

All right. Let's open our Bibles tonight to Deuteronomy 14, as we continue in our favorite book of the Bible - Deuteronomy.

We've mentioned to you, I know, several times that this book is Moses' last set of sermons. They were delivered to 2½ million folks (imagine that in your congregation!), as they sat on the border of the Land of Promise, waiting to move forward to possess the land that God had promised them for generations; but the previous generation had failed to enter in because of unbelief.

You know, in many ways, when you read through these books you should look at yourself because you're much like this nation in the sense that God has promised you a good life: one filled with His Spirit; one of victory, not of defeat; one of the ability to overcome temptation and stand in the will of God and find His best, even when you're outnumbered. So, in many ways, we're this picture. We're not Israel, obviously. But yet the picture is the same. We can have peace, we can have victory, we can have overcoming faith in God. And God can use us, He can anoint us. Or, we can kind of turn around every time He makes promises and never enter into that promise that He has given to us.

So Moses cheers them on for all of these chapters in the book of Deuteronomy. He reminds them of a lot of things, certainly. His encouragement to faith is because he was there when the last group turned around. He argues, in many ways, from the last year (that thirty-ninth into the fortieth year), as this generation came to this same Kadesh Barnea city, a border town. And he was able to say to them, "For the last year, we have whooped on everyone who got in our way. From the north down to the south, from the Galilee to the Dead Sea, no one, no one has been able to stand before us. And that will continue in the land if we will continue to do what we learned this year - please the Lord and serve Him and walk obediently so God might bless." Same thing is true for us. You obey God, God will bless you. There's no other way about it. You disobey God, oh, you'll belong to Him, but you'll have a different kind of relationship. It'll be one of kind of prodding you along.

We said a few weeks ago that your desire to obey God is His greatest joy, and I believe that the Bible teaches us that. In fact, besides the Psalms (and, by the way, Psalms are only mentioned one more time than Deuteronomy), Jesus quotes this book the most (after that one extra quote in Psalms) - by a wide margin. And it's always this call to do as God says, and that call is presented to this nation in every possible light, with every possible background, with every argument from experience - to bring the hearers to agree that's what we have to do. Obedience is the way we love God. Obedience is the way God blesses us. That's really the presentation.

Well tonight we are looking at three chapters because they focus specifically on how God's Word should govern our lives in many different areas. From grieving to tithing, from debt to generosity, from worship individually and corporately, it's just here's God's best, at every turn, for His people.

So let's start in verse 1 of chapter 14, "You are the children of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." You should underline that first part - "You are the children of the LORD your God." Is that a good title or what?! "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us," old John would write (1 John 3:1), "that we should be called children of God!" It's an amazing title. I don't know about you, but sometimes in families you have relatives that you can share about with pride. I talked to a guy whose uncle is a professional football player (last Sunday morning). He was telling me about how proud he was of his uncle and all of his exploits. And I thought, well, sometimes that's true - you can't wait to brag on your relatives. Other times you just hope nobody knows who they are. (Laughing) You don't want them to find out who they are. But, we're children of God. Isn't that something! We're God's kids. We belong to Almighty God. That's amazing, isn't it?!

And because of this statement, you're to be different from those who are not children of God - both in your action and in your reaction to life. That's God's interest. "Here's the way My kids live. Here's the way our family does it." And the first is in the reaction or the response to loss or to death in your life. Mourning for the children of God is far different than for those in the world. As a believer, the Bible says (Paul writing to the Thessalonians), "We don't grieve as those who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Death hurts. Losing people we love is life-

changing. It doesn't leave you the same, and it probably shouldn't. That's the way people have impact in your life. But we don't grieve hopelessly. It's always an amazing thing at funerals to see the Christians from the unbelievers, and you can tell them - you can tell by the look on their faces, you can tell by the comments they make, you can tell by the way they grieve. There's all kinds of difficulty. It's the last enemy, the Bible says (1 Corinthians 15:26), death. But the way that we respond to death is certainly not the way the world does. And though the nation of Israel, at this time, had far less knowledge of life after death than you do, the counsel was still the same. Right? We trust the Lord even in these most difficult of circumstances. The unbelievers and most of the cultic, if you will, pagan religions of the day did something of this form of cutting themselves, shaving their heads into weird designs. They were truly demonic practices. You go read the Canaanite religions, and you certainly find that to be so. They had a lot of bad ideas about life and death. They thought they could get to the gods and appease the gods and maybe stop the death from the camp and all, and they followed these wicked kinds of weird practices. And the Lord says, "Not you. That's not you. That's not the way you grieve." We're not to grieve this way. We have a hope, don't we? And even when we lose somebody that we love, if they go to be with Jesus, we know where they're at, and we know what's waiting when we get there.

