

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 21, 2018

## **Tightfisted or Openhanded**

Deuteronomy 15:1-11

Many of you probably remember Rabbi Robert Pristoop, who has been a speaker here at our church, filling the pulpit while I was away on a couple of occasions. I remember that as we prepared for his first visit, he asked me to keep it a secret that he would be using a shofar, a ram's horn, during his presentation. That way, you could experience the suddenness of the horn's blast, signifying the coming of the Lord in saving power. And from the stories I heard after returning to the church, it sounds like his plan worked. You won't soon forget the sound of the shofar.

Felicia Thomas writes:

Imagine the sharp, resounding blast of the sacred ram's horn: a sound so full, so startling, and so resonant that it stops you in your tracks. The horn sounds a note so clear and true that it instigates a chain of events: a massive work stoppage, followed by the cancellation of all debts, the return of leased property to its original tenants, and freedom for those who have been forced to sell their labor, and even their very selves, in exchange for the necessities of life. Whatever is held inappropriately is released, to rest for a year. Sacred time. Time to recoup, regroup, revive, refresh. Time to repent and give thanks. The ram's horn proclaims Jubilee.<sup>1</sup>

The year of Jubilee is the backdrop for the legislation in today's Scripture passage from Deuteronomy. The Jubilee comes out of a time when the people of Israel were returning from exile and had to re-establish a socio-economic order in keeping with God's will. In one respect, the Jubilee was the culmination of the Sabbath laws that God had given his people. Humans and animals were not the only ones who should rest. The land itself would also get a Sabbath every seventh year.

And every fifty years (based on the formula seven times seven plus one), God's people were to observe and celebrate the Jubilee. In the fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the trumpet of Jubilee, the shofar, was to be sounded, announcing liberty throughout the land. This liberty came in two major forms. If during the previous forty-nine years, a person had fallen on financial hard times and had to sell property in order to pay the debt, during the Jubilee the property would be returned to the original owner. In addition, people who had submitted themselves to slavery in order to repay their debts would be released.

The laws concerning the Jubilee were quite involved. But the essence of it was this: During the Jubilee, the financial balance sheets among God's people were wiped clean. It was time to level the economic playing field. Inequities between the rich and the poor were set right. Debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, land was redistributed, and proper financial and material relationships were restored. Think of the Jubilee as a key piece of God's plan for economic justice among his people.

Of course how you felt about following these God-given commands might depend on whether you were among the haves or the have-nots. If you've spent the past five decades benefitting from an economic system that rewarded some, especially landowners, while leaving others in impoverishment and financial captivity, you may dread the sound of the ram's horn. On the other hand, if you and your family are locked in debt and poverty, with seemingly no light at the end of the tunnel, the blast of the shofar might be music to your ears. The year of release has arrived. Financial freedom is on its way.

This freedom had a lot to do with the possession of land. Remember that we're talking about an agricultural society, which meant that land was the fundamental form of wealth. You could build on it, raise livestock on it, and grow crops on it. These were the primary ways of amassing wealth. When you had land, you had the primary form of capital and one of the key factors in production.

John Perkins, an African American civil rights activist and herald of biblical justice, tells about learning a powerful lesson in economics when he was about 11 years old. After a day's worth of hauling hay for a white farmer in the heat and humidity of a Mississippi summer, Perkins stood on the back porch waiting for the farmer to come back with the money for his pay. Perkins expected a dollar or maybe a dollar and a half, and was already imagining what he could buy with it. But when the farmer came back out, all he dropped in Perkins's hands were two coins, a dime and a buffalo nickel. Perkins writes:

I had been used. And there was not one thing I could do about it. Everything in me wanted to throw that blasted money on the floor and stomp out of there. . . .

I shuffled off of that back porch, head down—ashamed, degraded, violated. I didn't want anyone to know. I had been exploited. I hated myself.

One question dominated my turbulent mind: "Why? Why was that farmer able to use me like that? Why did I just have to take it?" Before long, I had the answer. The farmer had the mules, the wagon, the hay and the field. All I had was my labor and my wants. Obviously, the person with the means of production sets the rules. . . .

I made it my goal right then to have my own wagon, my own mules, my own hay, and my own field, so to speak. If I didn't want to forever be exploited, I would have to own my own means of production and take control of my own values. I never forgot that lesson.<sup>2</sup>

When the ram's horn signaled the beginning of the Jubilee, part of the good news for the poor and oppressed was that you would get to have back your own land, and not just be working on property that belonged to somebody else, primarily for their economic benefit. Now you yourself would have access to the resources needed for production, so that you could have more of a say in your own financial future.

