

## The Choice of a New Generation | Deuteronomy

### *The Year of Release*

Deuteronomy 15.1-11

11.26.17

*"At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. <sup>2</sup> "This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed. <sup>3</sup> "From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. <sup>4</sup> "However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, <sup>5</sup> if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. <sup>6</sup> "For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.*

*<sup>7</sup> "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; <sup>8</sup> but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. <sup>9</sup> "Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. <sup>10</sup> "You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. <sup>11</sup> "For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'*

We've been reading through the fifth book of the Bible...the Fifth Book of Moses, Deuteronomy.

This is the constitution of the Nation of Israel...or better yet it's the RE-constitution. The Exodus Generation (the original Gen X – Generation Exodus!) the children of Abraham who went to Egypt as a mere 70 persons and multiplied WILDLY and were then enslaved by the Pharaohs and rescued by God in the Exodus... THAT generation has died in the desert. Now their children are about to enter the Land of Promise... and Moses (who is about to die himself!) Moses is restating their constitution to them...their national charter, the Law of Sinai.

And now the Law...the Ten Commandments and the laws governing society and the rules of worship ...these laws are now applied more specifically to life in a settled realm... no longer strictly nomadic (always a pilgrim people) but now able to engage in agriculture and to be established in a homeland.

This passage has to do with debt...and caring for the poor (widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor are addressed repeatedly as objects of God's special concern) and THIS section is about how to deal with the poor and their debt... that every seven years debts were to be canceled – the Year of Release.

Debt... is of course totally irrelevant in present day South Florida...the Bible is completely out of touch with modern life... No, actually DEBT is a VERY current concern for almost all Americans...when you think of the debt-crisis in 2008...of credit-card debt, of the national debt...of Student Loan Debt – turns out the Bible is more in-tune than most people imagine!

Let's think about debt today...and the poor...and generosity...forgiveness. There are three body-parts mentioned in this passage. They'll form the outline for the sermon: 1) Hand 2) Heart and 3) (v.9) Eyes (2x)

“Open your hands to the poor”: that's the basic law in this passage... Don't be (as we'd say) “tightfisted” – another figure of speech using the hand as an emblem of generosity or stinginess. V. 3 “Your HAND shall release whatever of yours is with your brother”

When they went into the Land and settled, there would be an agricultural economy...ownership and property rights. And, for any variety of reasons, some would have more than others...Some, by great industry/hard work OR by things just sort of “going their way” would have more. Others, by illness or misfortune or through bad decisions would have less.

And Israel, as the Unique Chosen People, God's own society, a City on a Hill...Israel was to show the whole world a tangible picture of justice and mercy. The Land would be super-fruitful so that there'd be enough for everyone to have an abundance as long as they managed it the way God commanded.

The Israelites were to lend their poor brothers and sisters whatever they needed... and there would be other provisions for their poor. Landowners were to be intentionally sloppy in their harvest, to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so the poor could take what was left for themselves (Lev 19.9).

Every seven years, whatever debts were left unpaid were to be released (lit. let go) AND after a cycle of 7 seven-year periods...after 49 years, the 50<sup>th</sup> would be a Jubilee Year and all properties would be returned to their original owners – a reset button for the entire economy every 50 years...AND a mini-reset every seven years.

I'm going to give you just a few moments to THINK about the implications of all that...

And when we're given "the terms" (v. 2 The Manner of remission) we, like the ancient Israelites, we will think for about one minute, "Ah! Isn't that wonderful?!" and then after about 60 seconds we'll think about... LOOPHOLES... "How can I get out of this? This CANNOT be practical...this is NOT workable!"

And there actually ARE two loopholes or provisos or escape-clauses IN this particular law. The first is a VALID one that can be misused and the second is a bogus loophole, an unintended consequence that God through Moses will expose/forbid.

