

Jubilee

Kicking It Off

What's one thing you own that you'd have a hard time letting someone else borrow?

Read

Leviticus 25:8-17, 23-25, 35-38

Summary

Leviticus 25 might be the most surprising economic plan ever written. Every seventh year, Israel's farmers were supposed to leave their fields alone and let anyone eat what grew. Then every fiftieth year, after seven of those cycles, came the Jubilee. Land that had been sold went back to the family it came from. Israelites who had sold themselves into service to pay off debts went home free. Nobody could buy a field forever. You could only buy the harvests left until the next Jubilee, and the price dropped every year it got closer.

Why build an economy like that? God gives the reason in one line: "The land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me." Everything Israel had was on loan from Him. That's hard for us to hear, because most of us think of what we've earned as ours, and we like to pass it down. Jubilee meant nobody's wealth could pile up forever and nobody's debt could swallow their kids.

There's a detail that's easy to miss. The trumpet that started the Jubilee sounded on the Day of Atonement, the day God cleansed His people of their sins. The year of release began on the day of forgiveness, so forgiveness was built right into the way God's people handled money and land.

The chapter also expects people to fall on hard times, and it doesn't stop to ask whose fault it was. If your brother becomes poor, support him and don't charge him interest. If he loses everything, a relative can step in and buy him back, and that person is called a redeemer. Jesus picked up this whole picture when He read Isaiah in Nazareth and said the year of the Lord's favor had arrived. He's the Redeemer who pays what we

can't. People who have been forgiven that much are called to forgive too, including the people they're still quietly holding something against.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. God told Israel, "The land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me" (25:23), so no one could sell a field for good. What is one thing you have that is hardest to think of as the Lord's rather than yours?
3. When Israel asked, "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" God answered, "I will command my blessing on you" (25:20-21). Where is God asking you to trust Him with something that doesn't add up on paper?
4. The Jubilee trumpet sounded on the Day of Atonement (25:9), so the year that released debts began on the day God forgave sins. How does remembering what God has forgiven you change the way you look at what others owe you?
5. Leviticus tells Israel to support a struggling brother and take no interest from him (25:35-36), without asking how he got there. Who is someone you find harder to help because you think they brought it on themselves?
6. In Jesus' parable, a servant forgiven an enormous debt had a man jailed for owing him far less (Matthew 18:23-35). Who is one person you need to declare Jubilee on this week by letting go of your bitterness?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"I want you to begin to see your assets as belonging to the Lord. The next time you open the app that looks at all of your net worth, at your bank account and all of your properties, I want you to take a moment to stop, as Sabbath suggests, and say, 'Lord, this is Yours.' Read this chapter and see how many times God says, 'I am the Lord.' Leviticus 25 is saying, 'The land is mine.' And so our response is to say, 'Yes, Lord. It is Yours, and we are going to follow Your way.'"

"Here is the difference between God's justice system and the world's justice system. When it's time for penalty and payment, God looks at you and me and says, 'You're forgiven.' Is it now okay for me to live in sin? No. What you did is abhorrent. The penalty was death. The penalty is high. Justice has to be served, and the sin is still sin. But the beauty of God's forgiveness is He pays for it."

"It's not about, 'Oh, I love being generous to this family, because they're so hardworking and good and lovable and kind.' That's not wrong, but in my heart of hearts, I do concern myself. It's just favoritism. They're getting help because they're so lovely, and there are so many others who are not so lovely, who get overlooked. Leviticus is clearly saying, when these neighbors, these brothers, are struggling, you need to care for them."

"There are some people in your life that you have bitterness towards. And what I need you to do is declare Jubilee. Not because they deserve it, 'cause they don't. You didn't. You did not deserve God's forgiveness. Proclaim Jubilee by saying, 'I am no longer going to hold bitterness, not because you deserve it, not because I deserve it, but because the Lord God commands it.'"

Sermon Notes

Leviticus 25:8-17

8 “You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. 9 Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. 10 And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. 11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. 12 For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

13 “In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. 14 And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. 15 You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. 16 If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. 17 You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 25:23-25

23 “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. 24 And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.

25 “If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.

