worse position; they had virtually nothing to start with, and therefore had no means to store up grain and supplies (or save money) during the 6 years of divinely authorized field use so that they could draw from that storage (their savings account) during the 7th year when growing was prohibited. Yet even those desperately poor might borrow money from time to time to survive; then as now the poorest were the most sensitive to any kind of economic disruption. And please understand: a forced stoppage of growing crops for a full year every 50 years was bad enough; but a stoppage every 7th year was an enormous burden on Israel. And therefore there is no record to demonstrate that Israel EVER observed the Jubilee year according to God's laws. Can you envision a time where in America all fields were to be given a years rest and all debts forgiven...and it was the same year coast-to-coast? Or that every kind of loan made to people would be cancelled? The economic consequences would be catastrophic, wouldn't they? But things weren't then in their economic system like they are today in ours.

One of the issues we need to understand is how (and for what purpose) the lending of money operated in those days. At first, particularly during the time of Moses and until about the time of King David, lending money among the Hebrews was usually directed towards the poor and

needy. It was rarely a business proposition; usually it was an act of kindness albeit an act of kindness ordered by God. Loaning money.....often in the form of food or seed grain.....was designed to ensure that peasants, widows, orphans, and the sick could survive. Only later did it become a business. When loaning money to the poor generally the law was that NO INTEREST could be charged among Israelites. Of course in order to make a profit charging interest was a given so methods were eventually developed to do this, but it was never meant to apply to what had always previously been a matter of charity to the poor.

So allow me to put this in the form of a God-principle: lending money (from a Biblical perspective) was not about making money or investing it; rather it was about the more well to do of Hebrew society assisting those dependent people in Hebrew society (usually called brethren or kinsmen) who at times had no other way to survive. Lending was the cornerstone of the Israelite welfare system. When we fast-forward a few centuries in the Bible we'll find that indeed lending eventually did become a business. But generally speaking it was NOT Hebrews who were the bankers; rather it was Hebrews who were the borrowers from foreign lenders. Lenders for profit were generally looked down upon by the Israelites as dishonest thieves; therefore it was the rare Hebrew who would become a banker (no matter how lucrative the opportunities) because he would also have become a pariah in his own society.

It generally remained that way within Israel until the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the early 6th century B.C. In Babylon Jewish culture changed dramatically; and one result was that (upon their release and return to the Holy Land 70 years later) many of the professions that had been looked down upon in prior times.....including being money lenders..... were now taken up by the Jews and in time those professions became common mainstays of the new Jewish society. Therefore by the NT times it was usual for Hebrews to be bankers and so we'll get stories about borrowing and lending as a money-making venture during Christ's era. Just understand that the PURPOSE of borrowing and lending in the Torah became perverted by the time of the Yeshua. And as you can imagine the poor got the short end of the stick. After all, if you were a lender seeking to make a profit would you rather loan money with interest to a businessperson, or lend it at little or no interest to a needy person who had scant ability to pay it back? It's not hard to guess which route those with money to lend chose to go.

Notice what the flavor of money lending is in the world today. It is all about the wealthy controlling the money supply, about the rich getting richer by means of consumers having the need to buy goods produced by those same wealthy businessmen. Here in America, where getting money by means of home equity loans, car loans, personal loans, and the use of credit cards at one time was rather easy for the middle class it certainly was not so easy for the poorest among us. The system and purpose that the Lord laid down for loaning and borrowing has been virtually turned on its head over the centuries; those who need money the most can't get it and those who use the loans for making more money for themselves, or buying things that are far more wants than needs, have it easily available and often pay the least interest.

