

Giving to the Community

Devotional Reading: Exodus 20:12–17

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:1–11; Matthew 25:31–46;
Luke 10:25–37; James 1:27; 2:14–17

Today's Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:4–11; Matthew 25:42–45

I. Giving to Neighbors

Deuteronomy 15:4–11

⁴ However, 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, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. ⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling 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. ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always

be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

4. The term *however* connects this verse with the preceding verses, which discuss the cancellation of debts for the Israelites every seventh year. God's intention is to *bless* his people. So the first part of this verse reminds the Israelites of God's ultimate goal: *there need be no poor among you*. The possibility of extinguishing poverty exists because God is poised to bless the people *richly* in their obedience.

The Israelites dwell *in the land* only because God *is giving* it. Their *inheritance* was set in motion when God made his covenant with Abraham. They now have all they *possess* because of their relationship with God and his great blessings.

5. God's promise of blessing is conditional. The Israelites must obey his commands. The blessings promised for their careful obedience are protection, procreation, and prosperity. However, if the people of Israel disobey God's commands, he will bring curses upon them (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). Those curses include disease, famine, and domination by foreign nations.

Unfortunately, this warning is not one the Israelites ultimately heed. Future

generations struggle to *fully obey* God's words and *follow all* his commands.

6. God promises to *bless*, and his lying is outside of his holy nature. If God promises something, he will do it. The promises stated here are of abundance and preeminence. Up to this point in history, the descendants of Abraham have lived as either nomads or slaves; however, God promised he would make Abraham into a "great nation" (Genesis 12:2). The Israelites stand on the cusp of having enough prosperity to lend to other nations, never having to borrow, and having the power to rule. With God's blessing, Israel could become the ancient Near East's most prosperous nation.

7. *If* indicates a prescription for times when the Israelites encounter poverty. As such, the instructions now move the narrative from the envisioned ideal to a future reality. That reality will include the continuous presence of *poor* people. In this case, God points to someone who is *your fellow Israelite*, one's neighbor, a brother, or a friend. This person lacks the financial means to survive, and God calls his people to notice and offer aid. God reminds his hearers that the land they dwell in was gifted to them. He then appeals to their hearts. Instead of callousness and selfishness, God calls for compassion and generosity.

8. God's expectation that his people hold material things loosely does not change in the transition from the old covenant to the new (Matthew 5:42; etc.). God is the provider, and his children should consider all they have as gifts. When holding this perspective, benevolence flows naturally.

The verb *lend* here includes the idea "to give a pledge," implying a security deposit of some kind to ensure that the money will be repaid. The caveat *freely lend* directs lenders concerning how much

they should give. It is tempting to avoid lending to the poor because they do not possess the means to repay. Thus the need for a security deposit. Unfortunately, history shows this practice is subject to abuse (Exodus 22:25–27; Amos 2:8). But God says his people have the responsibility to lend if it is within their power to do so.

The phrase *whatever they need* means "to lack" or "to be without." It is not a comment on what a person might desire beyond basic needs but rather a fundamental deficiency.

9. *The seventh year* is the Sabbath year. God declares that every seven years, all debt is forgiven. Suppose an individual asks for a loan of \$10,000 with a repayment plan of \$100 per month. If the plan is followed as outlined, the debtor will repay the loan in approximately 8 years. According to the Sabbath-year system, however, the loan must be forgiven at the end of the seventh year. The discrepancy might well discourage lenders. God realizes the possibility of such an attitude and speaks to it. He warns that withholding aid from someone who needs it may be considered *sin* because it shows something *wicked* in their hearts. When a needy person goes to God with a complaint against the generosity of God's people, God takes it seriously.

10. It is one thing to lend money out of obligation. It is another thing to lend money with a happy heart, knowing the funds may not be repaid. God's commands extend beyond the letter of the law to the action of the heart. The phrase *without a grudging heart* refers to the internal attitude of the giver. God's people are not to be saddened by sharing their means with others. They are not to feel like they are losing or must give unwillingly. When God's people follow his ways, he provides for their needs and blesses *all* they do—abundance in work, skill, and finance flows from generosity.

11. On the surface, this statement looks like a blatant contradiction of God's words just a few verses earlier (see Deuteronomy 15:4). Some commentators believe the statement *there will always be poor people in the land* is a foreshadowing of Israel's refusal toward complete obedience. Others say it is a reminder that sin breeds poverty. No one can deny that hard times exist in this world. Therefore, 15:4 refers to the ideal, and this verse faces a harsh reality.

Be openhanded calls hearers toward a steady state of openness. God essentially says, "Throw open your lives" in compassionate generosity. The image of an open hand contrasts starkly with the idea of a clenched fist. God calls his people to a broad, unobstructed benevolence. This is the opposite of the closed hand of Deuteronomy 15:7, above.

The repetitive use of the term *you* and *your* emphasizes ownership, which indicates responsibility. There is a relationship to consider: the underprivileged live alongside the wealthy and successful. They are part of the same *land*.

II. Giving to the Lord Matthew 25:42:45

⁴² "For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

42. Jesus is outside Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, when he makes this

statement to his disciples. He speaks in first-person and boldly declares that when *I was hungry* and *thirsty*, no one assisted. Like an undercover boss, the King comes incognito, and people fail to respond. The passage unfolds in an "I was" and "you did not" formula that pairs a needful condition with a subsequent reaction.

43. Under both the old and new covenants, God requires his people to care for others, with equal treatment. He calls his people to act with commonsense humanity. Through the prophet Isaiah, God urges true religion and fasting to be practiced by freeing captives, feeding the hungry, housing the exposed, and covering the naked. When Jesus sent his disciples out to preach God's kingdom and heal the sick, he declared, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Hospitality results from a generous spirit.

44. Those condemned rebut, "But when did we ever see You like this?!" How could they be held responsible for something they did not know? Surely if they had seen Jesus in such a terrible condition, they would have come to his aid. If they had seen the *Lord* naked, *in prison*, or *sick*, they would have done something.

45. The faithfulness of God's people hinges on their treatment of *the least of these*. Judgment does not consider our knowledge, fame, or fortune. It is based on the help we give to others as an indicator of the grace we ourselves receive. To neglect those who are suffering is to neglect the Lord.

Considering our treatment of God's people as though we serve God himself is the closest the Synoptic Gospels come to identifying the church as the body of Christ. The ways we're called to help are not extravagant. They are based upon responding to obvious needs. We are held responsible for how we react to what we know and see.

Involvement Learning

Giving to the Community

Into the Lesson

Describe a time when you experienced generosity.

Key Text

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.
—Deuteronomy 15:11

Into the Word

Read Deuteronomy 15:4–11. What is the central message of this passage?

How does the promise of blessing in verse 10 motivate generous giving?

How can the principle of canceling debts be applied in modernity?

How do you be “openhanded” to those in need in the modern world?

How does this passage challenge our understanding of wealth and possessions?

Read Matthew 25:42–45. Define *neighbor* in your own words.

How does the biblical concept of neighbor differ from your common understanding?

How do consumerism and materialism impact our ability to practice generosity?

Into Life

List definitions or examples of neighbors for each column.

Traditional Neighbors

Biblical Neighbors

Write down a “neighbor” to whom you can show generosity this week. Explain one specific way you plan to express generosity to that person.

Thought to Remember

Give out of your rich inheritance!