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Was God's Law Really Fair?

Exodus 19:7-8: (NASB) ⁷*So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him.* ⁸*All the people answered together and said, All that the LORD has spoken we will do! And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.*

Guest Speaker: Jerry Monette

The Old Testament Law provided a way for Israel to function as an individual society as well as a society that interacted with the world around it. So, how did this Law treat the less fortunate, the sick, the indebted, the slaves, the aliens, and so on? What kind of "social programs" were available and how did they operate? Was there justice? Was there mercy? Did the Old Testament Law promote individual accomplishment at the expense of others? Did it promote a socialistic approach of spreading the wealth evenly to everyone? Stay with us as we take a fascinating walk through God's unique Old Testament model for society.

How should we deal with the inequities among us that are more or less a result of natural talents and abilities?

In our society, certain talents bring wealth and notoriety. For example, if you are really tall and can handle a basketball, you may have different opportunities than someone working with their hands for a living. How did the Law handle this?

Because we are Christians, let's first see how the New Testament handles this, and then we will see if there are differences in the Old Testament.

Galatians 6:1-5: We are to *bear one another's burdens*, meaning we are to help people when they are in need. Jesus gave us broad guidelines for living instead of the specific guidelines provided by the Old Testament.



Law is basic for all, The Code of Hammurabi, Karen Barnes, News 2

- *Imagine what it would be like if we didn't have any laws, if people did just as they pleased without any regard for others. Life would probably get pretty chaotic. Law is one of society's most basic institutions and one of the most necessary. It establishes a person's rights and obligations. It also sets penalties for those who violate these rules. "Equal justice under Law," reads this inscription on the Supreme Court building in Washington D.C. Although specific laws change over time, most people agree that justice is one of law's most abiding principles.*

The Law Covenant advocates for human equality.

Currently, falling into debt and losing your land (foreclosure) are just the hard knocks of life. No one will step forward to help you out. But it was different under the Law. You were obligated to help people who were hurting economically.

If they would follow the Law, the people would be blessed. The nation of Israel, if they were to keep the Law, would be *a blessing to all the families of the earth*.

Galatians 6:6-10

Regarding personal debt - Why did God's Law NOT allow interest on debts? Was this really proclaiming equality or just charity?

The Law tried to control, if not eliminate, the inequality of growing indebtedness in at least three ways: the forbidding of interest, the controlling of collateral, and the establishment of "remission."

Why were people forbidden to charge interest? God's intention was to protect His people, including the individual Israelite, that would keep them perpetually in a state where the person could never recover.

Deuteronomy 23:19: This Law was for the nation of Israel only. It was their economic system that applied to fellow Israelites. They were allowed to charge interest to others because outside countries that were outside the Mosaic Law charged Israelites.



Israel had anti-poverty programs in place, but they were much different than today. How did people get into debt back in those days? People were very dependent upon rain but there was drought, family problems where people could not work, etc., so people would need to borrow money. It wasn't out of wanting "stuff," rather it was from various levels of hardship. Today we get into debt because we want new and faster and better stuff. In the Old Testament society, everyone was to pull their own weight, but the Law made allowances for when times were difficult. That's why there was no interest.

Exodus 22:25-27: An equivalent today might be similar to a pawn shop. Here this individual is probably very poor. Perhaps they were a day laborer and likely did not own land. An individual is obligated to give them a short-term loan. In this case they took a cloak. But because the person was so poor, he needed his cloak presumably after work was through, so the collateral was returned. You could not make him suffer more. Under God's law, the lender had to give back the collateral before the loan was paid off if it was necessary to the poor person's health and well-being. In this way, the poor had a friend in the Law that allowed him to at least keep his head above water and keep the loan sharks at bay until he could get back on his feet. There was great compassion in the Law. The Law really encouraged people to pull their own weight. How different that is from where we are now!

Deuteronomy 24:6: This is how grain was ground. It was clearly forbidden to take in pledge the very thing that allowed the person to make a living - he would need this in order to pay back the loan and get out of debt. It is as if a mechanic owed money but the collateral was his tools. He would be unable to pay back his loan.

