

Hearing God's Grace: Grace to the Poor

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[0 : 00] This is Deuteronomy, chapter 15, verses 1 to 11, and that's on page 194, if you've got one of these red Bibles.

At the end of every seven years, you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done. Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelites.

He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed. You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you.

However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you. If only you fully obey the Lord your God, and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

For the Lord your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations, but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations, but none will rule over you.

[1 : 10] If there is a poor man among you, or among your brothers, in any of the towns in the land that the Lord your God has given you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother.

Rather, be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought. The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts is near, so that you do not show ill-will towards your needy brother and give him nothing.

He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him, 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.

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers, and towards the poor and needy in your land. Thanks very much, Alex. Well, we're making our way through Deuteronomy. Don't fear, we're not going to go through every single law.

[2 : 35] While I'm away, there'll be others speaking, and they're going to be jumping right the way up to chapter 26 and 27. But they're great things to read, and we're going to be looking at one particular law, one particular command.

And this morning, as the people moved into the land, the promised land, so God gave them laws, which they were to live with. Let's ask for God's help to see how this applies to us today.

Father, we thank you for this amazing book. And we come afresh to hear of your amazing grace. We are needy people. In many ways, we are poor. And we need you to fill us with your grace, to enrich us, so that we may know you better.

And we pray that by your Holy Spirit, you would help us to know you better today. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

[3 : 48] Amen. A pastor, writing in a book, commented on an article that he had been reading.

The heading on one side of the page read this. First Baptist Church celebrates new \$23 million building.

And an article followed underneath, detailing the wonderful interior, the marble, and the stained glass windows. Opposite, on the other side of the page, was another heading.

Baptist relief helps Sudanese refugees. And the article described how 350,000 refugees in Western Sudan were dying from malnutrition.

At the end of that article was this. Baptists have raised \$5,000 to send to refugees in Western Sudan.

[4 : 56] I hope your reaction is the same as mine. But let's not be pointing the finger. What is our response to the poor?

Whether in other lands far away, or increasingly so, the poor in our own country who are facing difficult economic times.

Well, three things we're going to look at from this section here. First, God's love for the poor. God's love for the poor is unmistakable.

Chapter 15, verse 4, we're told that there should be no poor among you. That meant whether you were local or somebody from outside, there was to be no poor among you.

But, look down at verse 11. It tells us there that there will always be poor people in the land. So which is it? Well, it's not a contradiction.

[6 : 01] Rather, this is God expressing his heart's desire that poverty be completely removed. However, the reality is there will always be people who are poor.

And people become poor through a number of different ways. Either through the oppression of others, like greedy multinationals who operate sweatshops to meet the demands of cheap goods. It could be the effects of natural disasters like flooding or drought that ruins crops or destroys businesses. Or it could be the moral failure of ourselves.

Just pure laziness, poor choices and selfish living. All of these things and any combination of them can cause poverty. But God's desire, his response is that poverty is to be eradicated.

Because this is the kind of God that he is. Look at how God describes himself in chapter 10, verse 17. Chapter 10, verse 17.

[7 : 16] Chapter 10, verse 17. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien, the outsider, giving him food and clothing.

And you are to love those who are outsiders. For you yourselves were outsiders in Egypt. Look, he's reminding them.

You were once poor and enslaved in Egypt, in captivity. But I released you from poverty. And I have brought you into a good and a prosperous land full of plenty.

You've experienced God's generous and gracious love. Therefore, you also must display this same gracious and generous love to the poor who are around you.

[8 : 18] And of course, those who are considered the most poor, as it says there in verse 18, they were the orphan, the widow, the refugee. These were people who had no land or property.

Therefore, they had no means of sustaining themselves. And if we are in any doubt at all as to God's concern for the poor, listen to this from Deuteronomy 27, verse 19.

Let me read it to you. Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow. Then all the people shall say, Amen.

