

Overflow

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 February 2017

Preacher: Chris Thornton

[0 : 00] So we've been looking at this book of Deuteronomy. And this book is all about what we're to be as his people. The kind of family we're to be. And in the midst of all the nations around, all the people around, pagan nations, God's people would be different.

They would be generous. They would be hospitable. Last week we looked at how they would be partying. How they would be filled with joy, eating together, enjoying each other, serving each other, inviting people in.

And all of that was to show that all the people around would look at that and say, why are you so different? Why are you so different? And the Israelites were meant to say, well, it's because we have an amazing, generous, gracious, hospitable, glorious God.

That's why. And they were meant to attract people to himself through this community. And today we're just going to have a look at this passage in Deuteronomy 15, which is a beautiful passage.

It's a challenging passage, but it's a beautiful one. And it's a challenge that we're to be out of an overflow of God's goodness in our lives to be a just people. And so what I'm going to look at is just three sections.

[1 : 19] I'm going to look at a vision for justice. That's going to be verse 4 to 6. A heart for justice. That's verse 7 to 11. And a power for justice, which is verse 15.

So let's look at a vision for justice. Have your bulletin open. And I encourage you to go away afterwards and read through this. This is just really powerful stuff. Deuteronomy 15 verse 4 says this, There will be no poor among you.

For in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you. I don't know many people whose heart would not resonate with that.

There will be no poor among you. You know, with the 300,000 kids in Hong Kong who can't afford three meals a day, wouldn't we want them to be well fed?

There is elderly people living in drafty nursing homes with nobody to visit them. Wouldn't we want them to be loved and given dignity? There are single mothers.

[2 : 29] There are people who are abused in their families. Wouldn't we long for them to find acceptance and belonging? Because poverty is spiritual, it's physical, it's economic, it's social, it's relational, it's economic.

It's economic in all of these different things. Wouldn't we long to see that? There's none of that. None of that poverty. And that's God's vision.

That's God's vision for his world. God says in this passage, he's going to provide so much for this people who are about to enter into the land of the promised land of blessing.

There's going to be enough to go around for everyone. No one should be poor. No one should be poor. That's what God is saying to his people. And Michael Jackson, he sang, heal the world, make it a better place.

I'm not going to sing it. Okay. My voice isn't that high. But deep down in our hearts, we resonate with that, right? We resonate with that. Because we know there's something fundamentally wrong with the world and with the injustice in the world.

- [3 : 42] And we want there to be a fix of this. And that is God's heart, too. But I don't know. I sometimes scroll down the BBC News.
- And there is like 15 tragedies in the world at one time. And do you know what I do? I avoid all of them, clicking all of those stories. And I click on the stories, which are like, why did the Victorians electrocute themselves?
- You know, like kind of these trivial things. Because I don't want to hear about the tragedies of the world. Because it's so much need. It's so overwhelming. So I hide in kind of the trivial things.
- I don't know if anyone else is like me. That's what I'm like. And yet this passage is going to say, God wants his people to face the issue of poverty and need.
- And in this passage, there are two types of poor people. The desperate poor. They're the people who simply need relief. That's the people in verse 7 to 11. And then there's the struggling poor.
- [4 : 40] Those who just need help to get back on their feet. That's the people in debt. That's the slaves in this passage. The servants. And so just to give you like the background of what's going on in this passage to help you understand it.
- Remember, most wealth and income comes from the land. And the passage tells us every seven years, and we know this from Leviticus as well and Exodus, every seven years the land was meant to have a rest.
- Okay? And they weren't to work the land. But Exodus 21 tells us they would have let the poor eat from the land on their fields. Okay? And if you become poor and had to borrow money to survive, your debts in this seventh year would either be cancelled or they'd be delayed for at least a year.
- Because those people who had to keep paying back would have less to provide from their land to repay debts. So they took it all into account. Foreigners, who are mentioned in verse 3, they were traders.
- So they didn't rely on the wealth of the land. So they could keep paying back their debts. But those who had fallen into the pit of poverty sometimes could only sell themselves to someone else because they had no more land.
- [5 : 52] They had nothing else to gain an income from. But Leviticus 25 tells us they would be treated not as slaves. They would be treated just as employees. Treated with dignity.
- And every seven years, they would be set free so that nobody would be permanently enslaved to poverty as a family. All land sales after 50 years...
- Okay, get this. All land sales after 50 years would go back to the original family. So Li Ka-shing and his family would not continue inherited wealth.
- But everyone would be equal again after 50 years. So nobody would have this unbridgeable gap between rich and poor. And the reason for this, Leviticus says, is the land shall not be sold forever because the land is mine.
- And your tenants on my land. This is my world. And your tenants here on what I have given you. And God is loaning this land of blessing to the people.
- [6 : 57] And what he says is, with great blessing comes great responsibility. You see, he's saying, you can party. We saw this last week. You can party and enjoy God's goodness.
- I don't want you to be a people living in guilt. But you've also got to be aware that as you're partying, there are some people who don't have what you have.
- And so because there is a broken world, poverty will always be among you. That's what he says. Jesus says the same. You know, sometimes it's because of the environment.

