

Giving to the Community

Devotional Reading: Exodus 20:12–17

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:1–11; Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 10:25–37;
James 1:27; 2:14–17

Deuteronomy 15:4–11

4 Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it:

5 Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day.

6 For the Lord thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee.

7 If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother:

8 But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.

9 Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee.

10 Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou putteth thine hand unto.

11 For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

Matthew 25:42–45

42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

Key Text

The poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.—Deuteronomy 15:11

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 1: Fulfilling Our Obligations to Neighbors

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List categories of generosity from Deuteronomy 15:4–11 and Matthew 25:42–45.
2. Explain why believers should demonstrate generosity without expectation.
3. Implement a plan to grow in a personal capacity to express generosity.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Endless Blessings
- B. Lesson Context: Deuteronomy
- C. Lesson Context: Matthew

I. Giving to Neighbors (Deuteronomy 15:4–11)

- A. Promise of Blessing (vv. 4–6)
- B. Reminder of Generosity (vv. 7–10)
- C. Command of Benevolence (v. 11)

English Lessons

II. Giving to the Lord (Matthew 25:42–45)

- A. Showing Compassion (vv. 42–43)
- B. Questioning Timing (v. 44)
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Jesus at the Grocery Store

Conclusion

- A. Open Hands, Hearts, and Eyes
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (th as in thin).
Colossians	Kuh-losh-unz.
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ephesians	Ee-fee-zhunz.
Hammurabi	<i>Ham-muh-rah</i> -bee.
Isaiah	Eye-zay-uh.
Israelites	Iz-ray-el-ites.
Leviticus	Leh- <i>vit</i> -ih-kus.
Synoptic	Sih- <i>nawp</i> -tihk.

Introduction

A. Endless Blessings

I live on a farm. My family primarily raises cattle and sheep, though we also raise chickens. In the past, we enjoyed raising hogs, goats, and horses. To make money with cattle and sheep, one must sell them appropriately. You must consider timing, weight, breeding quality, and other marketing factors. When we sell an animal, that animal is gone for good. We will never have it back. The finality of it makes selling livestock difficult.

Chickens, on the other hand, differ because they produce eggs. We can take the eggs, knowing more will appear tomorrow. No matter how often we collect the eggs, the chickens will lay more if they are healthy.

Sometimes, we reject generosity because we fear we will face a lack. However, generosity is like chickens and eggs. Our giving does not equate to permanent depletion. As you think about today's lesson, consider the blessings of God. God supplies the needs of His people; therefore, what we are gifted is to be used generously.

B. Lesson Context: Deuteronomy

The title *Deuteronomy* is a combination of two Greek words meaning “second law.” Moses spoke and wrote the words in this book after the Israelites served their 40-year sentence in the wilderness (Numbers 32:13; Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:2). A new generation replaced the previous one, and that new generation needed to hear the Law of Moses for themselves. Thus *Deuteronomy* refers to the second giving of the law (compare the Ten Commandments in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5).

Law codes directly shape (and are shaped by) culture. They articulate societal norms and expectations. Throughout the ancient Near East, law codes included common themes such as repayment of debts, release of enslaved people, and establishing land rights. The Law of Moses speaks to similar themes. It also calls for the release of debts, people, and land, although on a different timeline (Leviticus 25:10; Deuteronomy 15:1–2).

The Law of Moses bears striking similarities to other codes of the ancient world, including the Code of Hammurabi. But the combination of political, governmental, and spiritual leadership within the Law of Moses is ultimately unique. The one true God is the spiritual leader and king. He calls His people to reflect His holiness and generosity.

C. Lesson Context: Matthew

Roughly fourteen centuries pass before the nation that received the Law of Moses receives the Gospel of Matthew. In that long interval, the Law of Moses received various “creative” reinterpretations (compare Matthew 23:13–26; Mark 7:8–13). Matthew and other New Testament writers document the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. These events transitioned God's people from the rules of the old covenant to the expectations of the new. Does this transition mean that the Law of Moses is without value today? Do practitioners of the new covenant need to uphold the expectations of the old? Today's lesson explores one aspect of these questions.

I. Giving to Neighbors

(Deuteronomy 15:4–11)

A. Promise of Blessing (vv. 4–6)

4. Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it.

