

Our Openhanded, Openhearted God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 October 2021

Preacher: Rev. Andrew Ong

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is Cynthia Ersu and I am a member of the Central South Berkeley Community Group. Our reading this morning is from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, verses 1 through 15, as printed in your liturgy.

At the end of every seven years, you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release. Every creditor shall release.

Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed.

[1 : 13] Of a foreigner, you may exact it. But whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release. But there will be no poor among you.

For the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess. If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I commanded you today.

For the Lord your God will bless you as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother.

But you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care, lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release, is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

[2 : 35] You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore, I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land.

If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed.

You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore, I command you this today. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

[3 : 51] Thanks for that scripture reading, Cindy. Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. Looking forward to getting into God's word with you today. Will you pray with me? Lord God, we want to hear from you this morning.

I'm asking your invitation and challenge to open up our hands in the same way that you have opened up your hands toward us. Inspire us this morning to love our neighbors, and to, by doing so, love you.

With all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we pray. In the name of Jesus, amen. So I'm going to give you a warning. It's going to be a little bit longer today because, honestly, this topic is very dear to my heart.

This topic of God and the poor. God and the poor. And it's interesting to me that today is Reformation Sunday because, you know, contrary to what you might think, if it weren't for Reformed theology, I'm not sure that I would care for the poor and that I would care about poverty and human suffering like I do today.

I don't think I'd recognize, without Reformed theology, how deeply, how deeply God cares for all of creation, all of life. I love how one Reformed theologian, his name is Gordon Spikeman, he said this in his final address.

[5 : 07] He said, nothing matters but the kingdom of God, but because of the kingdom, everything matters. Nothing matters but the kingdom of God, but because of the kingdom, everything matters.

And what drew me to Reformed theology as a college student was this holistic vision that it gave, this vision of how the good news of Jesus, it comes to bear on every square inch of creation, so much more than just saving people out of hell and into heaven.

That's what I love about the Reformed tradition. And it really was as a result of diving deeper into the implications of this tradition that God began to convict me back in my college days, going into working for two years before going to seminary.

He started to convict me about moving toward the poor. Every Tuesday I started going out. I was living in Orange County and every Tuesday I would go out to Santa Ana. Santa Ana was one of the poorest cities in the nation, even though it was part of one of the richest counties in the nation. And I would go out and I would help distribute food. I would bring clothing. And I would start building relationships with many of the houseless folks out there in Santa Ana. And then as I grew in appreciation of the incredible need that was out there, and as I grew in my appreciation also of the Reformed tradition that says we live before God, all of life before God, Coram Deo, my prayers began to expand.

[6 : 37] Before I had only prayed, God, break my heart for those who don't know Jesus. But as I spent more time with the people in Santa Ana, my prayer began to expand to, God, don't just break my heart over those who are hell-bound apart from Jesus, but break my heart, continue to break my heart for those whose lives are living hell now.

Make me a witness of the whole gospel, not just the good news of heaven later, but the good news of Jesus' kingdom now, the good news of the Holy Spirit's power and presence now.

And like I mentioned a couple weeks ago on our birthday celebration Sunday, this is what I began to pray 15 years ago. For myself, for maybe the future family that God might give me, for my future children, for the future church that I believe God was one day gonna call me to lead, I prayed that God would break our hearts, all of our hearts, for all who live without the person and power and presence of Jesus.

And I want you to know that this prayer has continued. It's continued today, maybe even more fervently than before, especially looking around in the Bay Area, especially looking around just on my newsfeed in the whole world, right?

How can the spirit-filled, Jesus-following people, how can their hearts not break for this broken Bay, for this broken world? Did you know that according to a study conducted by UC Berkeley, this was before the pandemic, did you know that even before the pandemic, more than one in three people, residents in the Bay Area, frequently run out of money before the end of the month?

[8 : 13] Or according to a California United Way study, that one in four Bay Area families, that's 608,000 households here in the Bay Area, are not earning enough income to cover their daily essentials?

Or did you know, according to the World Bank, that one out of 10 people in the world is living underneath, and this was before the pandemic, underneath the international poverty line, which was \$1.90 per day.

That's 689 million people under \$1.90 per day. So it's in light of this, and it's in light of God's word from Deuteronomy 15, that my prayer for us today is the same.

