

Week of January 29, 2012

Giving in a Greedy Culture

Passage Outline:

1. **Share Generously** (Deut. 15:7-11)
2. **Treat with Dignity** (Deut. 24:10-15)
3. **Protect with Mercy** (Deut. 24:17-18)

What This Lesson Is About:

We have an obligation to meet the needs of people our culture would prefer to ignore.

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life:

This lesson can help you get more personally involved in helping people in need around you.

Share Generously (Deut. 15:7-11)

7 “If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers within any of your gates in the land the LORD your God is giving you, you must not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. **8** Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has. **9** Be careful that there isn’t this wicked thought in your heart, ‘The seventh year, the year of canceling debts, is near,’ and you are stingy toward your poor brother and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty. **10** Give to him, and don’t have a stingy heart when you give, and because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you do. **11** For there will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, ‘You must willingly open your hand to your afflicted and poor brother in your land.’

Through Moses, God instructed Israel regarding their responsibility to meet the needs of the poor in their community. How do we order a society that reflects God’s priorities? How do we care for the least of these? What responsibility do we have to the poor, the hungry, and the vulnerable? It would appear that the text could not be clearer in stating their requirement of generosity toward the poor.

Having addressed the economical ideal of no poverty in the nation (see Deut. 15:4), Moses shifted to helping the Israelites understand how to respond to poverty. Because of greed and selfishness, God anticipated reluctance to supply the needs of **a poor person**. Therefore, He led Moses to command the Israelites to help their impoverished **brothers within any of your gates** abundantly and willingly. God knew kindhearted and generous people would not always make up the majority. He addressed the inherent miser rather than the potential benefactor. He identified four dangers that the Hebrews should avoid.

First, if they heard about the poverty of one of their **brothers**, then they **must not be hardhearted** by refusing to assist **a poor person** in need. God sought to institute His plan of provision in Israel in order to diffuse the cycles of poverty. In reminding Israel that **the land** came to them as a gift, God wanted them to embrace the truth that no one earned or deserved their possessions. Therefore, as members of the covenant community, they were to adopt a general policy of willingly sharing with neighbors in order to meet their needs.

A previous *Biblical Illustrator* article “Poverty in Ancient Israel” (Summer 1993) relates to this lesson and can be found on the Winter 2011-2012 *Biblical Illustrator Plus* (CD-ROM).

Jumping to conclusions can make us suspicious about needy people. If we see them getting dropped off from an

expensive car, or if we see satellite dishes on their roofs, we go down the path of cynicism. We can easily fall prey to skepticism breeding hard hearts. Instead, the Bible urges us to have a spirit of generosity toward them. Second, one with the ability to give aid should not be **tightfisted toward his brother**. The word pictures a clenched fist clamped down around money so tightly that no one could pry even one finger away from it. God provided the antidote for a **tightfisted** attitude toward those in need: **open your hand to him and freely loan him**.

Because of our sinful nature, we want to cling to our money and possessions because we fear losing them. In doing so, we actually shortchange ourselves. **Hardhearted** and **tightfisted** attitudes prevent us from receiving from God all the blessings He wants to pour out on us. Opening hearts and hands allows us to receive from God, so we can pass blessings to others in need.

Third, the Hebrews should avoid any **wicked thought** in their hearts. God did not require simply giving anything to the poor. Rather, He said to **loan him enough for whatever need he has**. When parties negotiated a loan, they agreed on the amount and the terms for repayment. Setting up assistance as a **loan** strengthened the potential relationship tie.

However, God made special provision for the poor. At the end of every seven years, He required the rescinding of all debts among the Israelites (see Deut. 15:1-2). **The year of canceling debts** provided for the release from all loans. Thus, a poor man, borrowing before the year of release, would no longer have to repay his debt. God warned against any **wicked thought** concerning the proximity of **the year of canceling debts**. God urged generosity regardless of how long till the debtor would no longer have to repay. By acting generously, people would experience the Lord's blessing and would prosper **in everything** they did.

