

## Take Care of Your World Leviticus 25

The book of Leviticus not only has criminal laws, it also has regulations concerning the care of the land and the care of the people. A holy God requires that we take care of his world and his people.

From the very first chapter of the Bible, mankind has been tasked with taking care of this world. God gave Adam and Eve instructions in Genesis 1:28 that they were to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth and to rule over life on the Earth. The very first application of that Divine mandate was when God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in order to cultivate and to keep the Garden. Even though mankind was driven out of that perfect paradise, we remain responsible to God to exercise wise dominion over this Earth. Our care for this world includes not only the animals that live on it, but our fellow human beings as well. We are stewards of God's Earth to manage it well. Both the welfare of the Earth and the welfare of human beings are inseparably linked.

Leviticus 25 illustrates that key truth because in this chapter God provides regulations for both taking care of the Earth and taking care of the people. I invite you to turn to Leviticus 25. Leviticus is the third book in the Bible. This is a long chapter so at points I will summarize the key points in the chapter.

I will read verses 1-7 which describe the Sabbath rests God prescribed for the land. Read. Every seventh year the land was to lie fallow and not be intentionally worked. Leftover crops from year six would naturally seed and produce new plants and anyone could gather from the land in the seventh year, but there was to be no actual farming of the land. It was also true that on the fiftieth year the land was also to lie fallow. The purpose of this legislation was to provide the land with a Sabbath rest to the Lord.

What did this legislation teach? One, the land actually belonged to God and as a consequence the human landowners recognized they were stewards of God's land and were to give the land a Sabbath rest so that God's land might be refreshed. That principle is still true. God owns the earth, its land and water, and all its resources and we are to manage those resources wisely on God's behalf. This is the reason behind all environmental protection and conservation practices. This land belongs to God and we are to take care of it for him.

Two, the land needs a rest to recover. Crops deplete the soil of certain nutrients which need to be replaced. You do this by letting land lie fallow for a year and also by rotating crops. We also shouldn't put things into our air, land, or water that are toxic to humans, animals, or plants.

Three, along with the land getting a Sabbath rest, those who worked the land would also get a rest from farming. What God built into the Israelite lifestyle with the sabbatical year was an enforced slowing down to reflect on their relationship with God, to strengthen family and tribal relationships, and to put a break to the endless accumulation of material goods. It was a reset and a reminder. The reminder was that God was the one who actually provided their food because he would take care of them during the sabbatical year. The reset was that life was so much more than the accumulation of goods, that it was necessary to attend to one's soul as well as one's farm. The Sabbath year provided time for reflection, meditation, and spiritual renewal.

Most of you are not farmers. How do you apply the principles behind this legislation? First, what about protecting God's world? How much energy do you use and how much waste do you produce? Most forms of energy production are going to produce some kind of waste whether it

is spent nuclear fuel or the burning of natural gas or coal. Some energy generation is relatively clean such as hydroelectric, solar or wind produced energy. Can you turn off lights and look for ways to reduce your energy consumption?

How about the waste you produce? What about all those water bottles that have to be put in landfills? Can you use reusable shopping bags rather than paper or plastic? How many miles do you drive in your car and much exhaust do you emit into the air? Do you recycle? Do you waste food? Our waste is going to pollute either our air, our land, or our water. Can you cut back on the waste you produce?

How about your lifestyle? How much time do you set aside to attend to the welfare of your soul versus the maintenance and acquisition of goods? Do you have some kind of sabbatical rest built into your week? In your year? What do you think Jesus meant when he said that your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions or that one should not gain the whole world and lose their soul? Well, that all may be a little too convicting, so let's move on.

In verses 8-22 God prescribed the Year of Jubilee regulations. Every fiftieth year was a year of Jubilee. So after seven different Sabbath rest years ( $7 \times 7 = 49$ ), the year after the seventh Sabbath year was the fiftieth year or the year of Jubilee. This was also a Sabbath year meaning that the land rested for both the 49<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> years.

The year of Jubilee began with the sounding of the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement illustrating that the grace and blessings of the year of Jubilee could only begin with the forgiveness of the nation's sins. In Hebrew, the ram's horn is a yubel, from which we get the name Jubilee.

On the year of Jubilee everyone received back any of the land they had to sell in the previous 49 years. All land reverted back to its original owners. Technically, land was not truly sold in the sense of a permanent transfer of ownership. If you wanted to buy or sell land in Israel, you calculated the worth of the land in terms of how much it would yield in crops and then you prorated the value of the land to correspond to the number of years left before the year of Jubilee. If only a few years remained before the year of Jubilee you could buy the land relatively cheap. If many years remained before the year of Jubilee the cost of the land would be much higher.

You may wonder how people could survive going essentially three years between the harvest in year 48 and the harvest in year 1 or 51. God addressed that concern in verses 18-22 which I will read. Read. God promised such a big harvest in year 48 that the Israelites could store it and live off of it in the three years between year 48 and year 1.

What do we learn from the year of Jubilee? First, it required trusting in God's provision to obey him and not to sow your seed in year 49 or 50. All the sabbatical years were faith-building exercises for Israel. Do you think God has stopped doing faith building exercises? God has been giving you faith-building exercises whether you realize it or not. God wants you and me to trust him for our provision, so you can expect times of difficulty and challenge in your life, because God wants you to grow in faith.

