

ECONOMICS OF FAITH

LEVITICUS 25:1-55

**UNDERSTANDING GOD'S VIEW ON MONEY AND POSSESSIONS
REQUIRES US TO ADOPT ECONOMICS OF FAITH.**

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Economics of Faith – Part 1

Leviticus 25:1-55

One of the huge problems churches in the United States face is that we often confuse what it means to be a Christian with what it means to be an American. Many people seem to just simply equate one with the other. In other words, if one is a good American, then one is a good Christian. We often confuse the idea of democracy with a biblical view of church organization and capitalism with a biblical view of economics. I would dare say that most Christians who live in the United States are Social Darwinists. In other words, we are free to pursue and acquire all the wealth, power, and prestige we are able to attain. Since we live in a free country, everybody is able to pursue all the life, liberty, and happiness they can grab and hold on to. Our attitude is that the poor are poor because of poor life choices, laziness, or their failure to get educated and failure to assimilate into the marketplace. They get what they deserve.

Although most Christians would not verbalize this because they know it doesn't sound right, that's really what they believe.

Again, pastors must preach unpopular subjects in order to straighten out bad theology, in this case concerning God's view of money. The problem is that most Christians who attend church in the United States are so self-absorbed, they can't think beyond their own agendas.

Being self-focused, self-centered, and self-absorbed is a very common American approach to life. Some years back it was reported that the president of the United States was trying to paint a brighter economic picture to the press than his administration had reason to take credit for. During a news conference, he was asked about the strength of the economy. The president answered, "If I wasn't the president of the United States, I would invest heavily in the stock market."

An unidentified voice from the back of the room responded, "If you weren't the president, we would all invest heavily in the stock market."

Criminal investigators often follow the main rule, "Follow the money." God created an economic system for His people that was intended to reset itself periodically. It was meant to prevent people from becoming permanently disadvantaged. I'm not saying that we can institute this economic system today. We can't. However, we can use it in the sense that we can examine our attitudes towards economics and reflect on how we spend our money. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **UNDERSTANDING GOD'S VIEW ON MONEY AND POSSESSIONS REQUIRES US TO ADOPT ECONOMICS OF FAITH.**

In chapter 23 we talked about the concept of Sabbath and how it was meant to recalibrate the rhythms of life for us. It described the weekly Sabbath and then went on to describe religious holidays and festivals that were to be expanded types of Sabbaths throughout the year. These extended Sabbaths along with the weekly Sabbath were commanded by God so that we could be reminded what is truly important in life.

In chapter 24, we saw how gaining a proper perspective on Who God is and who we are is important when we worship.

In this morning's text, God is going to apply the Sabbath to the earth: vegetation of all sorts, to animals, and to society. In other words, God does care how we make and spend our money. In fact, how we handle our finances directly relates to our faith.

God will apply this Sabbath concept from not working every seventh day, to not working the land for one year on the seventh year, to celebrating a double Sabbath rest for the land and society on the 49th year and the 50th. Here again we see that 7 times 7 plus 1. This 50th year becomes a Jubilee year that recaps the previous 49 years and starts out the next cycle of years.

I. EXERCISING PERSONAL FAITH (VS 1-7)

It Takes A Great Deal Of Faith To View Money And Possessions The Way God Does.

Verses 1-7 instruct us in exercising our personal faith. You see, **IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF FAITH TO VIEW MONEY AND POSSESSIONS THE WAY GOD DOES.** We look at money equaling security. For the most part, it is a good thing to save money. However, if money becomes our protector, and our security, then we are now worshiping a false god.

A. THE IMPORTANCE OF SABBATH (1-2)

Verses 1-2 lay out the importance of Sabbath as it relates to our finances. I'm sure that this principle is good ecologically, but since we find it here in Leviticus, this practice is meant to make us better people as well. What's interesting to me is that God says that the land itself must observe a Sabbath rest. I think that for years modern day Western Christianity has taken the position that God gave us over the creation, misunderstood it, misused it, and flat out disobeyed it. God gave us dominion of the earth and all that is in it, except for one another. By giving us dominion over the creation, from the context of Genesis 1 and 2, it is clear that what God meant by that was we are called to care for and look out for the creation. But we have used this position of dominion; we have exploited the earth, its resources, vegetation, and animals. I think I am seeing signs of that reversing and I see more and more Christians becoming conscious of caring for the environment and all created things. Christians ought to be at the forefront of caring for creation.