Believers should not lend to the needy based upon the probability of getting paid back. In fact, we would probably do well to mentally write off the loan in advance. By providing for people in need, we can value and invest in them. God calls us to care for the poor.

Fourth, Moses warned against holding a grudging attitude or having **a stingy heart when you give**. Such an attitude puts people in a perilous predicament. The Bible teaches that the poor have a slam dunk legal case against them and **will cry out to the LORD against you** in the court of God's justice. The Lord did not want people to help others in a totally unwilling spirit but desired them to open their hands in generosity to their brothers in need.

In the real world of fallen humanity **there will never cease to be poor people in the land**. Though some use Jesus' quotation of this verse (Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8) to justify neglect of the poor, such an understanding twists the meaning. Rather than God's people throwing up their hands at the inevitable presence of the poor in their midst, Moses actually urged them to combat poverty through beneficent acts regardless of the likelihood of repayment.

We often feel paralyzed by the reality of poverty in our communities or among people we know. Ancient Hebrews struggled to live within their covenant, envisioning a world with no division between loving God and loving each other. We often battle the same kinds of circumstances. Although we often stumble and lose our way like the Hebrews did, the Lord still desires that we aspire to create communities where we reflect God in all we do.

Your community likely has organizations that provide assistance to people experiencing financial crises or perhaps to those we might classify as "chronically poor." While these organizations need the cooperative efforts of many for the financial resources to carry out their services, they could certainly benefit from people volunteering their time to forge the relationships which could possibly provide longer-lasting results.

Check the word below (or add one of your own) that best describes your attitude toward helping those in need around you.

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> reluctant | <input type="checkbox"/> generous | <input type="checkbox"/> annoyed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> spontaneous | <input type="checkbox"/> struggle | <input type="checkbox"/> joyous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> guilty | <input type="checkbox"/> involved | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Treat with Dignity
(Deut. 24:10-15)

10 “When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not enter his house to collect what he offers as security. **11** You must stand outside while the man you are making the loan to brings the security out to you. **12** If he is a poor man, you must not sleep in the garment he has given as security. **13** Be sure to return it to him at sunset. Then he will sleep in it and bless you, and this will be counted as righteousness to you before the LORD your God.

14 “Do not oppress a hired hand who is poor and needy, whether one of your brothers or one of the foreigners residing within a town in your land. **15** You are to pay him his wages each day before the sun sets, because he is poor and depends on them. Otherwise he will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be held guilty.

In the lesson a couple of weeks ago, we learned that God created human beings as the crowning glory of His creation. As persons of unique value in God’s eyes, we should treat one another with dignity. We will inevitably encounter individuals and families facing economic challenges resulting from unemployment or underemployment. They might belong to our congregations, so we have the responsibility to help them as family members. On the other hand, we might only bump into them in the course of life. These divine appointments provide us with opportunities to practice Christ’s love.

In the middle of Moses’ teaching on the rights that the Israelite people would enjoy and observe for one another’s good, he identified specific directives regarding loans to the poor and the collateral involved with those loans. Understanding the heart of these instructions provides principles believers can apply today.

God stipulated that His people should treat with respect a **neighbor** who borrowed money. The Hebrew word included a wide variety of possibilities: brother, companion, fellow, friend, or other family member. The rights the Israelites enjoyed presumed very simple conditions, like those in a small farming village. Previously, Moses prohibited the use of a millstone as a guaranty (Deut. 24:6). Here he stated the lender could not barge into the poor person’s home **to collect** the collateral. Entering the debtor’s **house** to seize something as **security** (see this lesson’s word study on “Security”), would humiliate the debtor and his family by having another acting as master of the debtor’s domain. Instead, the lender **must stand outside** waiting for the borrower to bring the object. This allowed a man to borrow with honor, without having personal possessions made open to the creditor for his selection of collateral.

Imagine the humiliation you might experience if a loan officer walked through your house taking your valuables as collateral. God set up safeguards to protect His people from the disgrace such a scenario could bring.