When Elijah was dealing with the prophets of Baal, there in 1 Kings 18, and he put on a contest between their god and his God, really, you remember the preparing of the offering and all and how these guys got to go first. And he said to them, mocking them about halfway through the day, "Maybe he's asleep. Maybe he's meditating. Maybe he's indisposed. Maybe you should yell a little louder." And it says, "As their custom was, they pulled out knives and lances, and they began to cut themselves in their desire to hear or see their god act." And it says, "the blood gushed from them." What a weird way to live. But that's not for us. They believed that the pain and the cutting showed devotion and a willingness to suffer. I don't know if you've ever read about Martin Luther, but Martin Luther tells about how, before he came to know the Lord, he would crawl up the steps in Rome on his knees until they were bloodied. We went to a church in Brazil a few years ago that had people who were in trouble and wanted prayer at the church. They had to literally crawl across a bridge, across an 18-lane highway, and some of them took two and three days to get across. But that's how you got prayer. And you could see the blood marks on the cement. What a terrible way to have to live. The Lord says, "That's not you. You don't live like this." Oh, we hurt, and we grieve, and we don't want to let anybody go ahead of us. We want to all go together. But, look, God is

not impressed with suffering for the sake of those kinds of things. He forbids it for His own. In fact, sometimes your greatest witness is how you handle loss and how you grieve. You share the gospel at weddings and at funerals, but I tell you - funerals tend to be far more fruitful, I think, because people are having to face life and death, and they listen; and we've seen many folks come to know the Lord simply by the response of the believer at the worst of times.

But God starts off this counsel by saying, "Look, you're the children of God. So don't you behave like the world around you. In fact, you're a holy people." The word "holy" - set apart for God. "You can grieve, but just don't grieve like the pagans do. You're a holy people." And so are we. What is it? 1 Peter 2:9 right? The Lord says the same thing to the church. You're a holy people. "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation....." So, if you only knew how valuable you were to the Lord, and that this is how He sees you - He doesn't want your life reflecting the world. We shouldn't be like the world. That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? And if you know His love, I think you'll feel pretty good about yourself. For years, the big counseling issue was self-esteem. I'll tell you what - you'll have great self-esteem when you figure out how much God loves you. You'll feel pretty good about you when you realize what God thinks about you. But until you know that, the world can really kick you down a hole. There's that Scripture in Matthew 13, that parable that Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven being like a treasure that's hidden in the field. And He said (verse 14), "When a man finds it, for the joy that he has, he goes and sells everything that he has so he can buy the field," and He said, "That's what the kingdom of heaven is like." God finds you - the treasure in the world - and He gives everything He has so He can have you. You're God's people. It's good to know. And it'll shape your view of death and loss and the hope of reuniting with family. We went through a season last year in the church; we had a lot of people just go to be with the Lord. I think the Lord opened a new wing or something. We kept getting invitations. You know? But we know where they are.

"You shall not," verse 3, "eat any detestable thing." Amen broccoli and...(Laughing) I don't know, actually, what that word means. "These are the animals which you may eat." He turns from mourning to dieting. One point you might want to walk away with when you read these Old Testament laws is that God has a finite care for you, so much so that He's even interested in how you go about living your day-to-day life. Imagine the Lord saying, "I'd like to tell you what to eat and what not to eat." And you say, "Well, gosh, Lord. That's pretty micromanaging." Well maybe

