

Looking out to the poor

February 1, 2009 - Deuteronomy 15:1-11

It was 1994; my first year as pastor in a small suburban Ottawa church. I wanted to know more about the city God called me to. Oh, I knew the Parliament buildings; the Rideau Canal and their hockey team. I knew about the Tulip Festival and Winterlude and the beautiful fall colors. But I wanted to see Ottawa from a different perspective. So I called Susan, the director of Ottawa Inner City Ministries.

She took me on a tour of downtown Ottawa that you won't see on the tourist buses. First we went to the Union Mission for men. Several men hung around just to keep warm. Every week Susan held a foot clinic to care for the street people. Then we walked around. She pointed out the high railings built around trees in planters. "Have you ever wondered why those are there," she asked? I hadn't and thought they looked a little strange. She said, "Street folks used to sleep under the bigger trees in the winter. The city didn't like the look of that. So they built these barred railings to stop it. On Rideau Street we looked at a busy shopping mall attended to by several busses. She noted their used to be huge bus shelters on either side of the street so commuters

could get out of the damp cold of Ottawa's winter while they waited. But street folks would sleep in the shelter during the night. The city didn't like the look of that. So they tore all the shelters down.

She also claimed that some street folks told her they would sometimes be picked up by city officials. They would drop them off far west of the city so it would take them 3 days to get back downtown. By then, any visiting diplomat could come and visit a beautiful downtown free from unsightly street people. We finished our visit at Shepherds of Good Hope, a mission like the Mustard Seed. About 300 people waited in line for the free hot lunch. That day gave me a very different perspective on Canada's capital city. Beyond all the monuments and museums there were real people struggling with poverty, mental illness and homelessness. I'm not here to judge city officials for their decisions. I know there are complex problems behind each story. I simply comment on the reality I saw and heard about that day.

What is your reaction when you see street people? Fear? Compassion? Tension – you want to help but you don't know if it's

safe? Judgment? What might God want of us with respect to street people or those economically disadvantaged people around us?

We continue our series on being salt and light to this world through prayer and ministry. We want to look *out* in prayer and ministry to the community and the world. We've looked at the call to be salt and light and God's call to ministries of mercy in the Good Samaritan account. We've considered how God helps others through hostile times by means of our intercessory prayers. Last week we looked at how God used Paul's walking and talking to get His Gospel into the city council of Athens.

Today we continue to look out towards poor folks. Specifically we want to focus on those in economic poverty of one form or another. Other poverties certainly exist in our city like spiritual and moral poverty. But our text today specifically addresses those in economic poverty. It comes from a passage preserving part of Moses' speech to the Israelites just prior to their entry into the Promised Land.

God wanted to remind that generation of all they'd experienced in the desert. He wanted to ensure that they remembered God's

provision for them through that harsh environment. But He also wanted to remind them of their responsibilities once they conquered the Promised Land. This Israelite nation was not to be like any other nation in the Ancient Near East. God's people were to reflect God's heart in this called out community.

The text we look at today would be especially relevant in later years to those living in established communities in the Promised Land. When things were not so idealistic, when they actually lived in houses, owned land, had money and enjoyed prosperity, what responsibilities did they have to the poor around them? We will discover some of God's heart towards the poor in Moses' words here. But since this passage comes from Old Testament law, we must address the question of how this applies to us at all. Once we get a handle on that, we will then look for God's commands to us concerning the poor. Then we will look at ways to respond in prayer that will move us towards obedience to these commands. Today's text:

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 - The Year for Canceling Debts

¹ At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. ² This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has

been proclaimed.³ You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you.⁴ However, there should be no poor 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 there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother.⁸ Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.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 your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.¹⁰ Give generously to him 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 brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

How should a Christian view Old Testament Law?

Daniel Block, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College who I have studied under the past couple of years, identifies four primary Christian approaches to the law. All of which are flawed.

Some conclude that since Christ is the ultimate atoning sacrifice, none of the Law applies today. This view seems to focus only on the sacrificial elements of the law. The sacrifice of animals

reminded the Israelites of their sin and the need for blood to be spilled to pay for it. Since Christ's blood covers our sin once and for all, the law is no longer necessary. But this view neglects all the family, social and criminal law found in the Old Testament.

Others believe that the law was important. But Christ obeyed it fully and completely. Since we are clothed with His righteousness upon our conversion, we don't have to worry about the Old Testament law anymore.