The valid stipulation is that this law applies only to actual Israelites. There would be immigrants (some Egyptians who were still tagging along...others who would look for refuge among the Israelites once they settled) and IF these people want to borrow from you, you DO NOT have to release them after 7 years.

I realize that sounds sort of racist to us but the truth is, non-Israelites COULD become true Israelites and be counted NOT strangers but citizens... AND God had chosen this ONE UNIQUE NATION (not very unique!) – just UNIQUE/ONLY/one-of-a-kind people to be the conduit/pipeline to send grace and truth to the whole world... but to BE that pipeline, there had to be a distinct difference...kindness...even LOVE (10.19) to the stranger among them but still a distinction – a very definite "us and them" – that's the nature of holiness.

Now later, this would become an overused loophole and we remember the lawyer who asked Jesus Christ "I know I have to love my neighbor but who IS my neighbor?" And this question was an attempt to justify himself... more on this in a moment.

The second loophole was one that God and Moses could see brewing in our slimy minds..."If I have to release people from paying back their loans every 7 years... then I don't think I'll make any loans on year 4, 5 or 6...because people will take advantage of me; they'll see the Year of Release coming and they'll ask for a loan, KNOWING they won't have to pay me back!"

And what God is saying is "NO! Even right up to the deadline...year six...you still must OPEN your hand!"

"Yeah but (be careful of the "yeah buts"!)... YEAH BUT that's like a gift...not a loan!" And YES...that IS what God was commanding: "give the poor what they NEED...whenever they need it...because I have a special place in My heart for the poor...if they cry out to Me about YOUR closed hand...I will answer them."

Now this brings up the whole idea of loopholes and mitigating circumstances (the “yeah-buts”) and all the things WE ALL DO to LOOK good, to play the charity game but NOT to BE truly generous.

The Pharisees in the days of Jesus Christ’s work, were expert in lowering the demands of God to make them “practical” and workable and achievable. They would meticulously “tithe” (i.e. give a tenth) of even their garden herbs (Matt 23.23) so that if they were ever audited they could show they were fully compliant with God’s Laws...but they were NEVER actually generous ...they were givers...but not open-handed (calculated).

I always think of that very well known modern Pharisee, George Costanza (from the show Seinfeld). He’s in the pizza parlor...trying to look friendly to the guy at the counter (really only so he’ll get better service) and then he drops a dollar in the tip-jar but the guy has turned around and doesn’t see it...so George takes the dollar out so he can actually demonstrate how really generous he is...and the guy catches him taking the dollar OUT of the jar and kicks him out of the restaurant.

Maybe you’ve heard or read the phrase “Virtue Signaling”...it’s all the subtle (at least we THINK we’re being subtle!) all the sneaky ways we tell people that we’re socially conscious or involved in good causes...really ways we signal to others that we’re GOOD and generous people... FB pictures of us at the 10k fundraiser for this disease...or wearing symbols (on our lapels or t-shirts) to show that we’re patriotic or helping people or involved in a cause.

And in a lecture I heard recently the speaker asked, “But if I (as a speaker) am informing you that I know about ‘virtue signaling’ – isn’t THAT a form of virtue signaling?” And that means I am doing the same thing now... and it points out how hard...even impossible it is to be truly open-handed... we can control our behavior but what about our motives?

And that brings up the second body-part in this text i.e. THE HEART. We may be able to open our hand and “let it go”... but we’ll only do that in a calculated way with ulterior motives (looking for loopholes and ways to obey technically...hoping for recognition, to signal to others, “I am generous...” – even when my generosity is ALL about ME) – we’ll be obedient but NOT really generous unless something changes the heart... “the want-to”... the thing BEHIND behavior.

And in this passage, the heart is highlighted. God wants NOT just technical compliance...but generosity from the heart.

Verse 7, “you shall not harden your heart”...v. 8 “shall FREELY open your hand...shall generously lend...” v.9 “Beware that there’s no base thought in your heart”... v. 10 “your heart shall not be grieved when you give”... v. 11 “shall FREELY open your hand.”

