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Open Wide Your Hand Deuteronomy 15 Series: Loving God in Every Way

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 15, Deuteronomy chapter 15.

The story is told of two men who were stranded on an island. The first man was pacing nervously around, trying to figure out how to get off the island. The second man was sitting calmly in the sun, seemingly enjoying his day at the beach. The first man finally barked at the second man, “Aren’t you afraid we’re going to die here? How can you just sit there?” The second man replied, “Nope, I’m not afraid at all.” “How is that possible?” asked the first man. “Because you told me that you make \$100,000 a month and you tithe faithfully. I’m confident your pastor will find us.”

Hopefully you don’t feel that kind of pressure from me, but we will risk that by considering a text together this morning that once again calls us to generosity with all that we have. Last week’s text dealt with the rhythm and the reason and the resulting joy of giving to the Lord. This week, in Deuteronomy 15, we will see one of Moses’ clearest pastoral exhortations to open wide your hand in generosity. You certainly have heard of the way to trap an animal, like a raccoon or a monkey in Africa, by putting food in a bottle that the animal can barely slip his hand into. Once his hand is in the trap and he has a hold of the food he will not release the food to get his hand out and therefore be free. Well, this is a fitting picture of how we so often get trapped by our possessions and money. We hold onto them with tight-fisted ownership and get trapped by the pitfalls of our materialistic hearts. Deuteronomy 15 is a call to open our hands and see them as conduits of blessing to the needy around us and to the Lord who has blessed us. Let’s read all of chapter 15.

This text is a call to the Old Testament people of God to show radical generosity to the poor among them. This is a needed command because God was about to put them in a land of abundant provision, and they needed to know the dangers which awaited their hearts in that abundance. Instead of closing their fists and hardening their hearts to the needy around them, they were to develop this generous heart. The generosity which was to mark God’s people in God’s land is encouraged in this text by three rhythms which were to guide the people’s interaction with the poor among them. In verses 1-11 Moses tells them that every 7th year there is to be a sabbatical year in which there must be a release from all debts. Then in verses 12-18 there is to be a release of the indentured slave after 6th years. And then in 19-23 they are to take the firstborn male of their herd and flock and they are to give that to the Lord as an offering of consecration and joy.

These three rhythms, if they were followed, would combine to create generous hearts in God's people. They would be constantly reminded, through these practices, of God's abundant provision for them. And they would also be reminded of their stewardship of all that God had given them, rather than their ownership. From this text I want to draw out some truths about generosity which should be true of God's people in every age. But before we get to those truths, consider for a few minutes some of the uniqueness of these commands. The danger here is to come to an Old Testament Law text like this and adopt it wholesale into our time and place in God's plan. So, we avoid that danger by doing good exegesis and interpretation.

So, we need to remember that Israel is going into God's Promised Land where he will be their king and will govern them as a society which will explicitly declare His goodness and glory. They will be called by his name and be known as His people. No other nation before or since has that distinction. And so, these societal laws we read about in the second half of Deuteronomy tell us a lot about the character and nature of God, but they cannot be taken wholesale and applied to all societies and governmental systems. We today live as God's people in a different governmental situation than these folks in the book of Deuteronomy. And our economic system is much different than the one which should have been at work in the Promised Land.

Without getting too far down in the weeds on this I want to simply point out how completely merciful and kind this economy that God called them to live under would be. So, for instance, they were all going to receive an inheritance going into the land. And if one of them fell into hard times through a poor harvest, then they could seek help from their brother Israelite who was to lend to them without interest. And this loan which did not collect interest would be forgiven and written off at the sabbatical year – that's what we learn about in our text. And if someone fell into a really tough spot and they were forced to sell themselves into some form of indentured servanthood – then that too was to be reset after 6 years and the person was to receive their freedom, and according to our text, a massive gift to get them off on their own two feet. Those are just some details from this text about the economy of Israel. We could spend a lot more time talking about the Law and its rules for finance, but the consistent theme we would find is this merciful system which was built to help everyone succeed and have their needs met. There is this promise of blessing attached to obeying God and doing it His way, and that blessing is a guarantee that there will be no poor in the land if they will obey.

And considering God's promises and God's commands, the emphasis in this text is upon God's people opening up their hands and being generous. This open hand of generosity is encouraged by these three rhythms in our text, but these are not the guarantee of a generous heart. Let's spend the rest of our time thinking about this call to generosity in the text. And specifically let's think about what this open hand of generosity will require and what it will result in. So, God's people must be marked by the open hand of generosity. And for this to be true it requires the risk of faith, the release of calculation and the reminder of redemption.

