

## The Kindness of God's Law

### Deuteronomy 15:1-18

David Sunday    October 25, 2020

It's good to see you back in our house, so to speak, together in this place. Let's open God's Word. He has a feast for us this

morning in Deuteronomy 15. We're going to continue in worship as I read God's Word, beginning with Deuteronomy 15:1. May we tremble with contrite and receptive hearts before the Word of the living God.



<sup>1</sup> *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.*

<sup>2</sup> *This is how to cancel debt: Every creditor is to cancel what he has lent his neighbor. He is not to collect anything from his neighbor or brother, because the LORD's release of debts has been proclaimed.*

<sup>3</sup> *You may collect something from a foreigner, but you must forgive whatever your brother owes you.*

<sup>4</sup> *"There will be no poor among you, however, because the LORD is certain to bless you in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance—* <sup>5</sup> *if only you obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow every one of these commands I am giving you today.* <sup>6</sup> *When the LORD your God blesses you as he has promised you, you will lend to many nations but not borrow; you will rule many nations, but they will not rule you.*

<sup>7</sup> *If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers within any of your city gates in the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother.*

<sup>8</sup> *Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has.* <sup>9</sup> *Be careful that there isn't this wicked thought in your heart, 'The seventh year, the year of canceling debts, is near,' and you are stingy toward your poor brother and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty.* <sup>10</sup> *Give to him, and don't have a stingy heart when you give, and because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you do.* <sup>11</sup> *For there will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am*

*commanding you, 'Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land.'*

*<sup>12</sup> If your fellow Hebrew, a man or woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, you must set him free in the seventh year. <sup>13</sup> When you set him free, do not send him away empty-handed. <sup>14</sup> Give generously to him from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. You are to give him whatever the LORD your God has blessed you with. <sup>15</sup> Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this command today. <sup>16</sup> But if your slave says to you, 'I don't want to leave you,' because he loves you and your family, and is well off with you, <sup>17</sup> take an awl and pierce through his ear into the door, and he will become your slave for life. Also treat your female slave the same way. <sup>18</sup> Do not regard it as a hardship when you set him free, because he worked for you six years—worth twice the wages of a hired worker. Then the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.*

This is God's Word. Let's thank Him for it.

Father, we praise You that though the grass withers and the flower fades, Your Word abides forever and bears fruit in the lives of those who abide in it. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts now be inspired and empowered by Your Spirit. May they be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Eight months ago, on a cold February night when the snow was covering the ground, my son and I went out for dinner in a cozy Italian restaurant on Third Street in Geneva. After our stomachs had been amply filled with rich pasta and we were very satisfied, we went back into the parking garage by the train tracks. We met a man there named Jim who was in a wheel chair. We learned some things about his life as we had a conversation with him. Jim is a double amputee and he lives in that parking garage—all four seasons. I asked him, "Jim, how did you survive the polar vortex last winter?" He said, "Well, the police are kind to me and watch out for me. People help me along."

As I reflected on meeting this man and having this conversation, the thought in my mind was, "This shouldn't be. It shouldn't be like this in the Fox Valley. In the middle of all this prosperity, here's a man in his 60s on a cold winter night sleeping in the parking garage."

This is the tension that's reflected in this text. Verse four is idealistic: "*There will be no poor among you...*" But verse 11 is realistic: "*There will never cease to be poor people in the*

*land...*” It’s this tension between the ideal world we long for and the fallen world we live in that surrounds this text and our lives as God’s people. This passage is about how God’s kindness toward His people makes us agents of transformation in the midst of this tension—the tension between the ideal and the real in this fallen world.

We’re going to look at three points this morning:

- God’s vision of an ideal world
- God’s prescription for a fallen world.
- God’s provision for the transformation of our hearts.

## **God’s vision of an ideal world.**

Let’s start right there in verse four: *“There will be no poor among you...”* Just let that sink in for a little bit. This is the will of God, that His people form a community, a nation, in which poverty doesn’t exist. Now, this is God’s word to His people Israel; He’s not speaking to His world at large. This is covenant language and in the second part of verse four the emphasis is on the Lord’s blessing. It says the Lord *“is certain to bless you in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance.”*

God has brought the Israelites out of 400 years of slavery in Egypt. He’s led them through the wilderness, providing all their needs and now they’re on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Every one of them is going to have a piece of land. Every one of them is going to have a home. Every one of them is going to have a means of making income. If ever there was a land of equal opportunity, this is it. So there is plenty to go around for everyone’s needs to be met, for everyone to benefit and enjoy this land flowing with milk and honey.

