

There Should Be No Poor among You

HN 5/02/06 pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 15, Acts 4:32-5:16

Study Text: Deuteronomy 15

Sing Psalms: 1, 113, 15, 22:23-26

While travelling on the train I got talking to a fellow passenger. I told him how I went out to poor people in the villages to help them get better health care and nutrition, clean water and education. This educated man with a business in the city was astounded. Why should I care about the poor? 'It was their own fault that they were poor – it was their lot in life, their karma' he said. He had no concern whatsoever for poor people. He was getting rich – this was his lot in life!

In this fallen world of sinful men it is 'every man for himself'. Darwin's theory of evolution sums this up well – the survival of the fittest. Hitler and countless others have lived by this rule, including my fellow traveller. But the Bible teaches us something different. Not the survival of the fittest but the survival of the poorest.

God is concerned for each individual person. He gave his covenant people commands designed to help the poor person (15:4), although he recognised that because of man's disobedience there would 'always be poor among you' (15:11, John 12:8). At the same time the nation that obeys these commands will be blessed – it will lend to many nations but borrow from none (15:6).

It is no accident that nations having the least poverty in the world today have a Christian heritage – and that these same nations are the most prosperous. And it comes as no surprise that when this teaching of Scripture is abandoned for the teaching of man's ideas, in particular evolution, that the gap between the rich and poor widens and poverty increases.

Among the people of God 3500 years ago, among the people of God 2000 years ago (II Corinthians 8:18) and among the people of God today, God desires equality. Through Moses he gave specific commands designed to prevent protracted poverty. Can we learn something from these commands?

These commands are largely contained in Sabbath and Jubilee legislation. Besides honouring the Lord, the Sabbath was given so that servants and animals got rest and were not exploited (5:14). You will notice that the reason appended to the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:15 is different to that in Exodus 20. And this reason is alluded to again in this passage (15:15) – the reason being that these covenant people were themselves slaves in Egypt until redeemed by Yahweh. The Lord heard their cry (Exodus 2:24) back then and he still hears the cry of the poor (15:9).

The Sabbath concept extended beyond one day in seven to one year in seven, and ultimately to the Jubilee after seven Sabbath years. In this chapter the focus is upon the Sabbath year. What was commanded in this seventh year?

Debts Cancelled

The seventh year was called *the Lord's release*. Fields were to be left fallow in this year (Leviticus 25:4) and all debts were to be cancelled (lit. 'let fall'). Some think that this was just a suspension of repayments for the year but the word itself, and the context, shows a total

cancellation of debts was intended. Such a practice may seem incredible to us today, but before hastily dismissing it, let us carefully consider the principles taught.

Remember God's blessings: It is God who gives the increase. All creditors are debtors in God's eyes. The land belonged to the Lord as did all the produce – and as does all money. Almighty God is powerful to bless, and he will bless those who obey him – both individually and nationally (15:4). When people start to think they have earned all that they have, and that '*my own power and the might of my hand has gained me this wealth*' (8:17), they are stepping onto slippery ground. 'Every good and perfect gift is from above'.

Obey God's word: The command was clear enough – in the seventh year all covenant people were to be released from their debts. Repayment was no longer to be demanded. Those who obeyed would be blessed by the Lord, and the whole nation also blessed.

But, knowing they were sinners, the Lord warned them against being tight fisted or stingy (15:7f). He knew what was in their evil hearts, that they would selfishly try to wriggle out of this command. As the seventh year approached, and they saw that their loan would soon be lost, they would be tempted to turn away from the poor and pretend he did not exist. Or they would not lend him sufficient for his need. Such action, or rather lack of action, and indeed such wicked thoughts, the Lord hates and will punish. If the poor person appeals to the Lord against you, you are in big trouble. It has become a sin among you (15:9).