The year of Jubilee was a fantastic means of maintaining a level of social and economic equality. In an agricultural society the primary income producing asset is land. Typically what happens in any nation is that over time the wealth of the nation becomes more and more concentrated in a few people. This happens for a number of reasons. Natural disasters or medical emergencies impoverish people. Poor money management and sins like gambling, alcoholism, and drug abuse can cause people to lose wealth. On the converse, people who are good money managers and train their children to do so, tend to accumulate wealth over time.

Sometimes the rich oppress the poor and become richer. There is a cumulative effect to wealth. The more money you have the more money you can make.

Over time the gap between the wealthy and the poor widens and you have greater income inequality. This is not good for a number of reasons. If the number of poor gets too high and they sense the disparity is due to an unjust economic system, then you run the risk of unrest and rebellion. Too many poor means you don't have enough of a market for goods and services. If you provide government assistance to the poor that system is going to be more costly and inefficient and demoralizing than if people can get good jobs and work themselves out of poverty. The best system is where most people work and make a decent living.

You really don't want to penalize people who know how to make money and are good entrepreneurs, because they are the people best able to move your economy to a healthier situation with a larger middle-class and less income disparity. The brilliance of the Jubilee system was that every fifty years you got a reset where people regained their income generating assets and could start fresh and if their previous economic downfall was due to natural disasters, health issues or factors beyond their control, they had a good chance of increasing their wealth. Now if their previous economic downfall was due to character issues, they might in a few years find themselves in the same boat, forced to sell their land again. You can never achieve a completely equal society and those who have promised it, like the Communists have to use tyrannical means to achieve it and they fail anyway. The causes of people being wealthy and being poor are multiple and some are ingrained within the person and not easily changed. Nevertheless, the minimization of the income gap is a worthy goal if it can be done in a just and wise way, which is always the challenge.

In verses 23-55 you have various regulations that protect the poor and promote social justice. Verses 23-34 deal with the right of redemption of property. The Law stipulated that when a man was forced to sell his land to pay his debts, the new owner of the land was required to allow the next of kin of the previous owner to purchase back the land. Or if the previous owner gained enough funds he was allowed to buy his own land back. This was called the right of redemption. The land was sold back for its original price minus a prorated figure for any years the new owner had to grow crops with it. Then in the year of Jubilee the land was given back to the original owner.

Now, in the case of a house within a walled city, where you had no attached farming land, the right of redemption lasted for a year, but if the previous owner could not purchase back the house in a year's time, then the new owner got to permanently keep the house. Houses that were not in walled cities which could have farming land attached to them were redeemable at any time and reverted back to the original owner in the year of Jubilee.

The Levites, the priestly family, were an exception. They had a permanent right of redemption for their houses, even the ones in walled cities.

In verses 35-38 the Israelites were forbidden from charging interest on any money they loaned to the poor.

In verses 39-43 God allowed the poor to sell themselves as hired servants. They were to be treated as hired servants and not as slaves and they were freed in the year of Jubilee. The amount of years until the Jubilee year determined how much of a person's debt his master would pay off. Hired servants were not to be treated harshly, but treated as fellow brothers.

In verses 44-46 God did allow Israelites to purchase and keep slaves from other pagan nations. We might be tempted to look at that situation with suspicious eyes, but since the Law also forbade holding any slaves who were kidnapped into slavery, those foreign slaves most

likely were the poor of other countries who had no means of support other than working for someone. Bringing them into Israelite society that protected people in these situations and which also allowed for them to come to know the God of their masters, was most likely a significant improvement for them.

Finally verses 47-55 made provisions that those who sold themselves into bond slavery could be redeemed by their relatives. If they could not redeem him, then the person was automatically set free in the Year of Jubilee.

All these laws protected the poor while at the same time expecting them to work off their debts. Combined with earlier laws we have seen about not harvesting the corners of the fields, God made provision for the poor in a way that also required them to work and to exercise personal responsibility. People could not take advantage of the poor but neither were the poor to expect handouts without working.

I think this chapter offers a lot of good principles both for individuals and for nations. It contains sound agricultural and environmental principles. It contains helpful economic and social justice principles. I would love for those trained in economics to try to figure out how in our American context we might justly work for some measure of income equality without resorting to unjust coercion or unworkable practices.

We tend to think of sin in personal terms, but this chapter makes clear that a nation's laws and practices can either be righteous or sinful. Environmental regulations can be righteous or sinful. Economic practices can be righteous or sinful.

So as you leave here today what things do you need to keep in mind? One, you are taking responsibility for your part in wisely managing God's world which means trying to minimize your energy use and waste production. It means not littering and taking care of God's creation when you are outside. It means making purchases that are the least environmentally damaging.

The poor of this world are also your concern. Certainly you should not take advantage of them. You should help them, but not in a way that eliminates their personal responsibility or undercuts their dignity.

The world we live in and the people around us all belong to God. How we care for them reveals what we think about God. Respect his world and you respect him.