so, but it's God's prerogative because He has the right to speak to us, and it should be interesting to us that God gives these words to the Jews as a national concern. You don't find this in the New Testament. But you certainly come away thinking, "Gosh, God really does want to be involved with my life. I'm His special people." It says it in verses 1 and 2. "I'm His child." So, whatever the direction is that follows, I have to interpret it in light of the picture that I get in verses 1 and 2, which is that God cares for me. I always worry when I meet well-meaning Christians who want to go back to the Mosaic laws - if it makes them holier. They'll say, "Oh, yeah, brother. We've just been reading the Old Testament. We're starting to diet like that." I always say, "Hey, go read Galatians. Take two of these, call me in the morning. It's written for you, man." Because they miss it. This is more than dinner. This is part of God's covenant with His people. And if you read places like (a couple of chapters back) Deuteronomy 7:15, it says there, "God will take away the afflictions from you, and He will lay upon you none of the terrible diseases which fell upon Egypt." And then Deuteronomy 28:60 (fourteen chapters from now), He says, "If you ignore what I have to say, I will lay upon you all of the diseases of Egypt." What God knew, and what they didn't, was how bacteria and parasites and diseases were carried by animals. And so He said what to them? "Don't eat these animals. Stay away from this food, and you'll stay well." They didn't have the FDA, but they had the G-O-D to rely upon. Right? Just because it's legal doesn't mean it's good for you or that it's right. If you go back and read about the black plague in the 14th century, 1348-1350 A.D. were the worst years that killed millions of folks. The Jewish people, as a nation, were the least impacted by it because they ate kosher foods. Interestingly enough, their diet protected them from all that that deadly disease brought to the lives of the people. Pork. You need to cook it until the worms die. That sounds good, doesn't it? I'll have some pork.

The controlling verses, and we won't necessarily read every verse, are laid out here. For example, when it comes to the animals, verse 6, "You may eat every animal with cloven hooves, having the hoof split into two parts, and that chews the cud, among the animals." So, when it comes to meat-eaters: split hooves, chews the cud; which means, from verse 8, you can't eat a pig, you can't have bacon, no ham sandwiches. Now we've found a way to preserve them, and we're fine, and you pray over it, you go ahead and take your chances. But, in these days, certainly that would have been not good - no refrigeration. This is not something you would want to even partake in, and God warns His people because He loves them. "Don't eat this, eat this. Don't eat this, eat that!" From the sea, verse 9, "You may eat of all that are in the

waters: you may eat all that have fins and scales." Interesting. This is the "to do" eat list, right? No eels ("unagi" in Japanese), no shellfish, no mollusks, no lobster, no shrimp, no scallops because they're high in cholesterol. They're tasty. And they carry diseases at certain times of the year. So you shouldn't eat them. You should stay away from them. And God gave to His people the ways of life, even from that standpoint. Verse 11, "All clean birds you may eat. But these you shall not eat," and then He gives us a whole list of, I guess, unclean birds; those who smoke and drink or something. Stay away from these. Like verse 12, "Don't eat the buzzard." There you go. Verse 19, "Creeping things that fly - you shouldn't eat those either." I'm saying "amen" to all of this stuff. Now this was listed in the Law back in Leviticus 11. They had a copy of it, if you will. But, again, Moses goes to say to them, "You're God's people. You live different lives in the way that you mourn, in the way that you eat." He even says, in verse 21, "You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to the alien who is within your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a holy people to the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk." So, if it dies of itself, don't eat it. But you can feed it to strangers. Now you say, "Well, that's not fair." No. But here's the deal. God's point is you're God's people. "You follow My rules. They don't have those rules to follow. They can eat, they may do fine, they may not. It'll be their choice. But I've got a law for you, and you follow My law, and it'll go well with you." They don't care. That's not their concern.

At the end of verse 21 here, this little small verse, "You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk," has led to the practice in Israel, to this day, that you will not be given meat with dairy; or you'll be given dairy without meat. In fact, if you go to Yad Vashem with us (to the Holocaust Museum), there are two distinct sides in the restaurant to eat. There's a dairy side and a meat side. And our people always get in trouble because they go buy ice cream and then go sit over here on the meat side; and the guy throws them out, "Hey, you're not supposed to be over here with that ice cream." No dairy and meat because they're afraid that, at some point, you could actually - if you drank the milk and you cooked the goat - have the same goat, both milk and meat, and that wouldn't be something that they would want. So the Lord gives them a restriction, and they have carried it out to the nth degree. So if you're in Israel with us, look around. If it says "Dairy," don't bring your sandwiches over there. If it says "Meat," don't bring your ice cream. Or some rabbi's going to let you have it.