Some people's land is more fertile than other people's land. Sometimes it's because of people's own sin. Their own poor choices that they've made. Sometimes it's other people's sin.

Their greed and injustice. All of these things are going to mean that there will always be poverty in your land. But you guys, as God's people, it's your responsibility not to neglect those who are poor.

[7 : 59] I'm going to give to you so you can give and be a blessing to others. That's what he's saying. And now here's the challenging part. He says in verse 10, if you as my people don't do this, he says, you will have your poor brother appealing to God and you will be guilty of sin.

That language is the language of the courts. It's language of a crime. Because this passage is not just about generosity. It's about justice. And what God is saying is that people, his people and being his people, it's not a private thing between me and God.

The vertical relationship with God always flows out in the horizontal of the way you live. Tim Keller puts it like this. He says, a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is seriously wrong with one's spiritual compass, the heart.

You know, I find this challenging because a few years ago, there was this story about a three-month-old Korean girl who died from malnutrition.

And if she had died because there wasn't enough food to go around, we'd say that's a tragedy. But her parents had plenty of food to eat.

[9 : 20] The child died from neglect because her parents were gaming for hours every day. And it wasn't that they were kind of terrible people. They didn't mean to do it.

But actually, they had no idea what it meant to be parents. And neglect, no matter how good their intentions were, was a crime. And they got arrested for it.

And God is saying here, and this is pretty hard, heavy stuff. He's saying, if you as my people are blessed with material possessions, and we mentioned a couple of weeks ago that all of us are rich, right?

So none of us escape from this. We're blessed. And he says, you're to enjoy the blessing. Don't go on a guilt trip because you're blessed. No, you enjoy it.

But we have responsibility to those who don't have it. So sin is not just about doing bad things. Sin is also neglecting to do good things when you have an opportunity to do it.

[10 : 22] Okay? In Ephesians 4, this is really, really interesting. If you go and read Ephesians 4, Paul picks up on the Ten Commandments. And he picks up on the sin of stealing.

You know, do not steal. And he says this, let the thief steal no more, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his hands. And you think, that's great, you know? One of the solutions to stealing, and you know, if you're poor, don't steal.

Get a job. That's good advice, right? That's not bad advice. That's good advice. But do you know what he goes on to say? He says, get a job so that you may have something to share with anyone in need.

Do you know what he's saying? He's saying, if God has blessed you with work, this is challenging. If God has blessed you with work, it's so that you can provide for yourself. It's so that you can provide for your family.

But it's also so that you can provide for those in need. So he's saying, you have a job. Have you thought about that? Your job is given as a blessing by God to you, in part, to be able to provide for people who don't have what you have.

[11 : 28] That's challenging. So your job is a blessing to be able to bless other people with the fruit of that. And verse 6 also says this.

The Lord your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations, but you will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations, but none will rule over you.

And this passage, it's talking particularly about providing people for those in need within God's people. But here, he's saying that God's going to bless his people, and they're going to be the lenders and the rulers of other nations around.

He's not saying, you're going to be the guys who are going to be the big, strong guys, so that you can oppress everybody else. He says, no, I'm going to give you position and blessing, so that through you, people around will be blessed.

I heard a TV presenter who was normally highly critical of Christians. She's an atheist, and she was kind of lamenting the current situation of the refugees in the States.

[12 : 36] And she said this. She said, you may not believe that I am actually saying this, but the church in America may be the only hope for America because they've consistently welcomed and spoken out for refugees.

She was an atheist. You see, when a blessed people share that blessing with other people, it's a powerful witness to the world around in need. And the reverse is also true.

