

Be Holy for I AM Holy Series
The Gift of God's Land

Leviticus 25:1-18

Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus

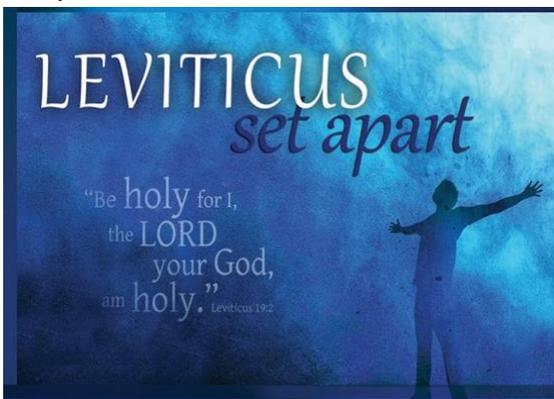
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXTS: Leviticus 25:1-18

We continue this morning in our series on the Book of Leviticus, and we face in Leviticus 25 a topic that is near and dear to most of our hearts. That topic deals with freedom and liberty.



Freedom and liberty are not American ideas. They may be American ideals, but they are actually God's ideas. The idea of freedom, a release from oppression, forgiveness of debt, and freedom to walk in God's ways, are the themes of flow out of this beautiful chapter. It may seem distant from us at first glance, and yet Leviticus 25 addresses how we are to relate to God over the generations, how we are to return to God a portion of what He gives us in

gratitude, in an attitude of Thanksgiving, and how we are to relate to one another with the accumulation of property, and the planned program of God to keep land within ancestral families. It is a beautiful institution that we have in Leviticus 25, and it is an institution that touches some of the central symbols of our own country and can inform obedience to us today.

Let's look at Leviticus 25 together. Notice again that throughout Leviticus, each section begins with the Lord's speaking. As much as there is in Leviticus 25, I almost didn't make it out of these first two verses because they made such a deep impression on me, and I hope for you as well. This entire book is God's speaking directly, right from the mountain. In Leviticus 25:1, the Lord again speaks to Moses from Mount Sinai and then speaks to the people. God's will is being revealed, and the subject, as we will see, deals with freedom and liberty. The Lord says in Leviticus 25:2:

"When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD."

He envisions a time when God's people have come out from Egypt and they have settled in the land. He goes on to say in Leviticus 25:3-4:

“For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD.”

The Lord says that not only should they keep a Sabbath day once a week, but when they get into the land, the land will observe the Sabbath as well. The land will observe the Sabbath in the sabbatical year once every seven years. God commands that even the land itself observe a period of being fallow, when the land is not worked, when people are not working. It is a time of sacred rest that God institutes once every seven years. It has the effect of causing the land to flourish and prosper.

As the chapter unfolds, we realize that not only is there a Sabbath every seven years, but then there is a super Sabbath, if you will, beginning in Leviticus 25:8. The Lord says:

“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.”

After 49 years, the Lord says that there is a special year once every 50th year. In Leviticus 25:9, the Lord says:

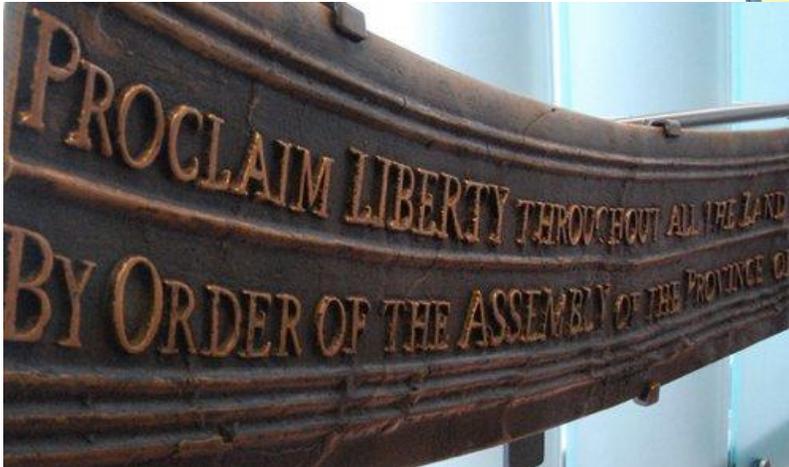
“Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land.”