Leviticus 25:35-38

35 “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. 36 Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. 37 You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. 38 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

Outline

1. The Land Is Mine - Leviticus 25:1-24
    a. Leviticus shows God and it shows us. He says, "I am the LORD your God," and we answer, "You are my God, but I'm going to do what is good for me." Jubilee is hard to grasp because we think from our economy, not the one that reflects His character.
    b. The chapter grows out of the Sabbath: a day each week, a seventh year when the land rests and everyone eats from it (25:4-7), and after seven sevens a fiftieth year to "proclaim liberty throughout the land" (25:10). There is no record that Israel ever kept it.
    c. No one bought land, only harvests, and the price fell as the jubilee drew near (25:15-16), because "the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me" (25:23).
    d. Israel heard this in the wilderness, just out of slavery and owning nothing, so it sounded like promise rather than restriction. Every fifty years God reset the economy, and neither debt nor accumulated wealth passed down for good.
    e. "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" God answers, "I will command my blessing on you" (25:20-21). Faith submits under God's logic before it understands it, and what we gain is a look at His generosity.
2. Forgiveness Built In - Leviticus 25:9, 25-46
    a. The jubilee trumpet sounds "on the Day of Atonement" (25:9). The year of release begins on the day God deals with the sins of His people, so forgiveness is built into His law.
    b. Wrongdoing deserves punishment, and forgiveness that pretends the wrong wasn't wrong is not biblical. God's justice differs from the world's because He pays the penalty Himself.
    c. Everything we hold is His, so He commands us to forgive, "not because you are paying for it, but because I have paid for it." When you check your net worth, stop and say, "Lord, this is Yours."
    d. "If your brother becomes poor... you shall support him... Take no interest from him or profit" (25:35-36). Care for him even if he brought it on himself, because generosity that only reaches the lovable is favoritism.
    e. "They are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves" (25:42). The redeemed must never rule ruthlessly over one another, and using God's word to keep people enslaved is the heart of man twisting it (25:43).
3. The Redeemer Has Come -Leviticus 25:25, 47-55; Ruth 4; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18-21; Matthew 18:21-35

a. "His nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold" (25:25). Because the jubilee was rarely kept, the brother who lost his land, and then himself, needed a redeemer.
b. The nearer kinsman wanted Naomi's land without the people attached to it, and Boaz took both. Ruth the Moabite became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:6, 17).
c. Isaiah took up the jubilee's "proclaim liberty" (Isaiah 61:1), and Jesus read it in Nazareth and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). He is the Redeemer, and the Redeemer pays the price we cannot.
d. The servant forgiven an unpayable debt jailed a man who owed him little, and the king jailed him in turn (Matthew 18:23-35). That should frighten anyone who has been forgiven and still holds a grudge.
e. Jesus answered "how often" in sevens, the language of the jubilee (Matthew 18:21-22). Declare jubilee on the people you're bitter toward, not because they deserve it, but because you did not deserve God's forgiveness and He commands it.

Notes

With two weeks left in Leviticus, the thread I keep seeing is how far God's economy is from our understanding. God tells His people again and again, "I am the LORD your God," and the people answer, "Okay, You are my God, but I'm going to do what is good for me." Leviticus 25 presses on exactly that place, because it is about money, land, debt, and who owns what.

Jubilee is hard to understand because we think from inside the economy we live in. For 49 years Israel bought and sold and borrowed. Then in the fiftieth year land went back to its families, Israelites who had sold themselves into service went free, and the fields were left alone. As far as we know, there is no record that Israel ever kept it, and I think it was hard for them too. You can hear it in the chapter, where the people ask how they are going to eat.

The chapter builds on the Sabbath. Every week there is a day to stop before the Lord, and every seventh year the land itself rests, and whatever grows feeds everyone, down to the sojourner and the animals (25:6-7). After seven of those years comes the fiftieth, a year of consecration to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (25:10).

A release every fifty years would wreck our financial system, and Leviticus makes a provision for it that shows what God thinks of ownership. You never bought the land. You bought harvests. In year one you paid for 49 of them, in year 25 you paid for 25, and in year 48 the price was almost nothing (25:15-16). The reason is verse 23: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me."

That cuts against our sensibilities about private property. I'm not saying property is bad, and not stealing is still one of the commandments. I'm saying God is the ultimate owner. Many of us already say, "Everything I have is the Lord's," which is the language of Leviticus, and then we act like little children about my house, my car, my things. This chapter asks us to mean what we say.

The first hearers had just come out of slavery in Egypt, owned nothing, and were eating manna and quail. When God told them how to handle fields and vineyards, they didn't hear restriction. They heard promise: "I get land? There's a plot with my family's name on it? Thank You, Lord."

Fifty years is a lot of life, with harvests, inheritances, failed crops, and families who went bankrupt and sold themselves to the rich. God put a reset into all of it. Our modern minds struggle with that, because we love to make wealth a generational blessing and debt a generational curse. I work hard so my children's children will be blessed by what I leave them, and God says that is not what blesses your children. For the one in debt,

whether by his own fault or by drought and disaster, the debt did not pass to his children. Money does not dictate your blessing. Your God does.

So when God says to let the land rest a whole year, the honest question comes: "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" (25:20). God answers, "I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years" (25:21). It doesn't make sense to us. The key is submitting under God's logic rather than waiting until we assent to it, and saying, "Lord, I will follow You, because You are my God." If we call ourselves people of faith, we have to act in faith.