If I preach a gospel message, and yet you know that I'm abusing my wife at home, you're not going to listen to anything I say. I've lost all credibility.

And it doesn't matter how great the message is. If I'm doing that, I've lost your heart. I've lost your ear. But if the church in Hong Kong, if we as the church in Hong Kong only seem to be supporting ourselves indifferent to the needs of people around us, while we invest lots of money in our own programs, our own buildings, whatever we're doing, if we do that, then the gospel message will not be credible to the city around.

But history shows when the early church rescued babies from rubbish dumps, people noticed. People noticed. When they fought against slavery, people noticed. And the gospel message backed up by deeds of serving and using what we have to bless the poor is powerful in society.

[14 : 02] That's part of God's vision for us as his church. So the second thing is there's a heart for justice. Not just God's vision for justice, a heart for justice.

It says here, If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of your towns in the land the Lord your God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards them.

Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need. Okay? So he said, From the overflow of your blessings, you're to be open-handed, liberally, generously blessing as God has blessed you.

That's why you cancel debts, even if it's going to be a cost to you. Don't be tight-fisted. Don't hold on to money. People matter more than money. Yet, the interesting thing is, though I know all this stuff, that's not always my first response.

Do you know why? I think there's a number of things. I mentioned it already. One of the things that stops me from really having that heart is I'm overwhelmed. I am overwhelmed.

[15 : 09] You know, I read this, and my first thought is often, are you asking me to give to everybody? Like, everyone? Because I walk along in Central, and you know there's often beggars along the side of the bridges, and I go through that thing, should I give to them?

Okay? I don't know if you've heard this. Should I give to them? And sometimes I've given because I feel guilty. Like, you know, I know I've got more than you, so I should give anyway. Sometimes, I've not given because I think they're probably part of a gang or something like that.

Right? It's real. Sometimes I've just ignored them. Okay? And if I was to magnify those responses on a city level and then on a world level, you kind of get to see that often we're paralyzed, particularly when those charity guys come up to you on the streets with their clipboards.

Do you know, my instant response is like, how can I avoid them? Right? Anyone else like me? I kind of head down, straight on, I'm not, no eye contact, that kind of thing.

Because I'm overwhelmed. But he's saying, you will always have the poor among you. You're not going to save the world, Chris. This church is not here to save the world. That's Jesus' job, not our job.

[16 : 27] Okay? One day he will return and bring justice and full justice to the world. That's his job. He's the savior. I'm not. But, what I'm asking you, what God is asking is for a people whose heart is soft, who have eyes to see, a heart that's soft and hands that are open.

And God, if we're like that as his people, God will show us who the poor, who you're poor, it says here, who you're needy, who you're, the people that you can reach out to within your context are going to be.

One Bible scholar said it like this, the disposition of one's possessions signifies the dispositions of your heart. I'm not calling you to everyone, but we are calling you to someone.

To someone. So do you ever pray, and this is challenging, do you ever pray, God, show me who that someone might be. Show me who that people in need that I can bless might be.

So we're sometimes overwhelmed. Sometimes we just don't trust God. Verse 9 says, be careful not to harbor this wicked thought. The seventh year is near.

[17 : 40] And basically, the seventh year is like they're going to cancel the debts, so it's kind of, I'm going to lose my money. If I lend money, I'm not going to get it back. So I'm not going to lend to this guy. And the idea is, if I lend to him, then I'm not going to, I won't have enough for myself.

I've got school fees to pay. I've got to provide for myself and my family. And what he's really saying when he says this is, God's not going to keep providing for me if I am generous. God's not going to provide for me.

Maybe I can't trust him. You know, there was a multi-billionaire called Ted Turner in the States. He pledged to give a billion dollars to the UN to encourage other billionaires to donate wealth.

I don't know if you've heard of this. But years later, after his pledge, a reporter came to him and asked him, are you going to give another billion away? And his reply was, well, the price of beef is going up at the moment.

Now, this is a guy who's got at least three billion dollars. And he's saying, with my other two or three billion dollars, I'm not sure if I've got enough money in the bank to kind of account for inflation.

[18 : 51] And that's ridiculous. I mean, he's got enough to buy a whole, like, the whole of American farming, probably. But, if you look at it, and we look at all that we have, do you know what?

I think sometimes I do the same thing. I may not have a billion dollars, but God has blessed me. Every meal, that's what we talked about last week, every meal is assigned God's provision, God's grace, God's blessing to you.