The term *save* is a difficult translation. In certain contexts it means “no,” “nothing,” “only,” or “yet.” The solution here is to see its connection with the preceding verses, which discuss the cancelation of debts for the Israelites every seventh year. God’s intention is to *bless* His people. So the first part of this verse reminds the Israelites of God’s ultimate goal: *there shall be no poor among you*. The possibility of extinguishing poverty exists because God is poised to bless the people *greatly* in their obedience.

The Israelites dwell *in the land* only because God *giveth* it. Their *inheritance* was set in motion when God made His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:7–8; Deuteronomy 7:7–8). They now have all they *possess* because of their relationship with God and His great blessings.

What Do You Think?

What does *inheritance* mean to you?

What kind of things do you hope you will inherit?

Digging Deeper

How does the hope of an inheritance change your perspective, goals, or direction?

How does the idea of leaving an inheritance affect those things?

5. Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day.

God’s promise of blessing is conditional. The Israelites must obey His commands. The blessings promised for their careful obedience are protection, procreation, and prosperity (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). However, if the people of Israel disobey God’s commands, He will bring curses upon them (28:15–68). Those curses include disease, famine, and domination by foreign nations (28:21–22, 25).

Unfortunately, this warning is not one the Israelites ultimately heed. Future generations struggle to *carefully hearken unto* God’s words and *observe* all His commands. Evidence of God’s adherence to the conditions of His promise (and its consequences) appears frequently throughout the book of Judges. Judges 2:11–19 establishes a cycle in which the Israelites do evil in the sight of the Lord; the Lord allows other nations to oppress them, they call out to God for deliverance, God raises a judge to lead His people, the judge is successful, and then the judge dies and the people rebel again. The cycle repeats over and over again (compare Judges 3:7–11; 4:1–6:1; 6:1–8:35).

6. For the Lord thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee.

God promises to bless, and lying is outside of His holy nature (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). If God promises something, He will do it. The promises stated here are of abundance and preeminence. Up to this point in history, the descendants of Abraham have lived as either nomads or slaves; however, God promised he would make Abraham into a “great nation” (Genesis 12:2). The Israelites stand on the cusp of having enough prosperity to lend to other nations, never having to borrow, and having the power to rule. With God’s blessing, Israel could become the ancient Near East’s most prosperous nation.

B. Reminder of Generosity (vv. 7–10)

7. If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother.

If indicates a prescription for times when the Israelites encounter poverty. As such, the instructions now move the narrative from the envisioned ideal to a future reality. That reality will include the continuous presence of *poor* people (compare Matthew 26:11). In this case, God points to someone who is *thy brethren*, meaning a fellow Israelite, one’s neighbor, a brother, or a friend. This person lacks the financial means to survive, and God calls His people to notice and offer aid (compare 1 John 3:17). God reminds His hearers that the land they dwell in was gifted to them. He then appeals to their hearts. Instead of callousness and selfishness, God calls for compassion and generosity.

Provision for “strangers” dwelling among the Israelites is addressed later in this book (examples: Deuteronomy 10:18–19; 14:28).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever experienced a “hardening” of your heart toward a poor or needy person? Did it cause you to “shut your hand”? Explain.

Digging Deeper

What helps you “thaw” your heart and keep it soft toward others?

8. But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.

God’s expectation that His people hold material things loosely does not change in the transition from the old covenant to the new (Matthew 5:42; 2 Corinthians 9:9; etc.). God is the provider, and His children should consider all they have as gifts (Psalm 145:16; James 1:17; compare Psalm 37:21–22; Proverbs 28:20, 22; 1 Timothy 6:9). When holding this perspective, benevolence flows naturally.

The verb *lend* here includes the idea “to give a pledge,” implying a security deposit of some kind to ensure that the money will be repaid (compare Deuteronomy 24:10). It is tempting to avoid lending to the poor because they do not possess the means to repay. Thus the need for a security deposit. Unfortunately, history shows this practice is subject to abuse (Exodus 22:25–27; Amos 2:8). But God says His people have the responsibility to lend if it is within their power to do so.

The caveat *sufficient for his need* directs lenders concerning how much they should give. The term *wanteth* means “to lack” or “to be without.” It is not a comment on what a person might desire beyond basic needs but rather a fundamental deficiency. God’s people are to take care of each other.

9. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee.

The seventh year is the Sabbath year (Leviticus 25:1–7). God declares that every seven years, all debt is forgiven—this is *the year of release*. Suppose an individual asks for a loan of \$10,000 with a repayment plan of \$100 per month. If the plan is followed as outlined, the debtor will repay the loan in approximately 8 years. According to the Sabbath-year system, however, the loan must be forgiven at the end of the seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:1). The discrepancy might well discourage lenders. God realizes the possibility of such an attitude and speaks to it. He warns that withholding aid from someone who needs it may be considered *evil* and sinful because it shows something

wicked in their hearts. When a needy person goes to God with a complaint against the generosity of God’s people, God takes it seriously.

10. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto.

It is one thing to lend money out of obligation. It is another thing to lend money with a happy heart, knowing the funds may not be repaid. God’s commands extend beyond the letter of the law to the action of the heart. The phrase *shall not be grieved* refers to the internal attitude of the giver. God’s people are not to be saddened by sharing their means with others. They are not to feel like they are losing or must give unwillingly. When God’s people follow His ways, He provides for their needs and blesses *all* they do—abundance in work, skill, and finance flows from generosity.

What Do You Think?

Have you ever gone against “business sense” and given generously to someone even though it was a “bad deal”?

Digging Deeper

Compare 2 Thessalonians 3:10 with Deuteronomy 15:9–10. How do you reconcile the New Testament teaching with the Law of Moses?

C. Command of Benevolence (v. 11)

11. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

On the surface, this statement looks like a blatant contradiction of God’s words just a few verses earlier (see Deuteronomy 15:4). Some commentators believe *the poor shall never cease out of the land* is a foreshadowing of Israel’s refusal toward complete obedience. Others say it is a reminder that sin breeds poverty. No one can deny that hard times exist in this world. Therefore, 15:4 refers to the ideal, and this verse faces a harsh reality.

Open and *wide* are purposefully repetitive. God essentially says, “Throw open your lives” in compassionate generosity. The image of an open hand contrasts starkly with the idea of a clenched fist. God calls His people to a broad, unobstructed benevolence. This is the opposite of the closed hand of Deuteronomy 15:7, above.

The repetitive use of the term *thy* emphasizes ownership, which indicates responsibility. There is a relationship to consider: the underprivileged live alongside the wealthy and successful. They are part of the same *land*. The issue is personal. Caring for the destitute is not a social issue left to governmental leaders to solve. It is a personal issue in which God's chosen people are called to act.

English Lessons

English was my favorite subject in school. I loved everything about words—spelling bees, vocabulary, diagramming sentences, and writing research papers. On warm, sunny days, I didn't want to play outside; I wanted to read books. It was natural for me to become an English teacher. I delighted in sharing the English language with high schoolers.

These days, I share my love for English with students from all around the world. They move to my city with minimal English language experience, and it is my joy to teach them.

God gives more than enough of everything to go around. Even if your wealth isn't material in nature, you have treasure. Like me, it might be language. Or you may have a special skill, like sewing. Maybe you are a builder or an athlete. What has God given you to share? How can you use your "wealth" to bless others?

—B. R.

II. Giving to the Lord

(Matthew 25:42–45)

The literary context for this passage begins in Matthew 25:31, where Jesus identifies Himself as the "Son of man" who comes in glory. He then describes an elaborate sorting (25:32–45). In judgment, Jesus separates the "sheep" from the "goats" (25:32–33). The goats face an eternal punishment and must depart from His presence (25:41). Today's passage focuses on the reason for their separation.

A. Showing Compassion (vv. 42–43)

42. For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink.

Jesus is outside Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, when He makes this statement to His disciples (Matthew 24:3). He speaks in first-person and boldly declares that when *I* was hungry and thirsty, no one assisted. Like an undercover boss, the King comes incognito, and people fail to respond. The passage unfolds in an "I was" and "you did not" formula that pairs a needful condition with a subsequent reaction.