This year is announced with the sounding of a loud trumpet. On the very Day of Atonement, a trumpet sounded throughout the land, and this 50th year is announced and proclaimed as a year where liberty is proclaimed throughout the land, Leviticus 25:10:

“And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”

Once every 50 years, there is a trumpet sound, the sounding of a ram's horn, that goes out throughout the country, and the Lord says this 50th year is an announcement of liberty. Liberty is something that we cherish as Americans, the freedom to move about, the freedom from oppression. Yet, freedom has many opponents. There is oppression from government; there is oppression from a debt burden that cannot be sustained. The Lord says that every 50th year there is a proclamation of liberty or freedom throughout the land. Leviticus 25:10 announces an institution that is without parallel in the ancient world. The image of Leviticus 25:10 is so powerful, that once in a generation there would be a proclamation, a renewal of liberty, because you can lose liberty in every generation. You can lose liberty in your family. You can lose liberty through the accumulation of debt. You can lose liberty through government that seizes it and takes it away from you, whether directly or indirectly. The Lord says once every 50 years we are going to reset, and liberty is again proclaimed.

I don't know what comes to your mind first as symbols of liberty in our country, but the Liberty Bell came to my mind, and I started looking at the Liberty Bell. The Liberty Bell is larger than I thought. Here is the Liberty Bell as it sits now in Philadelphia, with the State Building, Independence Hall, behind it. You can see the famous crack; you see the American elm at the top; and you see a man with a smart phone trying to figure out how can he can take a 'selfie' with the Liberty Bell behind him.



As I dialed in, I realized what is inscribed on the Liberty Bell is Leviticus 25:10: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land." This is an announcement of forgiveness of debt, an announcement of

restoration to families, and an announcement of freedom in the land. The Liberty Bell was cast as a poignant reminder of the need for liberty to be regularly announced. In Leviticus 25:10, this proclamation of liberty is said to be a Year of Jubilee. We get the word *jubilant* from Jubilee. In Hebrew *jubel* is simply a ram's horn, the instrument used to proclaim this trumpet sound. It is a Jubilee year, and the Jubilee year is described in more detail as that each person returns to his property, his ancestral land, and each returns to his ancestral family. The Year of Jubilee is an announcement of rest for the land; it is an announcement of restoration of property; it is an announcement of reuniting scattered families; and it is an announcement of debt forgiveness. Each of these aspects is important for us to understand as God's design for the Year of Jubilee. As we mentioned, the Sabbath year is repeated on an extraordinary scale in the 50th year: there is a total rest for the land. You may be thinking as ancient Israelites were thinking: "What will we eat if we take a break from working?" That's an obvious question, but it is not a question that catches the Lord by surprise. The Lord says: "You keep my Jubilee years, and I will make the harvest of the year before so abundant that you will be able to live on that harvest and have enough to eat when you plant your crops again." The reward for obedience is the opportunity to obey again; the reward for disobedience is diminishing returns, that is, keep working for less and less.

The Year of Jubilee is a rest for the land, and the Lord promises His blessing. In Leviticus 25:18, the Lord says:

“Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep My rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely.”

Out of obedience to the Lord, we obey this radical institution which is without parallel in the ancient world, and God blesses in return. Why does God institute this Year of Jubilee? He explains in Leviticus 25:24:

“And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.”