Do you think he's going to stop providing in the future if he's already provided in the past? He says, no, be generous, trust him. God is good. He will provide for you so you can be open-handed.

But the third thing that I think when I hear all of this stuff, do you know what I tend to feel? I just feel like there's this weight of guilt on me. You know, I feel like so much that has motivated me to do charity work and to serve people is actually just out of guilt.

You know, I feel bad that I've got so much and other people don't and I feel blessed. But the motivation here, that's not the motivation of this passage. This passage, verse 4, verse 6, verse 10, verse 18, it says this passage is about blessing, which is interesting.

[20 : 04] It's about blessing. He says, showing justice to the poor and the needy, it will free you from an impoverished spirit. This is a way for God to channel his blessing to you.

Because if you want to enjoy God, if you want to enjoy his good things, then party together. That's what we said last week. If you want to enjoy God, celebrate him, invite others to join, but then look out for those who don't have.

And do you know what will happen? You will just begin to see God's blessing flowing into your life. That may not be financial blessing, maybe, but it's going to be a richness in your experience of God in your life that actually is so much more exciting when you become actually the person you deep down would really want to be, a generous person, somebody whose respect, who you would love to be like.

So the vision is no poor among you. The heart is not out of guilt, not just because you're overwhelmed, not just because you're like, I can't trust God, but with a trust of him for your future and realizing that God is calling you to blessing, look out to serve and give and be generous to the needy and the poor.

Third thing, the power to be just, the power for justice. Verse 15, give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you.

[21 : 35] Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. Do you see what he's saying?

He's saying, you need to remember who you were. You were slaves in poverty in Egypt and I rescued you. So now you reflect my saving work to others.

You know, so much charity work and I've done this is when we feel like we're the strong, confident ones and we're the wealthy ones and we're just going to help all the poor.

We're going to rescue them from their problems. That's one of the reasons why NGO workers have such a high burnout rate because actually when they get down to it they realize they can't rescue the poor because there are so many different things going on.

sometimes we can so much neglect people because we feel they don't deserve to be helped because frankly the poor are sometimes as unrighteous as the rich.

[22 : 34] Right? And we feel like we've worked hard to get what we have but are God's people of justice and neither of those? Jesus is the savior and that's what motivates us.

I shared this story a few years ago but I think it's worth sharing again. When I was in the UK I met a homeless guy I called him Jim and we tried to help him find a place to live and so we had him stay at our house for a few days and eventually a friend of mine agreed to kind of put him up and the first night he stays there he steals 500 pounds from my friend.

He runs away. Didn't see him I called the police eventually they were like oh we can't press charges or anything like that and so I went to find him went down to a homeless shelter and I went there I knew he was going to be there he walks in he sees me his face was just like shock and kind of like just hang his head in shame and I told him you know we know what you did we've called the police and those different things but do you know at the end of the day I know there's a God who's gracious and he forgives me so we forgive you and I invited him for dinner he never turned up a few days later or maybe even a week I can't remember maybe a week or so later I was cycling in this completely other end of town in this kind of narrow back alley like no one goes down there and I was cycling through and then suddenly I see him sitting on a bench and as I saw him I got off my bike and went over to him and again he saw me and the look on his face was like shock and he said to me you know I've been trying to avoid you all of this time in fact and I thought this was the one place in this city that I could come to avoid you but obviously

God's got something different going on here and so from that point we started doing Bible study with him I invited him to stay at our house for a few days until we found him another place to go one day I went out to work I get a call from my housemate saying this guy's gone and stolen my PSP and we call the police he gets arrested he'd stolen some other stuff he gets sentenced to three years in prison every month I went to go and visit him in prison every month we talk about Jesus we talk about going to the chaplain and going and sharing the gospel with him and every month he'd say I'll go to see the chaplain every month I went back I'd ask him have you been to the chaplain and he'd say no this went on for like about a year and then I kind of began to give up about 18 months into his term I hadn't seen him for three or four months I get a letter from him the letter says

I I just wanted to say that I've become a Christian and I got baptized last week because I was put in isolation for brewing beer inside the prison go figure you can tell the kind of guy Jim was and and he said and while I was in there I remembered everything that you guys had done for me and the grace that you had shown for me and I realized how much a sinner I was and so I asked God to save me he said later that day the chaplain came around and he came around and he said hey you're getting baptized Sunday and Jim hadn't told anyone he prayed this prayer and he's like okay fine Saturday comes the chaplain comes around again and says hey I'm really sorry Jim but I totally mistook you for somebody else like but do you still want to get baptized and and he did and and he gave this testimony to all of the other inmates of God's grace and faithfulness now why do I tell you that story it's not because

