

**“A Kingdom of Rest”**  
**Deuteronomy 15:1-18**  
**March 16, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

It is not unusual to outline the main body of Deuteronomy by seeing it as an exposition of the Ten Commandments. Chapters such as the one we are considering today give credibility to that structure, because this chapter very clearly expands upon the fourth commandment, the one requiring rest. The command to observe a Sabbath rest is based on God’s pattern in creation, resting on the seventh day after six days of creation work. God directed that this pattern should be followed by his people, and even extended it beyond the weekly pattern into other areas of life. For example, the book of Exodus requires a Sabbath rest for the land, allowing it to lie fallow one year out of every seven. And then there was a Sabbath of Sabbath years, the seventh of every seven sabbatical years, or year fifty, which was called the Year of Jubilee. All land was to be returned to its original owners on this year. This idea of rest continues into the New Testament in two ways. First, it is seen as a rest from our works as that which would make us right with God. Second, it is seen as a picture of heaven, our eternal rest. God’s goal is to bring his people into his rest. The kingdom of God is about entering into God’s rest.

Today’s chapter shows us that the rest that God gives in his kingdom is more than simple cessation from work. There is an economic and social side to this rest. The word used in the early part of our chapter is significant, calling this Sabbath rest a “release.” It is a word that communicates the idea of being freed from a burden. In the context of this chapter, the burdens are those of debt, poverty and enslavement. The kingdom of God is not about the adding of burdens, but the release from burdens. Do you remember what the last day of school feels like prior to the long summer break? It is a release from the burdens of homework, tests and writing assignments. That is a dim picture of what the kingdom of God is like. Let’s look more carefully at this kingdom rest as it is described in this chapter.

**I. Rest for the One Needing Release**

This chapter deals with three situations in which people are under burdens and need release: debt, poverty and enslavement. All three are just different expressions of poverty. There were many more occasions for people to become poor in the Old Testament economy than in our modern economy. In an agrarian economy such as this, one year of drought was often enough to send many into trouble. And without such things as life insurance or disability

insurance, if something happened to the primary worker, the husband and father of the family, then the wife and children could easily be sent into poverty. If such a thing should happen, a wife and mother would often be forced to sell her children into slavery. It was just a situation from which Elisha once delivered a widow by miraculously supplying her with an abundance of oil. **“Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, ‘Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves’”** (2 Kings 4:1).

Poverty is a great burden, and God’s kingdom is all about releasing burdens. So he commands that every seventh year, all debts are to be forgiven. The exact wording is that **“every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor.”** There are three different interpretations of what is in view with this release. The first is that it means a complete forgiving of the debt. So if you borrowed the equivalent of \$5000 six years ago, and still owed \$2000 on that loan, in the sabbatical year the remaining \$2000 would be written off. The second interpretation is that it means the return of the pledge or collateral accompanying the loan. Just as in our own day, when money is borrowed, collateral is supplied to be held in pledge for the return of the money borrowed. If you borrow money to buy a car, the bank holds the car title as collateral until the loan is paid off. A pledge in the Old Testament was often something more necessary, like your winter coat. The third interpretation is that it meant that the borrower was given a one-year break during the sabbatical year from having to make the loan payments. I like the first interpretation, that it means a complete forgiving of whatever part of the loan has not been repaid, because it best harmonizes with verse 9. In that verse, a potential lender is warned against deciding upon whether or not to make a loan depending on how close they are to a sabbatical year. That suggests to me that it is a complete forgiving of the loan that is in view.

There is need here for an important clarification. This passage does not have in view business loans. It is referring to loans made to keep people alive because of financial setbacks beyond their control. The sabbatical year would have allowed those in such situations to make a fresh start. The Bible’s vision isn’t complete economic equality, but adequate provision. There would still have been wealthier people and those who struggled financially, but the rich would not have been quite so rich, and the poor would not be quite so poor. The poor would also not be trapped under a burden of debt. So they would have hope for a reversal of their circumstances and the possibility of being more permanently lifted out of poverty. There seems to be a contradiction in this chapter between the statement, **“there will be no poor among you”** (v. 4) and the statement of verse 11 that **“there will never cease to be poor in the land.”** I think what is meant is simply that while there will always be those

who fall into poverty, as Israel obeys God in this matter, no one will stay in poverty.

Anyone with any experience of poverty knows that it is not just about money. There is a social side to it, a feeling of not belonging, of being left out. I notice that the release offered to the needy here addresses the social side of poverty as well as the economic. Notice the relational words used in describing the needy. He is referred to repeatedly as “neighbor” and “brother.” So verse 2 says, **“every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother.”** And then notice the belonging pronoun “you” and its repeated use in verse 7. **“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land..., you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother.”** Those in the kingdom of God are all one. There is to be no alienation due to one’s poor economic status.