My prayer is that the reality of our open-handed, open-hearted God would inspire us to be an open-handed and open-hearted people. This is what God wants for us. This is what God has always wanted for his holy people.

Now I need to qualify everything I'm saying. I am no poverty expert. I am not a social worker, an economist, or a politician, so I'm not here to tell you that if we would just vote for this, if we would just invest in that, if we would just volunteer there, then definitely we could make everything better. [9 : 28] That's not what I'm here to do. And you also have to understand that because of what's written in Deuteronomy 15 is a civil law meant to govern the old covenant nation of Israel, this ancient nation, how we apply it as citizens from many nations as new covenant Christians is gonna be quite different.

To apply Deuteronomy 15 isn't to go and lobby Biden and Newsom and insist that they make Deuteronomy 15 our new economic policy, all right? But as your modern-day pastor, while I don't have all the answers about what political platform will best help us forward, while I don't have all the answers about which nonprofits or volunteer opportunities are most strategic to invest in, and while we're not here to just imitate identically Deuteronomy chapter 15, these civil laws for this ancient nation, what I can tell you, and what I'm called to tell you, I believe, is what to believe about God, and what to believe about our neighbors, and what to believe about ourselves that must and that will transform our care for the poor.

So today, I want us to see what Deuteronomy 15 teaches us about God, and about our neighbors, and about ourselves, and how a right understanding of all these three things cannot but transform our care for the poor.

All right, so let's start with the first one. This is our longer one. Let's look at God's heart for the poor. Now, we're in Deuteronomy, right? So we need to remember, Israel's about to enter the land. Israel's about to enter the land, and Moses is about to die without being able to enter with them. So what he's doing here is he's expounding the law to them. One more time, he is explaining the heart and will of their covenant God to them. He's making sure that they understand what it looks like to be his holy people, and what we have in Deuteronomy chapter 15 is Moses is unpacking one of the 10 commandments for them, and he's unpacking the fourth commandment, the fourth commandment, and the fourth commandment is the Sabbath commandment.

[11 : 27] Deuteronomy chapter five says, observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, so that your male and female servants may rest as you do.

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Moses is explaining to God's people how they are to live out in the promised land the fullest implications of the Sabbath. And guys, this is so much more than just taking a day off every week, taking a day off from work.

This is so much more than even coming to church once a week. These holy people of God were to embody as an entire community, the liberating justice of God, seeking the Sabbath rest of God, not just for themselves as individual persons or even as individual families, but they were to seek the Sabbath rest of God for their neighbors, even their servants, their entire covenant community on a regular basis.

In Deuteronomy chapter 15, God, who is Lord of their time, who's Lord of our time, who's Lord of all time, is building his Sabbath principle into the seasonal rhythms of the people of God.

[12 : 54] Look with me at verses one and two. At the end of every seven years, you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release. Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor.

He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed. God was building into their conception of time and seasonality a permanent sense of freedom and hope.

He was building into their sense of time a shadow of new creation. He was building into their community conscience the reality that if you are God's people, if you belong to God's people, there's no such thing as permanent poverty.

There is no permanent debt that will forever cripple and enslave you, God says, not for my people, not for my people. For God's covenant people, there is always hope and there is always freedom. No debt is forever.

There is no permanently binding burden on the people of God because the seventh year, the seventh year is always on the way for God's people. So this is what God's holy people were to embody in this astonishing practice of regularly canceling debts every seven years.

[14:02] This is how they were to demonstrate to the world the huge difference, right, between being a Yahweh-ruled nation and a Pharaoh-ruled nation, right? Every other nation sought to rule and govern like the oppressive Pharaoh of Egypt, right?

Might makes right. People can be property, increase debts and leverage and power, but not in a nation ruled by Yahweh, the liberator of Israel. Yahweh, the Lord, right?

The Lord who is one, Israel's God, the one true God over the entire universe, greater than all the false gods of Egypt and Canaan. He was a God who desired and demanded rest, rest for all people, not just the wealthy, not just the powerful elite.

Sabbath rest is not only the obligation of all, but it's the right of all God's creatures. And this is quite an incredible thing if you think about it, that Sabbath rest is the right of all God's creatures.

We have to think about that for a second. Because I think a lot of us tend to think about caring for the poor and obeying the Sabbath in this way of caring for the poor as merely a voluntary thing that we do, right?