God has redeemed them and promised to bless them so richly. Now He’s saying, “I want you to be the people I’ve created you to be. I want you to be a people who reflect the hope and promise of Eden, the world as I originally created it, here in this new land I’m giving you.” If there’s one word that sums up God’s vision for an ideal world, it’s the Hebrew word *shalom*. When we think of *shalom*, we think of peace, but it means so much more. Cornelius Plantinga defined *shalom* like this:

It’s the webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets called *shalom*. It’s far more than just peace of mind. It’s far more than just a cease fire or a cessation of hostilities between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight. It’s a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder, as it’s Savior and Creator opens doors and

welcomes the creatures in whom He delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

This the way we long for things to be. God's vision for His people is for them to be a people of *shalom*, a people of justice, compassion and generosity. Where no one is left behind, where no one is impoverished emotionally, no one is impoverished psychologically, no one is impoverished sociologically or economically, where there are "*no poor among you.*" That's God's will. That's God's vision.

As a result of the *shalom* among God's people, they will become a blessing to the nations of the world. That's what we see in verse six. When the Lord blesses you as He has promised, you will be the lender, not the borrower. You're going to be like the world bank, and they're going to be coming to you. You're going to be extending the blessing of God to all the nations of the earth, just like God promised in His covenant with Abraham.

What's the key to all of this? It's in verse five: "*[I]f only you obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow every one of these commands I am giving you today.*" This, friends, is where the breakdown occurs. Because they don't do verse five, we have verse 11 in the text. Because no nation and no people have done verse five, no nation and no people have ever been able to eradicate poverty. Whenever we see poverty in this world, it's a grim reminder of our corporate failure to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40).

One test of whether we really love God is how we treat the poor. That's why we keep running into this quartet of the vulnerable throughout the book of Deuteronomy. God won't let them out of our sight. He wants His people to be constantly aware of the oppressed poor, the widows, the orphans and the resident aliens. Their presence is an indicator, a barometer, that this world is not the way it's supposed to be. Our sin—our failure to obey the Lord—has vandalized *shalom*. It's brought disorder, poverty and injustice; everyone knows it. As the singer Leonard Cohen put it in his bleak lyrics from 1988:

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded  
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed  
Everybody knows that the war is over  
Everybody knows that the good guys lost  
Everybody knows the fight was fixed  
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows.

What's Cohen saying? He's saying the dream of the Great Society has not materialized. But what does the Bible say? It's not God's fault; it's due to human sin. It's because our hearts are out of sync with God's love and God's law that His vision for an ideal society in verse four has to be tempered by the reality of verse 11, where it says, "*For there will never cease to be poor people in the land...*"

What does God want us to do about it? Interestingly, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 15:11 close to the time of His death. In Matthew 26, a woman comes to Him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment and pours it over Jesus' head lavishly to anoint Him for burial. The disciples are indignant. They say, "Why this waste? This could have been taken and sold and given as money to the poor." Jesus is aware of this and says to His disciples, "*Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a noble thing for me. You always have the poor with you...*"—just like Deuteronomy 15:11a —"*...but you do not always have me.*"

Sometimes I've heard Christians take this verse to mean there's nothing we really can do to stop poverty. There's always going to be poverty in the world, so let's just worship Jesus, which has to be the priority, and not worry about the poor. But that's ripping the verse out of its context. Look again at what verse 11 says: "*For there will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, 'Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land.'*" That emphasis is saying, "They're your responsibility. You are your brother's keeper." So even though God's ideal vision has yet to be realized, God does not give up on pursuing a community of people who will demonstrate His *shalom* in the world by the way they care for the poor.

## **God's prescription for a fallen world.**

That brings us to point two this morning: God's prescription for His people in a fallen world. We see this in verse one: "*At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts,*" as the CSV and the NIV translate it. The ESV says, "*At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release.*" The Lord's "release of debts," found in verses one and two, is an important phrase I want you to keep in the back of your mind.

Something we need to understand about God's law is that it's bathed in kindness for people in our struggles, infirmities and sufferings. Just think about it. One day in seven—the Sabbath—is to be devoted to rest, renewal and replenishment. Then one month in seven was to be dedicated to special feasts and celebrations, so the people could worship God and enjoy the

plenty from the land (Leviticus 23). Then every seventh year, according to the passage we're in today, the land was to be given a rest and the people were to be released from their debts.