When I was in seminary, I was poor, as were the vast majority of my classmates. Most of us drove very old cars, lived in dilapidated apartments and made do with the clothes we had instead of buying anything new. But it was not burdensome because we did not suffer the crushing social alienation of poverty. There was a sense of belonging, both in our seminary community and among the churches where we served and worshiped. It is to be the same in God’s kingdom. In the church, we are to do all we can to make sure those without much money are not made to feel second class. We don’t want to plan church-wide social events that exclude those with little money. We don’t want to create a competitive atmosphere with regard to material things, whether it be clothing, cars, homes or vacations. There is to be the kind of sharing that releases the poor from the burden of feeling like they don’t belong. The motive given to us for our treatment of the poor in the New Testament is simply that Jesus was a poor man. Now he identifies with the poor to the point that if we exclude the poor, Jesus says it’s like excluding him.

In addition to the social side of poverty, Moses addresses one other result of poverty in his day, slavery. People in the ancient world became slaves for a variety of reasons, but the reason in view here is poverty. If you borrowed money and couldn’t repay it, the lender would typically accept the labor of the borrower or one of his family members as payment for the debt. In a sense, the debtor is simply working off the loan by this arrangement. In this, too, there is to be a release from poverty. The person working off the loan could not be required to work more than six years, after which they were to be freed and the loan regarded as paid in full.

## **II. Rest for the One Giving Release**

The kingdom of God is all about the release of burdens. It is not just the poor who get released, but also those who provide the release. We can see that mostly in the promise that occurs twice in this passage, the promise God makes to bless the one who provides this release for the poor. **“For the Lord your God will bless you”** (v. 6). The same thing is stated again in verse 10: **“because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.”** It is true that this promise has been misused by some to teach that the way to get rich is to give to others, when the deepest desire of the heart is not to love and care for another but to get rich for oneself. But just because a promise has been misused is no reason to ignore it. So what is the blessing God has in mind with this promise? I believe it includes at least three blessings.

The first blessing this includes is the blessing of adequate provision. Whenever you give money away, you will have less of it. We often want to accumulate money so that we will be sure to have enough for our own needs. It is an abuse of this promise to interpret it to mean that God will make us rich. But I don't think it is wrong to interpret it to mean that God will provide for our needs. In my experience, his provision usually is abundant, but I don't think he promises that. I can testify to God's provision for our family in so many ways. Things were much tighter for us when our children were young. During that time, there was about a six or seven year span when God provided two cars for us that I ended up being able to sell for more than I had put into them, including both the purchase price and the repairs. Wendy could tell you many stories of praying with our children about things they wanted as they drove to the thrift store, only to see God provide the very thing they had prayed for.

A second blessing included in this is the blessing of learning to trust God. The Bible teaches that money is a dangerous thing because it can easily capture our souls, leading us to trust in it rather than in God. But when we give it away, God blesses us with a fresh trust in him. And when we trust God, there is always a great deal of joy added to us. I spoke to a man this week who is a church planter in Athens, Greece. We have all read of the economic troubles Greece is currently experiencing. This man told me that when the church in Greece had plenty of money, people were stingy and didn't give much at all. But now that there is great need, Christians are giving more generously and joyfully, even though they themselves have less to give. They are growing in their trust and joy as they give.

A third blessing is loving relationships. The end of our passage describes a situation in which a slave is released by the lender for whom he had been working to pay off his loan. But he has grown to love the man and his family and doesn't want to leave. In such cases, provision was made for the slave to remain with this master and his family perpetually. This speaks powerfully of the way the kingdom of God transforms relationships. Here we have a situation

where it would be easy for anger and bitterness to take over. Instead, love takes over. The biggest transformation that would have taken place leading to this outcome would have to come in the heart of the master. He had the power in the relationship, and if he had used it selfishly, it would have led to anger and bitterness. But instead, the power has been used to serve, and it has led to love.

There's an application in this third blessing of loving relationships. All of us have people who serve us. You may be the boss at work and have several people under you who serve you. Or maybe it's just those who serve you when you eat out at a restaurant. To use power selfishly is not suited to life in God's kingdom. The kingdom of God turns upside down the values of the world, and gives to the one with the power the duty of serving the one under him or her in such a way that love is formed in the heart of the one with lesser power.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This chapter is part of the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament. The Sabbath commandment is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, and it is a hinge commandment. The three before it deal clearly with loving God and the three after it with loving our neighbor. This sits between those two because part of loving God and neighbor is to be released from burdens in such a way that love can flourish in our hearts. We love God because he has released us from our burdens, and such release frees us up to love others. The one freed from burdens no longer needs to use people, so there is the ability to love people.

So I invite you now to lay down your burdens. I don't know what burdens you are carrying, but I do know that God is not asking you to carry them any longer. In Christ, the Sabbath of God's rest is here. So if it is a burden of guilt, you've been carrying it long enough. Put it on the shoulders of Christ, who offers to bear it for you. Maybe it's a burden of anxiety that keeps you awake at night. Lay it down. You've been carrying it long enough. Maybe it's a burden of anger and a lack of forgiveness. Your anger is hurting only you. Lay it down.

Once you've released your burdens, you are able to partner with God in seeing others released from their burdens. Maybe it's a financial release that your generosity could grant to another. Maybe it's spending time with another who is suffering a burden of loneliness. Maybe it's some parents of young children who need some relief from the constant care of their children. As a church, we have the privilege of being an outpost of the coming kingdom of heaven. We get to show the world what heaven is like, and one of the descriptions of heaven is that of Sabbath rest. It is a time of release of all burdens for all time.