

Deuteronomy 15

- The Israelites, having fled Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years
- Moses addresses the Israelite nation in Moab, east of the Jordan, as they prepare to enter Canaan
- Sermons – and laws – given to a transient people, preparing them to become a nation state

Read – Deut 15:1-11

Hope this Deut series has helped us see something new in scripture.

- Has it changed our concept of the God we worship?
- Has it helped see the stream of grace which runs through the Bible – founded in the Old Testament, not something that sprung up with the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament?

The year for cancelling debts:

- The concept is totally alien to us today
- Do we find it shocking? I did!

A continuing seven year cycle – it's not a 7 year loan

- If you borrow in year 6, it will still be cancelled in year 7

Hardly any other references to it in scripture

Deut 31:10-12 – reading of the law in the year for cancelling debts

- Moses commanded them [that is, the people of Israel]: “At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.”

Not the same as the year of Jubilee (Lev 25) which was every 49 years – 7x7 years of cancelling debts

Only other ref to this in the Bible...

- In Nehemiah – as the people of Israel renewed their side of the Covenant to God, they renewed their promise to cancel debts every seven years
- Nehemiah 10:31 – ‘Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.’

No other Biblical references to the year for cancelling debts

Why cancel debts? Because the Israelites were a tenant nation – the Promised Land remained God's possession
Leviticus 25:23

- God said, “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers”.
- Lev 25 goes on to state that if land is sold because of family poverty, “You must provide for [its] redemption” – to occur in the year of jubilee

Restate - No other Biblical references to the year for cancelling debts

However, whilst at first I could find little reference to this in history, recent historical discoveries implied that these laws were taken seriously in OT times – certainly by some (in fact the tradition was continued by many Jewish communities up to and including the Spanish Jews in 12th Century Spain)

Deut 15 – a glorious ideal – a heavenly ideal

Shocking to us – very much opposed to 21 Century values of money, wealth & possessions

Let's be clear, the Levitical principle of the year for cancelling debts does not apply to us today
It states quite clearly that this was a law for Israelites in Israel

Ask – However, how perverted have we become by the modern world's view of property and possessions that we view this law – remember, it is God's perfect law – as being all too radical or utopian?

So I could ask:

What would the world be like if it did practice a year for cancelling debts today?

How should we react to this passage?

I want to look at:

1. What does Deut 15 tell us about God?
2. What is the relevance of this passage to us today?

1. What does Deut 15 tell us about God?

- God cares!

In previous chapters we see God's grace and mercy to Israel

In chapter 15 Israel is commanded to consciously display grace and mercy to others in Israel

God cares about social justice

Define – 'Social justice' implies fairness and a shared responsibility (or a mutual obligation) in society: that we are responsible for one another's wellbeing, and that we should ensure that all have equal chances to succeed in life

Restate: God cares about social justice

Remember, God in the Old Testament is exactly the same God we see the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God is often wrongly perceived to be distant, dispassionate and wrathful.

A God of social justice: not an image of God that we normally concentrate on or which we're presented by in classical paintings or modern media

Yet...

- We worship a God who cares about the poor and debt-ridden (Social justice – as a term is a relatively modern concept, yet these commands here are 3000 years old)
- God is concerned the individual; God is concerned for the needy

Ancient world debt was not due to irresponsible spending; more likely due to a poor harvest or sudden death

Whilst he was creating a nation, God does not want individuals to be disregarded or devalued

Throughout scripture we see a God as a King who cares about the impoverished and needy in his Kingdom
A perfect, loving, compassionate and just King – a King who keeps his side of the covenant

Bible packed with evidence of a God of social justice:

Social justice verses (only a few of the many)

Read – Psalm 82:3 – Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed

Read – Proverbs 31:9 – Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy

Read – Isaiah 1:17 – Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow

A God who wants to see widows and orphans survive and thrive

(Widows and orphans were the ignored underclass – a one-way ticket, for most, to starvation and an early grave)

God has given Mankind the ability to deal with poverty himself – we are to share and help a brother in need
God should not have to intervene because he has given Mankind the ability (and, for Israel here, the command) to level/balance society himself

So firstly, God cares!