But this does not sit well with a lot of Christians because that would mean you could ignore the 10 commandments. There are lots of other ethical commands in the Old Testament that Christians point to as guiding lights for their lives today. So some conclude the way to approach the law is to ask a question of it: As a Christian, do I have to keep this law? Subscribers to this point of view usually divide the law into 3 categories; ceremonial, civil and moral laws. They conclude the ceremonial and civil laws no longer apply but the moral ones do. One problem with this view is who decides which laws we can set aside and which laws we keep?

The final view some Christians take is that the entire Old Testament Law is still in force today. Adherents to this view would follow the dietary commands and worship on Saturdays to observe the Sabbath law. They might also advocate a return to the sacrificial system not to actually receive forgiveness of sins but in remembrance of what it cost Christ.

But Block suggests a different approach which would help us get beyond the flaws of each of these views.

First, we must affirm the entire Old Testament as divinely breathed Scripture that is ethically relevant and is used by God to transform His people. We must not view the Old Testament as optional reading or additional lessons that we might get to if we have time. It is God's Word communicating His heart and His identity to people throughout the centuries.

Second, we must recognize that with Christ all Old Testament sacrifices have been terminated. The book of Hebrews lays out the reasons why Christ is the once and for all sacrifice. But as those of you in the Leviticus class are learning, the sacrificial system communicates the heart of God and how seriously He viewed sin.

Third, recognize the unity between the Old and New Testaments in commanding love for God and love for others. There is not a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament. It is unbalanced and ill informed to argue that the Old Testament God is judging and harsh while the New Testament God is merciful and loving. God demonstrates justice, mercy, grace, love and wrath consistently throughout the Bible. We might gain this unifying perspective by recognizing everything in the Old Testament points towards Christ and the Cross. Everything in the New Testament flows from Christ and the cross. It's all one continuing unity.

Fourth, recognize five different segments of the law; sacrificial, civil, criminal, family and pleas for poor/marginalized. Then seek the deeper principle behind each law.

Fifth, ask a different question. Instead of "As a Christian, do I have to keep this law, ask "how can I, as a Christian, keep this law?" Then the emphasis is more on seeking God's will through this not what we can get out of. Block then goes on to say the Old Testament law was never intended to be a system of salvation BY works. But it

was to present a salvation that DOES work. It is a salvation that results in a life conforming to God's will.

With these basic principles in mind, let us turn to Deuteronomy 15. You will have noticed that this text specifically addresses the poor in Israelite society. Here we discover the answer to the question

What does God require of His people concerning our poor?

Requirement #1: God requires a generous response to indebted

poor. Moses commands God's people to adopt "cancelled debt" thinking. Every seven years, the Lord required Israelite creditors to cancel debts owed them by fellow Israelites. Just like every week had a Sabbath day, Israel would have a Sabbath year.

The Lord introduced the Sabbath Year principle to Moses at Mount Sinai. There God gave Moses the 10 commandments along with a whole body of laws that expanded on them. In Exodus 23:10-11, God commanded His people to incorporate a sabbatical year into their society.

¹⁰ *"For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, ¹¹ but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and*

the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

That - Israelite landowners needed to leave their land fallow or unseeded in the seventh year. Then the poor could harvest whatever grew from the land. So God had already established the principle of a societal commitment to supporting the poor.

Here in Deuteronomy, the Lord extends the Sabbath year principle. In Exodus, the Sabbath year focused on releasing the land from plowing. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath year focused on releasing humans from debts. The debt could be financial. But more likely it included things like a loan of seed corn so a poorer family could plant – or it could be the paying back of a debt through labor or child labor. Now Bible commentators debate what was actually required of the lender. Some argue verse one instructs the lender to suspend demand for payment in the 7th year. Others argue the law prescribed a complete release from the rest of a loan. The simplest reading of the text suggests cancelling all remaining debt was the essence of the command. Don't demand the seed back; don't hold the debtor in a perpetual state of owing labor.

Was God sentencing prosperous Israelites to a life time of bad debt write offs? Or was something deeper intended here? Well notice the phrase at the end of verse 2, “the Lord’s time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.” God wanted a regular debt cancelling season in Israel’s life. Why? Because He released them from a debt they could not pay. He rescued them from slavery to the Egyptians. They did not have the power in themselves to earn their release from Pharaoh. God loosened their chains through His mighty hand.