Verse 22, "You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always." And I want you to kind of take note of the rest of that. Here's the reason: "that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always." Different in your mourning, different in your dieting; now distinct in your giving, as well. They were asked to bring a tenth of their increase as well as to bring the worship offerings that they would bring as part of their relationship with God to a distinct place that God would choose. You're going to read that a lot in the next few chapters, over the course of the next seven or eight years in biblical history. God was going to put His name in a place, and they were going to have to go to one place to worship. But for now it was a matter of preparing themselves to give to the Lord the tithes of all that God had given to them; and it was the firstfruits and the first increase, and it was a tenth of what came first, if you will. But notice that it was to develop in them a healthy "fear of the LORD your God always." There is certainly something to be said for the fruit of regular giving in terms of how it connects your needs and income with God's provision. And I'm not sure that those two things connect if you're not a regular giver. Now let me just say, because someone will interpret saying we're looking for money - we don't need your money. God has a way of paying all of His bills. We've never had a need for anything. But you have a need to learn how to give. And you're welcome to give it somewhere else. You should give it, I think, where you're involved so you know what's being done with it. But, look, here's the point - until you become a regular giver, your income and your needs are not really tied to God's provision and care. You just see them as, "I worked overtime, I got more money, I got a little bonus, I got this, I got that," and I never tie myself dependently upon God's provision. Tithing says, "God has so provided for me that I want to invest in His work. I know He doesn't need my money. I'm sure of that. And He certainly doesn't need My help. But I need to recognize that everything I have, He's provided for me." And that's a fruit that you will miss if you choose not to practice giving on a regular kind of basis. I think it hurts you spiritually. It certainly doesn't help God, but it can certainly bless you. And I like the fact that Moses throws, at the end of these two verses about tithing, "You've got to learn to fear the Lord. You've got to learn that God is your provider."

Verse 24, "But if the journey is too long for you," (that's when they find out where their position is in the land and where God is going to put His name), "so that you

are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household." So, look, if you had to bring a lamb for, maybe, a sin offering, but you have to travel too far - the lamb's going to get bruised or worn out, or he can't go that far - just sell the lamb, take the money, come into town where God's name was, and buy another one so that you could bring it to the Lord as a sin offering or a peace offering. And then some of the offerings like the relationship - peace offering, for example - God gets some, you get some, and you just kind of eat with the Lord there. The whole idea was hanging out with God, if you will, sharing in what you guys are - He's eating and you're eating, what He's being given and what you're being nourished by.

By the way, just as an aside, the word "tithe" means a tenth, and the "tenth" law predates the Law of Moses by generations. In fact, if you go all the way back to Genesis 14, Abraham gave tithes of all that he had to Melchizedek, the king of Salem. For Israel, there are several tithes. In fact, if you want to go through the tithing issues in the Bible, Israel tithed about 33 1/3% every year. But that included all of their government care as well. It was their taxation system, it was their provision.

But just for your own consideration, you're asked to give to the Lord a portion of what God has given to you. But you should never lose sight of the fact that everything you have belongs to Him, and He's going to get it back. You're not going to take it with you. You're not going to deliver it. You're going to leave it here. And it is really a good proving to see what kind of stewardship you have in your heart.

Now, when it comes to the New Testament, the standard of giving is found in two principles, and neither one of them is in a tithe. None of that is spelled out, per se, in the epistles to the church. But here are the two things upon which giving is interesting in God's eyes: number one, that you give whatever you give willingly and with joy. If you can't do that, just keep it. That's what the Lord says. He doesn't want it. If you can't be a hilarious giver, you shouldn't probably give at all because you're not really gaining much traction with the Lord, and you're not being really

changed much in your heart. And the second principle of giving is - is it sacrificial? For some people, 10% is not sacrificial at all; for others, it'd be impossible. The idea is sacrifice. Right? Does it cost you something? David said, in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 24:24, 1 Chronicles 21:24), "I can't give to God what costs me nothing." The Lord pointed out that widow with her two mites in the temple, and said (Luke 21:3-4), "She has given more than everyone." And everyone was pouring in all kinds of stuff, and the disciples went, "Wait a minute. I just saw a guy pour a whole bucket of money in the reception plate." And the Lord said, "Yeah, but she gave everything she had." It was two mites. It amounted to nothing financially. It amounted to everything in God's eyes in her life. So, joyful giving and sacrificial giving are the only two prerequisites, if you will, in the New Testament for you and me giving to the Lord as far as acknowledging His provision in our lives. There is no place in the Bible where God says you should test Him until it comes to giving; and then you go to Malachi 3, and the Lord says to them, "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it" (verse 10). Now, giving to get is not biblical. So check your heart. But on the other hand, God's Word to us, as His people, is that when you begin to trust Him and give to Him, you're far more blessed than you are when you try to hoard or take away from that which God has entrusted to you. I'm pretty sure that for most Christians, their wallet is the last portion of their lives to get redeemed. It's usually the thing we give to God last, and that's between, certainly, you and the Lord. But it's an interesting picture because what we're told here is that God brings obedience from our lives because we belong to Him - we're a holy people - and if we put Him first, we'll learn to fear Him; and if we learn to fear Him, then we'll find His blessing.