Then actually, when seven cycles of these seven years were completed—the 50<sup>th</sup> year—there was to be this magnificent Year of Jubilee when debts were forgiven, slaves went free and all the land was returned to the original owners, because the land belonged to the Lord. So woven into the fabric of God's law is this great compassion, this great kindness, for people who had grown weary and fallen on hard times.

Craig Blomberg comments, "On average, each person or family had at least a once in a lifetime chance to start afresh, no matter how irresponsibly they had handled their finances or how far into debt they had fallen." What a kind Lawgiver our God is!

Look at this prescription for God's people as it's spelled out in verse two: "*This is how to cancel debt: Every creditor is to cancel what he has lent his neighbor...*" This was to take place on a schedule that the whole nation would follow every seven years. So if you borrowed money in the first year of the cycle, your repayment schedule would be broken down into a six-year period. If you borrowed money later in the cycle, say in the fourth year, then your repayment schedule would be broken down into a two-year period. No lender should lend the poor more than they could reasonably repay and no borrower should take a loan they had no intention of paying back.

But, life happens. Suppose you lend someone money, then a year later the husband dies. Or there's crop failure. Or there's a famine in the land. Or someone in the family gets sick. When there were additional expenses and they fell way behind in their payments, when the seventh year rolled around, what were you supposed to do as the lender? God told you what you're supposed to do: write it off. Cancel the debt. Forgive the loan. Let them go free.

Can you think of a time when someone in your life has been really generous to you? They've given you a gift you did not work for or earn. Maybe they forgave a debt you would have had a hard time repaying. I can think of a time like that in my life. What a great demonstration of God's grace and goodness.

When it happens, God says this debt should never be brought up again. Look at verse 2b: "*He is not to collect anything from his neighbor or brother.*" In other words, there should be no legal action, no physical force, no threat to get back what was owed. Just cancel the debt freely and fully. Here's why. They were doing it for the Lord's sake, because it says at the end of verse two, "*...because the Lord's release of debts has been proclaimed.*"

Now, this is the most powerful motive for a Christian to give generously. We do it for Jesus' sake. Maybe, if we're just looking at one another, we won't always feel like being generous with each other. Maybe there's something about your brother or sister that makes you feel a little stingy toward them, that hardens your heart toward them. But then you look back at Jesus and see His love for you on the cross. Then you think, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small" and you are moved by Calvary's love to give freely and generously.

All we see in verse three was motivated by brotherly love. The Israelites didn't have to show the same generous kindness to foreigners; not that they could be unjust toward foreigners, but they weren't required to generously forgive their debts. But for their brothers, their fellow Israelites, the Lord required this uncommon generosity. And they couldn't just go through the motions either. God required them to give from their hearts.

We hear a lot of heart language in the middle section of this passage. Look at verse seven: *"...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother."* Verse eight, *"Open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has."* Verse nine, *"Be careful that there isn't this wicked thought in your heart...and you are stingy toward your poor brother and give him nothing..."*

That word for "stingy" literally means to have an evil eye toward your brother. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 6:23: *"If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light."* That was in the context of generosity, of giving, of being free from our wealth and possessions. The same thing is in Deuteronomy 15:10: *"Give to him, and don't have a stingy heart when you give..."* Verse 11, *"...Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land."*

You see, your heart is the seat of your motivations, your affections. Your hand is the symbol of your actions. Your eye is the revealer of your attitudes. God is saying, "My people, I want you to put your whole being into this lifestyle of generosity. I want you to have a loving motive from your hearts. I want your hands to be open and active in giving away. And when they look into your eyes, I don't want them to see resentment or regret; I want them to see joy and liberality and delight." God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7) and it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). "Blessing comes to you, My people, when you give." That's what God keeps saying throughout this passage.

In verse 12 we see the reality that if someone had a loan they couldn't pay off, they might try to discharge the debt by selling themselves to the lender as a household servant. When you see slavery in the book of Deuteronomy, do not think of chattel slavery like we had in the

Western world, that great evil. That's not what's happening here. This is more of a voluntary selling yourself to someone in order to pay off a debt. Notice how God protects the dignity of this worker. He says that no matter how great the debt, the limit you could require a person to work for you was how long? Verse 12—six years. Then you must set that man or woman—notice God is equally concerned for male and female here—free in the seventh year. Let them go free from you. No more obligation.