[15:11] A matter of niceness and charity and mercy and compassion and generosity, but that's only partially right. The fuller implication of Deuteronomy chapter 15 is not simply that we should be generous, but also that we should be just.

That we should be just. Verse nine says, if you give your needy neighbor nothing, he will cry to the Lord against you and you will be guilty of sin.

By institutionalizing and legislating and commanding care for the poor, God was saying, this isn't just a matter of generosity, this is a matter of justice.

God's people, God's holy people are to be generous and just. And I know that for some of us, this might be hard to hold together, this both and, right?

That we are called to be generous and just in our care for the poor, right? Because those on the left, we prefer the language of justice, sure, and rightly giving to the poor what belongs to them.

[16:12] But then those on the right, right? We might prefer language of generosity and of mercifully giving to the poor what belongs to us. But I think Deuteronomy chapter 15 and the ethic of the scriptures offers us a beautiful third way.

While the left often pulls for the rights of the debtor, right? And the right often pulls for the rights of the creditor. The scriptures remind us of a third party who's often overlooked in all these debates. Look at verse two. You have the creditor, you have the debtor, but you also have the Lord. Second sentence, verse two. He, the creditor, right? He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, the debtor, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed.

Verse four. But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for inheritance to possess. Yes, the creditor-to-debtor relationship exists, but so also does the Lord-to-creditor-to-debtor relationship exist.

The Lord who is the one who gave to the creditor all that the creditor possesses in the first place, the Lord before whom even the richest creditors are only inheritors, right?

[17:27] Only recipients of all that they possess. And if you think about it, then this changes everything, right? There isn't just a two-party relationship between the haves and the have-nots, between the rich and the poor, between the superior and the inferior.

There's a third ultimate party member who relativizes supposedly unequal relationships. The supposedly unequal relationships between creditors and debtors.

See, while the left and the right want to argue endlessly about what belongs to whom. The simple point here is that God's the real owner. God's the real owner.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and thus while our individual ownership and our right over our possessions is real, it's also relativized and subjected to God's ownership.

Jesus says, yeah, I know that's your tunic, but it's also, and more importantly, actually my father's. And the question for us this morning is, do we believe this?

[18:28] Do we believe this, that everything we own is our father's? And if so, what reason could we possibly have to not share with those in need what our father has so kindly given to us?

You know, sometimes I open my hand and I open up a bag of goldfish for my three-year-old daughter, Cami. A bag of goldfish. And then her hungry one-and-a-half-year-old sister, Leah, will

stretch out her little hand toward her jeje and say, please, jeje, please, share. Right? And Cami will often say, no, mei-mei, no, little sister. Mine. Mine. Mine. And so I'll say to Cami, Cami, I want you to share your goldfish with mei-mei. And then she'll say, but they're mine. But they're mine. So then I'll say, Cami, did you pay for those goldfish? Didn't mommy buy them for you? Didn't God give them to us? And I don't know, maybe it's like 10% of the time that this actually persuades her to share willingly, right? And it drives me crazy because in my head, I'm like, come on, Cami.

[19 : 44] These are my goldfish. And I want you and your sister to enjoy my goldfish. And you know there are a lot of times where she might, you know, just give two goldfish, maybe three. And I'm like, come on. You know there's a whole box at home. We bought the Costco box. We're not going to run out. We're not going to run out of goldfish. I ask her, or at least I think, why can't you trust that I love you? Why can't you trust that I love to give you and your sister goldfish? Why can't you trust and believe that you will always have more than enough because you are my child? Now maybe she doesn't believe that because sometimes her father gets hungry too. And I might grab a handful out of her bag, right? But let me tell you something. Our father in heaven, he never hungers. And he calls us to radical generosity. This radical generosity that he calls us to is an invitation for us to trust in and experience his abundance.

[20 : 54] But again, will we believe that? Will we believe that? Will we believe his promise of abundant care and blessing over us? Look what he says in verse five.

If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today, for the Lord your God will bless you as he promised. Think about that. The God who owns it all has promised to bless us richly, even as we pour ourselves out to serve others in need.

I want to read you this quote from Jen Wilkins. She's a Bible teacher I really enjoy. She taught on this text. She said, it's so easy to slip into believing that we provide our own daily bread. And when we believe that we are the origin and sustainer of all we have, generosity will die a hard and fast death. Our hearts will grow hard and our fists will grow tight.

