



**“Stories You Missed: Year of the Jubilee”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Christopher Chatelaine-Samsen**  
**Leviticus 25:1-12**

SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

LEVITICUS 25:1-12

*The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.*

*You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh*

*month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.*

---

There are some parts of the Bible that we would just rather look past. The parts that are, shall we say, old-fashioned. Even hurtful. You’re probably familiar with some of the laws of the Hebrew Bible - places like Leviticus and Deuteronomy that have been used to hurt people. Twenty-five hundred year old laws about sexual ethics that people still use to try to legislate in the United States in 2023. Parts of the Bible that it feels like we should simply relegate to the dustbin of

history. Let's just agree to leave those things be – ancient laws for ancient people.

So what on earth am I doing dredging up the book of Leviticus and some of those ancient laws in this modern, inclusive, justice-seeking church? Why bother turning back time and looking in? Maybe there's something yet to learn from some of the most ancient wisdom of the people of God yet.

As we close the summer – and yes, I'm sad to say that this weekend marks the unofficial end of summer! – we're taking a look at one more Bible story that you may have missed. Over the first half of the summer, we read through eight Bible stories that I think everybody should know – eight stories that chart the course from the beginning to the end of the Bible. But that leaves so much out – so much that may in fact be important. So in the latter half of the summer, we've taken a look at some stories that I think are just as important, even if they often get looked over.

And this one is my favorite.

Tucked away in the midst of countless archaic laws about livestock, farming, marriage, and yes, outdated sexual ethics, is a chapter in Leviticus that I think is perhaps the most revolutionary passage in all of the Hebrew Bible – the year of the Jubilee.

If you felt a bit bogged down in the details when I just read it a few minutes ago, having to count off years between growing cycles on the land, let me try to summarize. Leviticus 25 summarizes an economic and social system that was meant to ensure the economic and social health and ethics of Israel. How?

In short, by ensuring that the consequences of chance never calcified into an unequal and fundamentally unjust system. By creating lasting and structural justice through good policy.

Here's how it worked, in theory, and I'm adding some things outside of the passage we just read. When the land of Israel was originally settled by the ancient Israelites, a sort of land-grant system was developed. Those original families had the rights to farm the land and pass it down generation to generation. Of course, things happen. Drought. Debt. Death. One may not be able to keep their land and pass it down, and might be forced to sell to a neighbor. As you can imagine, wealth would then accumulate with some families, while debt is passed down in others.

It wasn't just land. Back then, indentured servitude was a way to repay a debt. Although we might find that morally reprehensible, it was one of the few ways to transact – before modern currency, it was pretty much land and people. So, if you had a bad crop one year, you might find yourself in servitude to a neighboring family for years in order to repay a debt of bad luck.

The ancient Israelites understood the long-term consequences of this, because this is what had happened to them back in Israel. Some people would become increasingly wealthy – a landowner class – and some people would become generationally poor – a servant class.

The ethics of the Israelites, at least on paper, indicated that this should not be so. So they developed a system to break the cycle. At regular intervals, all forms of debt would be

forgiven and means would be provided to redeem property. That would mean that all indentured servants would be released from captivity, and all land returned to its original land-grant owners.

In order to facilitate fairness, the purchasing of land and labor looked more like a lease than a purchase. If you bought your neighbor's farm, you only had rights to it until the next year of forgiveness, and the purchase price was to reflect that reality. For example, if only one year remained, the purchase price would be low as compared to if there were many years remaining.

The system provided for land health, ensuring that periodically land would go fallow to allow soil regeneration. It provided for the poor and stranger, ensuring that extra food would be available. It provided for justice for foreigners, ensuring human rights not only for Israelites, but for foreigners in their midst.

If it all seems a bit technical, it was. If you read the remainder of Leviticus 25, it comes off as a series of laws governing contracts, which is exactly what it is. But it needed to be technical. They understood human nature. The desire for greed was not an invention of Gordon Gecko. They understood that social and economic restraint would be needed to continue to be the people that God had called them to be – distinct from the other peoples of the world, upholders of God's love and justice.

Which, at its core, is what it was always fundamentally about. Honoring their God-given identities. If the Israelites were going to say that they were the people of God, distinct from the peoples of the world, then it

would be their love, put into practice and policy, that would signify to the world that there is a better way. A more just way. A way to honor the truth that each human being is made in God's image, and that the society in which we live should reflect that core truth.

I have to note a sad reality about Leviticus 25, which is that there's no good evidence that it was practiced, perhaps beyond a few initial cycles. By all accounts, the people did not hold on to this distinctive aspect of their social and economic life, and looked like most other agrarian cultures, economic class system and all.

And yet the idea of the Year of the Jubilee – this grand year in which all things would really be made new, hung on. Those who passed down the scriptures never saw fit to remove it – it stood as a guidepost still orienting the people to what life ought to be like, and what true worship of God really looked like, even if that was not the road taken.

It continued to be so influential, that you've heard about the Year of the Jubilee, even if you don't know it. You've heard about it because Jesus talked about it. Once, Jesus went to preach at his home synagogue, and he picked up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read these words:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

And then he put the scroll away and told everyone that they were witnesses to that very thing happening. And their minds were blown open, because he knew what he was talking about. When Jesus says that he's proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor," that's another phrase to talk about the year of the Jubilee. That technical system of contracts in Leviticus that would ensure justice and equity for all people. That's what Jesus said he was out there to bring about.

Leviticus 25, buried deep in the pages of the Bible that we usually skip over, is more than a series of laws governing contracts. It's a vision. It's an imaginative framework of a world in which greed is not good, in which our desire to get more and more is restrained by more than good intentions, but by good policy and mutual accountability. It's a system of governance that's not only practical, but honoring of God's deep, abiding presence in each and every person and in the land we inhabit. It is a conviction that following God is something we not only do in our private lives, but something we live out in public because we're convinced that a life that worships and honors God is a life that honors all of life. That we love God not for our own sakes, but for the sakes of others.

That's what Jesus told us he's all about. That's what the prophets have pointed to. To follow God faithfully is to live for the life of the world. To act with more than good intentions, but to create systems that are just and free people from the bounds of chance that hold them down. I could go on for another hour about all the ways that we can and ought to do this – reparations, ending usurious interest on loans, honoring treaties with indigenous people – the examples are

endless. Instead, what I want you to know is this. The Bible, your sacred book, contains within it one of the boldest and more comprehensive systems to eradicate injustice and inequity, and it has been handed down to give us a vision of justice and equity.

May we live, and advocate, and vote, and love, and pray, and worship God with such boldness. Amen.