Then He says in verses 13-14, “...do not send them away empty-handed.” The word is literally “garland” them. Put a garland, a necklace, around them and let it be loaded up with blessings from your flock, with blessings from your threshing floor and winepress. Just like the Israelites left Egypt with treasures of gold and silver from the Egyptians (Exodus 3:21-22, 12:35-36), God is saying, “I want you, My people, not only to do what is righteous; I want you to do what is kind and generous. I want you not just to act justly; I want you to act compassionately.”

The reason for this is in verse 15. Such a precious verse. “Remember...” Don't ever forget who you were. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this command today.” How can we treat someone else with unkindness when the Lord has dealt so generously with us? This is God's prescription for His people Israel, as well as for new covenant believers, although we're not under this law. God wants the character of His heart that's on display here to be molded and shaped into us.

So what principles can we glean from these laws of kindness? For sure, we should learn from this that the powerful should never take advantage of the weak. The rich must never trample on the poor, because if we do, they will cry out to the Lord against us and we will be guilty (verse nine). This same theme is repeated in the Gospels. It's repeated in the New Testament letters. James, the apostle, writes scathingly to religious people who trample on the poor. We must never take advantage of the poor.

As Colin Smith wisely remarks, we should learn, “These laws tested the hearts of the lender and the borrower. Am I willing to help my brother, even if it proves to be costly? If I receive from my brother, am I the kind of person who will abuse his kindness?” Those are some of the principles we can take away.

As we look at these laws, I wonder if we would have liked to live under them. It probably depends on whether you see yourself as a debtor or a lender; whether you see yourself as someone whose debts are greater than your assets, or the other way around. It was very costly

in that society to be someone with assets. They couldn't hoard them all for themselves. If they had money, they had to be a generous lender. They had to be a forgiver of debts.

This explains perhaps why these laws were so rarely practiced by the people when they entered into the Promised Land. Commenting on this passage, D.A. Carson writes, "The extent to which these statutes were ever enacted is disputed. There is very little evidence that they became widely observed public law in the Promised Land." Does that surprise you? It doesn't surprise me. The people who had the power to actually put these laws into practice were the ones who had the most to lose. These laws demanded much from them.

By and large, because of sin being what it is, the rich wanted to get richer and the poor kept suffering, because no one had the leadership to stand up and say, "I'm willing to pay the price for the forgiveness of the people's debts." Until Jesus.

## **God's provision for the transformation of our hearts.**

That brings us to God's provision for the transformation of our hearts. Jesus was born into a poor, working-class family. When He began His public ministry, He went back to His little out-of-the-way home town of Nazareth. He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and they handed Him the scroll to read Scripture. It was the book of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus opened that scroll and looked for the place in Isaiah 61, where we read these words from Luke 4:18-19:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

He rolled up that scroll, sat down and everyone's eyes were fixed on Him. Jesus said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). A release of the Lord's captives has been proclaimed! Jesus came to proclaim the Lord's release—exactly what Deuteronomy 15 is talking about. What we have not done for each other, because it is too costly, Jesus came to do for us. He came to release us from our eternally crippling debt. When Jesus forgives our debt, He removes the penalty forever. This is what we proclaim in the gospel.

Our sin has exacted a heavy toll. We are under a certificate of debt that is astronomical and we cannot pay it back. But Jesus came into the world to proclaim the release of that debt. He not only proclaimed it; He paid it. He erased the certificate of debt that stood against us, with all its obligations, and He took it away by nailing it to the cross.

Do you know what it's like to be carrying a heavy load of financial debt? You know how it works on your mind constantly? You know the pressure you feel? Multiply that infinitely and that's the debt of sin we're carrying until Jesus takes it away. Do you long to be released from your burden of the debt of sin? Jesus said, "I came to proclaim the release of the Lord's debt. Now is the year of the Lord's favor." If you come to Jesus and say to Him, "Master, my debt is too great for me to bear. Will You forgive me?" He will open His hand willingly to you. His heart will be filled with tenderhearted compassion. His eyes will be filled with mercy and He will say, "I have paid it all."

He will also do what Deuteronomy 15:18 says. He will never regard it as a hardship to set free any sinner who comes to Him. It is the joy of Jesus' heart to forgive the debts of those who come to Him and say, "I cannot pay my debt, Lord. Will You set me free?" So now we can sing, "Now my debt is paid. It is paid in full by the precious blood my Jesus spilled. Now the curse of sin has no hold on me. Whom the Son sets free, oh, is free indeed."