Since I believe that understanding the ancient cultures is central to properly understanding the words and intent of the Bible, let me add that borrowing and lending was (of course) a common thing since time immemorial. We have cuneiform tablets dating to before Abraham that lay out laws from various kings concerning borrowing, lending, and release. Most of the ancient Assyrian clay tablets that have been discovered by the scores of thousands are accounting records and business transactions. So, as we have been learning, most of the things God were ordaining as law for Israel (including the matter of social justice and release) concerned normal everyday matters that were also long established norms among the world's nations. Among the Mesopotamian cultures it was common for kings to release some of their subjects from debt, from slavery, and from their prison sentences as part of their coronation celebration. Of course while it made the King look magnanimous the cost of it was on the shoulders of those who had paid substantial sums for the slaves or lent the money; it cost the king nothing. Later we'll find the Greeks and Athenians release serfs from their land debt, even take the land from the rich and powerful who took it from them and return it to those it rightfully belonged, as a means of righting decades of social wrongs.

It is interesting to note that these Laws of Moses concerning release, debt repayment and cancellation and so on ONLY included Israelites; foreigners had no obligations and received no benefits from these laws. This is made all the more clear in verse 3 because it separates the treatment of foreigners from the kinsman....kinsman meaning a member of Israel.

In verse 4 is the crux of the matter; it is the Lord's **ideal** that there be no poor in Israel. The concept is that the Lord is giving Israel land for which they did not pay, vines they did not plant, fields they did not clear, even cities they did not build. Therefore there is no reason at all for anyone to go without and everyone should be provided for (by the way, this does NOT include the lazy, foolish, criminal and rebellious as we'll find out later). And if ONLY the Hebrews will obey God's Laws about caring for the poor and releasing folks from debt and servitude as the Lord commands, then in return He will bless Israel so abundantly that money and food won't even be an issue, ever. In fact, as it says in the following verses, the result will be that Israelites won't be borrowing money from foreigners; foreigners will be seeking to borrow money from Israelites.

Notice the final words of verse 6: you (Israel) will dominate nations, they will not dominate you. This is completely connected with the few words preceding it, which talk about lending money. The idea is that whatever person or society who lends money to the another has a measure of domination over the borrower Let me tell you a dirty little secret: the reason that America is so hated in many areas around the world is NOT so much because of our spiritual beliefs as we'd like to think.....it's because we lend so much money to poverty stricken 3rd world nations and demand repayment. They are poor, we are rich; they KNOW we have so much and that they are in debt to us. They KNOW that without our loans to them they probably wouldn't survive. They KNOW that this makes us dominant over them, even if we don't make any overt attempts at domination. They also know that if we would show mercy and RELEASE them from their debt to us it would FREE them, lift an impossible burden off their backs and hardly put a

dent in our economy.

Debt is enslaving. Debt creates social economic classes. Debt creates anxiety and bitterness and debt controls the debtor. This principle of the lender being dominant over the borrower is at the heart of so many Proverbs and NT commands for the one who trusts the Lord to avoid borrowing except perhaps for sheer survival. The New Testament cautions us that debt is equivalent to slavery to the one who borrowed the money. It does NOT make borrowing or lending a sin per se; it is more a matter of wisdom versus foolishness.

Let me expound a bit more on verse 4: “there shall be no needy among you”. This is one of those classic IF, THEN dynamics that’s at the center of the Mosaic Covenant; IF Israel will do thus and so, THEN God will bless them. One of the areas I think most neglected within Christ’s Church and perhaps the Synagogue is an understanding of just what the Bible means when it speaks of the blessings and curses of the Law. Evangelical Christians especially like to point to Paul’s letters as he uses the phrase “curse of the Law” on a few occasions and say that it means the Law is inherently bad. This is really rather easy to explain so let’s address it right here and now: every Law of God has two sides to it.....a curse if it’s disobeyed and a blessing if it’s obeyed. The curse involves several elements; first, the curse is the result of sin since being disobedience to God’s Laws is the definition of sin. The ultimate spiritual curse of law breaking (of sin) is eternal death. The intermediate earthly and physical result of sin ranges from a minor penalty all the way up to being executed. The curse of the Law is NOT the Law itself. The Law is NOT being called a curse that must be ended. Rather, the curse is the divine consequences of breaking the law, while the blessing is the reward that comes from God’s hand for being obedient to His commands.

