

Compassion for the Poor

Deuteronomy 15

Let's say you roll up to an intersection in your car. There you see a man/woman with a sign that says, "Will work for food," or "My children are hungry." What is your response? Honestly, my response is to avoid eye contact and get on with my busy day. I don't like to see the pain and desperation in a person's eyes; I don't know what to do so I don't usually do anything. Maybe your response is to think of all the reasons why they might have gotten themselves in such a desperate condition: laziness, poor choices, irresponsibility, etc.

I talked with someone a couple weeks ago who has money in his monthly budget for just such occasions. He has decided ahead of time to show compassion for people in need. Typically, he parks his car, talks to the person, goes and buys them something to eat and drink. I'm not saying that every single one of us should do that every single time we see someone with obvious needs. But that heart of compassion should dwell within each of us.

Today we are going to see from the book of Deuteronomy how God expected the Jewish nation to show compassion for the poor. Then we will see how the early church fulfilled this expectation naturally and spontaneously. Finally we are going to discuss a corporate response, a way that we together as a body of Christ can show our compassion. In light of the needs that exist within the church and within our community, we are going to invite you to show compassion for the poor a very specific way.

Old Covenant Compassion for the Poor

Sabbath Day Rest (Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

I first want us to notice the emphasis of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5. Notice the emphasis upon every member of the household and every member of society getting a day of rest on the sabbath day (sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday).

12 'Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.
13 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

This rationale is different from that given in Exodus 20. When the ten commandments are recorded there, the creation week is given as the paradigm for resting on the

seventh day: Since God rested on the seventh day, His people should also; they imitated their Creator by resting on the sabbath.

But here in Deuteronomy 5, their deliverance from Egypt is given as the paradigm: Since they were delivered from slavery, they shouldn't live as slaves, working seven days a week. And they couldn't force sons, or daughters, or servants, or immigrants, or animals to work either. The entire society (including the poor and the "least of these") received the gift of a day of rest as a declaration of what God had done for them.

Sabbath Year Generosity (Exodus 23:10-13, Deuteronomy 15)

The Law not only established a Sabbath **day** to be observed every *seventh day*; it also established a Sabbath **year** to be observed every *seventh year*. Exodus 23 instructs the people to plant crops for six years and then let the land lie fallow the seventh year; in essence they were release the land from its labors every seventh year, allowing the land itself to rest. Deuteronomy 15 builds on Exodus 23, teaching that during the Sabbath year not only was the land released from its toil; as well, the poor are released from the burden of their debts.

This is what we read in Deuteronomy 15:1-2.

1 "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 "This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed.

Verse 1 literally reads, "At the end of every seven years you shall grant **a release**." Just as the land was released from its work, the poor were released from paying their debts. Bible scholars disagree about what this actually meant. There are three main views.

Some think that the entire balance of the unpaid debt was forgiven. Others think that during the Sabbath year the repayment of their loan was only suspended (as a student loan might be deferred) and that the loan repayment would continued when the Sabbath year was over. Others think that Moses is talking about releasing what was pledged as collateral for the loan (usually a piece of land). Honestly I don't have a strong conviction about which view is correct.

For our purposes today it doesn't really matter; the emphasis throughout this chapter is upon compassion and generosity toward the poor. And as we saw in the food laws, a different standard was applied to those outside the covenant. Verse 3 probably has in mind a foreign merchant (as opposed to an immigrant living in the land).

3 "From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother.

Since people outside of the covenant didn't have to let their fields lie fallow during the Sabbath year, there wouldn't be extra hardship for them to continue repaying their

debts. Your fellow brothers (fellow Jews living under the covenant), however, were given a year of release.

Verse 4 is an interesting statement in light of what we'll read in verse 11

4 "However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, 5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.

How does this statement, "there will be no poor among you," square with the statement down in verse 11 where Moses says that "the poor will never cease to be in the land"? I agree with those who see this as a deliberate tension (see Wright, p. 189). I don't think Moses wrote one thing in verse 4, got confused, and then wrote something else in verse 11. Verse 4 gives the ideal: If Israel were fully faithful to God, carefully obeying His command to show compassion and generosity, there "will be no poor among you." But verse 11 gives the reality: Since Israel would live out her calling imperfectly, "the poor will never cease to be in the land." Therefore there will always be a need for generosity and compassion.

Verse 4 reflects what we see throughout Deuteronomy: the people's obedience and God's blessing go hand in hand. If the people were faithful to forgive debts during the Sabbath year, there would be no poor among them"; this **lack of poverty** in Israel would be evidence of **God's blessing** (not the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer). Verse 6 says that God's blessing would also be evident in Israel's standing relative to other nations.