[21 : 54] Whether you see yourself as an owner or a steward will determine how generous you are. Owners will be tight-fisted and stewards will be open-handed. But when we recognize that God gives us good things, not so that they might terminate on us, but so that we might steward them on behalf of others, it changes the way we interact with the world around us.

When we find ourselves with abundance, we must ask, am I a terminus or a distribution point? Does it all terminate on me or do I see myself as someone who now has abundance to share with others?

Christ's church. Do we believe this? Do we believe that this God that we worship is the owner of all things? Everything we have is his. All right, now I gotta move quick, but I also wanna show you what this text calls us to, how this text calls us to view, not just God, but also our neighbors. And the first thing that we need to see is that we need to see our neighbors as more than just liabilities and burdens. All right, look with me at verse nine. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart about your neighbor and you say, oh, the seventh year, the year of release is near and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother and you give him nothing and you be guilty of sin.

So imagine this is a very possible scenario, right? Maybe for the first couple of years, first couple of years after the previous year of release, you're rich and you're comfortable and you're lending out freely, thinking, oh, well, these people, they have five, six years to pay me back.

[23 : 27] I can be generous, right? But now imagine it's two months, right? Two months before the seventh year, the year of release, and someone comes to you asking for a gigantic loan.

How might you feel? Would you see the person coming to you for that loan as more of a brother or more of a bother, right? See, Moses warns us here against the temptation of seeing our neighbors as pests and not people.

Like, here's a question, here's a question for all of us that we need to answer. Do we actually care about the poor and the houseless people in the Bay Area? Or do we really just like the idea of a

cleaner street, of a less depressing commute to work in Berkeley and Oakland and San Francisco? Do we love these people as people, not as burdens we're trying to get rid of out our society? Notice how Moses, he also continues to remind the Israelites that not only are the poor not to be seen as a burden, but they're also not just some random people.

Actually, God's people are called to see their neighbors as their family. Verse two, he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother. Verse three, your brother.

[24 : 48] Verse seven, if among you, one of your brothers, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother. Verse nine, your poor brother. Verse 12, your brother, a Hebrew. And in verse 11, in the Hebrew, this is a more awkward but more literal translation, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor.

That's what it says in the Hebrew. These people are ours. The scripture rejects any kind of radical individualism that denies our relational connectedness to our neighbors before God.

The scripture rejects any kind of individualism that denies our collective responsibility to our needy neighbors, our needy family members in our community, especially amongst the covenant community.

Paul writes in Galatians chapter six, let us not become weary in doing good. As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. According to the law of Moses, the poor amongst us are not simply the poor over there. There are poor. There are poor. I was just at a shelter, an animal shelter the other day.

[25 : 59] We just wanted our kids to see some dogs and stuff. And there was a quote by Gandhi and it said, oh man, I don't even remember. I didn't plan to say this, but the quote by Gandhi was, you can tell how great a society is by how well it cares for its animals.

All right? Well, how much more how it cares for the poor? How much more? There are poor. There are people. And thus, in some real way, they are our responsibility.

Like, just sit in that for a second. What if we looked upon that last houseless person we saw, maybe as we drove to church today, right? What if we looked upon that houseless person as our brother, as our responsibility?

Wouldn't this change everything? Wouldn't this change everything? Wouldn't we have a burning passion to see this brother thrive? Wouldn't we want to give this person the benefit of the doubt and believe in better things for him?

Deuteronomy chapter 15 is not calling for, you know, Moses is not just saying, go throw some people a bone, which really often only cultivates unhealthy dependencies. Moses' law is actually calling us to something even higher.

[27 : 18] Higher than mere charity. Higher than just relief. To see our needy neighbors rightly. And as God sees them is to see them as responsible and capable agents with gifts and callings that our God desires to cultivate in his kingdom.

Deuteronomy chapter 15 is not just saying, just go give out some handouts. If you look at verse 12, there's this situation here where he's applying the year of release to indentured servants.

But I want us to notice God's attitude of abundance toward the release of these indentured servants in verses 13 and 14. God doesn't just desire for the poor to go from thousands of dollars of debt to zero.

He wants to put them back on their feet and be so generously cared for, right? That they are empowered to become productive citizens of the community once again.

Verse 13, and when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall not just bring him back to zero, right? You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress.