It's all echoed in the New Testament words of Paul, "not grudgingly or due to pressure for God loves a cheerful giver ..."

And the GOOD NEWS of this passage...in fact the Good News of the entire Bible is that everywhere we're commanded to be generous...there is VERY close by the command, some promise or reminder that the wherewithal to keep the command depends on the God who is boundless in generosity.

You'll see it in the text I quoted from 2 Corinthians 9 about "God loves a cheerful giver..." – close by Paul says words about God's bottomless generosity. Paul is addressing OUR INSECURE HEARTS.

In today's passage, the basis for all the commands is v. 2, "BECAUSE the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed." In other words, "You are a forgiven people – therefore your heart can rest SECURE..."

God has set His affection on you...NOT because you did something to get God's love (see if you could earn God's love then it would be a transaction based on selfishness – I obeyed in order to get God to like me – NOW GOD GIVE ME WHAT I DESERVE...it's mine...mine...mine" (Like the seagulls in Finding Nemo!)

But God's affection and His release from debt comes to US not because we worked for it but FROM THE FULLNESS of God's infinitely generous heart.

The Israelites KNEW remission...all their debts were paid...all their slavery had come to an end. They had been released from Egypt...and they KNEW conclusively, "This was NOT our doing...we didn't make the plagues...we didn't work the Passover...we didn't open a dry path through the sea...IT WAS GOD WHO RELEASED ...freely we have received...and NOW we can freely give."

In the big picture, the FORCE that can change your heart is the sense of profound security that comes from seeing the open-handed generosity of God when in Jesus Christ...He opened His arms and His hands were NAILED OPEN...open as wide as they could be...God is saying from the Cross... "Release! You are free...your guilt and shame are taken away...I welcome you...I release you...your debt is paid in full ...your sins are forgotten...and YOU ARE NOW RICH beyond what you could imagine – all the moral perfection and obedience and beauty of Jesus Christ are attributed to you...as if YOU were that good!"

And whatever you need to do My will...I will provide it! I will be the dynamic of My own demands... Your standing with Me is so secure...even if you give away everything...are homeless...penniless...despised by people – IF I AM YOUR GOD...your Savior...your Father...then YOU ARE INFINITELY RICH...so let your heart FEEL THIS WEALTH ...and your hand will relax."

And the practice of this way of life...the hand open when the heart rests and THIRD, when the EYE looks at life in this new and liberated way.

V. 9 “When your eye is hostile toward your poor brother...” Jesus Christ said, “The eye is the lamp of the body...if your eye is clear then your whole body will be filled will be full of light...” (Matt 6.22; Lk 11.34).

The key to the practice of liberated generosity is to see God as the great Liberator.

That changes how I see myself: He has released me and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ prove it. My mountain of debt is paid in full and God’s inexhaustible love is mine – I’m released from the performance trap. God is totally realistic and knows all about me - and loves me anyway!”

And it changes how I look at others – “Your eye shall not be hostile toward your poor brother... I can’t look with a mean eye at someone else – because I AM poor! I have NOTHING...except what my loving Father has given me... I don’t have to look at people and judge whether they may be a good investment (“I’ll tip this guy and THEN he’ll take care of me...”) I am seeing God, myself and others with released eyes...Gospel eyes see everything with Godward Optimism.

Truth is: the recipients of charity that doesn’t come from the heart – they can tell. It feels to them like a pat on the head...like manipulation. We all want to impress...to signal...to project, “I am a good and kind and generous person...and I’m humble.” But that desire in ALL of us comes from a deep insecurity that ONLY that Gospel can fill...

In the doing and dying of Jesus...I am released and I don’t have to prove myself (He did it once and for all...) And if you believe it (or when!) – it enables you to see in a new way... no longer looking for loopholes or technicalities... but now looking for opportunity to see God at work...and to walk with Him...and be generous...even when no one notices.