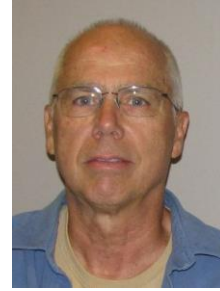


2018 Spring Bible Study – Act Justly

Week 5 - Economic Justice

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Introduction

During Jesus' final week on earth, some skeptical religious leaders ask him what the greatest commandment is. Jesus responds that the greatest is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That's not too surprising, but then he adds this. "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:36-40). That's more surprising, and still today we often forget that part. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul spends a lot of time discussing the Law and concludes with this, "The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14). John's first letter helps us understand why Paul might have decided not even to mention the first commandment and go straight to the second. John says that "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person" (1 John 3:17)?

It's apparent from these and many other passages that God cares a lot about how we treat each other. According to one group that counts the times certain concepts are used in Scripture, *justice*, and words that mean about the same thing show up in 1,379 different verses. In speaking of justice, the Bible often brings in the concept of love as well. Love and justice go together. If we love our neighbors, we will want to treat them justly. Of course we need to bring this down to earth. What does it mean in a practical way? For the Israelites ready to enter the promised land, Leviticus 25 was extremely practical. As farmers, the people knew that land was their most precious economic resource. As they got ready to enter the promised land, God told them that they would all get some land, that they could even buy and sell the land (or at least the crops from the land), but that every fifty years all the families would get their original land back. The bible refers to this as the year of "jubilee." Leviticus 25 has a lot of other laws too. For example, when people fell into poverty, the wealthy were supposed to lend to them and not charge any interest, and they were not allowed to make their fellow Israelites work as slaves.

There are huge differences between the agricultural system of the Israelites and the way our modern economy works, so most everyone agrees that the details of property rights described in Leviticus are contextual and perhaps don't apply to us. But how about the principles?

Reading the Word - Leviticus 25

Read this passage with your group. (Each person can take a verse.) As you read, take a pen/pencil and circle or underline the words or phrases that jump out at you, especially if you think they might have relevance for us today. Let's read some sections and see if the underlying ideas of Leviticus 25 still have relevance for us today. Consider the questions: What is God doing? And why might God be doing this? The whole chapter is long, but well worth reading. Below are some select passages:

⁸ Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. ⁹ Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. ¹⁰ Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. ¹¹ The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. ¹² For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. ¹³ In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property.

¹⁷ Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God.

²³ The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. ²⁴ Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

³⁵ If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. ³⁶ Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. ³⁷ You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. ³⁸ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

³⁹ If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. ⁴⁰ They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. ⁴¹ Then they and their children are to be released, and they will go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors. ⁴² Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. ⁴³ Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

Go around the group and let each person mention one thing they circled and explain why.

Responding to the Word

1. Why was it so important in that context for people to be able to return to their family's land every 50 years? Are there ways to apply this type of practice in our society today?
2. Is it still right to say that God owns all our economic assets, and to think of ourselves as "foreigners and strangers?" Does this have any practical relevance for the way we live?
3. How do you see the 2nd great commandment (Love your neighbor as yourself) being represented in these passages? How about the 1st great commandment (Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind)?
4. If we were to treat the poor today with the same sense of care as the poor were treated in Leviticus, what would that look like?
5. Leviticus was part of the Law for the nation of Israel. How might the ideas contained in these passages apply to the laws of your own nation?
6. In addition to legal issues, there is much instruction here about our personal attitudes and behaviors. What is the most important lesson here for your personal life?

A Closing Prayer

God of justice and love, write on our hearts the commands to love our neighbor and to love you. Break down the walls of protection we build around our own privileges and wealth, and build up in us a desire to live justly, to think of others as better than ourselves, and to treat everyone like you would yourself. Teach us daily that everything we think we own really belongs to you, and that you have blessed us with the opportunity to be your stewards, your hands, and your voice as we seek to love others and to live justly in every part of our lives.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

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