- Secondly, God knows us...

God knows our hearts – knows that we are naturally tight-fisted (v7-11)

- As God knows man's heart, Deuteronomy 15 speaks to the innate miser rather than the potential benefactor
- A personal God – a caring God who understands our selfish, tight-fisted, greedy, me-only nature

Because of this Israel is commanded...

- v7-8: ...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted... Rather, be open-handed and freely lend... whatever they need.
- v9: Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin
- v10: give generously!

It's a serious offence to God if a brother's needs are deliberately ignored

Israel was supposed to be a moral testimony and a model of God-centred community living – reflecting God's own holy, righteous, loving, merciful, full-of-grace character

Therefore we see this glorious ideal of what Israel should be:

A glorious ideal!

- In the perfect land (Israel under the covenant blessing of God) there would be no poverty – an ideal which Israel never saw.
- A glorious ideal – a heavenly ideal – a picture, surely, of what life will be like in eternity

However, for Israel entering the Promised Land, there is a caveat in v4-5:

Read – Deut 15:4-5...there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

Israel didn't obey God's law, didn't follow the covenant, so didn't see the material blessings – such as the obliteration of poverty

We shall see this in Glory – but can we see it today? (Quite simply, no – v11: there will always be poor people in the land; God knows our miser hearts)

God knew Israel would fail to follow the covenant

2. What is the relevance of this passage to us today?

1. God loves us – He cares
2. God knows us – so He addresses the miser
3. God expects from us – to react to His Word and to help brothers in need

Poverty need not exist under God's rule, but God knows that not everyone will obey his word and that, in this fallen world, the poor will always exist – human sin means that people will always be greedy and selfish

Remember that as followers of Jesus we don't need to keep the law, however...

- As Tim explained last week, the law is there to show us our need for the gospel and guides us under grace

- Followers of Jesus Christ are to strive to be Christ-like

Read – Philippians 2:5 – In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus

Read – Ephesians 5:1-2 – Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God

So as we receive God’s mercy and grace, we should to show mercy and grace to others (to present day ‘widows & orphans’). Ideally this will become so natural to us that it will become second nature

We should not give begrudgingly – God cares about our hearts – the manner in which we give – as much as the gift itself.

Read – Deut 15:10 Give generously... and do so without a grudging heart

Read – 2 Cor 9:7 God loves a cheerful giver

Why should we be gracious and generous to others?

Because God wipes the slate clean with us!

Verse after the Isaiah verse read above states...

Read – Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Give gracefully and generously – for however much grace we show, God has given more grace to us; however generously we give, God has been more generous to us

So, some questions (to which I have no answer myself)...

- Do we need to change our worldview?
- If we think that the concept of ‘the year for cancelling debts’ is too shocking, too radical or too utopian, is the fault not with us (with our mindset) rather than in the command?

Taking the risk of blowing our own trumpets, as a church the GSM is pretty good at social justice – Growth night shelter, Teen Challenge, food bank, in our own relationships within the GSM – but should we do more? Are we led to do more – individually or corporately?

How often do we just pray (so pray only) rather than pray and act (when we then feel God directing us to act)?

James 2:15-17 – supplying physical needs

Discussing the relationship between faith and deeds, James states:

Read – James 2:15-17: Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Restate – however much grace we show, God has given more grace to us; however generously we give, God has been far more generous to us

Deut 15 questions:

Why did God command the year for cancelling debts in Israel?

The year for cancelling debts applied to Israelites, not to foreigners living in the land. What do we think about this; how does it make us feel? Is God right in this command? Why do we think God made this specific prerequisite?

Does the year for cancelling debts apply to us today? If it doesn’t, what is this passage saying to us in 21st-century London?

On v12-18:

What are our opinions regarding servants and servitude in the Old Testament? Why would people fall into servitude in Old Testament times?

How are servants supposed to be treated in seventh year and why would this be?