You see, God loves the poor. And his desire is quite clear to eradicate all poverty. But second, God's grace in action or God's grace in our life.

God's love for the poor is expressed through the commands that he gives to his people. In other words, if God's people begin to obey God's law, so God's grace is seen in action.

[9 : 34] So let's look at chapter 15, verse 1 of Deuteronomy. At the end of every seven years, you must cancel debts.

Now, I think Ireland knows all about debt, don't we? And most of us have debt. We've got a mortgage or some other kind of loan. And we all know that if you're not able to pay off your debts, well, it can lead to terrible poverty.

And that's what we see within our own country at the minute. Well, through the law that God offered to, or through God's law, he offered grace to those who found themselves in poverty.

He provided a way out, as it were. Let's read verse 1 again. At the end of seven years, you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done. Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite.

He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.

[10 : 47] You see, when God's people moved into the Promised Land, every tribe, every clan, every family was allotted a piece of ground for their provision.

Everybody had their own little allotment, as it were. A place where they could keep their cattle to graze, and they could grow a few veg. Now, as the years passed, some did very well, while others, for various reasons, maybe they were lazy and they didn't dig their garden very well, and they had to take out a loan, which left them in terrible debt.

And, of course, the idea was that over the years they would try and pay back that loan, as they were able. But if they weren't able to pay back that loan, the law said that every seventh year, the loan was to be cancelled.

The debt was to be written off. And the reason? Because, at the end of verse 2, the Lord's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.

So God is saying, look, I am the God who provides a way for you. I am the God who cares for the poor and will release them from poverty.

[12:04] You see, this debt, or the cancelling of debts, was provided for each family so that they would have a fresh start, a new beginning.

It meant that the slate was completely wiped clean. In fact, the law also stated that every 49 years, it was the year of the Jubilee.

And that meant that every piece of land that had been passed on to other people because of debts had to be given back to the original landowner. So God's law was put in place to give the people a fresh start.

Now, could you imagine if every seven years you had a visit from your bank manager coming to your house to tell you that all debts have been cancelled, whether you were at the Ulster Bank or whoever it is, could you imagine?

What a joy! What a relief! The sense of freedom, the weight that had been tying you down for so long, has now been lifted, and poverty is no longer a burden to carry.

[13:23] You see, God's law obeyed with God's grace in action. It was really quite radical. And no other nation had these kinds of laws.

The other nations that surrounded Israel looked to them and said, Wow! What an amazing nation! What a God who would provide these kinds of laws!

We don't have anything like this. For everybody else, it was, well, if you got into poverty, well, that was your own fault. If you were poor, well, the gods must be angry at what you had done, and they've cursed you.

But for God's people, he was providing a means for a fresh start. God was teaching them this very simple lesson. I am the God who cancels debts, wipes the slate clean, and releases you from poverty.

Well, you think, Wow! I'm going to try this out tomorrow. Hmm? But you know what? We're going to end up in all kinds of trouble if we try and apply this directly.

[14:36] If you went down to your bank manager tomorrow and you opened up before him Deuteronomy 15, Mr. Manager, or Miss Manager, it's the seventh year.

Cancel my debts! What would they say to you? Well, we must remember, these laws were given to a particular people in a particular place.

We're not Israelites, are we? Anybody here an Israelite? Didn't think so. They were living under an old covenant.

We live under a new covenant. And I don't think anybody here has been allotted a particular piece of land by God, have you? Your house, did God give you that?

Did he say, this is where you must live? You see, it would be wrong to expect these laws to function in exactly the same way today. However, as we have seen, these laws are all about God's grace in action.

[15:41] That God does love the poor and it is God's desire to eradicate poverty. well, that's exactly what God has done for us through his son, Jesus Christ.

We're going to come back to Deuteronomy and see how it does apply, more so in a minute, but for now, go forward to Luke's Gospel, chapter 4. Luke's Gospel, chapter 4.

And verse 20, well, sorry, verse 16. Luke's Gospel, chapter 4, verse 16. Let's read Luke 4, verse 16.