I think that's the best news in the world. But that news is not meant to just send us on our merry way, happy that our sins are forgiven and our debts have been cancelled, so now we can go free. No, this news is meant to transform us into people who want to relieve the burden of debt for others too. We want to do that for them spiritually by proclaiming the gospel to them, but we also want to do that for them physically, emotionally and psychologically by demonstrating the gospel in deeds of love, mercy and generosity. The gospel makes the church of Jesus Christ a distinctive and compelling community. It creates a community where the ideal God expresses in Deuteronomy 15:4—that there will be no poor in the land—actually starts to be realized.

Think about where you hear verse four repeated in the Bible. It's in the book of Acts. After the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church, listen to what it says about God's people in Acts 4:34-35: *"For there was not a needy person among them..."* Do you hear the echo of Deuteronomy 15:4? *"...[B]ecause all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need."*

I believe this is the first time in the whole Bible when any community of people is described as actually fulfilling God's vision that was set forth in Deuteronomy 15:4—and it's only possible through gospel. I think it's fitting for us to ask how does the gospel transform our hearts toward the poor? As I asked that question in my preparation, I thought of seven ways. I'm sure there are more.

1. The gospel levels the playing field. The only way to come to God is to be poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). You come broken to be mended, wounded to be healed, desperate to be rescued. You come empty to be filled, guilty to be pardoned by the blood of Christ the Lamb. All of us are on equal footing before the cross of Jesus.

2. The gospel greatly enriches us at Christ's expense. *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though He was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

3. The gospel teaches us that all we have is a gift of grace. So Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, *"For who makes you so superior?"* Who gives you the right to look down on someone else? *"What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?"* Why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

4. The gospel breaks the power of money, wealth and possessions over our hearts. Jesus says the Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found (Matthew 13:44). When he found it, he hid it, so that in his delight, he could go and sell all he had in order to buy that field. You've got the treasure if you've got Jesus. So you can say with Martin Luther, "Let goods and kindred go."

5. The gospel frees us from the fear that we will not have enough to get by in this life, because if God is for us, who can be against us? *"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8:31-32 ESV).

6. The gospel makes us debtors, not to God, but to a world that needs Christ. When the Apostle Paul received his commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles, he said, "I am a debtor to them." In Galatians 2:10 he wrote, *"They asked only that we would remember the poor, which I had made every effort to do."* For Paul, it would have been unthinkable to be a preacher of the gospel and not a lover who generously gives to the poor. The two go hand in hand.

7. The gospel sets us free from the tyranny of harsh masters so we now willingly commit ourselves as bond slaves of the Lord. I love how Deuteronomy 15:16-18 ends. A slave has been released from bondage, then says, "I don't want to leave you. I want to be with you, my master. You love me and I love you and your family, and it's well off for me to be with you."

If this is the case, that slave could voluntarily give himself into the master's service. The master would take an awl and pierce the slave's ear by the doorpost of the house, as if to say, "From now on, you're part of this family. You belong to this household." That's what we want to do when Jesus sets us free. "O Lord, now I willingly present myself to You as Your bond slave,

to be an instrument for righteousness in this world.” Friends, the gospel tells us God does not command us to do anything He has not much more abundantly done Himself for us in Jesus.

The power of this gospel should transform every local church. Very practically, what this means for New Covenant Bible Church is that there should not be a poor person among us. God has provided more than enough for us as a body to make sure every need is met. If you are part of this community and are struggling to provide for your basic needs like food and clothing and shelter, I want you to know that’s not your burden to bear alone. That’s our burden to bear together. That’s for us to share in. I would urge you to come to one of the deacons or pastors if you have a need. I believe you will find us to be openhanded, tenderhearted and eager to respond to your need. This is a blessing for us as a church family to give.

Dear friends in this church family, I would urge you, along with your regular giving to our general budget, to give periodic special gifts to the Love In Action fund, so that our deacons can have an ample storehouse, ready to meet the needs of whoever has them in our flock.

I also want to add that the poor in the Fox Valley—in our community—are our responsibility too. Here’s where I think we need to be a little more alert and attentive as a church. It’s easy in our community to forget the poor, but we are blessed to have ministries like Fox Valley Christian Action and Lazarus House, where Linda Jezek plans a meal every month. This reminds us that the quartet of the vulnerable isn’t just in the city of Chicago—they’re out here in our community as well and their presence is a test for us. They’re a barometer of how deeply this gospel has penetrated our hearts.

So may we be eager to remember the poor, making every effort to do so for Jesus’ sake.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ [www.newcbc.org](http://www.newcbc.org)

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Text provided by sermontranscribers.com ♦ [emily@sermontranscribers.com](mailto:emily@sermontranscribers.com)