Now they were about to enter the Promised Land, conquer it and settle down. They would become a more complex, sophisticated, prosperous people. What can sometimes happen when a people gets prosperous? They forget where they came from. They become comfortable in prosperity. They can become prideful in their own accomplishments while looking down on those less fortunate. But if it was written into the law that they had to cancel debts every seven years, this would remind them that they too once were in debt. Just as God released them from debt, they were to reflect this attribute of God to their fellow Israelite.

God’s command on His people to show generosity towards the poor shows up in other parts of the Bible. Psalm 41:1 states “Blessed is he who considers the poor.” One commentator notes, “The word considers is striking. It usually describes the practical wisdom of man and implies giving careful thought to this person’s situation.” In other words, we are to ponder the condition of poor friends and seek ways to bring them to self-sufficiency.

One time Jesus went to eat at a prominent Pharisee’s house. They debate the technicalities of the law. But then Jesus goes beyond socially acceptable norms and indirectly confronts the Pharisee whose hospitality he enjoyed. In Luke 14:12-14, we read, ¹² *Then He also said to him who invited Him, “When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

God constantly shows special concern for the poor and needy throughout the Bible. Israelite law would reflect this concern to

protect the underprivileged. If we apply this to our situation today, we are certainly called to have “cancelled debt” thinking within our church family. Verses 1 and 2 speak specifically of consideration shown to other Israelites or members of the people of God. But does verse 3 give us a loophole to escape a debt canceling attitude towards outsiders?

Well there were at least three terms used for non-Israelites in Deuteronomy: sojourner, alien and foreigner. The sojourner and alien lived among the Israelites; perhaps they too feared Israel’s God. Perhaps they didn’t. But they were part of the community. Foreigners were normally in a country for trade purposes. Any loans given them were usually investments or advance payments on goods, not loans because of poverty. From the foreigners, these debts could be collected. But from regular members of Israelite society hit by hard times, God’s people could not adopt a Scrooge like attitude.

God requires His people to respond with a generous debt forgiving ethic to poor friends in the church community and outside of it. But what happens if we begin to have negative thoughts towards those friends? Or maybe you’ve heard or expressed some of the

common doubts about the poor – “Don’t they abuse the system?”

What if they are ungrateful? What about those who could have made better choices?” It seems these thoughts were common because Moses spends verses 7-11 addressing these unspoken questions. This brings us to the second requirement God places on His people.

Requirement #2: God requires a God-like compassion towards the poor. This compassion has three components.

Component #1: A soft heart. Verse 7 again – If there is a poor man among you, do not be hard hearted. Verse 10 instructs us to give generously without a grudging heart. In ancient Israelite thinking, the heart represented the mind and will. It governed the intention and direction of economic action. In each reference to the heart, Moses warns against a hard hearted response to the poor.

Component #2: An open hand. Verse 7 – Do not be tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and lend freely.

Verse 11 – Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

To cancel a debt in verse 2 is literally “to release the hand.” It means to renounce your claim or power over someone who owes you.

So the social response to poverty is put squarely in the hands of those who have hands – those who have the power to do something about poverty. It is not left to the self-effort of the unaided poor alone.

I think this really challenges us especially in our political views. We can let political ideology shape our ethics and attitude towards the poor more than God’s word. Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer pointed this out almost 40 years ago in his book *The Church at the end of the 20th century*. He writes, “Christians may at times be ‘cobelligerents’ with the Left or the Right, but never allies. If there is social injustice, say there is social injustice. If we need order, say we need order . . . But do not align yourself as though you are in either of these camps: you are an ally of neither. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is different from either – totally different.”¹

Pastor Tim Keller then comments on Schaeffer’s statement with striking insight. *“The ideology of the Left believes big government and social reform will solve social ills, while the Right believes big business and economic growth will do it. The Left expects a citizen to be held legally accountable for the use of his wealth, but*

*totally autonomous in other areas, such as sexuality. The Right expects a citizen to be held legally accountable in areas of personal morality, but totally autonomous in the use of wealth. The North American “idol” – radical individualism – lies beneath both ideologies. A Christian sees either “solution” as fundamentally humanistic and simplistic.”*²

Friends we live in a conservative part of the country. I know this treads on sacred ground. But we must seriously evaluate who or what has final authority over our decision making. Do we allow our political views to judge the Bible? Or do we allow the Bible to sift and judge our political views? God’s Word says; show an open hand towards the poor.