The Lord says that the land on which you reside ultimately belongs to Him and you are sojourners, strangers, on it. We are, if you will, God's tenants on the land and are to permanently allow a redemption of the land. This is an institution that recalibrates society once a generation, and it is an institution that strikes fear for some. It strikes joy in the hearts of others, and yet, as Leviticus 25 unfolds, we see that the Year of Jubilee has a very concrete application. The Year of Jubilee is set as a moment of redemption, as a moment of debt release for two very real situations that arise in our lives. As the chapter unfolds, we see that the Year of Jubilee guards an ultimate redemption of property and it guards an ultimate redemption of persons.

Let's look at these two together. Beginning in Leviticus 25:25, we read that that there are situations that come up when people are forced to sell their ancestral homes. This could happen from a crop failure; it could happen from sickness; it could happen from family tragedy so that the circumstances of our lives change in such a way that we are not able to live or care for or farm the land that God has given us. Something has happened, just as things happen in your lives where situations change, and we begin to be in need. So the situation is envisioned that the property is sold. God says that when property is sold, the first line of defense is that your family can help you. When you are in need, God's design is that the family of faith would come along side of you and help you. We read in Leviticus 25:25:

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

His nearest redeemer, his kinsman, can purchase the land on his behalf. Your family can come and protect you. The second situation that is envisioned is that if you have circumstances, like an illness, like crop failure, like a tragedy, and you are not able to work the land and you have to sell your very means of livelihood. In Leviticus 15:26-27 we read the situation that is envisioned:

“If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property.”

He is able to purchase the land back; he can reclaim his property. God takes care to specify that

it is purchased at a fair market price. If neither of these situations comes about, there are no family members who can help, the circumstances of their lives don't change, then God makes an ultimate provision of restoration of property at the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25:28:

“In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.”

Property goes back once a generation. The means of livelihood are returned. It is not a guaranteed freedom of result, but it does guarantee the freedom of opportunity and family systems in perpetuity in God's vision of the world.

The second case of Jubilee that is described in more detail is the situation when a person needs to be redeemed, a redemption not just of land, but a redemption of yourself. What happens when you can't pay your bills? What happens when you cannot provide for your family? You begin to accumulate debts; you sell your assets, as we saw in the first part of the chapter. The second part of the chapter is that you cannot pay your debts, you cannot provide for your family, and so you sell yourself, as it were. You offer your own labor. In Leviticus 25:35, we read:

“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.”

In God's economic vision, if a person has to sell themselves as cheap labor, the first thing that the we are told is that we are to treat people fairly and justly and to not exploit them. Secondly, we read that if a person has to sell their own labor, they are treated as a hired servant and not as a slave, Leviticus 25:39:

“If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: He shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner.”

God says that they are treated with dignity, with respect. God makes specific provisions that people are not to be exploited in their time of need. Our society needs fair labor laws. Our society needs minimum wage laws, because the temptation of a fallen human heart is to say when you're in need, I'm going to get as much out of you as the law allows. God makes provision for a fair and equitable treatment of people whose circumstances are down. They are not to be extorted; they are to be treated with fair wages. You cannot treat your brother as a slave. In Leviticus 25:53, the Lord says:

“He shall treat him as a servant hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight.”

This is very powerful language that the Lord uses. The expression in the ESV that is translated *he shall not rule ruthlessly* echoes the language that is used in Exodus 1, when the Egyptians ruled ruthlessly over the Israelites and exploited them for their own projects without fair pay. The Lord says you treat your brother kindly; you pay them fair wages. Then, in Leviticus 25:54,

the Lord says:

“And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee.”