I know this can sound like the prosperity gospel, as if obedience earns three years of crops. The point is what you see in the exchange, which is the generosity of God. Well-meaning people give and think, "Look how generous I am." The jubilee turns that around, and God says, "Look how generous I am." He is far more kind and gracious than we will ever be. So the next time you open the app that shows your net worth, stop the way the Sabbath suggests and say, "Lord, this is Yours." Then read this chapter and count how many times He says, "I am the LORD."

The timing of the jubilee says even more. "Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land" (25:9). The day the sins of the community were paid for, and their guilt sent away on the goat, is the day the year of release began. Forgiveness is built into God's law.

Our culture argues about this constantly. One side says wrongdoing must be punished, and they're right, because God is holy and just. The other side says we must forgive, and they're right too. But forgiveness so often becomes a way of saying the wrong wasn't really wrong, and that isn't what the Bible teaches. Some Christians tell me sin is not that bad. I love them, and I disagree. We are covered in sin, and the wrath of God is justified.

Here is the difference between God's justice and the world's. When it is time for penalty and payment, God looks at you and me and says, "You're forgiven." That isn't because what we did was acceptable. It was abhorrent, and the penalty was death. Justice has to be served, and the sin is still sin. The beauty of God's forgiveness is that He pays for it. So when we think, "I have to forgive the debts against me," God answers that it was His to begin with, from the land to our bank accounts, our homes, and the era we were born in. "I am commanding you to forgive. Not because you are paying for it, but because I have paid for it." That is why I won't put my hope in whoever holds office. I take injustice to my Father in heaven, mourning wrongdoing as wrong and still loving the people who did it, because I can't fix their sin and Jesus can.

Leviticus then follows a brother as he slides. He sells part of his property (25:25), then cannot maintain himself (25:35), then sells himself to his neighbor (25:39), then to a foreigner (25:47). Imagine he brought it on himself, the farmer who never worked his plot and kept saying, "God, You'll provide." God still says, "You shall support him… Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you" (25:35-36). It is easy to help the lovable family everyone already cares about. That isn't wrong, but if our help only reaches the lovely, it is favoritism, and the unlovely get overlooked. And the redeemed must never become the oppressor: "They are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly" (25:42-43). God brought them out of slavery, and enslaving one another would be the height of hypocrisy. I still grieve that the church in our own country used the word of God to keep people enslaved.

Because the jubilee was rarely kept, the brother needed a redeemer. "His nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold" (25:25). Ruth shows what that looks like. A Moabite widow followed her mother-in-law to Bethlehem and gleaned in the field of Boaz, a man who kept the law. When it came time to redeem Naomi's family land, the nearer kinsman wanted the land but not the people attached to it. Boaz took both. Their son Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David, and a foreigner who lived on the margins of a field became the great-grandmother of the king God promised.

The jubilee's words did not stop there. "Proclaim liberty" (25:10) became Isaiah's promise of One who would "proclaim liberty to the captives" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth, read it, and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). He is the Redeemer, and a redeemer pays the price. The poor man cannot pay to be set free, and neither can we, because we do not have enough righteousness to repay our debt against God's holiness.

Jesus' parable doesn't end with the debt forgiven (Matthew 18:23-35). A servant owed the king more than he could ever repay, and the king forgave all of it. Then that same servant found a man who owed him a fraction of that and had him thrown in jail until he paid every penny. The king asked him, "Didn't I just forgive you of all these things?" and threw the unforgiving servant into jail himself.

That parable frightens me. I stand here week after week proclaiming that the Lord has forgiven my sins. My debt has been washed away, and I am no longer bound by what was charged against me and my history. And yet I still find unforgiveness in my heart. The responsibility now lies on me to forgive others, not because they deserve it, but because the Lord commands it. When Peter asked how often to forgive, Jesus answered in sevens, the language of the jubilee (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgive the brother who wronged you as often as it takes, and proclaim liberty.

Most of us aren't owed money, because we've gotten good at not lending it. But there are people we hold bitterness toward. Declare jubilee on them. Say, "I am no longer going to hold this against you," not because they deserve it, and not because you do, but because the Lord God commands it. You did not deserve His forgiveness either. So embrace them, love them, and forgive them.

Blog

This Sunday we come to Leviticus 25, and I think this might be the chapter that feels the most distant to us. Not because of the blood or the altars, because there aren't any in this chapter. It's because of money. Leviticus 25 is about land, loans, interest, and what happens to a family that loses everything. And the way God handles all of that is so radically different from the way we see things. We have built so much on top of our capitalistic viewpoint that this passage feels distant not only in time but also in ideology.