God's People must be marked by the open hand of generosity.

I. Which Will Require:

- a. *The Risk of Faith* – vs. 1-2, 4-6, 12-13, 19-23

- i. The open hand of generosity will first require the risk of faith. By faith here I mean the taking God at His Word and walking forward in day by day obedience even when human logic would say that another way would be better. And that is the risk of this faith. Human logic and understanding of a situation are often pointing in a different direction than God's clear will communicated in his clear word. And so, the risk of taking God at His Word is the risk inherent in refusing to walk by sight and rather to walk by faith.
- ii. In this text just consider that risk as it relates to these three rhythms. So, the rhythm of the sabbath year where all debts are forgiven, and the rhythm of the 7th year release of the indentured servant, and the consecrated offering of the firstborn male. From a human perspective, none of that makes much sense. And that is true because we are looking at these scenarios from a fiercely self-interested position. How could it possibly be best to just release someone from money they owe me? How could it possibly be best to release an indentured servant when their debt is not paid? And on top of that, how is it possibly best to release them with the lavish gifts commanded in verses 13-14? How could it possibly be best to take the firstborn male of your flock and dedicate it to the Lord? Wouldn't that hinder the building of the flock and therefore the furtherance of your ability to provide for your family?
- iii. In all three of these situations, the people are being commanded to part with something that is legally theirs, all in the name of merciful generosity. What matters more than their legal right is the Lordship of God over them. They must take Him at His Word and believe that these systems of financial generosity are good for everyone involved. And it is this risk and cost of faith which often deceives the heart of mankind to trust its own way rather than God's. We tend to think that since our economics make more sense that we should go with our way. We tend to think that our calculator figurings are sounder than God's clear Word. And this precludes faith which snuffs out generosity. But the open hand of generosity requires a full-hearted trust that God's economics are better than mine. It requires this risk of faith which is willing to release something which is under my control for the sake of benefiting someone else, all while trusting that God will work it out as He sees fit.

b. *The Release of Calculation – vs. 7-11*

- i. This open hand of generosity also requires the release of calculation. That is what pastor Moses anticipates in verses 7-11 – that the people of God would be prone to be keepers of the letter of the law while dismissing the spirit of the Law. So, he anticipates this situation where they harden their heart to the poor among them because it is too costly. And especially, in verse 9, he anticipates that they will calculate the coming sabbath year of release and will not be willing to help their poor neighbor because they will basically just be giving money away.

- ii. This is called an “unworthy thought” in verse 9, which more literally is a thought that is without profit. So, this thought which calculates the loss of profit through generosity is called a profitless thought. That is combined with a grudging look and with hard hearts and tight fists. And that is where the calculating heart always lands. If you give much thought to the personal risk and loss of generosity then you can be assured you are on the fast track to a hard-hearted, tight-fisted, grudging look at the poor.
 - iii. That is not to say that generosity is to be willy-nilly and carefree – just handing out money at random to anyone who asks. There must be a real need according to verse 7, and this is specifically within the realm of the people of God – one of their brethren. And these poor in verse 11 are described by two different Hebrew words, translated as needy and poor. The needy are those who have fallen on tough times – who have had a bad harvest or had some unforeseen disaster fall upon them. But the poor in verse 11 uses a word to describe those who have been afflicted. They are not poor because of some series of wrong decisions they have made, but they are poor because of some outside reality which has put them in great need. So, it is in these situations that the people of God are to be freely generous. They are to open wide their hands and give, even if there is no possibility of ever seeing the money again.
 - iv. The lesson here is that you will never be generous to others if you do not learn to release this calculating spirit in your heart. It is a sin against God and against your brother or sister in the Lord to value money more than you value them. It is sin to refuse to be generous to someone because you are afraid you will never see the money again. It delights the Lord to evidence trust in Him by using your resources to bless and help someone else without calculating the loss to yourself personally. Developing a generous heart requires this release of calculation.
- c. *The Reminder of Redemption – vs. 12-15*
- i. And it also requires, most importantly, the reminder of redemption. That’s in verses 12-15. This situation with someone who is so desperate they must sell themselves into servanthood is what is going on there. The Israelite who buys him, and therefore helps him clear his debt in exchange for becoming his servant, must release him or her after 6 years of work. The insinuation here is that the 6 years of work are not enough to pay off the debt that was paid. But the command is to release them at this interval of 6 years. But they are not just to be released. They are to be sent off with an abundance of goods so that they have a leg up on getting started on their own. So, the master is to open wide his hand from the ways that God has blessed him, and he is to give liberally to fill the hands of the servant who is being released. This generosity thing is costly! He is losing a servant and he is liberally supplying him with animals and food to get started.