And if you were one of the people who had to forgive debts and return land to its original owner, you too would experience a gain and a blessing, though in a costly sort of way. Financially, it might involve some pain and sacrifice. But in terms of relationships and righteousness, you would definitely make a profit. As God tells his people, when it comes to your needy fellow Israelites, "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" (v. 10). So by obeying God's commands, you were not only helping others become more economically self-sufficient. You were also investing in the creation of a community of faith where God's people lived in interdependence with each other and practiced compassion toward one another.

When it comes to money and material possessions, we need to stay alert to how they can shape our attitudes and actions, often in ways that are contrary to the will of God. True, money and material possessions are good gifts of God, entrusted to us as stewards, to be used in keeping with kingdom of God purposes. But sometimes, we're not just managing the money. The money is managing us. The Jubilee commandments remind us that financial deprivation and material need can be a form of captivity. But so can financial and material success. Prosperity itself can be an experience of bondage.

And sometimes that bondage takes the form of greed. Greed that we might not even be able to recognize. Pastor Tim Keller talks about doing a series of talks at a men's breakfast. The topic was the Seven Deadly Sins. Keller's wife Kathy told him, "I'll bet that the week you deal with greed will be the lowest attendance." She turned out to be right. Keller says, "People packed it out for 'Lust' and 'Wrath' and even for 'Pride.' But nobody thinks they are greedy." He goes on to say:

As a pastor I've had people come to me and confess that they struggle with almost every kind of sin. Almost. I cannot recall anyone ever coming to me and saying, "I spend too much money on myself. I think my greedy lust for money is harming my family, my soul, and people around me." Greed hides itself from the victim. The money god's *modus operandi* includes blindness to your own heart.<sup>3</sup>

During the time leading up to the Jubilee, there were many who had no trouble seeing their own financial struggles. But there were also many who were blinded to their own greed and to how it had contributed to the suffering of others.

In order to deal with such circumstances, God had given Jubilee rules designed to regulate and restrain commercial activity and provide a check on economic injustice. These laws had their source in love. The love of God for his people, and for the world in which his people were to be a witness to God's righteousness. Love without law wasn't enough. But neither was law without love. Love that could work upon and change the human heart. That's one of the most strategic places where the Jubilee needed to take root.

In today's text, notice how the instructions for Jubilee are designed not only to regulate but to regenerate. In other words, to create new attitudes, new perception, and new possibilities in the hearts of God's people. There are warnings against being hardhearted, harboring wicked thoughts, showing ill will, or having a grudging heart in matters of giving and generosity (vv. 7-10). All of these exhortations point to the influence that money can have on the way that we think and behave.

A 2012 *Boston Globe* article engaged readers around the question, Does money change you? While many people believe that having more money wouldn't change who they are as people, much of the evidence points to a different conclusion. The article reported:

As a mounting body of research is showing, wealth can actually change how we think and behave—and not for the better. Rich people have a harder time connecting with others, showing less empathy to the extent of dehumanizing those who are different from them. They are less charitable and generous. They are less likely to help someone in trouble. And they are more likely to defend an unfair status quo. If you think you'd behave differently in their place, meanwhile, you're probably wrong: These aren't just inherited traits, but developed ones. Money, in other words, changes who you are.<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons God has given us this congregation, and this day of worship and rest each week, is that we may see more clearly our relationship with money and possessions. Not only what we may do with money, but what money is capable of doing with us, and to

us, when we lose sight of our calling to generosity, compassion, and economic righteousness.

By ceasing from our labor and coming together to worship, we respond to God's call to repent and give thanks. On this day, we put down all the things that we use to produce and to profit, to be self-sufficient and independent, and we remember instead our utter dependence on God and our interdependence with one another. And we do that in part by bringing with us a portion of the financial resources that God has entrusted to us, so that we can give into the larger mission of the Lord in the world, including his commitment to the poor and the needy. It makes me think that perhaps, in keeping with the spirit of the Jubilee, we should have one of the ushers blow a shofar every Sunday when it's time to collect the offering.

In many respects, the Jubilee vision remained just that, a vision. There are major questions about whether the Scripture's Jubilee laws were actually ever implemented faithfully and fully. Most commentators believe they were not. As one person has put it, "The trumpet of Jubilee (Lev 25:9) blew softly if at all." But that doesn't change God's commitment to economic righteousness. And it doesn't change his call for us to be people whose hearts are capable of being moved, so that we can be not tightfisted but openhanded in the way that we give, and the way that we live with one another.

---

<sup>1</sup> Felicia Y. Thomas, "Proclaiming Jubilee." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 2001) 39.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Perkins, *With Justice for All: A Strategy for Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009) 52.

<sup>4</sup> Britt Peterson, "Why It Matters that Our Politicians Are Rich." *Boston Globe* (February 19, 2012).