

A Compassionate God

(Highlights from Deuteronomy, Part III)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — May 14, 2017 (Mothers Day)

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Deuteronomy 15:7-18

"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. 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.'

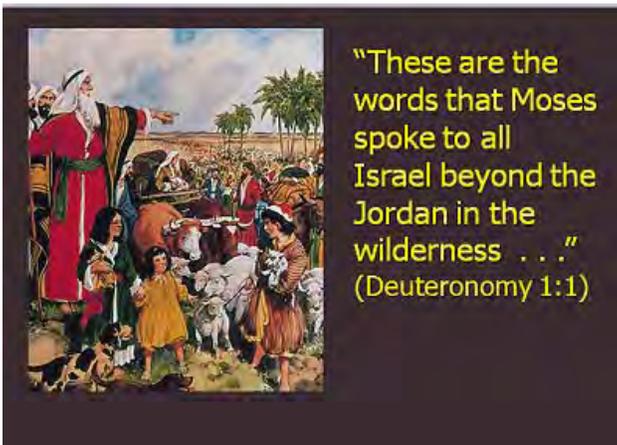
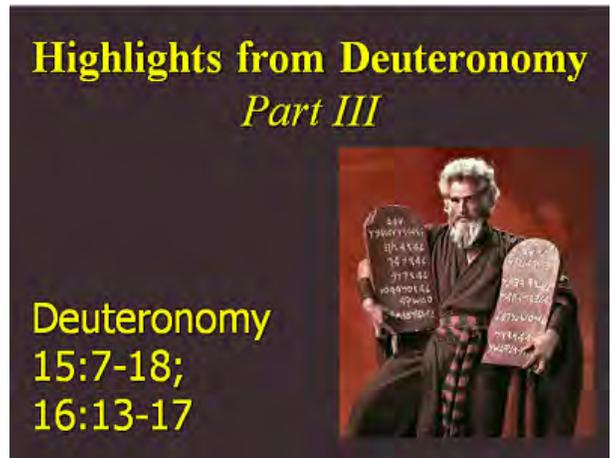
"If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing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

"But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same. It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do."

Deuteronomy 16:13-17

"You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.

"Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you."



As we continue our study of "Highlights from Deuteronomy" it will be helpful to review the place of Deuteronomy in the Bible. The name Deuteronomy, or "second law," is the Greek name for this book. In Hebrew the book is called *Devarim*, or "Words," from the opening line in Hebrew: "These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel." That's because Deuteronomy is a long speech, or sermon, by Moses in which he recaps the history of Israel's wanderings from the exodus from Egypt up to the point where the people are about to enter Canaan, the land the Lord has promised them. And then, beginning with the Ten

Commandments, he explains the meaning of the instructions, or *torah*, that the Lord delivered to them on Mount Sinai (called Horeb in Deuteronomy).

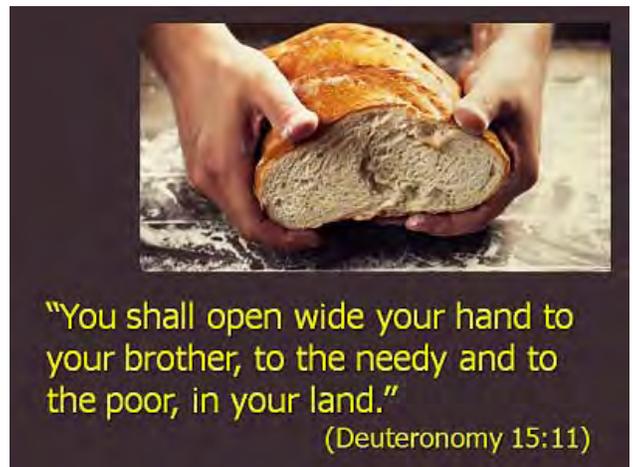
Moses is doing this to prepare the people for the kind of life the Lord has called them to live in the land they're going over the River Jordan to possess. Moses knows he isn't going to enter the land himself; of the Israelites that came out of Egypt only two men, Joshua and Caleb, will enter the land of promise because they were the only ones willing to go up and fight for it right after the Israelites escaped from Egypt. Moses, because of a problem he had, must end his career as Israel's leader and turn the reins over to Joshua, his assistant. So the last verses of Deuteronomy record the death of Moses on Mount Pisgah.

Today we consider two passages from chapters 15 and 16. The first passage concerns the treatment of poor people in the community of Israel, and the treatment of slaves or bondservants. The second passage concerns the celebration of the annual feasts. Now, I am fully aware that today is Mothers Day and I know you would expect me to say something about that in this message. Can I develop a thought appropriate for Mothers Day in a teaching based on the Book of Deuteronomy? Well, we shall see. Stay tuned.