Jesus went to Nazareth where he had been brought up and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his custom. And he stood up to read, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Now, the prophets, people like Isaiah and Jeremiah and others, everything that they said was really a repeat or an application of what God's law had said.

[17 : 10] It was a reminder to the people of God's law. So, Jesus, the rest of verse 17, unrolling the scroll of Isaiah, he found the place where it is written.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Well, that's what we've just read in Deuteronomy, isn't it? Verse 19 there, the Lord's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.

Let's read verse 20, then Jesus rolled up the scroll, he gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him and he began by saying to them, today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

[18 : 24] You see, as Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour, Jesus is proclaiming to the people who are listening to them and to us today as we read it, Jesus is saying to us, you know the seventh year that you all long for?

That seventh year is me. I am the one who has come to cancel your debts. I am the one who has come to give you and your families a fresh start.

I am the God who provides you the new beginning that you all so long for and desire. I am the one who wipes the slate clean. It is me who is going to release you from poverty.

The year of cancelling debts, it is me. However, with Jesus, this poverty is no longer confined to material poverty.

It is about spiritual poverty. He came to preach good news to the poor. Yes, Jesus was concerned for people's material and temporary needs, but his greatest concern was people's spiritual and eternal needs.

[19 : 50] For God loves people like you and me, people who are truly poor, people who are weighed down by the debt of sin, who are crippled by our guilt and our shame from the past and from the present, that we carry with us, crippling us so that we cannot live life the way it's meant to.

And the ultimate expression of God's love for the poor was to come to people who are poor like us. God was not so immune from us, but he actually entered into this world through his son Jesus Christ for people like you and me.

Jesus came to take our debt, to take our sin from past, the present and the future, to eradicate it once and for all, to wipe it away so that it would never be a burden to carry ever again, to wipe the slate clean and to give us the fresh start that every one of us needs every single day.

you see, as Christ would hang on the cross, he was proclaiming to the world that through his death now is the day of the Lord's favour, that all sin debts, past, present and future, are cancelled here through Jesus Christ.

It's only through the gospel, through the good news of Jesus, that our spiritual poverty is completely ended and we have been set free to live a new kind of life with him.

[21 : 41] That's where we must start with Deuteronomy 15. This is where it is pointing to and where it leads us to and we must come back to the cross every day as people who are poor needing to know that fresh start and the forgiveness that he alone can bring.

Well, you say that is good news and in some ways that should be sufficient in itself but what about those who are in poverty materially?

What about them? Does God not care about that? Well, thirdly, God's command to the church. You see, if we have been released from spiritual poverty, then we will want to see others released from material poverty.

Loving the poor and giving to the poor is a crucial sign that we actually believe the gospel. If we say we believe it and we say I'm a Christian, then the sign that you are a Christian is your love for the poor and giving to the poor.

two things. First, open-handed, not hard-hearted. Go back to Deuteronomy 15. Deuteronomy 15, verse 7.

[23 : 07] If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother.

rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. You see, a closed hand is a sign of a hard heart.

If you know someone who is in need, perhaps they're struggling to pay their bills. Maybe they cannot provide for their family adequately. And you know what that need is and you do nothing about it. It's just a reflection of your own heart. It's a sign that you are still in spiritual poverty and have never experienced the fresh start that Jesus gives.

Alternatively, if you respond to the material needs of others, then that is a sign. It's an outworking of your genuine belief in the gospel.

[24 : 25] It's a sign that yes, you have been to the cross and you have experienced God's grace in your life. Listen to how the early church obeyed God's law from Deuteronomy 15 and demonstrated their open-handedness to one another.

These are familiar words. I read them from Acts 4 verse 34. This is what it says of the believers there and this is paralleled from Deuteronomy 15.

There were no needy persons among them for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

What a radical way to live. Nobody was in need among them. Well, we as a church have sought to do something about that.

