



## FOUNDATIONS FOR HOLISTIC MINISTRY

### LESSON FOUR - "COVENANT LAW: HOW ARE WE TO LIVE?"

#### Introduction to the Lesson

After the Exodus the next major encounter between God and the Israelites was the handing down of the Covenant Law- the Ten Commandments being the most known part of this law, but not all of it. As a result of God's intervention through Moses in their desperation, the people are in a covenant relationship with God. Out of this relationship the people agree to live as the people of God and the Covenant law is delivered by God to Moses to show them how to do just that. This lesson will present the Covenant law, examine the instructions God provides in the law, and its provisions for social justice.

**Key scripture: Leviticus 19:9-10, 25:8-55; Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-11, 12, 15**

#### Key points:

- o **God directs God's people to carry out God's concern for the poor, needy, and enslaved**
- o **God is a God of social justice**
- o **God expects of God's people to act in a manner towards all human beings in accordance with God's nature**

#### Lesson

##### Covenant law

There are four main aspects of the Covenant Law that are important for holistic ministry.

- 1) The Law presupposed a relationship between God and the people. Their motive for accepting and keeping the law was gratitude for their deliverance; for what God had already done.
- 2) The law became the human side of the equation between God and Israelites. It is how they were to demonstrate their faithfulness to God.
- 3) "The Law was intended to apply the relationship with God to every aspect of human life." Because of the instruction received, there was no longer separation between religious practice and everyday life. We might say there is no longer a separation between the sacred and the secular. This is where we will focus in this lesson.)
- 4) The Law continued to give guidance as to the character and nature of God. Because "God is concerned with human content and character, humans must be concerned." (Kysar., p15-16).

##### Examining the law

When we examine the Covenant law laid out in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy we find that God provides instructions for how the Israelites care for those in need. God tells the people to give special attention to the most vulnerable persons in that day: widows, orphans and strangers. As you read these scriptures together, you'll find they are so rich with God's expectations.

Let's look at some specifics of God's concern for the welfare of the oppressed as expressed in the Law. God told the people to be concerned about the poor and hungry and to be generous with food. Let's look at a passage from **Leviticus 19:9-10**.

As the farmers and vineyard keepers tended to their crops, some of the harvest was to be intentionally let for people in need to come and harvest to meet their needs. It is a picture of sharing out of one's abundance. It becomes the responsibility of those with much to change the circumstances of those with too little.

*Reflection questions: How often do we hear and say just the opposite in our own time; that it is the responsibility of the poor to improve their own conditions? Is there a "middle ground" where it is the responsibility of those with more to offer a way for those with less to do better? How might the principles of "gleaning" be lived out in our modern world?*

Most of us do not raise crops or tend vineyards anymore. One example to be considered as an answer could be the program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture commonly known as "Food Stamps." Another is food rescue programs and food banks found around our country.

Now let's look at some passages that have to do with money. Read Exodus 22:25-27

This passage deals with the exchange of credit and puts limits on what a lender can demand of a borrower even to the point of charging interest. That is not to be done. It also indicates that God is concerned that the basic needs for shelter from the cold not be denied to even the most destitute. God does not want someone to go without the basic necessities while they are trying to repay their loans. Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

We see God here in the Covenant demanding that God's people be champions of the poor, hungry and indebted. God is also concerned with the manner in which needy people are to be extended credit. No one is to give begrudgingly, but willingly lend enough to meet the person's need. One is not to be "tight-fisted."

*Reflection Questions: Have there been times where you have been "tight-fisted?" How do modern day manifestations of credit enslave vulnerable people? Do you know much about "pay day" lenders and the unfair, exorbitant interest charged?*

Notice in verse 9 of the passage above that something different happens for debtors in the seventh year. God also sets forth in the Covenant Law provisions for social justice. God initiates the practice of Sabbatical and Jubilee years. Read Exodus 15:1-2. Every seventh year (Sabbatical), all debts are remitted. It provides the means for debts to be forgiven and for those in debt to be given a "clean slate." This is a redistribution of wealth.

Walter Brueggemann writes of this economic dimension of the communal law:

*"This command, likely the quintessence of neighborliness, seeks to prevent the emergence of a permanent underclass by providing that regularly and frequently, the poor will have their debts canceled and be equipped for reentry into the economy in a viable way." (200, p. 81).*

This practice set Israel apart as a "peculiar community in the world."

In that day, many poor persons had no recourse to support themselves or to pay debts than to sell

themselves and their families into slavery. In verse 12, God demands that even slaves within the

community are also to be set free in the seventh year. God gives reason for this magnanimous gesture with, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command on you today," Deuteronomy 15:15, NRSV. Because of God's liberation, God's people are in turn to be liberators.

Returning people to a state of freedom, allowed them to once again have full participation in the community and be restored in wholeness. One scholar says, "Participation has multiple dimensions...including physical life itself, political protection, and decision making, social interchange and standing, economic production, education, culture, and religion," (Mott, p. 25). Until slaves were freed, they did not have this full participation in community. The Sabbath year restored it to them once again. Slaves were made whole participants in community life.

*Reflection Question: Are there people today that have no recourse but to sell themselves into slavery? Who are these in our world today? Are they able to fully participate in society?*

The practice of Jubilee was established every fifty years. In Leviticus 25:8-55, the observance of Jubilee is set forth. There are several provisions: real estate is returned to its original owner or their family (Lev. 25:10, 13); the land is to remain fallow for one year (Lev. 25:11-12); sale and redemption of land is required (Lev 25:14-17, 23-28); slaves are freed (Lev 25: 39-43, 47-55). Jubilee is again a radical redistribution of wealth and an acknowledgement that really all land and possessions, and most importantly people belong to God.

This idea may be very hard for us as products of Western civilization to wrap our 21st century minds around, yet these demands are found within scripture. How might we practice Jubilee today? One idea is the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

*Reflection Question: Are there ways for you to extend the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee toward persons in need?*



### **Call To Be Attentive**

Spend time this week reading through materials from the Center for Responsible Lending, Jubilee 2000 and other social justice organizations you may know about. Research ways you might become involved in their work. Spend time over the next few weeks looking for ways you can become involved in justice issues in your community. Read through the newspaper, go online, or spend time with community members to determine the justice issues for your local community.

## Benediction

O God, the Father of us all, we praise you for having bound humanity in a great unity of life so that each must lean on the strength of all, and depend for his comfort and safety on the help and labor of his brothers and sister.

We invoke your blessing on all the men and women who have toiled to build and warm our homes, to fashion our clothing, and to wrest from sea and land the food that nourishes us and our children.

We pray you that they may have health and joy, and hope and love, even as we desire for our loved ones.

Grant us wisdom to deal justly with every man and woman whom we face in the business of life.

May we not unknowingly inflict suffering through selfish indifference or the willful ignorance of a callous heart...

May the time come when we need wear and use nothing that is wet in your sight with human tears, or cheapened by wearing down the lives of the weak.

Speak to our souls and bid us strive for the coming of your Kingdom of justice when your merciful and saving will shall be done on earth.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918),  
American Baptist Minister and exponent of the Social Gospel  
Quoted in Davies, pp.121-122

## Sources

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