He continues in that same vein in verse 27. He said, "You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you. At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do." The final application was the Levites. The Levites were the priests. God chose them to work in the spiritual aspects of the life of Israel, to maintain the sanctuary, the tabernacle, to provide offerings, to be judges in the gates for a long time. But they were to be paid from the people so that their spiritual servants could continue to labor. Now,

interestingly enough, whenever the nation got away from God, the first people that were out of work - Levites. They would go home, they'd go farming, they'd go somewhere else to another city. Nehemiah comes into town and says, "Where are the Levites?" "They're gone." "Where are they?" "Well, nobody's taking care of them so there's no church service. There's no worship. There're no offerings. There's no sacrifice." The Levites were always kind of the first ones to suffer when the spiritual collapse occurred within the lives of the people. But the Lord places the care of the Levites as a national responsibility upon the spiritual people, the holy people, that God had chosen for Himself. And He adds with them the stranger, the fatherless and the widow. The widows were within the gates of the responsibility of the city.

Chapter 15 covers debt, poverty, slavery, even generosity. And we find, in chapter 15, the law of the seventh year of release and the fiftieth year called Jubilee. And, before we read it, they both speak of God's grace and mercy and of our need to have His heart toward people who owe us. I mean, the children of Israel were put in a place where they often had to suffer loss for the sake of others even though they had a right to collect on a debt that they were able to sometimes suffer for the sake of others. The law of the seventh finds itself throughout God's Law. It was on the seventh day that you rested in the Sabbath. It was the seventh year that the land wasn't supposed to be planted. God said, "You'll get twice of what you need in the sixth year. Let the land rest for the seventh year, and year eight you can go back and plant again. Year nine, you'll have fruit again." And the people never once listened to that. In fact, if you read 2 Chronicles 36, as God explains the captivity that the children of Israel were going to go into for seventy years, one of the reasons that He made it seventy years (could have been sixty-five, could have been fifty-two, but He made it seventy years) was because He said, "You owe me for all of the years you never let the land rest." So, for 490 years, they never once had that seventh year of rest for the land. Why? Because "we'd rather farm. We'll get more money. We'll make more income." Yeah, but the Lord said, "Do it this way," and they hadn't; and so they had set it aside. Those who would look to keep the Sabbath and make a big deal of it - maybe you've run into these folks who like keeping Jewish laws as Christians, and they just love it - you might ask them if they stop working every seventh year to trust the Lord for the income. "Yeah, we like to follow the Sabbath." "Really? You don't go to work all of your seventh year? Just let the land rest?" That usually confuses them.

Then there are seven sets of seven; so seventh, forty-nine, and then there's the fiftieth year. And the fiftieth year is seven sevens - seven being the number of completeness in the Bible or of the Lord, if you will (man being six). This seventh year is a law that we discover in here as well, and certain things had to happen. But the seventh year of release - the word is "**Shemitah**" in Hebrew - means to set free. It's what is in view here for God's people. Again, you're God's people. Verse 1, "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a '**Shemitah**,' a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release. Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother, except when there may be no poor among you;" (now, if there's no poor among you, then it doesn't apply) "for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance - only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today. For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you. If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs." So, the release, seventh year - you lend anybody anything, they owe you anything, on the seventh year, they don't owe you anymore. Foreigners were not to be treated in the same manner because there's this special relationship amongst God's people. This is God's Word for God's people. They're distinct.