43. I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Under both the old and new covenants, God requires His people to care for others, with equal treatment (Leviticus 19:34). He calls His people to act with common sense humanity. Through the prophet Isaiah, God urges true religion and fasting to be practiced by freeing captives, feeding the hungry, housing the exposed, and covering the naked (Isaiah 58:6–8). When Jesus sent His disciples out to preach God’s kingdom and heal the sick, He declared, “Freely ye have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). Hospitality results from a generous spirit. The author of Hebrews writes, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2).

What Do You Think?

Have you ever encountered Jesus through an interaction with someone?

Digging Deeper

Share an example of a time when you extended kindness to someone as though serving the Lord.

B. Questioning Timing (v. 44)

44. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Those condemned rebut, “But when did we ever see You like this?!” How could they be held responsible for something they did not know? Surely if they had seen Jesus in such a terrible condition, they would have come to His aid. If they had seen the *Lord* naked, *in prison*, or *sick*, they would have done something.

C. Revealing Meaning (v. 45)

45. Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

The faithfulness of God’s people hinges on their treatment of *the least of these*. Judgment does not consider our knowledge, fame, or fortune. It is based on the help we

give to others as an indicator of the grace we ourselves receive. To neglect those who are suffering is to neglect the Lord.

Considering our treatment of God's people as though we serve God Himself is the closest the Synoptic Gospels come to identifying the church as the body of Christ (compare Ephesians 5:23, 29; Colossians 1:18, 24). The ways we're called to help are not extravagant. They are based upon responding to obvious needs. We are held responsible for how we react to what we know and see. James writes, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

What Do You Think?

How is it possible that the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned represent Jesus?

Digging Deeper

To whom is Jesus referring when He mentions "the least of these"?

Jesus at the Grocery Store

As I walked into the grocery store one day, I noticed a young girl sitting on the ground in the parking lot. I thought it was odd, but I quickly moved on. She was still there when I left.

I looked at her intently. She wasn't begging for anything, and she wasn't talking to anyone. She was just sitting on the pavement with her shoulders slumped. She seemed sad. For a split second, I wished I had some cash or a gift card to give her. But I kept walking and loaded my groceries into the car.

Before I arrived home, Jesus' words in Matthew 25 were racing through my mind. Was it *Him* sitting there on the ground? How could it be? In my mind, Jesus doesn't have piercings or colorful hair. He doesn't look like a teenage girl.

How often do we miss Jesus because He looks like people we quickly dismiss? If we genuinely recognized Jesus in the eyes of the people we see on the street, how would our response toward them change?

—B. R.

Conclusion

A. Open Hands, Hearts, and Eyes

God calls His people to pay particular attention to orphans, widows, the poor, the needy, and foreigners. He gives similar-sounding laws as those prescribed in the nations around Israel (consider the Code of Hammurabi; see Lesson Context) but adds a significant layer of generosity to His commands. God wants His people to see and comprehend needs and then be moved by compassion into action. He wants us to serve one another as though we are serving Him. Jesus radically teaches that compassion for the poor and needy is one way to recognize true disciples.

Our God is full of incredible generosity. We reflect His glory and charitable nature when we give. Benevolence helps us remember that our abundance and blessing come from the Lord. As God's children, we need not worry about lack or loss. Our heavenly Father provides for our needs. Therefore, if it is within our means to help another person, we are to do so. The help Jesus calls us toward is not difficult or complicated. It is simple and reflects His heart, compassion, grace, and love. We are to be openhanded.

God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). He does not consider the gifts and blessings He bestows as something that harms or bankrupts Him. Instead, God blesses His children because He loves them. He desires His people to reflect His nature. God calls us to live with open hearts.

Jesus asks us to see and serve others as if we are seeing and serving Him. This requires new eyes of compassion. There is no room for prejudice, racism, judgment, or favoritism among the people of God. Jesus does not want His people to have an "everyone for themselves" mentality. He calls His people to vibrantly compassionate community life. The poor, needy, hungry, thirsty, migrant, homeless, shirtless, sick, and imprisoned all deserve our loving kindness, care, and attention. Although society might reject these people, God sees them as children created in His image. The care we extend impacts the inheritance we receive. God calls us to live with open eyes.

B. Prayer

Father God, give us loving hearts open wide to all people. Protect us from the sin of selfishness. Open our hands in generosity. Help us remember that everything we have comes as a gift from You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Give out of your rich inheritance!