[26 : 39] I'm great but it's because looking back would I have done some of the same things that I did before maybe there's one or two things I would change but I think I would do exactly the same why did Jim deserve my help absolutely not could I rescue Jim absolutely not his own sin prevented him from accepting my help really so why love people like Jim why love people who are desperate in need in this different way because the gospel says that you and I are just like Jim you see God lavishes his blessing on me again and again and again and then we steal his stuff trying to keep it just for himself when he says your tenants I've loaned this to you but we say no it's mine and again and again God keeps chasing after us showering his blessing on us his grace and forgiveness on us again and again and again and again we keep holding on to it

Jesus didn't just lose a PSP he lost his life for you and me because we're just like Jim we were slaves to our own spiritual poverty and God rescued us and he blesses us with so much not because we deserve it but because he's gracious and that's the kind of people that he calls us to be in this city a people who are gracious to those who are in need what does that look like for each of us that's going to look very different very different some of us are like I'm so busy I have so many things to do and God is not saying I want you to fill your timetable with a hundred things but I want your heart to just stop and ask yourself do I see people is my heart soft are my hands open the greatest education my parents gave me was never in a classroom but it's they invited a refugee family around to my home week after week they never preached to me about reaching out to the poor and needy

I saw it that's the greatest sermon you can give your life there are tutoring opportunities at Ebenezer some of you God has blessed you with some time or some abilities that could be a great opportunity right here to teach some of the people Thursday sons and daughters they go out loving and serving the sex workers on Lockhart Road maybe you can go maybe you're not free then but maybe you can pray for them maybe you can bake goods for them maybe we can just get together and think about look at our spending I don't know if you've ever got together with somebody and said hey how much do I actually spend on clothes how much do I actually spend on food and entertainment maybe if I just cut one meal and we set that money aside and used it to be able to give to those in need maybe we just need to just start to pray as a CG and say God open my eyes I don't know where I don't know how I don't know what but my eyes and my ears are open for what you want to say maybe that's where we start last year and I'll close with this

I was walking back from the community center the old community center on Bonham Road and I saw this guy walking towards me and he looked at me I looked at him it's one of those kind of awkward moments you know and I was like should I stop and be friendly or should I just ignore him but I said hi and he kind of said hi and he then said to me do you know a church near here and I was like I don't have random strangers just coming up to me asking me that and he I found out he was a Sudanese guy he said I've just come over from China and there was money that was meant to be wired to me today hasn't come through and I've literally got nothing this night like tomorrow morning stuff should be come through and but I've got nothing right now and at that point I'm going yeah I've heard so many stories like seriously I know how this works and I asked him a few more questions we chatted for a while and I'm kind of in this should I give should I not should I give should I not and then

I'm like okay it's 20 I there's I said there's a McDonald's I had to go out later but I said hey if you want to stay the night there's a McDonald's there a 24-hour McDonald's down the road okay and here's \$20 or \$30 whatever it was just buy yourself something you can hang out there and you know what happened at that moment he just burst into tears like literally his face just started streaming with tears and you know what he said to me he said I've been around to so many churches and all of them said they couldn't help me and he said I thought that God had abandoned me but now I know that he hasn't and I wonder how many people there are in this city that think that God has abandoned them because I just haven't stopped to think to pray to ask God show me who it is who's that someone you want me to reach and yet God has us here as his people not just to be a busy people running around doing lots of stuff but to see who are the people within the church we need to love but outside people whose eyes are open whose heart is soft and whose hands are open to say God may I bless people here so that they might know that you have not abandoned them but that you came to rescue them and pray father this is a heavy topic in many ways but it does cut right to the heart of my own sense of comfort and sense of responsibility

[33 : 23] I pray for us as a church make us this kind of people that you call us to be change our hearts don't let us go away from here feeling just guilty that we're not done enough let us go away here with just that heart saying God change my heart open my eyes open my hands show me I pray that you'd make us a people who know how to bless those around us who know the riches that you've lavished on us and will freely openly bless those around us with wisdom but with compassion in Jesus name amen what's going on your neighbors you are saying