When we learn about someone in the church family experiencing a financial crisis, we can take the initiative in helping. In my years as a pastor, I have found that church members in these kinds of circumstances will attempt to eke through the crisis on their own, not asking help from the church. Regrettably, I heard about one church leader who insisted the church not assist families unless they formally requested it. The biblical principle in Deuteronomy 24 urges us to protect these persons from embarrassment and treat them with dignity.

Moses provided for a **poor man** who secured a loan. Because he could only offer his **garment**, the lender **must**

not sleep in it. All humans have value—they bear God’s image and likeness (see Gen. 1:26-27). God’s covenant people must recognize the value and worth He places on humans and respond appropriately. The outer **garment** served as cloak during the day and blanket during the night. Keeping it from him would show utter contempt for his circumstances and would leave the borrower subject to the cold at night. Returning his cloak **to him at sunset** carried the expectation of being blessed by the borrower and being **counted as righteousness** by the Lord.

A previous *Biblical Illustrator* article “The Cloak: Its Use and Value” (Spring 1982) relates to this lesson and can be found on the Winter 2011-2012 *Biblical Illustrator Plus* (CD-ROM).

Concern for the poor continued into Moses’ instructions to land owners who employed hirelings. The fact a **hired hand** had no significant economic status provided the employer no excuse to deny him dignified treatment. These directives equally applied to a fellow Israelite or to **one of the foreigners residing** and working in the **land**. Once the people entered the promised land and settled down to their new life, God foresaw oppressive landowners misusing **poor and needy** employees. Therefore, God required that every laborer receive **his wages each day** before sundown so he could buy food to take home to his hungry family. Should land owners choose not to pay employees, the poverty stricken workers would **cry out to the LORD against** the employer. Without a doubt, God would hold such offenders **guilty** and not overlook their sin.

When sin and greed becomes entrenched in human lives, its victims have little or no leverage to overcome their circumstances. While we live in a very different culture than when payment of wages came at the close of each day, many people do live “from paycheck to paycheck.” People in service industries know—often from first-hand experience—how important it is to receive timely payment for services rendered.

We can even apply this truth to how we tip servers at restaurants. Restaurant workers often consider Christians to be among the worst tippers of any single identifiable group. On Sundays after church and during events like Christian concerts or conventions, Christians go to eateries in large numbers, perhaps unaware of how poorly they represent the gospel to a specific and largely unreached group—their servers. Leaving less than the minimum expected gratuity can actually offend servers. For Christians, it must never come down to whether the server deserved a good tip or not. God called us to reflect Him in our dealings with the world, being both merciful and generous to those who may not always deserve it.

If you have ever received help, financial or otherwise, in which you were not treated with dignity, record your feelings about that experience here.

Protect with Mercy
(Deut. 24:17-18)

17 Do not deny justice to a foreigner or fatherless child, and do not take a widow’s garment as security. 18 Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. Therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Through Moses, God called Israel to stand as one to protect the most helpless in their society—the aliens, orphans, and widows—by not denying them **justice**. The verb, **deny**, essentially means to stretch or spread out or bend away. Moses warned not to pervert justice by stretching or bending away from God’s clearly revealed law. In the Old Testament, **justice** stood out as God’s will for everyone in Israelite society because it reflected His character and treatment of them. Here, Moses actually reiterated his previous admonition not to deny justice (see Deut. 16:19) but specified the command protected the most vulnerable.

Perverting **justice** might come by showing favoritism or by taking bribes—neither of which reflect the God-like

qualities God wanted His people to demonstrate. In the January 8 lesson, believers were called on to imitate God through kindness and boundless love for people. Here, Moses called on God's people to act like God in granting justice to all people.