In our first passage, from chapter 15, Moses begins by instructing his people in how the Lord expects them to deal with the poor in their midst. "There will never cease to be poor in the land," Moses reminds them. "Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'" (15:11). We're reminded of what Jesus told his disciples when they objected to what they considered extravagant waste after a woman poured expensive ointment on his head. "You always have the poor with you," he said, "and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me" (Mark 14:7). I suspect Jesus is quoting Moses here. And, although he said this woman's action was appropriate in view of his impending death and burial, Jesus and the disciples did maintain a treasury from which they gave out aid to the poor. Jesus said he didn't come to do away with the Law of Moses, but to fulfill it, and we see him doing that, in part, by the provision he made for helping the needy as he went about proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Why was it important for the people of Israel to make sure the poor in their midst were cared for? We find a clue in what Moses says at the beginning of our reading: "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" (15:7-8). The key word here is *brother*. The people of God, the people the Lord has called to serve him, are a *family*. They're not a family just because they're all descended from Abraham. In fact, if you read the Bible's fine print you discover that not all members of the Israelite community were blood descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; other people had joined their movement along the way. They were a family *because they served the one God*; they were brothers and sisters in a bond more powerful than the ties of blood and biological birth.

Christians are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, and the church has always taken these words of Moses to heart and cared for the poor. Within the body of Christ there isn't supposed to be any neglect of those who are in want. Even the apostle Paul's instructions for the Lord's Supper indicate that believers need to look out for one another's needs. He has some severe words for the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11: "When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).



So, from the very beginning the Christian church has worked to aid the poor through various works of mercy, to minister to the orphaned with homes, or to help the sick through establishing hospitals. Our hosting of the Hamilton Food Pantry, and the help our congregation provides in operating it, is an example of what followers of Jesus have always done. So is the Love Fund, which provides assistance to people in our community who run up against a financial problem. So is the Mexico mission, helping people in our neighbor



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country toward a better life. But, if we would follow Moses and also the early Christians, we need to especially take care of the needs of those who are members of our own Christian fellowship. There's a saying, "Blood is thicker than water." But when it comes to our responsibility as Christians, the waters of baptism should create a family bond between us that's just as strong as the ties of a blood relationship.

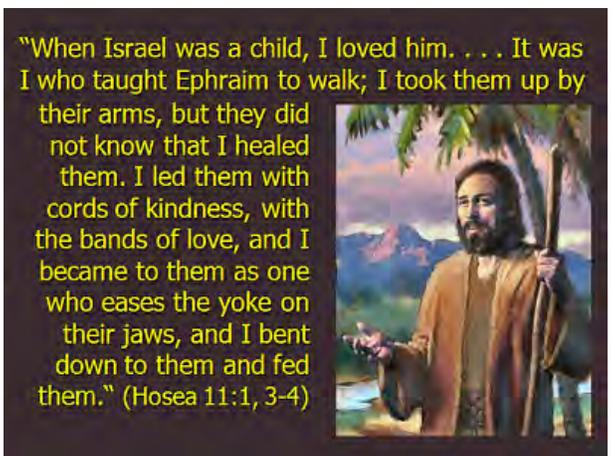
As the Christian church grew in the ancient world and on into the modern age, biblical values such as concern for the needy have come to permeate our Western culture. The result is that, today, programs to help the economically disadvantaged have come to be viewed as the responsibility of government. That hasn't been a helpful development,

because it has led us to the socialistic "welfare state," which pretends to help the poor through entitlements financed by taxation. This is certainly not what the Lord had in mind in giving Moses his instructions, for there are no "brothers and sisters," no tender family ties, in such a regime. When helping the needy becomes a matter of politics, the most well-intentioned efforts become subject to corruption and abuse and misdirection. An example is President Johnson's "War on Poverty" of the 1960s. What that program really did was to create a lot of nice jobs for middle-class administrators, but not much that ever really helped the poor. In fact, poverty in America actually increased because people lost their incentive to better themselves through responsible living — and the problem is still with us. How much better if the people of God throughout this nation were to take on the responsibility the Bible gives them to "open wide their hand to their brother," and not leave that to the government. But the fact that we find such a solution virtually unthinkable shows how far we have come from the ideal set forth in Scripture.

When the people of God care for those less well off, this is simply a reflection of the character of our God. The Lord proclaims himself to be merciful and compassionate, especially to those who are oppressed — which is why he took pity of Israel and delivered them from slavery in Egypt. One of the most powerful statements of the Lord's compassion is found in the prophecy of Hosea, in what we know as chapter 11:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. . . .