We have what we call a ministry of mercy, something that we're seeking to develop. There is some funds available and it would be great if that were increased to be able to give to those who are in need.

[25 : 47] So if you know people within the family of this church who are in need, maybe there's people who you work with or within your neighbourhood or friends who are in need.

What better way to express and to show the grace of God by giving them something that would help? It may be small, but it is a sign of the grace of God.

And if you want to think through that more, you can speak to Alex or to Jan who are looking after that on behalf of the whole church. Open-handed, not hard-hearted, a sign that we have experienced God's grace in our own lives.

second, generously and not grudgingly in terms of our giving. We need to be careful that we don't have a sinful attitude towards the poor.

Look at verse 9 of Deuteronomy 15. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought. The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts is near.

[27 : 02] so that you do not show ill will towards your needy brother and give him nothing. You see, the law was something like this. If somebody came looking for financial help in year six, the reality is they would have very little paid back by year seven.

One year is not a long time to be paying back your loan. So the temptation would be that if you were somebody who had plenty and somebody came along in year six and said, you know, I wonder if I could just have a loan here.

Well, the temptation would be to say, well, year seven is next year. I mean, how am I ever going to get the money back in a year's time? The temptation would be to think, well, no, you've got yourself in a mess.

You sort yourself out. Why should I take the hit for your mistakes? Well, that kind of attitude is a sign that we don't believe the gospel.

Deuteronomy 15, look at the rest of verse 9. He may then appeal to the Lord against you and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart.

[28 : 20] debt. I think we can have that very attitude towards the poor. I know I can.

Somebody who is in need and you think, well, you know what, they were just very unwise with their money. Why should I help them? After all, they've just been on holiday and now they want a handout.

Huh? You've got to be joking. If they're in debt, well, it's because they were foolish and silly. I was careful with my money. I saved it. I put it in a pension fund and, well, I've been very good and they've just wasted theirs.

Well, let me ask us this question. What if God had that attitude with us? What if God looked at my sin debt and said, you know what, Johnny?

That's your mistake. You sorted out. What if God were to show me and to throw before me my continued sin and said, you never learn.

[29 : 34] I've forgiven you time after time after time, but this time deal with it yourself. The reality is we would be left in our spiritual poverty.

We would be left with hell. You see, if we have known the cancellation of all of our sin debts, past, present, and future, if we have known the generosity and grace of God who has provided us with an eternal kingdom, the ultimate promised land where we will never be in want and never be in need, if we have experienced the fresh start that only God can give to our lives, then we will want to follow his command to love the poor.

It will not be a duty or a grudge to do it, but we will just love the opportunity to do it. look at verse 11 of chapter 15.

There will always be poor people in the land, therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land.

may God give us grace that we would always see how rich we truly are, that we would be a church that is open-handed, demonstrating the amazing grace of God, building those bridges to welcome people in so that they may have their spiritual poverty, their sin debt cancelled, once and for all.

[31 : 33] Let's pray. Just reflect for a moment on the amazing work of Christ, who has taken our sin debt on himself, took our poverty.

Thank you, Jesus, that you have cancelled it, wiped the slate clean, and given us a fresh start. heart. Thank you that every day we can come, as it were, to the cross and find that fresh start because our sin debt has been cancelled.

Thank you that we live today in the knowledge that we are your children, treasured and loved. Lord. Thank you for your rich, generous grace to us.

And thank you too for blessing us. Thank you that we live in a country despite all of our economic struggles. thank you for our homes, for running water, for food to eat, for the blessings that we have every single day.

Thank you for your amazing grace. And please would you work your grace in our hearts so that we are not hard-hearted but open-handed.

[33 : 39] Please provide for us in our lives so that we are generous. I thank you, Father God, for this church family, for the many expressions of generosity.

I pray that you will continue to meet all of our needs so that we are a generous people first to one another and to our wider community that they may see something of God's grace, that they may be drawn in, that they may experience what it is to have their sin debt cancelled.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.