Component #3: A kind eye. (15:9)

Where do I get that from? Well verse 9 addresses potential abuse of God’s law by creditors. Some lenders could simply have refused to give loans to poor people in the year prior to a Sabbath year. Because there was a greater likelihood of default on the loan. Moses speaks

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the end of the 20th Century*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1970), 37.

² Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, (Philipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 1992), 26.

against that in verse 9 by saying “don’t harbor that wicked thought of doing that.” The New International Version translates the next phrase like this “the seventh year, the year for canceling debts is near” so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother.” But the text is more literally translated by the New King James Version which states, *Beware 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.*

Moses warns them against scheming about ways to get out of generosity. Such scheming leads to looking at the poor with evil eyes and justifying inaction towards them. “Don’t harbor thoughts like that,” says Moses. Instead we are to look with kindness. A sincere kind look reveals the attitude inside.

Our current economic times present a tremendous opportunity for us to show a soft heart, open hand and kind eye towards one another and our community. God requires His people to adopt a “debt-cancelling” ethic and a God-like compassion towards poor friends around us. But what can we do when we sense feelings of

doubt, mistrust and objection rising within us towards a specific individual struggling in this area?

How can we deal with objections to this command within us or around us?

Well the text reveals a great strategy for that.

Recognize that poverty is a collective problem, not an individual one. (4-6)

Verses 4-6 reveal that if the people collectively lived in obedience to God’s law and ways, there would be no poor. However, since this is not the case, God expects His people to have tender hearts towards the poor in the community. There is to be a collective battle against poverty; the Israelites were to guard against oppression and ignoring those most vulnerable members of society.

Yet isn’t this declaration crazy? “There should be no poor.” Moses has just given them God’s law on right attitudes towards the indebted poor. There is obvious tension in this passage and the tension must have been thick as he spoke. It summoned the listener to reflect on what Moses said. He portrays the ideal in verse 4-6. If Israel fully obeyed the law and God’s commands, God would richly bless them.

In fact, He would so richly bless them, that there would be no poverty and no national debt. Israel didn't get close to this ideal. There were always poor within her borders because they collectively failed to live by God's law. But scholars can't even find evidence that a Sabbath year was ever had. Moses undercuts any foundation for a superior attitude or contempt towards the poor. The rich might say to the poor, "it's your own fault that you're poor." Moses reminds Israel "it's our collective fault that there are poor." A people's collective disobedience to God's law results in poor people and national debt. Hmm I wonder what that says about Canada!

Remember your own indebtedness.

Sin enslaved us once upon a time. Because of our sin, we owed a huge debt to the Lord that we could never pay back. Yet God forgave that debt on the basis of His Son's sacrifice. Because we have been forgiven much or released much, we must show the same release to others around us.

This theme of remembering God's release from past enslavement echoes through Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 5:15 – You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Deuteronomy 8:18 – "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers as it is this day."

Deuteronomy 15:15 – "You shall remember you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this day." God's people are eternal debtors to Him. Yet He chose to forgive our debt so that we might have life. We are to reflect this characteristic of the Lord to our world.

If you are not a Christian here today, you currently owe a debt you cannot pay. Your sin results in the wages of death. But Christ came to pay a debt He did not owe – your debt. Will you trust Him personally as your savior from that debt? If you do, 2009 can become the year of cancelled debt in your life.

Those already Christians – think back to when you became a Christian; a specific date or season of the year. That's your year of

cancelled debts. We can look forward to the time when verses 4-6 are actually true. This will be life under Jesus when He returns. Won't it be a great life? Won't it be awesome to have no place in the whole city where we could go and see poor people?

Until that time, it's our responsibility to do our part in creating a glimpse of verses 4-6 in this community. What can we do, you do, to make SVBC a people that have soft hearts, open hands and kind eyes to all kinds of poor people; spiritually poor, materially poor, relationally poor, those impoverished in spirit because of some difficulty or tragedy or life blow.

We start with prayer.

So how do we pray?

- **Confess any hard hearted, tight fisted or grudging attitude.**
- **Ask the Lord to remind us of our great release from debt.**
- **Ask the Lord to open our eyes to the poor around us.**

We'll have much more opportunity to do that in two weeks. The director of Community and Family Services for Salvation Army, St. Albert will join us. She will share some of the needs right here in our city. We will be challenged to change our lifestyles so we can respond

to these needs. But today, let us come to the Lord to respond to what He's said to us through this time together.

If you are one of our poor – will you rejoice that our God hears your cries? Psalm 145, 146, 147 proclaim His heart for you.