Let me suggest this connection to you. Human being not only exploited the environment throughout human history, we have carried that selfish attitude over into human relationships. We have exploited one another throughout all of human history. The environment, animal, plant, and human life are all our responsibility. God commanded the Israelites to give a Sabbath rest to the land once every seven years. It's important because God said it was important.

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF OBEDIENCE (3-5)

And that's important because as verses 3-5, it is a matter of obedience. Here is the command. God said that once the Hebrews inhabited the Promised Land, they were to plant, work, and harvest their crops and fields, their vineyards and groves for six years. However, on the 7th year, they were not to plant, work, or harvest anything. They were to let the fields, orchards, and vineyards rest. The land was to replenish itself. Obviously it would be God replenishing it. It made sense to God. But I'm sure it didn't make sense to the everyday Israelite. It made no possible economic sense.

It really is not much different from us. I have been a pastor for a long time now. It never amazes me to see how Christians respond to financial challenges in the church. There is no way we could take modern day American Christians, place them in the situation God placed the Hebrews in the Promised Land, and succeed. We would fail just like the Hebrews did. We would reason what a waste of money and time it would be not to plant, work, and harvest perfectly good land. We start to use all sorts of faulty reasoning when it comes to our money. For example, we constantly think that only a tenth of our money belongs to God and the other 90 % belongs to us. Let me just make an aside comment here. Most Christians in the United States don't even give a tenth of their money to God. But the point God makes here is that everything belongs to Him and He will designate how it is to be used.

Let me just paint a picture for you. Once the Hebrews settle Israel, God is saying they only work for 6 years. The seventh year they are not allowed to work the land. They have to trust God to provide for them.

C. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST (6-7)

And that brings us to verses 6-7. In order for them to obey God, it will be important for them to trust in God. Can you imagine what kind of trust in God it would take not to plant or harvest crops for one year? They may starve. Could God really want us not to work the land? How will we survive?

I need to make this even more graphic for you. This one year Sabbath in reality becomes two agricultural seasons. Let's say we harvested our crops in September of 2007. In May of 2008 we do not plant crops and in September of 2008 we do not harvest our crops. Then in May of 2009 we can again plant our crops and then harvest them in September of 2009. Our last harvest took place in September of 2007. That is two calendar years between harvests. The Hebrews would have to depend on a bumper crop in the 6th year. And they would be allowed to eat whatever the ground and trees produced the Sabbatical year. However, they were not allowed to prune, or cultivate, or anything like that. Whatever the ground produced naturally, they could eat.

The Hebrews were being trained by God in the wilderness. Every day, God would send manna from heaven. On the 6th day, God sent a double portion because He didn't send any on the 7th day. God was getting them into the rhythm of Sabbath while they were traveling through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

I know that we modern day Christians have almost no trust in God to provide for us and sustain us when faced with even the most minute financial challenges. We are not good at trusting God and taking steps of faith when it comes to finances. And the sad thing is that we often miss God's blessings as a result of our lack of faith.

Listen, it's not just us. There is no biblical evidence that the Hebrews ever practiced these concepts of Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In fact, Warren Weirsbe has a theory that they never once kept the laws. From the time Israel settled the land until the time they were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians, they lived in the Promised Land for close to 500 years. Warren Weirsbe speculates that would have been about 70 cycles. So roughly the Sabbath years plus the Jubilee years should be about 70.

Listen to the prophecies of Jeremiah:

"⁸And now the LORD Almighty says: Because you have not listened to me, ⁹I will gather together all the armies of the north under King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, whom I have appointed as my deputy. I will bring them all against this land and its people and against the other nations near you. I will completely destroy you and make you an object of horror and contempt and a ruin forever. ¹⁰I will take away your happy singing and laughter. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will no longer be heard. Your businesses will fail, and all your homes will stand silent and dark. ¹¹This entire land will become a desolate wasteland. Israel and her neighboring lands will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years" (Jeremiah 25:8-11 / NLT).