They were commanded to be cheerful givers, happily obeying the Lord's command. They must *willingly lend sufficient for his need* (15:8), for the Lord loves a cheerful giver (II Corinthians 9:7). In India the poor were often granted a loan to buy a buffalo – this would help them out of their poverty. But corrupt officials often took a cut from the loan so the poor person did not have sufficient money to buy a buffalo. The loan was then of little benefit.

Trust God's promise: Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). If a brother or sister is without food and clothes what do you do? Do you say 'God bless you, go in peace'? No! True faith gives what is needed. True faith gives as unto the Lord. True faith believes that the Lord loves a cheerful giver and will bless. *Give and it will be given to you, a good measure shaken together and running over* (Luke 6:38). The Lord promised to *greatly bless* those who obeyed his commands, including this command to release the poor from their debts every seven years (15:4, 10).

Love God's people: If the Lord is concerned for the poor then should not his people be also? If the Lord hears the cry of the poor should not his people also hear? The Lord is merciful and gracious; he is full of goodness and compassion. After all he graciously delivered all of them out of slavery in Egypt. He commanded them to be compassionate and caring towards one another.

The Lord knew that love for money would soon challenge their love for one another. This command would be threatened by evil hearts. Do not let your heart entertain wicked thoughts or *your eye be evil against you poor brother, and you give him nothing* (15:9). Do not grow weary in doing good. Love your brother and sister in Christ and give without resentment, believing the promises of the great Provider of all good things.

This command did not apply to foreigners (15:3). His debts were not cancelled in the seventh year. Why this discrimination you might ask? The foreigner was not included in the covenant community. He had no inheritance – he did not own land. He was free to move in and out of the country. He was offered hospitality but not the Lord's release from debts.

We live in a society which promotes debt and living off credit – despite warnings that this cannot continue. Many are in debt because of greed not because of need. This was not the situation Moses faced. People were forced into debt because of need. They could easily find themselves in the cycle of poverty with no escape, as with millions in the world today. Many even inherit the debt of their parents. To help such people their debt must be cancelled so they can make a fresh start in life. Some Christians effectively do this by paying off such debts for the poor. This year of release prevented perpetual poverty. Are you willing to help brethren in this way?

Servants Freed

In the seventh year Hebrew servants or slaves were to be released. This went hand in hand with the release of debts, for their brothers often entered in bondage because of debt. They would work to pay off their debt. In India there are millions of bonded labourers. Landowners and businessmen lend them money and when they cannot repay they are forced to work to pay of their debt. This practice is open to corruption. Many spend their lifetime paying of the debt.

As with the release of debts, the release of servants was to be done with a willing and cheerful heart. After all they had served the owner well for up to six years and had saved him the cost of hiring labour. They were not to be sent away empty handed but supplied liberally – note again – *from what the Lord has blessed you with* (15:14).

And again the Lord promised to bless those who obeyed (15:18). If the servant liked their master and wanted to stay, their ear was pierced, and probably an ear ring or tag inserted, to mark their commitment to permanent service.

There is little evidence in Scripture or elsewhere that this command was implemented. When Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar, King Zedekiah apparently remembered it and proclaimed a release of all Hebrew slaves (Jeremiah 34:8f). So all the princes and the people let their bond servants go free. But they changed their minds and made all the servants return. The Lord was not pleased and through Jeremiah declared judgment upon them.

Some have suggested that Pentecost was like a Sabbath or even Jubilee year. New believers sold all they had and gave to anyone among them that had need (Acts 2:45). Certainly many aspects of this year of the Lord's release were present. The Lord had blessed them and they gave themselves to the Lord, trusting in him absolutely for all things. There were no evil hearts or tight fists – not until Ananias and Sapphira anyway. They rejoiced in their 'plenteous redemption' and the power of the Holy Spirit manifest among them.

In Christ we also enjoy the Lord's release. In Christ we enjoy every blessing in heaven and on earth. Do you trust the Lord in every aspect of your life, knowing that he gave his all for you? He gave his life to set you free from bondage. Therefore honour him with all that is yours, and as *you have opportunity do good to all, especially those who are of the household of faith* (Galatians 6:10).

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