Verse 4 - the only time this seventh year release of debt could be set aside is if they found amongst themselves that there should never be any poor. But what would that require? Well, it would require that all of "you," verse 5, "carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God." That didn't happen. And, in verse 11, the Lord says, "For the poor will never cease from the land." There's the reality. The possibility is there. The reality is that that's not going to happen. But to the extent that we do things - be faithful, give, let God's blessing flow, be lenders not borrowers, open hearts, help those in need, open hands, but there is this cutoff time where the debt someone has incurred against you will be forgiven in the seventh year.

Verse 9, "Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing," (because you're figuring, "I lend him \$100 now, next month he's off the hook," and so you don't give your poor brother anything) "and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand." Isn't that amazing?! "For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.' " Don't neglect the poor just because it's one month until cutoff day. Beware of the wicked heart. Give, and don't be grieved as you give. Even if it costs you something, there's nothing to lose here. There's a connection between willingness to be a conduit of God's blessing and God's blessing. Does that make sense? God will bless you. I know people go, "Hey, I got ripped off!" No. You didn't get ripped off. You give to the Lord. If you give to people, they'll rip you off. If you give to the Lord, you never get ripped off. You do it to the Lord, you'll always be happy about it. You do it for folks, you're going to get discouraged fairly quickly. There's a proverb that says, "He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given" (Proverbs 19:17). God will pay back. Isn't that good? So we can help. Be open-handed, not closed-hearted. And I must tell you that we've been here 31 years, I think, as a church. I've never seen a body - and I worked at another church as well - that is so willing to give to people's needs. We've done so well, I think, when needs come up - that we've always had more than we've needed; to missions, to outreaches, to feed others. I think it's a sure sign that God's at work when we have that kind of willingness. But I see it in our body a lot. And so grateful for that, that we're not so caught up in the world that we aren't willing to give to those in need.

Verse 12, "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the LORD your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today." Again, it is a matter of I've received, now I give out. God has blessed me, now I bless others. Now how does a Jew become a slave to another Jew? It was always

about unpaid bills. I have a debt to pay. Creatively, I just come to work for you. I become your slave, if you will. But if I work those six years, and I haven't been able to pay off the debt, I've done my best, year seven rolls around, I'm supposed to be let go even though I haven't fully paid. And not just let go. Loaded down. "Hey, bro, have you got a sheep?" "No." "Take these sheep. Have you got some grain? Here, take this grain. You need some wine? Here, take this wine. You need a checkbook? Here's my checkbook." You're supposed to bless the guy as he goes out the door, and yet he owes you money! Isn't that the way God treats you? You owed God, and what does He do? He saves you, forgives your debt, and then loads you down with blessings. He said this to Israel, "That's what I did for you when I got you out of Egypt. That's why I'm asking you to do it now." It's just - you do what God has done for you.

Well then He says, in verse 16, "And if it happens that he" (the slave) "says to you, 'I will not go away from you,' because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise." So, here's the condition - the slave, in the seventh year, gets to walk and goes, "I don't want to leave. I love your family, I love your kids, I love the job here. I can't see myself doing anything else." So he goes from serving out of necessity to serving out of loyalty. There's a change, right? He had to be there; now he wants to be there. If so, then he's to be marked as a slave by choice. So, pick up an ice pick, ram it through his ear (ears pierced), hang a golden hoop in it - he was earmarked. That's where the word comes from. As a slave by choice, he becomes a permanent slave for life, which maybe makes more sense when you go read Psalm 40 about Jesus. And what you read about Him there is, "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; My ears You have opened" (verse 6), and it speaks about Jesus' willingness to be a slave or a willingness to be a slave by choice - to come and to save and to serve. "I'm coming by choice. You have opened My ear." It is later quoted in the book of Hebrews (chapter 10) as well and applied to Jesus. He made a choice to come. In the New Testament, the Greek word for slave - bondsman - is "**doulos**" or "**duloi**," depending on the noun or the verb tense. But it refers to the same thing - you're a slave by choice. So the early church grabbed hold of this concept - these two verses - and they saw themselves as bondsmen of Jesus, earmarked. My life now belongs to Him by the presence of the Holy Spirit. We were once slaves to sin and to Satan, to our flesh and to the world. But now, by choice, I'm a slave of Jesus. I forget who it was that used to say, "Whose slave are you? Because I choose to be Jesus' slave. You're going to be somebody's slave.