[28 : 26] He's saying, give to him from among your wide, wide variety of resources. Help restore his dignity as a self-sufficient citizen. This isn't just a cancellation of debt, money for a single meal, a roof over a head for one night just to help them survive.

This is job training, education, financial planning, spiritual discipleship, walking with people, helping them to avoid the self-destructive habits that they might have been accustomed to to help them thrive.

A radical generosity that doesn't settle for our neighbor's relief, but aims for our neighbor's revitalization. All right, so we've talked about God and the poor. We've talked about God and how we should view our neighbors.

And I hope that, you know, I hope that it's pricked some hearts this morning. I hope that it's pricked some of us to consider taking some action to look for opportunities to serve and to donate. You can drop off some diapers in the pack and play back there.

Fill up a shoe box for Operation Christmas Child. Ask Molly Wood or Jane George about that. Join our Care Portal response team. Care Portal is a way that we can receive requests from social caseworkers in the area and help prevent children from going into the foster system.

[29 : 37] You could tutor with Harbor House or help them unload and sort and distribute food in November. Maybe you could become a foster parent or at least a support friend with Foster the City. Support a child with Compassion International.

Actually, preparing the sermon this week convicted my family to do that. We found this little girl named Hekaya in Tanzania who was born on the same day as our firstborn, Kami.

And I'm not sharing this to our own horn. Truthfully, I feel like my family is so far from where we want to be in terms of our ministry of generous justice. But the challenge for myself and my challenge to all of us is that we just start taking some steps.

Let's just start taking some steps, even small ones, toward the generous justice that our God calls us to. Even if it's just going home today and doing some research, thinking more about the problem of poverty and how you can help.

Or just like when you go for a walk and you encounter these houseless folks, look them in the eye with dignity, share your smile and remind yourself, teach your children to teach our, to see our houseless neighbors as neighbors, as people.

[30 : 50] Let's take some steps and increase our heart for and our proximity to the poor. And this is where really, I think this is really where the core issue is though, is taking steps, it has to come from your heart.

This is a heart issue. And I have to be brief as I conclude, but the last thing I want us to notice in Deuteronomy 15 is how Moses doesn't, he doesn't just give them a law to obey or a fact to believe. Moses understands that this is a heart issue. Verse nine, take care, lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and your eye look grudgingly and you give him nothing and you be guilty of sin.

Verse 10, you shall give to him freely and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him. A law for our hands to obey is not enough and neither is the right information for our heads to acknowledge.

What is most needed is a change of heart, a deep personal reassessment of who we are before God and the poor. And that's why Moses says, starting in verse 14, you shall furnish him liberally as the Lord your God has blessed you.

[32 : 02] You shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore, I command you this today.

He reminds his people that above all, they should care for the poor with open hands and open hearts because they were poor, because they were slaves and yet their open-handed, open-hearted God cared for them to stir the hearts of God's people toward the poor.

Moses preached the old covenant gospel to them, the good news of the redemption from slavery in Egypt. But you know what? Today, it's my privilege to preach the even better new covenant gospel, the good news of redemption from slavery and sin to death through the work of Christ.

This Christ who, though he was rich, yet became poor for our sakes, right? A newborn with a manger for a crib, born into a family who could only afford two pigeons, the poorest of poor sacrifices at the temple.

This son of man who, while foxes had holes and birds of the air had nests, had nowhere himself to lay his head. This king who rode into his kingdom on a borrowed donkey, ate his last meal in a borrowed room, was stripped naked of his last possession, his robe, and then crucified by the ones occupying his homeland.

[33 : 19] The naked, crucified, and forsaken Messiah who was buried in a borrowed tomb. By becoming poor with and for us, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has paid our debt of sin and he's made his people rich.

He's made us heirs of his kingdom. And because of his resurrection, we can trust that the Spirit of the Lord has come upon him to proclaim and to secure good news for the poor, liberty for the captives, and the year of the Lord's favor.

And this is the gospel that we, who were once poor and helpless, slaves ourselves, that we've been redeemed by our open-handed, open-hearted God in Christ.

So as Israel was called to remember their good news in Moses, may we hear the Spirit's call to remember our good news in Christ. And with this good news of God's ultimate generosity, open up our hands.

open up our hearts to love and serve this world. Will you pray with me?