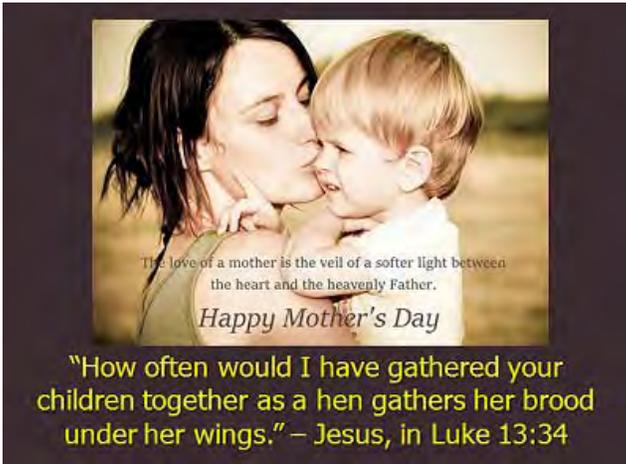
How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hosea 11:1-4, 7-9).



Jesus, approaching Jerusalem as he was about to be crucified, expressed the same tenderness toward the city, even though it had refused to accept his message: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the

prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

Passages like these underscore the Lord's compassion and care for those who belong to him, even when they're not always faithful or obedient. Here's a question for you: Who has it been in your life that has reflected this same compassion — who, as Hosea says, took you in their arms, bent down and fed you, taught you to walk, and when you did wrong still showed warm and tender compassion and didn't reject you? You know I'm referring to your mother! A mother who does what comes naturally to her is going to display the same kind of loving care that the Lord shows toward those he has called to serve him.

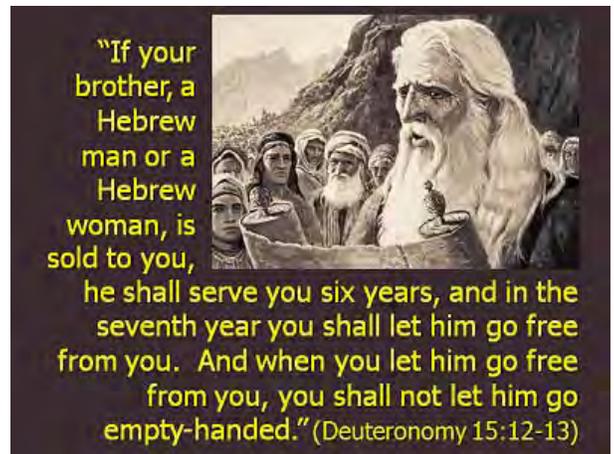


I realize that with the so-called feminist movement there are people who object to the idea that it's natural to a mother to nurse and care for her children. They call that "sexism." Public places now often have baby changing tables in the men's room as well as the ladies', because we're no longer supposed to respect the different roles human history has typically assigned to men and women regardless of the obvious differences between them in body parts or the way their brains operate. But, realistically, there is a difference between being a father and being a mother, as we all know. And when Jesus wanted to express compassion toward Jerusalem, the center of his Jewish world, he used the language and imagery of motherhood: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her

brood under her wings." The day we forget or abandon Mothers Day is the day we lose a little bit of our biblical understanding of the nature of God, a merciful and compassionate God who cares for the needs of those he loves.

Now, completing our discussion of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, what about slavery? For Moses explains that if an Israelite has another Israelite as his slave, he's supposed to let him go free in the seventh year, the "jubilee" or year of release. And he adds, "When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed." You don't just turn the slave out into the street, Moses is saying, but you provide for his continued livelihood till he can find other work and support himself. And don't consider this a hard thing to do, the Lord tells the Israelites, whether it's a male or female slave that you have to let go — because, remember, you were all slaves in Egypt and you know what slavery is like, and you should be grateful to the Lord that he set you free as well.

Already we can see how different the practice of slavery was in Israel from the cruel, dehumanizing way slaves could be treated in other cultures. For slavery was universal in the ancient world. In fact, slavery has been called "the electricity of the ancient world." The economy of that world could no more function without slavery than our economy could function today without electric power. Slavery was just the way things got done. It wasn't based on race, as it was in the old South of the United States; in fact, in the Roman Empire many slaves were Greeks or people from other nations Rome had subdued. You could become a slave by losing your source of income, so you had no choice but to sell yourself to someone in order to even have a roof over your head and food on your plate. You could become a slave by being captured in warfare and driven away to the land of your conqueror.



So in most nations the lot of a slave was a hopeless and dismal one, and slaves were tempted to rebel against such demeaning conditions. The famous revolt led by the Thracian slave Spartacus against the

Romans, in the first century BC, is a case in point. In suppressing this revolt the Roman forces lined the Appian Way, all the way from Capua to Rome, with a string of crosses on which the defeated slaves were hung, as a gory reminder to all of what becomes of a slave who tries to break away. That was the Roman treatment for a slave and a rebel, and we understand why the cross of Jesus was a symbol that flew in the face of everything the Roman world considered worthy and worth considering.