"¹⁰The truth is that you will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again" (Jeremiah 29:10 / NLT).

"²¹So the message of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah was fulfilled. The land finally enjoyed its Sabbath rest, lying desolate for seventy years, just as the prophet had said" (II Chronicles 36:21 / NLT).

It really is sad that the Hebrews never lived up to the plans God had for them in building a just and holy society. I'm sad to say that most Christian churches in the United States don't want to accept the fact that all of our money, all of our possessions, and all of our lives belong to God;

Not a tenth, not the portion we designate, but everything belongs to God. And further, God tells us that our attitude towards money and possessions is a direct indication of our faith. I know this is hard to swallow but **IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF FAITH TO VIEW MONEY AND POSSESSIONS THE WAY GOD DOES.** Before we leave this section, let me just quote the background for this concept of Sabbath affects the Jew, foreigners living among the Jews, animals, and land:

¹⁰*"Plant and harvest your crops for six years, ¹¹but let the land rest and lie fallow during the seventh year. Then let the poor among you harvest any volunteer crop that may come up. Leave the rest for the animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves.*

¹²*"Work for six days, and rest on the seventh. This will give your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It will also allow the people of your household, including your slaves and visitors, to be refreshed. ¹³"Be sure to obey all my instructions. And remember, never pray to or swear by any other gods. Do not even mention their names" (Exodus 23:11-13 / NLT).*

The particular sin churches face in our society is narcissism. We look at all of life from our own personal perspective and our own personal agenda.

II. ACKNOWLEDGING THE TRUTH (VS 8-24)

We Must Start From The Truth That Nothing Belongs To Us. God Has Merely Given Us Money And Possessions To Manage For Him.

Verses 8-24 clearly state that healthy living starts with acknowledging the truth. In this case the truth is this. **WE MUST START FROM THE TRUTH THAT NOTHING BELONGS TO US. GOD HAS MERELY GIVEN US MONEY AND POSSESSIONS TO MANAGE FOR HIM.** Again, this flies in the face of our American ideas of capitalism, our right to ownership, and our desire and lust to possess things. If you take time to study what makes capitalism work, it comes down to the belief that all human beings are greedy and lust to possess things. The greedier people are, the more they lust, the more they buy, and the more healthy the economy is. Look, the government is now preparing to send us checks in hopes that we can kick-start the economy. The one thing they don't want you to do with the money is to put it in the bank. They want you to spend it.

Again, I'm not proposing that the United States adopt any other sort of economic system. I'm merely pointing out that for Christians, we must make sure that we never make our decisions based on worldly principles.

A. RENEWING THE LEASE (8-13)

In verses 8-13, God makes it clear that they are merely renewing the lease. Here we encounter a special year in the Hebrew calendar. It is called a Jubilee Year. The word Jubilee comes from the Hebrew word *yobel*, which means a horn. In the religious calendar of Israel, the seventh month opened up with the blowing of the Ram's Horn to announce the command that the people gather together for worship. Shortly after the New Year's celebration, the sacred Day of Atonement festival started on the 10th day of that month.

There is a lot going on. First of all, The Day Of Atonement was a sacred worship service in which God forgave the sins for each Hebrew individual, cleansed the Tabernacle, and cleaned up the community of all its sin. Secondly, this is the completion of the 7th Sabbatical year of rest for the land. And now, in the 50th year, another type of Sabbatical year is added on by God. For the second year in a row, crops must not be planted, cared for, or harvested. So in reality, that means that the Hebrews will go three years between harvests. Think about the faith it will take to abide by God's commands. This Jubilee Year will be a year of liberty. On the Day of

Atonement, the Hebrews were liberated from sin. During the Jubilee Year, people will be liberated from financial debt, liberated, from slavery, and liberated to return home. Could anyone possibly miss what Jesus was saying about Himself when He taught this concept of liberation?

