

LEVITICUS 25:8-12 THE TRUMPET OF MERCY

Several years ago, Taylor and I were walking out of the Bob Evans restaurant on the east side, when a middle-aged man approached us.

He said his family was on a long journey, and that he was just about out of gas, and that he was parked at the gas station across the street, but he did not have the money to fill his tank.

Could I help? Would I help? Should I help?

Has something like that ever happened to you? What did you say? What did you do? What would you say? What would you do?

God made us as spiritual and physical creatures, and we have material needs. Especially in this community, and even in this church, we are faced with people who come to us and say, "Please help!"

What do we say? What do we do?

As we read through the Old Testament this year, we are now reading through the book of Leviticus.

It is not an easy book to read, is it? Sometimes the details overwhelm us, and you may wonder why God would preserve all those details.

We discover the heart of the book of Leviticus in chapter 11: "I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy...I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy."

Leviticus is about the worship and lives of God's "peculiar" people. God has called a people together, who are to be different. Their hearts and lives are to be holy in a world of so much unholiness, for he is holy, and he is their God, and they are his people.

But what does holiness look like? It is far more than just activities like gathering for worship. Holiness is about living lives that honor the holy Lord, through every area of daily life, including when you leave Bob Evans, and you are approached by a man who wants gas for his car.

Today, we ordain two men to the office of deacon. The work of the deacon is about two callings: service and mercy.

The deacon is called to serve. He serves inside and outside the church.

The deacon is called to show mercy. He has received the mercy of Jesus Christ, so he offers the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Yet the deacon is not alone in this. He leads all of us, through example and encouragement, in acts of service and mercy, because of Jesus.

Today, we ponder a portion of Leviticus that describes some of the holy mercy that God calls his people to demonstrate.

In the verses before us, God commands that the trumpet of Jubilee blow. It is the trumpet of mercy.

Slaves are restored to freedom. Land is restored to the poor. The God who is holy, calls his peculiar people, to lives of mercy.

The trumpet of mercy. WHY DOES IT BLOW? Why does the Lord proclaim, "...sound the trumpet throughout your land"? Why does he call deacons and us, to blow the trumpet of mercy?

Here is the first reason: *MINE IS NOT MINE.*

The Israelites are preparing to enter the promised land. It will be their land. Or will it? Will it really be theirs? Are your possessions, really yours?

Verse 1: "The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them, 'When you enter the land that I am going to give you...'"

They have been slaves in Egypt. Many generations have passed since these people have lived in the land they are about to receive.

It is not theirs. It is the Lord's. Theirs is not theirs.

Verse 23: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants."

Who owns the land? Does Israel own it? No. The Lord does. He is the Owner of everything, and Israel will now receive and occupy what he owns. It will be in their possession, but it is not theirs.

God sovereignly made the land. God sovereignly gives the land. God is reminding his people that this blessing is his, not theirs.

I am reminded of little Rachel, a girl a few years younger than me, who lived down the street. I can still see her, riding a bike along the sidewalk in front of our house, and stopping to talk to me. Somehow, she said something about something that she had, and she said, "It is not mine. It is God's. I am just borrowing it."

Yes, Rachel. Theirs is not theirs. Yours is not yours. Mine is not mine.

That is more than just some cute words from a cute little girl. That is more than just a churchy way of talking about possessions. That is a truth proclaimed here by the Lord - a truth that must seep into our souls.

We live in a very possessive culture. We think ours is ours.

You stay off my property. You keep your hands off my stuff.

The small child cries, "Mine!" The teenager cries, "Mine!" The adult (sometimes in court) cries, "Mine!"

There is good reason for some of this. If mine is yours and yours is mine, we have chaos.

But God calls his people to a peculiar perspective on "mine!" It is not mine. None of it. It is his.

Think of what you have. Kids, think of the stuff you try to keep away from your siblings. Young adults, think of what you have saved to purchase. Adults, think of all that you own.

It is not yours. It is a gift of God. You are merely a steward of what truly is his.

If that truth seeps deeply into your soul, how might it change your attitudes toward what you have?

Maybe, just maybe, you would begin by realizing that if God is the Owner, he governs how you use what he has given you.

You must say, "Lord, what do you want? Because they are yours, how do you want me to use your gifts?"

You must say, "Lord, what is wise? Because they are yours, how can I wisely use your gifts?"

And if he calls you to blow the trumpet of mercy in the life of someone in need, you blow the trumpet.

Yet the trumpet blows for a second reason. Mine is not mine, but *MERCY IS MINE*.

Let's go back to verses 8-9: "Count off seven sabbaths of years - seven times seven years - so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years.

"Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month..." Why this day?

"...on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land."

The trumpet of mercy blows, on the day when the people of Israel know for certain, that they have received mercy.

We learn of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16.

Moses' brother, Aaron, was to enter the place in the tabernacle called the Most Holy Place. In doing this, he would be entering God's presence.

He was to offer a bull as a sacrifice, then he was to take two goats and present them before the Lord. One of the goats would be sacrificed to take away the guilt of Aaron's sin.