6 "For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

This isn't a command for Israel to rule over other nations as much as an economic reality. If they were generous toward the poor in their midst, they would experience God's blessing and would find themselves stronger than the surrounding nations. One of the reasons why they would go into exile generations later was because they were calloused toward the poor and they oppressed the poor (see Isaiah 58). The wealthy had no compassion or sympathy for the poor; they forgot what Moses told them repeatedly to remember - that everything they had was a gift of God, that God gave them the Land and the ability to work.

Beginning in verse 7 Moses challenges the people to show generosity toward the poor gladly and willingly. Notice in these verses how Moses talks about various parts of the body: heart, hand, and eyes. We would all be wise to notice what we do with our bodies (literally) because we live our lives through our bodies.

7 "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor

close your hand from your poor brother; 8 but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.

Instead of being hard-hearted, they were to let their hearts go out to their poor brothers and sisters; instead of being tight-fisted (clenching tightly to what they had), they were to be openhanded. Here the call is to “lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.” Given that the loan would be forgiven/released when the Sabbath year came, Moses warns against being cold and calculating instead of compassionate.

9 “Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you.

Moses gives the scenario, “Let’ say it’s just a year or two before the Sabbath/seventh year. You see a poor brother and think, ‘It’s only a year until I have to forgive his debt; that’s just too costly. . . I’m not giving him anything.’” This is so true to human nature. Instead of focusing on the other person’s need, we focus on the cost to us. When we do that there’s almost always a great reason not to be compassionate and generous.

Moses warns against “your eye” being hostile toward the poor - looking at them with contempt and hostility instead of compassion. Throughout Scripture we are told that God hears the cry of the poor and notices how His people treat them. Verse 10 confirms that a person’s heart attitude mattered under the old covenant; it wasn’t enough to give to the poor while resenting it inwardly.

10 “You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.

It’s not enough to give to the poor. That was Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 13; as you give, you should also be kind and patient.

11 “For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’

Since there will always be poor among you, you will always have the opportunity to be generous and compassionate.

New Covenant Compassion for the Poor (Acts 4:32–35, Matthew 25, Galatians 6:10, 2 Corinthians 8-9, 1 John 3:16-17, etc.)

In the first century, as the church was being established, many of the early believers were poor. This was true for at least a couple of reasons. First, there was a famine in the Asia Minor that caused hardship for everybody. Second, when people became followers of Christ they were commonly discriminated against in terms of employment

and economic opportunities. Acts 4 describes how the early church spontaneously addressed the needs of the poor in their midst.

32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

Verse 34 should sound familiar (after reading Deuteronomy 15:4):

34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

It's a big deal to sell a house and lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet and say, "Use this to meet whatever needs exist within the church." Were they shamed into giving so generously to the poor? No, they were moved by compassion out of gratitude for God.

Compassion for the poor is something of a litmus test for salvation. Do you remember what Jesus said to Zaccheus after he announced that he would "give half his possessions to the poor" and give "back 4x as much" as he had defrauded people"? Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham." He hadn't earned salvation by giving to the poor; rather his compassion for the poor (and his newfound honesty) was evidence that God had invaded his life.

Think about what John wrote in 1 John 3:16-17 makes a very similar point:

16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

John's point is that it's inconceivable that a person could say to God, "Thank You for lavishing Your love upon me," and turn around and say, "Even though I have much more than I need, I could care less about that guy over there who's in need." When the love of God abides in a person, your heart goes out to others in need. You're not motivated by shame and guilt; you are motivated by compassion to give to the poor.

For Manhattan Fund

In response to today's message, we'd like for you to consider being part of a corporate response that will be used to help those in need in our midst (and beyond). We've put together a video that explains this offering we're calling "For Manhattan."

Watch For Manhattan VIDEO here: <http://www.faithmanhattan.org/formanhattan.html>

If you are visiting Faith this morning, we certainly don't expect you to give to this fund; you are welcome to give, but this is really a challenge for those who consider Faith their church home.

Many times the 80/20 rule applies to giving: 20% of the people give 80% of the money. In some ways that is appropriate because the Scriptures teach that we should give proportionally to what we earn. Our thought, however, for this For Manhattan fund is that we would ask everyone to give a modest amount - \$20 - to this fund so that it would be a true expression of our **corporate commitment** to helping others in need. We are encouraging every man, woman, and child to consider giving \$20.

Some of you may not have \$20 to give; that's completely fine. This may be a season when you receive. To those of you who are younger - college age, high school, middle school, elementary age - we would love for you to be part of this effort. You might have to give out of your allowance or your savings. But we consider you to be part of this church. As Russ likes to say, "You're not the church of the future. You are part of the church here and now." And so we want the For Manhattan fund to be an expression of your compassion also.

As the video mentioned, half of this offering will go to our Compassion Fund (used to help people with rent/utilities) and half will go to two organizations (Big Brothers Big Sisters and Manhattan Emergency Shelter).

You can give using an envelope in the seats, using the giving kiosk in the office (debit card), or giving online through our web site.

We hope (and pray) that this For Manhattan fund is an expression of our corporate compassion and generosity toward the poor.