¹⁶When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. ¹⁷The scroll containing the messages of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him, and he unrolled the scroll to the place where it says:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, ¹⁹ and that the time of the Lord's favor has come. ²⁰He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Everyone in the synagogue stared at him intently" (Luke 4:16-20 / NLT).

Jesus claimed to be the Great Liberator. The passage Jesus quoted from came from the prophet Isaiah who talked a lot about the coming Messiah. The concept of this Jubilee Year starts with the premise that the earth and everything on it belongs to God. He gave the Hebrews the land as a very special gift. They were to treat the land they received reverently. It was to be passed down from generation to generation.

Look at verse 13, "In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property." In other words, God built into His social and economic system a correction and a redistribution of wealth so that no family would ever find itself in perpetual poverty for generations. We have created perpetual poverty and hopelessness through our social injustice, through welfare, and through using the poor for political gain. Every 50 years, land would revert to its original family owners. So if you had to sell your land because you needed the money, your grandchildren wouldn't have to live with your misfortune. They would get the land back on this Jubilee Year.

I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not trying to change the American economic system. Capitalism is as good as any other economic system out there. Arguably, it is probably the best. What I am arguing for is that Christians start to adopt a biblical view of the way we handle our money. The New Testament Church had it right. They didn't look to the Roman government to take care of them. They took care of their own poor:

³²All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had. ³³And the apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great favor was upon them all. ³⁴There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them ³⁵and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.

³⁶For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus.

³⁷He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles for those in need" Acts 4:32-37 / NLT).

Christians took care of their own. Of course, we live in the United States and feel that everyone has the right to do with their money what they want to. And that is correct. But remember, God doesn't run His kingdom according to the Constitution. He runs it according to His Word. Think about the attitude we have towards money. Think about how we make decisions. The way we handle money is a direct indicator of the maturity of our faith.

I know this kind of talk is not popular in our country. I know these kinds of sermons are not well received. I started out this section by asking if anyone could possibly miss Jesus' point about Himself?

²⁸When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. ²⁹Jumping up, they mobbed him and took him to the edge of the hill on which the city was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, ³⁰but he slipped away through the crowd and left them" (Luke 4:28-30 / NLT).

The point of this section is this and Jesus uses this illustration often. Everything and everyone belongs to God. There is nothing in the entire universe, nothing in all of creation, nothing in heaven or hell that does not belong to God. I know that we have this natural drive to possess and own things. But the truth is that we are merely stewards, managers of God's assets. And like it or not, we will be judged for how we managed the assets God put into each of our hands.

So every 50 years, when the land reverted to the original family of ownership, God was in effect renewing the lease for individuals and the entire nation of Israel:

¹⁰"The LORD your God will soon bring you into the land he swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a land filled with large, prosperous cities that you did not build. ¹¹The houses will be richly stocked with goods you did not produce. You will draw water from cisterns you did not dig, and you will eat from vineyards and olive trees you did not plant. When you have eaten your fill in this land, ¹²be careful not to forget the LORD, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12 / NLT).

That would be a thought worth remembering as we look at our homes, our investments, and all of our possessions. The reality is they are not our possessions. They are God's. Statistics show that not many Christians give 10 % of their salaries to God. But even if we do give a tenth or more, we are still not giving back anything of ours. We are merely giving back to God what is already His.

B. FAITH AND OBEDIENCE LEADS TO BLESSING (14-22)

Verses 14-22 illustrate that only faith and obedience lead to blessing. The way we handle ourselves in our everyday affairs demonstrates whether or not we have faith in the God of the Bible and if we are willing to obey the God of the Bible. Here again, we come in direct conflict with our upbringing. We often feel that it doesn't matter what we do to get the best deal possible. We feel free to lie and cheat in business as if that is a world separate from our Christian life.