Aaron was then to sprinkle the blood of the bull and the goat on something called the "Atonement Cover." This sprinkling of the blood would atone for the sins of the Israelites.

Then the other goat was to have hands laid on him, while the Israelites' wickedness and rebellion was to be confessed. Then the goat was to be sent into the desert, for the goat would "carry on itself all their sins."

What is going on here?

The people are receiving mercy. They deserve to die for their sins. But God has provided a way for someone else to die, so they may live.

This prepares us for Jesus. In the book of Hebrews, the writer tells us that the Day of Atonement was “an illustration for the present time.”

Then the writer declares that Jesus is the great High Priest, who, like Aaron, enters the presence of God. But he does not offer animals to atone for sin. He offers himself. And he does not offer animals to atone for his own sin. He offers himself, to atone for our sin.

The trumpet of Jubilee, blows on the day God’s people remember God’s mercy to them.

In his challenging book, Don’t Waste Your Life, Pastor John Piper writes,

“...we totaled our old Dodge Spirit a few years ago, but nobody was hurt.

“...But why was nobody hurt? That was a gift to me and my family that none of us deserves...”

“So how did we come to have such a gift for our good? Answer: Christ died for our sins on the cross and took away the wrath of God from us and secured for us, even though we don’t deserve it, God’s omnipotent grace...”

“Apart from the cross, there is only judgment - patience and mercy for a season, but then, if spurned, all that mercy only serves to intensify judgment.

“Therefore every good thing in life, and every bad thing that God turns for good, is a blood-bought gift.”

Have you ever thought that way? Once again, if we are to be a peculiar people, we must think differently than our culture. We tend to say, “Mine is mine!”, and we define everything by rights. I have a right to this. I have a right to that.

We are like Sally in the Charlie Brown Christmas movie, after she recites an outrageous list of gift demands to Santa Claus, and Charlie Brown hangs his head in disgust. Sally says, “All I want is what’s coming to me. All I want is my fair share.”

As the peculiar people of God, looking back on the Savior Moses dreamed about, we know that we have not received what we deserve. We deserve all of God’s wrath for our rebellion. Instead, we have received mercy we do not deserve. All we have, is purely a mercy gift from the God of mercy.

I don’t deserve any of this. I don’t deserve life. I don’t deserve health. I don’t deserve delicious and nutritious food. I don’t deserve a decent car. I don’t deserve all the comforts of body, mind and soul that I receive.

It is mercy. It is all mercy. That is how I must see it. What I have is not mine, but mercy is mine.

So if I see that mercy is mine, how will that direct my heart, as I look at people who need mercy? I will look at them with deep humility.

I am better off than that man in front of Bob Evans. I do not need anyone to give me money to fill my gas tank.

Why? Because I am better? No, because of the mercy of God.

But didn’t I work hard? Didn’t I do the right things? Have I not played by the rules - rules that maybe that fellow at Bob Evans didn’t follow?

Maybe. But if so, why? Only by the mercy of God. Apart from God’s mercy, I am nothing. I am worse than nothing. I am dead.

How can you show mercy? Why do you show mercy? Purely because you have received such mercy.

Why does the trumpet of mercy blow? Mine is not mine. Mercy is mine.

But HOW DOES IT BLOW? In the year of Jubilee, the ram’s horn was to be blown, and slaves were to be set free, and land was to be restored to the original owners.

Can we do this? Legally, maybe not. We live under different laws. We cannot blow the trumpet precisely as this trumpet was to be blown.

But we can pursue the sound of this trumpet, as we minister mercy, both in the church, and through the

church.

So how? What a difficult question! We spend weeks on this during our training of deacons!

Yet the words of Leviticus 25 direct us to two words for our showing of mercy, as individuals, as deacons, and as a church.

The first is responsibility. The trumpet blows *WITH RESPONSIBILITY*.

Mercy is hard, because we believe people should take responsibility for their actions. We don't know why people in Israel faced "financial trouble," but we know human nature, and we suspect that at least some of the poor, faced poverty because of their own sinful and foolish decisions.

So it is with us. Pastor Tim Keller has written wise words on mercy ministry, many of which I use in our deacon training.

Keller writes that there are three basic reasons for poverty:

1) Disaster. Events that we cannot control, which hurt us.

2) Oppression. People that we cannot control, who hurt us.

3) Sin. Often, when we do not control ourselves, and hurt ourselves.

Sometimes it is sin. So sometimes mercy means asking people to take responsibility.

If you read thoughtfully through Leviticus 25, you will discover that mercy and responsibility do go together. For example:

* Verse 15: "You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops."

In other words, if I am buying land from you, we both know the year of Jubilee is coming. So the price must reflect that, so that neither one of us takes advantage of the other.

* Verses 29-34: the Jubilee law describes different situations, requiring different solutions. This law does not command a thoughtless handout. This law reflects the different realities and responsibilities for different people.

