

Releasing The Debtor • Deuteronomy 15:1-11

I. INTRODUCTION • Read Vs. 1-6

A. Debt & Poverty

1. The US public debt is right at \$7½ trillion.
 - a. that's over \$25,000 for every man, woman, & child!
 - b. for the last year, the public debt has grown by about \$1.6 billion per day.
2. Bankruptcies have doubled in the last decade, ^[1] to nearly 1½ million annually. ^[2]
3. In 2003, 1.3 million were added to what's considered the 36 million poor in this country. ^[3]
4. As we listened to the recent Presidential debates we heard the candidates views on how to fix the economy.
5. But the fact is, for many people, as soon as *economic* issues are mentioned, they shut off.
6. There's a sense among millions of Americans that the state of economics has become so complex there's really no way to sort it all out.
 - a. it's a complicated ball of tangled yarn that cannot be fixed.
 - b. and many believe any candidate who says he can mend what ails our economy is making a promise he can't keep.

B. God's Prescription

1. God made a provision for the economy of Israel that would ensure fiscal strength for the entire nation.
2. It's found here in Deut. 15 and is known as the Sabbatical year.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-2

1“At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts.

1. Moses here repeats for a new generation of Israelites a law originally given to their parents in Exodus 23 & Leviticus 25.
2. In those earlier passages God had told the people once they entered the Promised land, every 7th year, they were to do 3 things:
 - 1) let their fields lie fallow – and harvest only what grew of its own accord.
 - a) they weren't to cultivate or plant the fields but to just let them go for an entire year.
 - b) whatever produce did grow during this 7th year was to be picked & enjoyed.
 - c) just as the *people* were to enjoy the 7th *day* as a time of rest, so the *land* was to get it's rest every 7th *year*.
 - 2) they were to release all Jewish slaves.
 - a) if a Jew fell into a debt he couldn't repay,
 - b) the solution was to enter into a kind of indentured service to the creditor.

- c) but perpetual slavery wasn't allowed; every 7th year the servants were given their freedom.
- 3) they were to cancel all debts.
- 3. That's what we read here in v. 1; Moses says that every 7 years, all debts were to be cancelled.
- 4. Moses knows how people think, how they'll take words and twist them into a meaning that is very different from what the speaker intended, so after saying, "You shall grant a release of debts" he adds -

2 And this *is* the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent *anything* to his neighbor shall release *it*; he shall not require *it* of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release.

- 5. Whatever the nature of the debt, whatever was owed, it was to be dropped by the creditor.
- 6. Moses says this is to be done for both a neighbor & a brother.
 - a. in the context this means *all* those who live in the land,
 - b. both fellow Jews & non-Jews who live in the land with them.
 - c. an exception is made in v. 3 . . .

B. Vs. 3-5

3 Of a foreigner you may require *it*;

- 1. The word '*foreigner*' refers to someone living *outside* the borders of Israel.
- 2. The Law of the Sabbath was something that governed the economy of Israel; its scope did not extend beyond the boundaries of the land.
- 3. As we'll see in just a moment, God intended to prosper Israel so greatly that other nations would appeal to them for loans.
- 4. These kinds of international loans were not subject to the release of the Sabbath year.
- 5. But v. 2 makes it clear, *inside Israel*, the debts of *both neighbors & brothers* were to be cancelled, meaning Jews & non-Jewish settlers.

3 Of a foreigner you may require *it*; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother, **4**except when there may be no poor among you; for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance— **5**only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today.

- 6. The Jews were not allowed to charge interest on their loans to each other. ^[4]
 - a. so loaning wasn't used as a way to "make" money in ancient Israel.
 - b. a loan was merely an act of kindness & assistance to someone who'd fallen on hard times, perhaps as a result of a bad harvest.
 - c. since *profit* wasn't the motive, the *reason* for lending lay in the *nature* of Israel.
 - d. they were the covenant people of God & as such enjoyed a bond of brotherhood.
 - e. they didn't hold their land by reason of strength but as a gift from the Lord.
 - f. *appreciation* for that gift must move them to be givers themselves.

- g. and this would lead to an important consequence - *there would be no poor among them*.
- 7. No one would be getting rich off the misfortune of others because every 7 years debts were cancelled.
- 8. And because debts were cancelled, no one would be kept in place of perpetual poverty.
- 9. Of course, as vs. 4-5 say, all that would come only if the people carefully obeyed God.

C. V. 6

⁶For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you.

- 1. What God says in v. 6 is linked to v. 5.
- 2. If they were careful to keep God's commands, then they would be blessed with such prosperity they would become a global economic powerhouse.
- 3. They would be a *lender*, not debtor nation & their economic muscle would dominate the world economic market.

D. Vs. 7-11

⁷“If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, ⁸but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. ⁹Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,’ and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you. ¹⁰You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand.