- ii. And why should he do this? What great accomplishment of the Lord in their not too distant past should compel this release of the servant? Well, in verse 15 it is the redemption of Israel out of their own slavery in the land of Egypt. They all used to be in this position, and the only reason they are not currently in that position of slavery is the kind providence of their powerful God. God intervened and rescued them and bought them out of slavery at the price of the blood of the firstborn. The only reason they are residents in a Promised Land where they have succeeded and prospered is not because they are so great and hard-working and skilled workers. Rather, it is solely the powerful work of God to free them and to liberally supply for them.
- iii. Do you remember the promise of God in Exodus 3? He is talking to Moses about how this whole rescuing the people from Egypt is going to go and he tells him that Pharaoh will finally tire of this situation and he will release them and when they leave they will not leave empty handed, but rather they will be given all kinds of material goods and money from the Egyptians. And therefore, they will plunder the Egyptians, the text says. God is calling them to the same thing here in this situation with their own indentured servants. They are to willingly release them, and they are to abundantly supply for them, and they are to do this because of their own great freedom given by God from slavery.
- iv. Now, if you are tracking at all right now, you are making immediate connections to the Gospel of Christ Jesus. You are seeing here an obvious picture of the spiritual bondage and slavery we are in apart from Christ. Sin is our master and we are its slave. We have accrued a debt to the Lord of the Universe which beyond human calculation and we have no way to pay it off. Our Master promises us life and health and peace and joy, but he gives us nothing but misery and brokenness and messiness and pain and eternal sorrow. But we are powerless and hopeless and helpless to free ourselves.
- v. But then God steps in by sending His very own Son from the riches of glory. He humbled himself and became the willing servant of the Lord. He lived a human life of perfect obedience and submission so that he himself could become the ransom price to pay the debt of all of his people and to free them from their slavery. Through his death on the cross he made possible the reversal of our fortunes. We can go from indebted to sin and impoverished for all eternity, to being seated with Christ in heavenly places and made spiritually and eternally rich in Him before the God of Heaven. He never just sets us free; he always sets us free with an abundant supply of all that we need.
- vi. So, those who know such freedom from their own slavery are to be those who willingly open their hands and soften their hearts to generously supply for others. In other words, the generosity required here is a generosity which will only happen if past redemption is remembered. The

Israelite will only be willing to open their hand to the needy in the land if they risk trusting the Lord and taking him at his word, and if they release their calculating thoughts about how much this is going to cost them, and if they remember their own redemption out of slavery in the past. And as that comes together and they show this open-handed generosity, then there are three specific results given in the text.

II. Which Will Result in:

a. *Ample Supply for the needy* – vs. 4-5

- i. The first result of this generosity is that there will be ample supply for the needy. That's back in verses 4-5 where the promise is given that there will be no poor among them if they will strictly obey the Lord. In other words, this call to faith in the Lord – to take him at his word and live life in the land according to his command – this is the best way. It will work best in the situation, and it will put them in the place of God's blessing. And this is how it always works with God's good gifts. He gives them to us and then he instructs us well on the best way to enjoy them and use them. And if we will listen and obey and heed his instruction, we will find that it goes best when we follow Him.
- ii. This promise of ample supply is also coupled with the realism of verse 7 and verse 11. There is a provision for the poor and in verse 11 there is the reality that they will always have poor with them in the land. This is not because God will not keep his end of the promise, but because the people of Israel will not keep theirs. And this will mean that there will always be ample opportunity for them to show this generosity prescribed in chapter 15. And if they will, God will amply supply for the needy in the land.

b. *Abundant Blessing for all* – vs. 6

- i. And the second result in the text is abundant blessing for all, which follows in verse 6. So, the needy are amply supplied and all are abundantly blessed by God. If they will walk by faith they will become greatly enriched by God and they will be made into a great nation who will borrow from no other nation and who will be subservient to no other nation. The picture in verse 6 is that of complete shalom upon the nation as they hear and heed God's Word and God's ways. They are blessed and they become a blessing.