From time to time, most vulnerable people would have cause to seek legal aid. The danger existed that these disadvantaged people could suffer at the hands of a corrupt judge. For example, the **foreigner** (non-Israelite) generally did not enjoy the rights or privileges Israelites would have had. A **foreigner** could obtain a full participation in community and worship life (see Ex. 12:48-49; Lev. 17:8-16; Num. 15:14-16). However, he could have no share in the land ("each of the Israelite tribes is to retain its inheritance"; Num. 36:9), and more specifically, would have no tribal affiliation. Therefore, the alien would need the protection only authentic justice could provide.

Consider similarities between the aliens in Moses' day and immigrants in our country today. Israel granted hospitality to them, providing them shelter and jobs. Although they could not vote in community matters, they otherwise could become full members of the community if they converted. The immigration issues in our country confuse and divide us politically, socially, and economically. As people of faith, we can look for ways to minister to immigrants trapped by their circumstances. We have a responsibility to our neighbors to ensure they receive fair and just treatment.

A disobedient and dishonest judge in Israel offered a particular threat to a **fatherless child**. Like aliens, orphans had no legal standing and needed someone to defend them. Without normal family support, the **fatherless** could not plead their cases effectively so Moses nailed down that under no circumstances should judges deprive them of justice.

Today, many children are deprived of emotionally stable, morally sound, and spiritually rich home lives. We have a responsibility to respond to this serious problem. With the tragic escalation of family breakups, these children need what a church family can provide through initiatives that provide love, security, and practical support.

On the death of her husband, a close relative might offer an attractive bribe to a judge in order to gain material advantage at the **widow's** expense. Moses required justice for widows as well. In addition, a widow lived especially prone to constant indebtedness. The prohibition to seizing her **garment as security** may indicate her loans required no collateral of any kind, thus taking on the characteristics of a gift she would not feel burdened to repay.

Remembering their own years spent in slavery **in Egypt**—a time of vulnerability, helplessness, and persecution—provided the Israelites with the motivation and sensitivity to treat the poor properly. Rather than evoke pity or sympathy, Moses wanted them to **remember** that **God redeemed** them and had provided for them. Formerly helpless themselves, they could relate to the weakest members of the community and reflect God's mercy.

As followers of Jesus, we can protect and provide for the poor in our churches, neighborhoods, cities, and world. We can do that by volunteering our time and skill, opening our homes and lives, repositioning our financial resources, and leveraging our influence to address the needs of the poor. Imitating God means we will demonstrate love and mercy in all our relationships. This may mean standing up for the rights of someone at work who cannot or will not speak up for himself. It means we will not take advantage of anyone's circumstances and take action to deprive him in any way. When we care for those in need in this way, we reflect the heart of our heavenly Father.

Those whom we have the opportunity to "Protect with Mercy" are also susceptible to our preying on

them mercilessly. Do you ___ protect with mercy or ___ prey mercilessly? How do you know?

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

- As Christians, we should adopt a general policy of a willingness to share with a neighbor in order to meet his needs.
- Rather than hard hearts toward the poor, the Bible urges us to have generous spirits toward them.
- Opening our hearts and hands allows us to receive from God, so we can pass those blessings to others in need.
- Christians can take the initiative in reaching out to those who might be experiencing financial crises.
- God called us to reflect Him in our dealings with the world, by being both merciful and generous to those who may not always deserve either.
- We can look for ways to minister to immigrants trapped by their circumstances.
- As followers of Jesus, we can protect and provide for the poor in our churches, neighborhoods, cities, and world.

On a scale of 1 (distant) to 10 (highly connected), how personally involved are you with those in need whom you help? _____

Word Study: *Security* (24:11,12; “pledge,” KJV)

The Old Testament regulated the practice of offering a “security” or “pledge” (physical property) as collateral on a debt. The Law required an Israelite to make an interest free loan to another Israelite; however, a foreigner could be expected to pay interest (Deut. 23:19-20). In either case, the borrower had to put up some form of collateral which the lender held as security. However, provisions for the disadvantaged in society placed limitations on the terms of the security. Prohibitions against taking millstones (24:6) likely safeguarded against taking away a man’s ability to earn income.