- 1. While it was God's plan & desire there be no poor in Israel, He knew the people would not follow through on His commands.
- 2. In fact, there's no evidence that as a whole Israel ever kept the Sabbath year.
- 3. And as a result, a poverty-class did arise in Israel.
- 4. Here God warns them to not loose sight of the need for *compassion* toward the poor.
 - a. if it was within their ability to help, they were to lend the poor person who asked of them.
 - b. they were to provide what assistance was needed,
 - c. not with a cold & calculating eye on what could be *repaid*.
- 5. God knew that some, reasoning the Sabbath was coming, would *refuse* to help the needy because when the Sabbath arrived what was owed them would be dismissed.
- 6. God warned them not to allow the coming Sabbath year to affect the decision

- to help someone in need.
7. If they loaned someone assistance & the next year was the Sabbath, God pledged to assign them a blessing that would repay the debt.
 8. This links back to what He said in v. 2 – that the Sabbath year was “the Lord’s release.”
 9. God wanted them to realize that as His covenant-partner, they were called to be a people, not of debts & bondage, but of release, of forgiveness & letting go!
 10. They could free those who owed them --
First – because God told them to.
Second – because what they released, they gave to God, & He would make it good!
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11. One year Mordecai’s barley crop was lost to pests. The loss of the crop resulted in a budget shortfall that meant his family would go hungry.
 12. His neighbor Samuel’s wheat crop that year was a bumper harvest so Mordecai went to ask for a loan to shore up his income.
 - a. in just two years the Sabbath year would come & Samuel knew that Mordecai would not be able to repay the full loan in just two years.
 - b. but he loaned the money anyway because God had made a command & promise.
 13. It turned out that Mordecai’s barley harvest the next year was so rich he was able to pay off his debt! And Samuel’s crops came in even more plentiful.
 14. That’s the kind of thing God said He would do if His people were more concerned with each other’s welfare than with getting repaid for the kindness they’d shown.
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15. Then in v. 11 Moses says . . .

11 For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’

16. Again, though it was God’s will that there *be no poor* & the Sabbath year’s release of debt was meant to ensure that poverty would not take root in Israel,
17. He knew the people as a whole would not heed His command.
18. This word is spoken to those individuals who go against the flow and refuse to follow the crowd.
19. They must be open handed with the poor, helping them as they’re able.

E. For Us

1. What do we have to learn from this? What can this teach us about our walk with God.
2. This passage speaks of *release* – of letting go of the debts *owed* us.
3. And it reminds us of something the Lord taught *His* followers to pray:
“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” [5]
4. To the first disciples, men steeped in the Law of Moses, they couldn’t hear the word ‘debt’ without thinking of the Law of the Sabbath year with its call to release what was owed.
5. As you know, Jesus spoke this in the context of the Lord’s prayer.
6. But immediately after ending his teaching on prayer, He went on to *elaborate*

on forgiveness, saying –

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”^[6]

7. Anyone who’s read Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John knows that Jesus placed a great emphasis on the need to forgive.
8. Deut. 15 & other OT passages that lay out the Sabbath year make it clear God placed a great emphasis on the idea of releasing debts, of letting go of stuff owed them.
9. So important is the reality of releasing debt, of forgiving, He installed it in their economic & social order.
10. He wanted to keep the whole *imperative of forgiveness* ever before them.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Keeps No Record of Wrongs

1. In 1 Cor. 13:5 we read this . . .
Love . . . thinks no evil;
2. Unfortunately, the NKJV doesn’t render that very well.
3. A more accurate translation is as the NIV has it – “Love keeps no record of wrongs.”
 - a. the word ‘record’ is an book-keeping term and referred to an inventory.
 - b. the word ‘wrongs’ speaks of an offense that causes hurt.
 - c. so we could translate it as “Love doesn’t keep an inventory of hurts.”
4. Paul’s point is clear –
 - a. Love, that bond of the Spirit that has made us One in Christ,
 - b. that has enfolded us into the Family of God & made us brothers & sisters – is like the Sabbath year of old.
 - c. it discharges the debts owed us because of past hurts
 - d. love erases the mental & emotional slate we’ve been keeping accounts on.

B. The Forgiven

1. The Cross speaks of a covenant God has made with us, the very center of which is *all about forgiveness*.
2. We **ARE** the forgiven!
3. Forgiveness is our *culture*, our *language*, our *value, morality & ethic*.
4. Unforgiveness is as foreign to a Christian as a lack of opinion is to Rush Limbaugh.
5. An unforgiving Christian is an *oxymoron*.
 - a. you know what an oxymoron is, right?
 - b. it’s a self-contradicting phrase, like . . .

- Government Organization
- Alone Together
- Silent Scream
- Same Difference
- Taped Live

- Plastic Glasses
- Tight Slacks
- Peace Force
- Pretty Ugly
- Head Butt
- Working Vacation
- Tax Return
- Virtual Reality
- Dodge Ram
- Work Party
- Jumbo Shrimp

- c. there are some things that just don't go together – like
- a peanut butter & tuna fish sandwich
 - a pepperoni & jelly bean pizza
 - spinach flavored ice cream
 - an unforgiving Christian.
6. In Deut. 15 God calls those in covenant with Him to release that which was owed them.
 7. In Matthew 6 as Jesus taught His followers how to pray He linked their *being forgiven* with their *forgiving*.
 8. Today, heed the call of the Sabbath year to let go what is owed you in terms of the hurts that have been dealt you.
 9. Release those you've held in bondage to their guilt.
 10. Let go of the anger, & hurt, & longing for getting even – release it to the Lord & know His forgiveness, not only *to* you but *through* you to those who've piled up a debt of hurt.

[1] My Generation (Sep-Oct 2001)

[2] <http://www.uscourts.gov>

[3] <http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/income03/prs04asc.html>

[4] 23:19–20; Ex. 22:25

[5] Matthew 6:12 *The New King James Version*. 1996, c1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson

[6] Matthew 6:14-15 *The New King James Version*. 1996, c1982. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.