You're either going to be a slave to sin or a slave to the Lord." So you choose who's your Master. And Jesus said, John 15:15, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." So, beautiful picture. Right? But it was this release thing. You didn't deserve to be let go, but you got to leave, and if you got to leave, you got to leave with all kinds of stuff. Imagine getting fired. "Hey, take the desk. Want the car? Take the car and the desk." "It's all I need".....oh, it's an old Steve Martin joke. "It's all I need." What a blessing.

Verse 18, "It shall not seem hard to you when you send him away free from you; for he has been worth a double hired servant in serving you six years. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do." So again, "Oh, man, I gave him so much, and he wasn't able to work it all off. Ahhh!" You could be hard on yourself, or you could just go, "Hey." God says, "He's been a blessing to you. He's worked hard. He sought to help. He's been better to you than anyone that you maybe could have hired. You've had him for six years. Just bless him, and let him go." Right? Twice this hired servant. How different the ways of the Lord when it comes to paying off a debt. "Just let him go."

Verse 19, "All the firstborn males that come from your herd and your flock you shall sanctify to the LORD your God; you shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock. You and your household shall eat it before the LORD your God year by year in the place which the LORD chooses. But if there is a defect in it, if it is lame or blind or has any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. You may eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean person alike may eat it, as if it were a gazelle or a deer. Only you shall not eat its blood; you shall pour it on the ground like water." So the law of the firstborn was - whenever you got a firstborn of an animal, it had to be offered to the Lord in sacrifice. If you had children, obviously you weren't offering them, but you had to purchase them from the Lord with an offering. The idea is the same as the tithe. Recognize what God has given you, and attach yourself, in your mind, "What I have, God has provided," if you will. So, bring the best to the Lord when it comes to giving. Don't bring second-hand merchandise. If it is a wounded animal, or if it's blind or it's lame, the Lord says, verse 21, "I don't want it." If you want to see stuff that, sometimes, the Lord doesn't want, go work at the Thrift Store. Sometimes stuff shows up that you're going, "Who would want that?!" and you can hear the Lord say, audibly, "I don't want it." No. (Laughing)

But that's what I think He's probably saying. Sometimes we bring to the Lord what we don't want anymore. But, trust me, if you don't want it, He doesn't want it either. Malachi 1:8 (instead of chapter 3, about tithing), the Lord says to the people, "And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" "If you don't think he'd be happy with it, why do you think I would be?" Pretty good argument, right? "Would you give this to your best buddy? Why are you giving it to Me?"

And then He says in chapter 1:13-14, a little further on in Malachi, "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand? But cursed be the deceiver For I am a great King. And My name is to be feared among the nations." And the Lord basically says, "I don't want that stuff." So here's the direction given - you bring your best to the Lord, God gives you the firstborn, you give it back to Him, but make sure that it's that which honors Him. But throughout the references, notice again verse 20, it's the place that God will choose to put His name. And I think we told you last week that there were a couple or three different places He put His name before He ended up in Jerusalem with King David and then his son, Solomon.

Chapter 16, and we are perfectly on time, is the call to corporate worship. And whenever you run into this set of instructions for the three main Jewish Feast Days, a couple things you should always remember. Number one - it was for a week at a time, it was in a specific place, and everyone was invited to come. It was a corporate time of worship. And second of all, with all of the callings came the demand to be joyful. Show up, bring the family, hang out a week, and be joyful in the Lord; which is interesting that all of those are attached to these - the three feasts - Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. "**Pesach**." "**Pesach**," by the way, in Hebrew means to limp or, if you will, to pass over. But the word "**Pesach**" means to limp. "**Shavuot**" is the weeks one, and "**Sukkot**" is booths. So those are the three. And all of the feasts revolved around the agricultural calendar, which is pretty interesting when you think about it because God, somehow, wanted to attach work and blessing to Him. God has blessed you, God has provided for you, God has given to you. Thank God for what He has done. So all of these three meeting times were attached to getting from God, if you will, or anticipating your getting from God, and they were all kind of like the sacred and the secular meet seamlessly in worship. They're brought together as one.