Deuteronomy 24:10-11: The lender was forbidden by the Law to enter into the home of the person after he took a pledge for a loan. The Law protected the borrower from shady lenders who might have demanded even more if he saw what was inside the house. It is just another layer of protection in the Law against the tendency of inequalities to build up due to debt. People were protected from the inherent greed of man.



Reasons why the war on poverty has failed, Bill O'Reilly, FOX News

- *Poor education and poor parenting are driving destitution. High school dropouts are almost four times more likely to end up in poverty than those who graduate. Children growing up in single parent families are four times more likely to be poor than those living with both parents. As long as Americans refuse to educate themselves and family units remain chaotic, you will have a 15 percent poverty rate no matter how much money you throw at it.*

Old Testament times were quite different. It was a community problem and not an individual one. It was designed to make the nation of Israel different from the nations around them. If cycles of debt were allowed to be continued, eventually there would be a two-class society. One class will own just about everything and the other will work for the rich class without any opportunity. God's economic system was to be different from the surrounding nations. Israel's society was built around everyone taking care of themselves. People worked and supported their own. If you broke your leg while you were working, society was obligated to help you until you could go back to work.

The establishment of remission - the cancelling of a debt.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2: Jesus said, *The poor will be with you always*. The Old Testament tells us that *the poor will never cease to be in the land*. Poverty just won't stop all by itself. It's going to take human action. God wanted to implement that human action that would help people avoid poverty and staying poor.

Slavery is part of this discussion as well. Slavery in the Old Testament is not what slavery is in modern times. Slavery then was more what we would think of as indentured servitude. It allowed people to be servants in order to pay off debt. God's Law was designed to help people move forward and have better lives.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11: It is interesting that God commanded that debts be forgiven in the seventh year, so obviously the closer the lender got to that seventh year, the less likely he would want to lend money! But God promised that if he did this, the lender would be blessed. There is mercy upon those who are merciful. It was God's land anyway!



Regarding servitude - how was it different than what we understand slavery to be today?

Individuals or families could sell themselves into slavery or could be enslaved by their creditors when their debt became too much. We are still really talking about indebtedness, but now it is at an extreme. It has reached the ultimate crisis. Like freedom from other debt, freedom of slaves was ordained in the law code of Israel on the seventh year.

Deuteronomy 15:12-15: Notice here that the Law required not only the release of the slave in the seventh year but also a generous severance payment with a stern warning against being stingy in giving it. This makes sense only if the intent of the law is understood to promote equality and prevent inequality among God's people. By setting up the freed slave with the means of being at least somewhat self-sufficient, it prevented him from immediately falling back among the ranks of the permanent poor. This provision was to break the cycle of debt and allow a person to get back on his feet. God reminded them that they were slaves in Egypt and He was merciful towards them.

In the nation of Israel, individuals could get wealthy, but not at the personal expense of others - especially not fellow countrymen. For example, they were not supposed to get wealthy by charging exorbitant interest that would keep someone in a perpetual cycle of paying interest, taking other peoples' lands forever, etc. One had to trust that God would bless you. That blessing came after you were generous to others.

How was justice and equality maintained when one was in line to lose their land?

 **Save him and save us all, Billy Budd (1962 movie)**

- We do not deal with justice here, but with the law... Can't you see you must first strip off the uniform you wear and even your flesh before you can escape the case at issue here. Decide you must or show us how to save the boy without setting aside our function...we could save the boy if we could find a way consistent with our duty...save him and you save us all.*

The Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. God brought them into the land of Israel and gave tribes individual portions of land. Every family had a portion of land that was intended to be theirs forever. The land was not just a piece of real estate to be bought or sold at a fair price or to be gobbled up by those with a natural talent to acquire. Land was life, and it was not to be taken lightly.

If you fell on hard times, you might have to sell all or a part of your land. There was a period of time - every 50 years - the land ownership would revert back. The whole design was to get people back on their feet. Those that were savvy could create wealth through the use of this land, and God was not against that as long as the family land was returned accordingly. The Jubilee wasn't a redistribution of wealth, just of the land.

