

Poverty (Deut. 15:1-18)

According to the site Poverty Solutions, hosted by the University of Michigan, Hillsdale County has a poverty rate of 13.5%. That number bumps up to 20% for those who are under the age of 18. 15% of children experience homelessness by the time they are in the fifth grade. Right here in the Hillsdale schools we find that 11% of the children experience homelessness, approximately 150 kids. Homelessness, of course, is not here defined as living on the streets but simply lacking a permanent address. The kids in question jump around from place to place, staying with family and friends. Poverty is often associated with other maladies. Things like domestic violence, opioid addiction, and dropping out of school are high on that list of associated problems

What do we do about these things? We are, typically, tender-hearted about questions of poverty, especially when we think of the cataclysmic poverty that we see around the globe. Some of us personally know the realities of poverty. We grew up in it or still live in it or have loved ones caught in a cycle of poverty. Is it enough for Christians simply to go with the flow and accept perspectives on poverty derived from the culture? Two broad approaches to poverty are the **Personal Responsibility** view and the **Social Justice** view. The Personal Responsibility approach says that life is largely made of personal choices and habits. Change your choices and habits and you escape poverty. The Social Justice approach says that poverty comes from systemic oppression. The privileged groups dispossess others and rig the system to their own advantage. The only valid way, therefore, to relieve poverty is to address the system. Should a Christian just pick such a view and move on?

What does Deuteronomy 15 have to tell us about poverty in ancient Israel and how does that affect the way we think of the poverty which we see and experience? Let us turn back to our **four categories for the study of Deuteronomy** to see if they help us understand this passage.

Inheritance. The Israelites had been promised by the Lord an inheritance in Canaan. This inheritance was not just to be claimed by the people, but by the tribes and the families. Families were to lay claim to their land as they were faithful to God's covenant. And each family was to retain its land, no matter the ups and downs of life. In our passage, there are two types of poverty that fall upon people. The first type of poverty is the need for moneylending. God's law here is very clear. We know from Leviticus that no interest was to be charged to another Israelite. Moreover, we see here that every seventh year was to be a year of release of debt. This could mean either total forgiveness or, possibly, simply a full year in which the debt need not be paid back. According to v. 9, it would be a sin to deny a fellow Israelite the loan of money simply because it was the sixth year and the year of debt forgiveness was close at hand. The second type of poverty is far more extreme. It allowed the poor brother or sister to enter a kind of indentured servitude with another Israelite. The seventh year would be a year of manumission in which the master gives generously to the servant, to keep them from going back into debt. In either case, we can see that there is a basic understanding of Israelite poverty. **Poverty is failure to enter the inheritance.** All Israelites were supposed to know God's blessings. If they were not doing so, if they were facing lack, then they would fall into poverty. The reasons for this fall will be considered next.

Idolatry. We must first remember that **life in a fallen world means suffering**, sometimes inexplicably. Bad things happen in a broken world. Genesis 3 really happened. So herein lies the first cause of poverty – brokenness due to the fall. But there is another important reason not lying far behind. Look again at vv. 4-6 – “However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, **if** only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you” (NIV). Do not miss the crucial “if” in the passage. If the people are faithful to the Lord, then they will experience fruitfulness. But what happens if they abandon the covenant and go after other gods? They will experience poverty – loss of inheritance – within their borders. This will happen for two reasons. First, if they don't follow the Lord,

then they will ignore his commands concerning how they treat the poor among them. Second, if they disobey the Lord, then he will lift the hedge around them, letting the nations pour in, and hold back the rain, letting drought and famine set in. **Poverty follows idolatry.** This does not mean, of course, that every poor person in the land would be an idolatrous person responsible for their own plight. It simply means that if there is idolatry in the nation, then there will be poverty in the land. This possibility of poverty will fall upon the just and righteous as well as those who bring it upon themselves through sloth or sin.

Interpretation. All these things help us to understand v. 11 – “There will always be poor people in the land.” Moses is preparing the people to understand the continuing reality of poverty in their midst. On the one hand, life is broken, so these things may always occur, until the promise of Genesis 3:15 is fulfilled and the seed of the woman steps on the head of the serpent. On the other hand, **there will always be poverty because the people will continue to struggle with faithlessness.** Throughout their long history, they will go after the ways and religions of the nations. Eventually, this would lead to the ultimate poverty, the dispossession of the land in the exile. The only hope for freedom from this reality lies with God’s promise of redemption, that he will act faithfully and decisively to deal with brokenness and sin.

Inspiration. But in the meantime, Moses is exhorting the people to tender-hearted, compassionate giving. Verse ten – “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.” **The ultimate motive for generosity and prodigality in giving comes from what God has done for the people in his grace.** Vv. 14-15 are key: “Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.” Such words are still inspiring to Christ-followers today. Bless and you will be blessed. Give as it has been given to you.

Though I think this helps us understand poverty in Deuteronomy, I haven’t quite answered the questions from the start of the message. What do we do about the poverty around us? Do these words inform our thoughts today?

Should we be taking people as indentured servants or handing out generous loans today? I will leave you with four thoughts.

1. **Imitate your God.** God is a just and loving God. He wanted his justice and love to permeate Israelite society. We also must be just and loving people today. We must imitate Jesus in his compassion and action. When I say action, don't hear me advocating some particular governmental policy. What I mean is that we who can give simply must have a heart to do so. Figure out the details through study and planning, but don't let the quest for the perfect kind of giving harden your heart to the actual possibility of giving. Be generous like God is generous.
2. **Care for the church.** Notice that the laws in this passage are particularly directed towards how the Israelites were to care for one another. This doesn't at all mean they were to be uncaring towards the foreigner. They were to respect the property rights and defend the inheritance of one another. Do you care about the well-being of your fellow Christians? Remember the way in which the early Christians in Acts sold property to support one another. Remember how each one saw their own stuff as open for use in the whole community. The picture in the early church is descriptive of a community that provided for one another. We may be called to different arrangements than what we see in Acts, but we will never be called to not care for our brothers and sisters in Christ.
3. **Let your love for the church train you to love others.** The church is a training ground for loving others in the world. Addressing poverty around us is an overflow of God's people loving one another within the church. Here the principle is like that of family. If you have healthy relationships in your family of origin, you will find it easier to form healthy relationships with others later in life. If you learn how to be generous to fellow Christians, then you will learn how to be effectively generous to non-Christians.
4. **Pray for revival.** There is a connection between cultural idolatry and the experience of loss of wholeness and blessing. When you see a society torn by violence, poverty, injustice, and all sorts of harm being

perpetrated against people (through government corruption or on-demand abortion or racial discrimination to name a few examples), as Christians, **we must believe that the spiritual loss comes before the social chaos.** And we must pray for the gospel of the kingdom to take off like fire across the land. I am not saying that faithful people won't suffer. But there is no greater answer to the questions of lack and loss of well-being than the spiritual blessings found in Jesus Christ and given to all those who know and love him.

Tender-hearted generosity inspired by our experience of salvation in Jesus Christ is key. Apart from Christ, we all live in spiritual poverty. But Jesus has liberated his people from a greater slavery than the bondage in Egypt. He has liberated his people from bondage to sin, death, and the devil. If you don't know the generosity of God found in Jesus, then don't let the day pass without being reconciled to God.