God makes it clear that we are to be honest in our business dealings. In fact our honesty demonstrates that we have faith in God's system and not in the world's system. In this section God makes it clear by stating at the beginning of verse 14 and again at the end of verse 17. The Hebrews were not allowed to take advantage of one another. The value of property wasn't determined by the market, it was determined by the number of years in relationship to the Jubilee year. In other words, if there was a great deal of time remaining until the Jubilee Year, the more money the property was worth. The closer to the Jubilee Year, the less the property was worth. Remember the land would revert to the original family on the Jubilee Year. We would do well to value the things in our lives according to God's standard. Also this system was set up in order that poor people or people who fell on hard times could keep their dignity.

Also, it would take real faith to trust God to provide for them for 3 years between harvests. But again, faith that leads to obedience is the only definition of true biblical faith. If we are not obeying God, then there is no reason for us to believe we possess saving faith. Believe me, many people who think they are Christians, really are deceiving themselves. In the United States we have perverted the definition of biblical faith into just some sort of philosophical intellectual agreement. But not planting crops for 2 years would take real faith, especially in an agricultural community. But listen to what God says here after He commands them not to plant during the Sabbatical years:

²⁰But you might ask, 'What will we eat during the seventh year, since we are not allowed to plant or harvest crops that year?' ²¹The answer is, 'I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so the land will produce a bumper crop, enough to support you for three years. ²²As you plant the seed in the eighth year, you will still be eating the produce of the previous year. In fact, you will eat from the old crop until the new harvest comes in the ninth year'" (Leviticus 25:20-22 / NLT).

And don't forget, for the Jubilee Year it would not be planting on the 7th year and the 8th year. True Christianity is based on good biblical theology, a willingness to submit to good biblical theology, and then to have faith enough in it to obey. I think that now that I am coming to the end of my career, the thing that most baffles me is how passionately people hold on to what they think is good bible theology. They argue it. They quote it to others and act as if it is the truth. The interesting thing is that what they put forward as biblical theology is nowhere to be found in the Bible. I have had Christians passionately come to me and try to convince me of some concept they put forward as biblical. When I ask them to show it to me in the Bible, they can't. Or when I challenge them, they get angry.

C. CORRECT THEOLOGY (23-24)

Listen as verses 23-24 point out, correct theology is imperative before we can have faith or obey God. Again, along this line of reasoning, I'm amazed at how free people feel to create their own theology and put it forth as Christian theology. Here is the theology that we need to understand about money, all our possessions, all of creation, and even concerning our very lives. In verse 23 God says:

²³And remember, the land must never be sold on a permanent basis because it really belongs to me. You are only foreigners and tenants living with me" (Leviticus 25:23 / NLT).

Why is it so important to understand this concept? It's important because if we make decisions on bad theology, that ultimately causes us to deny Christ and we will start to worship the idols of self, pleasure, and possessions. The point of this section is this. **WE MUST START FROM THE TRUTH THAT NOTHING BELONGS TO US. GOD HAS MERELY GIVEN US MONEY AND POSSESSIONS TO MANAGE FOR HIM.**

III. EPILOGUE (PART I)

How we handle our finances, how we make financial decisions, and our attitudes towards money and possessions are a direct reflection of our faith. Next week, we will finish up this concept of Jubilee and see how it applies to other relationships. For now, let's remember this.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S VIEW ON MONEY AND POSSESSIONS REQUIRES US TO ADOPT ECONOMICS OF FAITH. I can't think of a better way to end this section by letting Jesus tell a story about this:

³³"Now listen to this story. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ³⁴At the time of the grape harvest he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³⁵But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same.

³⁷"Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, 'surely they will respect my son.'

³⁸"But when the farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ³⁹So they grabbed him, took him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

⁴⁰"When the owner of the vineyard returns," Jesus asked, "what do you think he will do to those farmers?"

⁴¹The religious leaders replied, "He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest." ⁴²Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous to see.' ⁴³What I mean is that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. ⁴⁴Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." ⁴⁵When the leading priests and Pharisees heard Jesus,

they realized he was pointing at them—that they were the farmers in his story. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid to try because the crowds considered Jesus to be a prophet” (Matthew 21:33-46 / NLT).

Please, I beg you, read and study your bibles because the theology that we place our faith in must be the theology of the Bible. I think one of the most difficult points of theology for us to change is our view of money, possessions, and pride.