What Disciples of Yeshua are saved from is the eternal **spiritual** consequence (the **spiritual** curse) of breaking the Law. And that consequence is eternal separation from God. We are NOT saved from divine or civil discipline here on earth, nor are we saved from the requirement to be obedient to God’s commands. What we have just read here in the first few verses of Deuteronomy 15 makes a crystal clear case of how the Law works: obey it and receive the blessings, be disobedient and receive the curses (meaning the punitive consequences). If Israel acts out that part of God’s justice system designed to alleviate the suffering of the poorest of society.....that part called “release”, **shmittah**.....then Israel will be greatly blessed. If they do not, the earthly physical penalty will be that they will find themselves fighting for their lives and dominated by other nations in every imaginable way. As I said earlier, there is NO record of Israel ever being obedient to even one Jubilee. And this disobedience automatically resulted in the stated consequence, the curse, coming into effect: they were under constant attack from their enemies, they were driven into exile, they had to borrow money and be indebted to foreigners, and even now with their return to the Land they are holding on by their fingernails and wondering why. And this is to be understood as being a divinely ordained consequence.

Verse 9 takes on the thought that would be most likely to enter the mind of a person who had the wherewithal to be a lender to the poor under the rules Yehoveh has just laid out. Since every 7th year whatever part of the debt that had not been repaid had to be cancelled, and since a Hebrew bond-servant who had enslaved himself to a master in order to either repay a debt to that master or simply to have food and a roof over his head was to be released from his bondage, as each 7-year cycle got nearer to its end the lender stood to lose more money. You see this 7-year cycle was set in the Hebrew Calendar; it was not like buying a car with a 7-year loan that began on the day you drove off with the car and ended exactly 7 years later. Instead each 7-year cycle was simply a repeating cycle of the Jewish religious calendar; it was not tailored to each borrower or indentured servant. So if a person borrowed money 5 years before the next release year came, the lender collected money from that person for 5 years before any remaining debt might be cancelled. If that same borrower had borrowed that money 3 years before the year of release came around, the lender would only collect repayment for 3 years and then have to forgive the rest. What happened if ONE year before the year of release came and a person came to you seeking to borrow, but you knew that this person would have to pay it all back in one year or you would lose the remainder? And that there was no way a typical peasant could ever pay back a sum of money in but one year? Well, the thought would be that at some point before that year of release came (whether on the 7-year cycle or the 50) that lenders would simply stop loaning money to the poor because they didn't want to risk losing most of that money because the date of required debt cancellation was just around the corner.

Well, to this the Lord says that if that happens that poor person (whom the Lord cares so much about) will cry out to Him and the person who refused to lend the money will incur guilt. Further, the Lord says, get used to it, this is how it's always going to be because (vs. 11), "...there will never cease to be needy ones in your land....."

Here's the thing: we've talked a lot about how the Torah and the Law are but God's heavenly ideals put into writing. These laws represent God's ideal justice system. I underline the word **ideal** because even though this is how God intends things to be, and one day after Jesus returns it WILL be that way, mankind's fall and our current corrupted state makes the actual carrying out of these ideals to their fullest extent a practical impossibility sin is just too rampant. This is reflected in the comment that despite Yehoveh's intention that there be no poor in Israel (verse 4), in earthly reality there will always be poor among them that will need mercy and help (verse 11).

Naturally it is this same concept that Jesus simply re-quotes in the NT when he tells his audience in ^{NAS} **John 12:8 "For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me."**

In verse 16 the situation is covered whereby an indentured servant (remember, these are HEBREW servants in the service to other Hebrews) would prefer NOT to be released at the end of the Sabbatical cycle or Jubilee cycle of release, but to remain in service to his master. This servant is loved, and happy, and wants to remain with the family. This servant does NOT have to be released; he may stay at his own choosing; if he does stay, he is to have a special mark put on him indicating that his status is no longer one of being a forced slave but one of choosing to be in service to his master. I hope this subtle difference impacts you; there is an enormous difference between living in forced servitude versus committing to offer your service voluntarily. The first is the condition we are told we have in relation to Satan before we are saved; the second is the condition the Scriptures tell us we have in relation to Yehoveh AFTER we are saved.

