

Leviticus Bible Study #31

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 25:23-55

23 “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. **24** And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.

25 “If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. **26** If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, **27** let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. **28** But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

29 “If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption. **30** If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer, throughout his generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee. **31** But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee.

32 As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess. **33** And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city they possess shall be released in the jubilee. For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. **34** But the fields of pastureland belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is their possession forever.

35 “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. **36** Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. **37** You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. **38** I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

39 “If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: **40** he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. **41** Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. **42** For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. **43** You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God. **44** As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. **45** You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. **46** You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.

47 “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan, **48** then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, **49** or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. **50** He shall calculate with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired worker. **51** If there are still many years left, he shall pay

proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. **52** If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service. **53** He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight. **54** And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee. **55** For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Introduction

It may confuse the reader to find land regulation in the priestly book. Leviticus is commonly thought of as an instructional code for the priests and Levites. For the most part the book reflects this characterization, with a heavy emphasis on sacrifices, ritual purity, liturgical observances, and the proper ways to worship God. With this though there may be a temptation to see too large a division between the civil and ceremonial laws of the Pentateuch, as though we could say “This command is for ceremonial observances, that command is for secular matters.” It is not such a simple demarcation. Oftentimes the ceremonial law informs the civil law, forms the civil law, or the lines are blurred.

The blurring between the ceremonial and civil laws is on account of both of them taking formation from the Ten Commandments. The sacrifices and purity requirements of Leviticus are the prescribed method for the Israelites to collectively obey the First Commandment, “you shall have no other gods before Me.” While *all* commands are predicated on the First, the ceremonial observances are more direct. Meanwhile, other laws are more oriented to flow from other commands specifically; the punishments levied on thieves comes out of the Seventh Commandment, “you shall not steal.” But the Jubilee year is predicated on *both* of these Commandments, as it is a recognition that all land is God's land and obedient to the command to be generous, respecting others' property rights, etc.¹ Here the civil command is an outgrowth of the liturgical observance, to the glory of our Lord.

Vs.23-34

23 “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. **24** And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.

25 “If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. **26** If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, **27** let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. **28** But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

29 “If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption. **30** If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer, throughout his generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee. **31** But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee. **32** As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess. **33** And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city they possess shall be released in the jubilee. For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. **34** But the fields of pastureland belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is their possession forever.

The land belongs to God. If any man among the Israelites is to believe in the Lord, then he must not conceive of the lands as belonging to his family alone. Since God created the universe, it is His.

¹ Each of the Ten Commandments has a “mirror” command. In the case of the Seventh Commandment, one must be generous instead of stealing.

Here though there is a foreshadowing of the Gospel, as our Lord adds “you are strangers and sojourners with Me.” This is to say, they must see themselves as travelers whose ultimate home is in Paradise with the angels, the saints of old, and everyone else who is Resurrected; the author of Hebrews uses parallel language to the twenty-third verse to build on his case that Abraham and his faithful descendants knew about eternal life, having faith in the salvation God offered.² St. John will comment further by positively identifying this future home as the New Jerusalem.³ While the average Israelite learning these commandments just after the Exodus will not likely understand the implication, they are expected to understand at least that their true home is with God.

Since they are to see themselves as sojourners in this life, their relationship to property must be different than that of a pagan. While the Lord established property rights, He also tempered it with a recognition of His promises to the Patriarchs.⁴ Therefore, a right of redemption is codified in law for all inherited territories: if a man cannot pay for his ancestral lands to return, his kinsmen must do it; if the kinsman cannot pay for it, then they shall wait for the Jubilee Year to see it returned. Thus the property rights of a buyer of land are better understood as a 50 year *lease*, but with the additional stipulation that he is compensated if the land is redeemed before Jubilee.

So our Lord balances keeping His promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the sojourner dynamic of Israelite faith, wherein their true inheritance is the New Jerusalem. Lest chaos ensue though, this protection for traditional inheritance is not applicable to the houses built in cities: buildings are just buildings. The permanent right of redemption *is* for the lands God promised and for the Levite cities though, since Levites did not have a full land inheritance. Even so, a one year probationary right of redemption is provided for the seller as a means of protecting urban families outside of Levite jurisdiction. He does not permit the poor to be oppressed in times of need by predatory buyers.

Vs.35-55

35 “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. **36** Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. **37** You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. **38** I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

39 “If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: **40** he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. **41** Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. **42** For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. **43** You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God. **44** As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. **45** You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. **46** You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.

47 “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan, **48** then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, **49** or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. **50** He shall calculate with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired worker. **51** If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. **52** If there

² Hebrews 11:13-16

³ Revelation 21

⁴ Genesis 15, Exodus 32:13

remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service. **53** He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight. **54** And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee. **55** For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Impoverishment and “hard times” are preempted by this command to help the poor. If an Israelite cannot find work, then someone wealthier must assist him. This could be in hiring him, permitting him to engage in gleaning, or even (especially for the old) simply caring for his needs and letting him rest. Even if the poor man sells himself into indentured servitude to a wealthier Israelite, the wealthy man must pay him wages for his work *in addition* to the sale of his self determination.

Notably the foreign slave has no right of redemption. He does not have the right to be freed at the Jubilee year, and nor is his owner commanded to pay him. This does not mean that it was a free-for-all though, as the Mosaic Law stifles slavery to the point of suffocation even regarding foreigners. The slavery economy was restricted by the law against manstealers; if anyone kidnaps another person and sells them into slavery, the offending party is to be executed.⁵ On account of that ban, the people would be unable to patronize slave markets. Further, female slaves that became concubines were elevated to citizenship.⁶ Here Moses passes along *more* restrictions by binding would-be slave owners to treat their indentured Israelite slaves disproportionately well, cementing protections for the poor.

The last verses in the chapter offer protections against and for foreigners regarding servitude. An Israelite can own a foreign slave permanently; a foreigner cannot own an Israelite permanently. There are no guarantees of opportunities for freedom for foreign slaves, but the Israelite under a foreigner's power must necessarily have the right of redemption. Like any other country, the citizen has greater rights than the noncitizen in this case. While rich foreigners who purchase Israelite labor are still entitled to compensation when redemption draws near, they are not given the option to refuse the purchase of an Israelite's freedom. The reasoning God provides is simple: the Israelite does not belong to man, but to God. While the Israelites were to see themselves as sojourners in the world, thus limiting their relationship with property, on the other side of this they had only one Master – the maker of Heaven and Earth, who guarantees their freedom. The civic principles of liberty, protection, and redemption from bondage are all of course foreshadowing of the Gospel, which shows us how Christ has won us liberty from the Law, protection from death, and redemption from our bondage to sin. But in the meantime for those under the Old Covenant, the people were strictly commanded to treat one another with dignity, respect, liberty and compassion, forming civic principles that nations do well to imitate today.

⁵ Exodus 21:16

⁶ Exodus 21:7-11