Leviticus 25:8-13 **Leviticus 25:23:** Comparatively, our society today is very broken!

God was definitely on the side of the individual. A caller suggested **Lamentations 3:36**

Isaiah 5:8: The spirit of the law of Jubilee was intended to "defeat you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land."

Why was there a mandatory day of rest? The idea that every seventh day must be set aside as sacred rest is distinctly and uniquely Jewish. But why should rest be so important?

Deuteronomy 5:12-15: Rest from what? Rest for what purpose? And what does rest have to do with equality? One day a week, everybody is on an equal footing. It is a constant reminder that one day a week, God looks for equality in his people, represented by this one day of rest. This was just another way the poor and indebted could be put on the same level - *or your male servant or your female servant*. It was fair that everyone have a chance to rejuvenate.

So how well did Israel do with all of this? We imagine it was hit or miss. If you did not give land back at Jubilee, there was no penalty. What would stop them from keeping it? Some would, some wouldn't. God gave it as a requirement but asked them to do it just because they should. Do we want to follow God's way or our own way? Israel also had the Sabbath year when, not the people, but the land itself got a rest. This represents yet another temporary postponement against inequality.



Exodus 23:10-11: In particular, the Sabbath year makes clear that the poor have rights - not just to charity and handouts - but an equal right to work the land and to share in its wealth. Leviticus 19:9-10: The untouched corner, the dropped produce, and the seventh year yield belong to the poor, not out of sympathy, but by right. God owns the land, and all his covenanted people have a right to an equal share in it and none can be denied that right. Even though that ideal could not be realized due to human imperfection, it is nonetheless God's will and these Scriptures constantly reminded Israel of that. Wasn't God's way compassionate?

So what is the point of all of this? God is an advocate for equality. Is there justice in equality? Yes, it was to prevent the system from being so skewed that a very few owned everything. Everyone was personally responsible to provide equality for the community. The vast majority of people could pull themselves out of the hard time with a little help.

Let's switch to the New Testament. James 2:1-5: If you were a very talented individual living in Israel, you could become quite wealthy. The problem was when you wanted to hold onto that wealth forever and didn't want to follow the Law. The Law provided that at some point you would have to give back to the community and help those who perhaps allowed you to gain your wealth. Equality was important in the New Testament as well. The New Testament does not give specific laws, but people weren't to be treated differently and all were given the opportunity to be rich in faith. The most important thing is what is in your heart, not where you live or what you wear.



What hope is there for any of us, *Billy Budd* (1962 movie)

- *Don't think me pitiless in this demanding sentence on a luckless boy. I feel as you do for him. As for myself, I feel revulsion, shame and rage.*
- *Is there hope for me, Captain?*
- *Billy, what hope is there for any of us?*

They end up hanging him. This shows the struggle we all have with justice and mercy. How do we find the balance in dealing with people around us?

Lamentations 3:22-25: God's compassions never ceases. As Christians, we have faith that everything is overruled for our best spiritual welfare. That doesn't necessarily mean that everything will always come up roses; there will be times when the Lord may feel He needs to allow suffering. God allows it but puts a limit on it.

Is there a prophetic view for the future? Everyone's life now is not fair and millions of people start out okay and end up in utter misery. How does God's mercy attach to them? For us, we look at the world around us and can see this was not what God intended. We know He intended on having an earthly kingdom with the nation of Israel. We can look forward to a similar arrangement for God's kingdom. We believe there will be a time when there will be true equality and God's mercy will be applied to all mankind. Psalms 86:15-16

1 Corinthians 12:18-26: The body of Christ in relation to one another - we can be a mutual help to each other. It takes all of these parts helping each other and not fighting each other to make a healthy body. The Old Testament provided more of an economic element to function as a healthy society and here it is a spiritual application. It is important to be a part of the whole.

God's plan for His people, by Law, legislated that you had to have an open hand for those who fell on hard times. It was a wonderful way for God to take care of His people. God's Law was fair, equitable, just and merciful! Go apply this information right now! Have an open hand and look at how you can help those less fortunate than you. It provides great spiritual blessing.

***So was God's Law really fair?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions,
Think about it...!***