c. *Ardent Love for one another* – vs. 16-18

- i. And the third result of this open-handed generosity is an ardent love for one another. That is in verses 16-18. This released servant has been treated so well and has such a great life with his master that upon his release he refuses to leave. There is a provision here for an ongoing committed relationship marked by an awl being driven through the ear of the servant into the door of the master's house. This is a symbolic act in that the ear is what is now given to the Master – the servant will listen and obey. And the door is the point of entrance into the house. So, the servant will be

identified as one who willingly and gladly gives his obedient service for the good of the entire household.

- ii. This love between master and slave is a result of this open-handed generosity. It won't be the same in every relationship, and many of the servants will likely want to start out on their own. But even if they do, they are to be shown more love as they are amply supplied to start out well. The point is, the whole system is filled with brotherly love, and these expressions of brotherly love through open-handed generosity produce more brotherly love within the people of God.

Conclusion: So, let's bring this whole thing home to roost in the Church. As the people of God in the age of grace, what should the application of these truths look like for us? Well, when Jesus addressed the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount, he showed the great transformation he expected in the hearts of his followers.

- ³²“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. – Lk. 6:32-36

If we are followers of Christ and children of God, then we ought to be known for our mercy toward others who are struggling. And this mercy will look like open-handed generosity which does not calculate the cost but expects nothing in return. And this is to be done primarily within the people of God – the household of faith – the Church. As it says in Galatians 6:10, we are to do good to everyone, but especially to those who are of the household of faith. And this is what we see happening in the New Testament as the church develops and grows.

In the book of Acts, one of the many evidences that they had been totally transformed by the great grace of God was seen in how they viewed their stuff and how they used it to bless others.

- Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. – Acts 4:32-35

This is the default mindset of the redeemed follower of Christ, and it is seen again in 2 Corinthians as Paul speaks about the Macedonian church who was eager to give out of their own need to supply for the greater need of the hurting church in Judea. They were eager and cheerful in their giving and were convinced of the great supply of the Lord through them and for

them. This is the heart of true Christian. If we know this redemption in Christ and we are truly God's children, then we will evidence this love for one another. Like John says in 1 John 3:

- By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. – 1 John 3:16-18

So, this text should call us this morning to evaluate our view of the needy among us. When we hear of a need of our brother or sister in the family of God, do we inwardly groan at the sacrifice it will require of us? Or do we eagerly anticipate how the Lord has already supplied for them by giving to us what is needed to meet their need? Do we have open hands and soft-hearts, or do we have closed fists and hard hearts?

But the application of this text is not just material. In fact, the NT is really clear that this open-handed generosity for the Christian is not just financial and material. Because we have been redeemed by Christ through the great mercy of God, then all of life is a living sacrifice to God. And this living sacrifice will look like an open hand policy with all that we are and have. It will look like a fervent use of our gifts to bless others in the church. It will look like the eager investment of our time to serve others. It will look like an awareness of the spiritual needs of others and the courageous trust in the Lord's desire to use you to meet those needs – to take that risk of faith. It will look like a releasing of the mountain of debt that other people owe us – not just physical and monetary debt – but preeminently the debt of sins committed against us. Isn't that exactly Jesus' point when he uses a situation of extreme debt owed by a servant to a master that gets forgiven. But then the man goes out and finds the guy who owes him pennies compared to what he had just been forgiven and demands that the guy repay him. Jesus uses this very imaginable situation to show us the ugliness of our unforgiving hearts. If we have truly been forgiven this great debt by the Lord, then how can we hold others captive to the small debt they've incurred against us with their sins? And isn't this logic also applied to how much we love the Lord and others? Remember Jesus' interaction with the Pharisee who invited him to dinner and didn't wash his feet or greet him when he came. But then a woman of ill reputation came and cried tears of repentance and love and anointed Jesus' feet and cleansed them with her tears. The Pharisee is obviously appalled by this situation and Jesus tells him the parable of the parable of the two debtors. One owed a debt that could never be repaid, and one owed a manageable debt. The money lender forgave both debts and freed them both from repayment. The question Jesus asks is "which of them will love him more?" Beloved, is your love for our Lord reflective of the great forgiveness you know through Christ? And is that seen in this open-handed generosity of all that the Lord has given you? Let's pray.