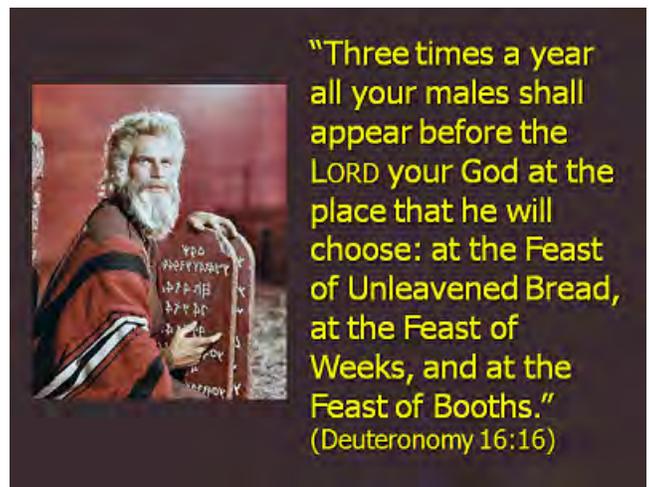
But slavery in Israel was different, as Moses' commandment about freeing the slave after seven years reveals to us. Just as in the case of the poor, the Lord shows his compassion in how his people are to deal with the question of slavery. In fact what Moses says next is illuminating, for he makes a provision for the slave who *doesn't want to be set free!* If the slave says, "I love my master, and I don't want to leave because

I've got a pretty good deal right here," then the master is to perform a little ceremony, piercing the ear of the slave against the doorpost of the house. If that sounds a little cruel, I take it that this was basically a symbolic gesture whereby the slave says, "I belong here, in this house, and in this family." You and I might want to ask ourselves: "If I'm a servant, or a slave (the biblical words mean both), in the house of the Lord, shouldn't I ask the Lord to "pierce my ear" to cement that relationship I have with him?" In fact there's a Christian song that goes like this: "Pierce my ear, O Lord my God; take me to Your door this day. I will serve no other God; Lord, I'm here to stay." (I remember hearing my eldest daughter sing it many years ago, when she was in high school.)



To us, slavery is a horrible and dehumanizing institution, no matter how comfortable the situation of the slave might seem to be. But we regard slavery that way only because of the influence of Christianity through twenty centuries of Western culture. It's only the biblical worldview, which understands people to be made in the image of God, that offers an incentive to do away with slavery. In fact, the drive to abolish slavery in both Britain and the United States was led by committed, Bible-believing Christian statesmen like William Wilberforce in England and American abolitionist preachers like Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote the influential book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* — a story that opened the eyes of many to the conditions of slavery in the old South.

Now, finally, let's turn to Deuteronomy chapter 16 where Moses describes the annual festivals of Israel. "Three times a year," he says, "all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths" (Deuteronomy 16:16). Worship in ancient Israel wasn't like the weekly gatherings that Christians and Jews practice today. The Sabbath didn't become a day of weekly gatherings until the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC. Instead, worship in Israel centered in the annual festivals when people went on pilgrimage to the sanctuary. Some of the Psalms, called the "Songs of Ascent," were probably sung by pilgrims as they went up to the Temple in Jerusalem (Psalms 120-134), and other Psalms were sung at the various festivals Moses lists: The "Feast of Unleavened Bread," or Passover; the Feast of Weeks, also called Pentecost in Greek, and the Feast of Booths or Feast of Ingathering, the fall harvest festival. All these festivals helped Israel remember what the Lord had done for them in setting them free and giving them his law.



In our Christian worship we retain only two of these Israelite festivals. Easter corresponds to Passover — and it's called "Passover" in many languages — because it's the time that Jesus, the Lamb of God, chose to die for the rescue of his people. Pentecost, fifty days later (which is what the name means) is the day the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, as recorded in Acts, chapter 2. We'll be observing that in just a few weeks. The third festival, the Feast of Booths or Ingathering, has no equivalent in the usual Christian calendar. It would be a good idea to bring it back in a special kind of "Harvest Sunday."

The point is that Israelite worship wasn't somber and colorless, like some of our Christian gatherings tend to be. It was a time of festival celebration when the worshipers had fun doing special things, like making a pilgrimage to the sanctuary with the processions, the music, the dancing, and other joyful actions that were involved. Listen to the description in Psalm 68: "Thy solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary — the singers in front, the minstrels last, between them maidens playing timbrels: 'Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel's fountain!'" (Psalm 68:24-26 RSV).

We can do a lot more with our time of worship to bring back the color and motion and excitement of biblical worship. As your interim pastor I've tried to do that with these banners, the reading of the Psalms, and just trying to introduce a general air of excitement about being in the presence of the Lord. I hope some of this has "caught on" with you and will carry over into the ministry here as it continues with your next pastor.

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