That third and climactic stage is the 50th year. Just as there is a redemption of property, there is a redemption of persons. If you come to the 50th year, then you are released; you are set free, the debt is canceled. You are given, once a generation, not freedom of results, but a freedom of opportunity and a cancellation of debt, once a generation. The Lord gives in Leviticus 25:55 the reason why He thinks in this way. He says:

“For it is to Me that the people of Israel are servants. They are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

God sees the land and the persons on the land as ultimately belonging to Him, and that means that God would be against state-sponsored ownership of all assets. God is not a communist. It also means that God is against a predatory version of capitalism that says I get as much out of you as I can. That leads to the consolidation of wealth and resources in the hands of a few at the exploitation of many. So God's vision of economic life is something very different because it rests on the foundation that the land is God's and the people are God's. So, work the land in a way that honors God, and work people in a way that honors God, because God says they ultimately belong to Him. If you are a business owner, this has huge implications for how you treat the people that work for you. If you are a worker, it means that you are not entitled to something, but you are given the freedom of opportunity, not a guaranteed freedom of result. There is no redistribution of property; there is no seizing of property and giving it away. There is a restoration and a cancellation of debt. There is no entitlement, and there is no exploitation. It is a profound vision. Scholars have asked the question that many of us may be thinking: this sounds so impractical. Scholars have asked if Israel ever really kept the Jubilee year. We read that the prophets indicted Israel for failing to keep even the Sabbath year. We read in Leviticus 26 that Israel often failed to honor God in the weekly Sabbath, in the sabbatical year, and failed to honor God in the Jubilee. But, they are criticized for that. The prophets even warned that judgment will come upon the land for their failure to keep the Jubilee or the sabbatical year. Yet, throughout history, the Jubilee year, or the implication of the Jubilee year, has been embraced.

I found myself this week initially looking at the Jubilee year from the outside. I've never been sold; I've never been enslaved; I've never had a debt mountain that I could not repay. I was searching what it would be like to hear that note of the trumpet. What would it be like if you had had an injury and you couldn't work and couldn't provide for your family? What would it have been like to have your circumstances change and to be dependent on a release? I found myself searching through history. I found myself drawn into the announcement of release from

slavery. I read this week on the participation of Christians in the antislavery movement in Britain. Many of you know of William Wilberforce, who was a close friend of John Newton, the slave trader who became a pastor. William Wilberforce was indefatigable in his efforts to cause his society to pass legislation to abolish slave trade, and it was passed in 1808 that you can no longer trade human persons as a commodity. Yet, the abolition of the slave trade was only the first step, because there were still half a million slaves working on plantations. What to do with them? As laws were passed to abolish the slave trade, Christians took up leadership in efforts to cause slaves to be freed.

This week I met a Baptist preacher that I had never met before. His name was William Knibb. He went to Jamaica at age 21. He was commissioned as a missionary two days after his wedding to Mary Watkins. Can you imagine that speech? “Mary, let’s go on our honeymoon, and we’re going to start missionary service 48 hours after getting married.” Well, they came to Jamaica, and William Knibb was appalled at the conditions of the slaves in Jamaica. He served as a pastor, and many in his congregation were slaves. He was appalled at how they were treated and the beaten. He said:



“I shall never forget the three years of struggle, and the incessant anxiety upon my spirit as I passed through the length and breadth of the country detailing the slaves' wrongs.”

He was summoned to the House of Parliament back in England and gave evidence that was authentic and unassailable and contributed more than any other witness to the conviction that slavery must be abolished. At last, in May 1833, 25 years after the abolishment of the slave trade, the institution of slavery was abolished. The date was set for August 1, 1834. On August 1, 1834, slaves were free. Right before this day came, the plantation owners in Jamaica scurried and instituted a six-year apprenticeship, saying that slaves can’t handle freedom. So right before the slaves were about to be freed, they passed a law that said that freedom will be only for children six years and under. Those older than six would have to work six more years you have to work on the plantation and then you will be released. The apprenticeship system was slavery under another name. It was cut off after four years. Eyewitness accounts of that day that finally came in August 1, 1838 say that slaves knew that when the sun rose that morning they would be free. They rose early in the middle of the night and got to hilltops and mountaintops and waited till the first ray of dawn could be seen on the horizon, and when they saw that light breaking forth, that was the announcement of freedom. That is what is like to experience the Jubilee. William Knibb said that when slavery was abolished, when emancipation was proclaimed, this obedience to God launched what was called and became