Last week we took a look at the Sabbath, one day out of seven that belongs to the Lord. In Leviticus 25 that same pattern grows. Every seventh year the land itself gets a Sabbath. You don't sow your field and you don't prune your vineyard, and whatever grows on its own is food for everyone, for you, for your servants, for the sojourner who lives with you, and even for the animals (25:4-7). And then it grows again. You count seven of those Sabbath years, forty nine years, and the year after that is the Jubilee:

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan" (25:10).

Think about what that means. If you lost your family's land, you got it back. If things got so bad that you sold yourself to work off what you owed, you walked out, you and your children with you, and you went home (25:41). Every fifty years, everything resets. No one stays trapped forever.

But how does that even work? How do you buy and sell anything in a system like that?

In Israel, nobody really bought land. They bought harvests. If the Jubilee was forty years away, the price was high, and if it was two years away, the price was low, because you were only paying for the crops you'd get before the land went back to its family (25:15-16). Every sale had an end date built into it. And God gives the reason: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me" (25:23).

This is where everything starts. We assume that what we earn is ours, and what's ours is ours forever. God starts from the other end. It's His. The land is His, and the people are His too. Twice in this chapter He says it: "they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt" (25:42, 55). And so no one in Israel could own another Israelite for good, and no one could own the land for good, because God was the owner of both. Leviticus is laying out a truly grounded economic framework, and it begins with this: God is the owner, and He has a desire to restore all things unto Himself.

And again, the people of Israel had the same question you and I would have. God even writes it into the text: "What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?" (25:20).

I think that's a fair question. I really do. It's the question we ask as a church too. We don't have an unlimited budget. We don't have unlimited manpower. We don't have unlimited resources. And so asking how we'll make sure we have enough isn't faithless. It's honest. But look at how God answers. He doesn't scold them. He doesn't say, how dare you ask. He says, "I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years" (25:21). The question of resources is valid. But the response of faith is important. God was saying to His people, the field was never what fed you. I was.

Then the chapter does something I love. It follows a man as he falls. Four times it starts the same way: "If your brother becomes poor" (25:25, 35, 39, 47). First he sells part of his land. Then he has nothing left to sell. Then he sells himself to work off his debt. Then he sells himself to a foreigner. It's a man going down, rung by rung.

And here's what's so interesting, Leviticus never asks how he got there. It doesn't ask if he was lazy, or if he made a bad investment, or if somebody cheated him. It doesn't ask whose fault it was. It just keeps calling him "your brother." At the top, he's your brother. At the bottom, he's still your brother. And it tells you what you owe him: "you shall support him... Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you" (25:35-36).

That your brother may live beside you. That's the goal. Not that he gets what he deserves. That he lives, and that he lives next to you.

I think this is where the chapter hits closest to home for us as a church. God is our redeemer. But our job is to make sure that when a brother is in need, we support them. Not only with prayers. Prayers are good, and we should pray. But we meet their physical needs too.

Now here's the part I can't stop thinking about. When does the Jubilee start? You'd think it would start on New Year's, or at harvest time. No. Look at the date: "Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land" (25:9).

The Day of Atonement. If you were with us back in October, you remember that day. It's the one day of the year the high priest went behind the veil with blood, the day the goat carried the sins of the people away into the wilderness, the day God said, "You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins" (16:30). And on that same day, in the fiftieth year, the trumpets started sounding across the whole land. Liberty. Go home. Your debt is gone.

You see, we tend to think of justice and forgiveness as opposites. Justice is when you get what you deserve, and forgiveness is when you don't. But in Leviticus they show up on the same day. Forgiveness is a foundational pillar of the justice of God. God's goodness and His holiness lead to the forgiveness of debts. It's built into the system. And that means our job, in perpetuity, is to display the justice of God, a justice that has forgiveness built into it.

And it doesn't stop with land and money. Hundreds of years later the prophet Isaiah took the words of this chapter, "proclaim liberty," and turned them into a promise. Someone was coming, anointed by the Spirit of the Lord, "to proclaim liberty to the captives" and "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Isaiah 61:1-2). And then one Sabbath, in a synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus stood up, opened the scroll to that very place, and read it. And He sat down and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

forgiveness of debts in Leviticus becomes, through Christ, the forgiveness of sins. That's the beauty of it. The debt you and I could never pay, the one underneath every other debt, God releases.

There's more in this chapter that I'm saving for Sunday, including what the law says about who gets to buy a poor man back, and it's very specific about who that has to be. Read Leviticus 25 before you come, the whole thing. In the service we'll read 25:8-17, so read the rest on your own. As you do, count how many times you see the words "your brother." And ask yourself what you're holding on to as if it were yours forever.