* Verses 35 and 39: the picture is of a poor person, doing responsible work to pay off the debt he owes. This is simply the principle of asking people to do what they can, to deal with the issues in their lives.

Mercy includes responsibility.

Earlier this week, I received a phone call from someone who is not a part of this church, asking for help. I had been warned by people I trust, that I should not help him. Within about a minute, I caught this man lying to me. I finally asked him, "How can you expect me to help you, when you are not being honest with me?" That was about the end of the conversation.

Mercy includes responsibility. As Pastor Tim Keller has taught us in our deacon training, sometimes mercy must limit mercy. Sometimes the merciful answer is to say "no" to someone who will not live responsibly.

This is hard! We live in a culture where people demand their rights, and where our government has offered programs that often allow people to evade their responsibilities. Our deacons will tell you that some people who receive mercy, especially from outside this body, want all of our money, and none of our wisdom.

The trumpet of mercy blows with a call to responsibility. As we give, as we help, as we show mercy, we are right to urge people to live responsibly.

Yet a second word is here, and I believe the trumpet may blow a bit louder with this word: *DIGNITY*.

Let's listen to several portions of Leviticus 25:

* Verse 13: "In the year of Jubilee, everyone is to return to his own property." God was going to give land to the various tribes of Israel, and Jubilee was a time for people to return to the land of their tribe.

* Verse 17: "Do not take advantage of each other." The poor might do this, but this is always a temptation for the person in the stronger position.

* Verse 35: "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help

him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.”

Then there are details on how to help him:

+ Do not lend him money at interest. The translation is a bit unclear here, and some believe interest is okay, but not excessive interest. But either way, you are to help, not harm.

+ Do not sell him food at a profit. Do not make money off his suffering.

We can discuss the details for hours, but one writer sums it up this way: “Whatever the cause of a brother’s poverty, he is to be given the hospitality accorded to a stranger or alien, and not be allowed to die of starvation.”

* Verse 39: “If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave.” Yes, he can and must work for you. But treat him not as a mere slave, but as a person with dignity.

Again, these verses raise many more questions than we can answer right now. For example: should we treat people who are part of God’s people here, in a different way than we treat people who are not?

One principle we use in our mercy ministry, is that we will only help people outside the church, when we are confident we have enough funds in reserve to help people inside the church.

But even that is not simple, because sometimes people will come to us from outside, and give a testimony of faith in Jesus. What do we do then?

It is complicated. But this principle remains: we treat people with dignity.

We take time to listen to them. We speak respectfully to them. We care for their most basic needs. We offer mercy as we are able, because God has been merciful to us.

That is partly why I have encouraged our participation in the Tuesday evening meals served at Rock Solid Ministries. I may be wrong, but I will guess that some of you do not understand this, or approve of this. What reasons could we have, for going “down there,” and doing that?

It is because of this principle of dignity. We affirm the dignity of those needy people, when we humble ourselves and serve at Rock Solid. We confess that these people are made in God’s image, and we want to show them Jesus’ mercy, as we offer meals to them.

Yes, I know what some of you are thinking. “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” That’s in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.

But some of these people do work. And some of these people do not work, because they cannot work. People are poor for more than one reason, and we cannot claim to know all the reasons.

But we can treat people with dignity. We can help the believers at Rock Solid minister to them, so they can enter their lives and maybe say to them, “You need to work.”

Dignity. Dignity at Rock Solid, and dignity as our deacons strive to move beyond that basic level of ministry, and help people to live responsibly.

Yes, it is hard. Our deacons usually do not get as far as they would like in working with people in their lives.

Yes, we make mistakes. Yes, we get taken by people who lie to us. But should we err, let us err on the side of mercy, for mercy is ours, in Jesus.

So what did I say to that man in front of Bob Evans? I told him to meet me at the gas station across the street. I filled his gas tank.

Then I looked right at him, and I said something like, “I am a minister of Jesus Christ, and I give this to you in the name of Jesus Christ. If you are taking me for a ride, he knows it. May God bless you.”

Did I do the right thing? I do not know for sure.

Would I do the same thing again? I do not know.

Mercy ministry is a big subject, and the answers are never easy. In a fallen world, nothing is easy. I think of David Wegener telling us that if he gave away money in Africa to every person asking him for money,

he and his family would soon be the ones begging for money!

Sometimes the trumpet must blow, with different notes. Maybe the way you blow the trumpet, will look different than the way I blow the trumpet.

But the trumpet must blow! The trumpet must blow from this church, and the trumpet must blow from our people, because the peculiar people of God are peculiar people of mercy!

Sometimes the trumpet blows with a resounding call to responsibility.

Always the trumpet blows with a decisive declaration of dignity.

I blow it, and you blow it, and we blow it, because it has blown for us.

Where is your heart? What do you think of this?

Where are your hands? How might you support mercy ministry here? How might you help our deacons in this calling?

God's heart of mercy, has extended even to the hands of his Son, nailed upon a cruel cross. So our heart of mercy extends to hands of mercy, in the name of the One who shows mercy.