This mark of having freely chosen to be in service to a master is a pierced ear. The ear is the ancient symbol of obedience; the ear is a word picture of “listening” and being obedient to the voice of your master. Recall as we’ve discussed before, when the Bible says “hearken” or “listen” it is translating the Hebrew word **shema**. And **shema** does not mean a kind of passive hearing, like enjoying the chirp of a bird or rhythmic splash of a waterfall; rather it means to pay attention to what your master is saying and to obey it!

The topics of chapter 15 now take a right turn beginning in verse 19 and deal with the required and expected sacrifice of the firstborn cattle. This falls in the line with the regularly repeated demand that all firstlings belong to the Lord. Firstlings include everything from farm animals, to field crops, to the tree harvest, to sons born to a man. Only after these firstlings are offered to the Lord thereby acknowledging Him as the source and owner of all life may the worshipper partake. This was only a more detailed ordinance of one that existed going back to the time of Adam and Eve; for in Genesis 4 we find the story of Cain and Abel bringing offerings to the Lord, with Abel bring the firstlings of his flock.

The basics are that once per year the firstlings are to be brought to the central sanctuary (the Tabernacle and later the Temple), where they are to be made a sacrifice by the priests. There, and only there, may the worshipper eat some of the meat of that sacrifice. In other words a worshipper can’t claim to “sacrifice” an animal to God in his hometown and eat it; sacrifice is only available at the place the Lord chooses. This opportunity to sacrifice before the Lord was given 3 times per year, as there had been 3 pilgrimage festivals already ordained.

Next, the sacrifice must be without physical defect or blemish. This does not indicate that the animal had to be 100% perfect, but rather that one could not offer an animal of lesser value. It was the best animal the worshipper possessed; it was the MOST valuable animal that had to be offered. Further, in honor of the missive that the Lord had recently granted allowing Israel to slaughter meat any time they wanted to for food, if a firstling was blemished and could not therefore be offered to God, then it was allowable to use it as a food animal.

You know, people are people no matter what era. The ancients were the same as you and I.....they were always on the lookout for a good loophole. We say, well I KNOW God says thus and so, but does He REALLY mean what He says? How about if.....and then we set forth a case of extraordinary circumstance full of twists and turns and unique conditions figuring we can perhaps qualify for a free pass on a technicality. This is why after some new Law is ordained, or an existing Law is clarified and expounded upon, the Lord will throw in a reminder of His principles because His principles never change. Therefore in verse 22 Yehoveh reminds Israel that the laws of firstlings and the laws of secular slaughter for food He has just discussed did NOT negate other aspects of those laws just because He didn't repeat them. So He says, remember: defective animals that could have been used for sacrifice IF they hadn't been defective are OK to be used as regular food. AND.....the ritually unclean among you are eligible to eat these disqualified animals just as are the ritually clean people. But also remember that in every circumstance the blood from an animal used for food.....even if from a disqualified firstling.....must be disposed of by being poured out onto the ground.

I have often heard it said that if Jesus didn't specifically repeat an OT command then we have no obligation to it. That is simply wishful thinking. No such principle exists in the Bible. In fact Jesus (being God) knowing how we sons and daughters of man think, stops right in the middle of His sermon on the mount where he was expounding on the Law (as was Moses in Deuteronomy) and says: by the way, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I have come to fulfill them. Not one jot and not one stroke will pass from the Law until heaven and earth pass away".

Next week we'll take up the matter of the Pilgrimage festivals in Deuteronomy chapter 16.