Well the first eight verses talk about the Passover. Verse 1, "Observe the month of Abib, and keep the Passover to the LORD your God, for in the month of Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night. Therefore you shall sacrifice the Passover" (the "*Pesach*") "to the LORD your God, from the flock and the herd, in the place where the LORD chooses to put His name. You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, that is, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), that you may remember the day in which you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life. And no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the meat which you sacrifice the first day at twilight remain overnight until morning. You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you; but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide, there you shall sacrifice the Passover at twilight, at the going down of the sun, at the time you came out of Egypt. And you shall roast and eat it in the place which the LORD your God chooses, and in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. Six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a sacred assembly to the LORD your God. You shall do no work on it." So, Passover - Exodus 12. It followed the final tenth plague of the death, you remember, of the firstborn. Every family was protected if the blood of that lamb without spot or blemish was either on the doorpost or on the lintel of the house. But if you go back and read Exodus 12, the cost of sacrifice was fairly dramatic because you had to bring a lamb, a newborn lamb, into your house on the tenth day of the month and keep it in the house for five days. The lamb became a pet. They're cute. Everyone likes them. And then you've got to go sacrifice the lamb. It's like having a new puppy. Imagine. After five days, now the puppy's gotta go. So it drove home, in the practice, to every heart - young and old - the cost for our redemption. It was a yearly practice among the people. And the day of Passover was followed by six days of unleavened bread. And the removal of the leaven around the house, because leaven is a type of sin, spoke of the Lamb of God coming to take away the sins of the world. So the lamb would be sacrificed, and the sin would be removed, and God would, in picture form if you will, in this practice of Passover each year, paint that portrait.

Fifty days later, verse 9, "You shall count seven weeks for yourself; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the grain." So at the end of the wheat harvest and the beginning of the grain harvest, "You shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you. You shall

rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are among you, at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and now you shall be careful to observe these statutes." Pentecost. "**Shavuot.**" Weeks. Like I said, it was at the end of the wheat harvest, the beginning of the grain harvest, and it brought you into the summer months; and so, the fruit of your labor you could begin to see, and as the Lord blesses you, you were to bring Him these offerings from the blessings. But notice, in verse 11, the command to rejoice. You'll find it again in verse 14. And I love how God demands worship and celebration. I look around at holidays, and, honestly, it seems like most holidays Christians get more stressed than joyful - especially Christmas. You go, "I had to go here, gotta go there, been shopping, got a party. I can't wait for it to be over." And you're going, "Yeah, we're celebrating the birth of our Messiah." "I know, but it's too much for me." It's amazing what we've done to ourselves.

Well, these were to provisions to not make it more difficult. It was to make it more focused - that God would have us focus on Him and His provision. Here's our fruit, here's our grain, here's our blessing. God is good. And we worship. And Pentecost would be fifty days later, after the Passover. And I think I said last week bars have happy hours; they had happy weeks. Just of rejoicing in the Lord.

And then verse 13, the Feast of Tabernacles or booths or "**Sukkot,**" as they call it. "You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. And you shall rejoice" (there it is again) "in your feast" with all of the same folks as they were told to enjoy before. So, the Feast of Tabernacles was in late September-early October, and the practice was that the people (and we get it from Leviticus) built lean-tos. They built little tents outside their homes. They lived outside. You could see the sky. And the idea was to say to your kids, "Our forefathers, for forty years in the desert, were provided for every day by God's goodness as they lived in these little tents and lean-tos and looking to the stars, and God kept us through the wilderness." And, like I said, it was a time of rejoicing as the threshing floor was filled, and you were called to rejoicing. Oh, God has been so faithful to us even as we see it today. So, Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles.

And then we read in verse 15, "Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God

will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you." So, come three times a year. Don't come empty-handed, but come with what God has blessed you with. Two requirements - attitude and ability, joyful and able. Does that make sense? That's really what God was looking to.

Finally, verse 18, "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the LORD your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment. You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous." Pretty good definition of the word "bribe." "You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not plant for yourself any tree, as a wooden image, near the altar which you build for yourself to the LORD your God. You shall not set up a sacred pillar, which the LORD your God hates." So, fair judgment in the city gates. And, by the way, for the next many years, we're going to find the judges always sitting in the city gates; until, administratively, they move into a court setting, the judges will sit at the gate of the city where people come in, and for the longest time, they'll be manned by priests who were called to be the judges. So that's where the businesses were being taken. Seated in the city gates. You can mark that as you read. But notice that the judge was to represent the Lord in all of his dealings. Right? Represent the Lord. And, finally, no idolatry. "Anywhere where you go, I don't want to see it; no wooden images, no sacred pillars because you're God's people, and we don't do this."

Amen? You did good. You did three chapters.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
May 16, 2016