known as the Jamaican Awakening. Obedience to God in one area brings blessing in another. You know what happened when the institution of slavery was finally abolished? What happened was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jamaica in 1838, a visitation of God in this place. Between 1838 and 1845, a religious revival happened in the land, and Knibb was right in the center of it. Knibb said that during those seven years, through the labor of about 20 Baptist missionaries, 22,000 people were baptized upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ. He said he personally baptized 6,000 converts. God used William Knibb to translate the Bible into Creole, the native language of the slaves. By 1845, the missionaries had built 47 new chapels. Knibb was personally associated with founding 35 churches, 24 missions, and 16 schools. When you obey God in one place, he blesses you in others. Don't be a congregation that's afraid of obedience, because obedience is life-giving.

I found out this week who the most famous graduate is of the William Knibb High School in Jamaica. The most famous graduate is the fastest man ever. Usain Bolt graduated from William



Knibb High School, and here he is doing the lightning bolt. It's fast by anybody's reckoning to run 100 meters in 9.58 seconds. Usain Bolt graduated from William Knibb High School in part because of the efforts of a missionary who took the Jubilee seriously.

Why would Christians take the Jubilee year seriously? Christians would take the Jubilee seriously because the Lord God said though

Israel will not keep the Sabbath year, God promised that there still would be a coming Jubilee in the era of restoration. The Lord promises in Isaiah 61:1-2 as the servant of the Lord is speaking:

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

There is a figure in Isaiah 61 who rises up in prophetic hope of an ultimate Jubilee year where debt will be forgiven, families will be reunited, and God will be honored in the world. This ultimate Jubilee comes to fulfillment in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus came into the synagogue at Nazareth to begin His public ministry. Luke tells us that He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up. It was His custom, and He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read in the synagogue, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and selected the passage, and He

found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor; He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills the ultimate promise of the Jubilee year, and Jesus rolled up that great scroll of Isaiah, and all eyes in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. Jesus looked at them, and He looks at you and me and says: “Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” God is a God of forgiveness, of debt release. God is the one who authors new beginnings, restoration to family.

How does the Jubilee year apply to us? The Jubilee year applies to us because we know the source of liberty and freedom. It is not in the ringing of a bell—the bell cracked at the beginning, and it cracked later, and its later great crack was even widened by an attempt to repair it. I love the image of the Liberty Bell, but that’s not really where liberty comes from, is it? Liberty comes from Jesus Christ; freedom comes from Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who offers us a new beginning, of forgiveness of the debt that we could never repay, a reconciliation within our families, and God's provision of a place to celebrate, and a people with whom to celebrate. The Jubilee year is a stunning innovation, and it reflects the very heart and character of God, and so it should be present in ours as well. Please pray with me.

Father, we thank You for this morning. We thank You for the great gift that You've given to us in Your speaking, in Your revealing Your will. We thank You, Lord, that Your design is something that we would never have invented. Lord, You know that we invent either state control or personal freedom at the expense of the neighbor, and yet, Lord, You have something very different in view. You call all of us to be land tenants, for the land belongs to You. The means of production belong to You. You call us, Lord, to treat one another fairly and with equity, and Lord, You make provision to reset the system once a generation. Father, I pray for those among us this morning who are facing a debt they can't pay, whether that is an economic debt, whether that is personal debt, or whether that is a debt that is owed to You. I pray, Father, that they would hear the summons, the trumpet sound of Your Jubilee, today. Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You have made provision for our forgiveness. I pray, Father, that You would renew us and that You would set us free. Jesus, You say: He whom the Son sets free is free indeed.” Father, I pray that You would help us not to put our hopes on government or elected officials, but on You who came to set the captives free. I pray, Father, that Your liberating work would be the great object of our service in this world. Help us to be faithful. Help us to forgive as we have been forgiven, and help us to extend Your kingdom, Lord, in gratitude and with thanksgiving.

In Jesus' name, Amen.