

# BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

4

## GOD'S DESIGN TO BLESS THE POOR

**Deuteronomy 14:28—15:11**

**By Marlene Nathan**

*“God’s concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. At the pivotal points of revelation history, Yahweh was at work liberating the oppressed. We can only begin to fathom the depth of his identification with the poor disclosed in the Incarnation...His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals that oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God’s people—if they are indeed his people—follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor.”*

Ron Sider

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## AIM OF THE STUDY

- To discover God’s heart for the poor as it is revealed in His Law.

## KEY VERSE

“If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.”

Deuteronomy 15:7–8

## PREPARATION

The authors suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Then, before you read over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, read through the Bible study below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. **Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to**

- Go over the questions and **choose** which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select **one application question** you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice should be the focus of your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship,

listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don't feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!

- Also, you may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders' benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

## **PREPARATION RECOMMENDATION**

All leaders need to bring to their small group meeting resources listing opportunities to participate in or partner with the urban ministries of our church. If you already support or engage in ministry with them on a regular basis, several days before this meeting, ask someone in the group to be ready to share a highlight from being involved in that work. If you do not have a regular place to serve, come with a few ideas for the group to decide on. You may find this information on a printed sheet in the church lobby, which has suggestions for both groups and individuals. Some of these are usually listed in a current issue of *The Mix*, our monthly magazine, or on our website. For more specific details, contact the Administrative Assistant of the Fruit of the Vine (Urban) Ministries.

During the time you are using this series, try to schedule several dates that your group could practice what you are studying in terms of mission and ministry.

## **OPENERS**

As Christians, we tend to have very little appreciation for God's Law that is found in the first five books of the Old Testament. We read verses in the New Testament, such as:

- "... Through the law we become conscious of sin," Romans 3:20;
- "...The law brings wrath," Romans 4:15;
- "The law was added so that the trespass might increase," Romans 5:20;

- “...The sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death,” Romans 7:5;
- “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law,” 1 Corinthians 15:56;
- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law...” Galatians 3:13;

and **we often conclude that the law is not really helpful** for us today.

But the New Testament also teaches us that **the law is good** (Romans 7:12; 1 Timothy 1:8), that it is perfect (James 1:25), and that it can give us freedom (James 2:12). It tells us that love, the highest calling of a Christian, is fulfilled in putting the law into practice (Romans 13:10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). James warns us not to speak against the law (James 4:11–12). Jesus Himself warns us not to think that His coming does away with the law (Matthew 5:17–18). In fact, we are told by Jesus to obey the commandments and to teach others to do the same (Matthew 5:19–20). So while it is true that the law cannot save us, it can be of tremendous help to us as Christians.

One way the law is helpful for us is that it shows us the will of God. The law is an expression of what God wants done, what is “right and good in His sight” (Deuteronomy 6:18). The law not only reveals God’s will, it also reveals His character. The law is good and so is God. The law is holy and so is God. As we examine God’s commandments concerning the poor, we can discover not only His will (what He wants done about the poor) but also His heart (how He thinks and feels about the poor). Understanding God’s heart for the poor is key for us, God’s people, to be able to effectively minister to their needs.

***Pray that the Holy Spirit would convey God’s heart and mind to your group as you study these verses.***

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

***This is background information for leaders. You may decide how much to share with your group members.***

### **Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy means “repetition of the law.” Its name arose from a mistranslation of Deuteronomy 17:18 in which the king of Israel is told to make a “copy of this law.” This mistake is not serious, however, since Deuteronomy is in a sense a repetition of laws already laid out in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Internal evidence points to

Moses as the author (1:5; 31:9; 22:24). Other Old Testament books (1 Kings 2:3; 8:53; 2 Kings 14:6; 18:12) and Jesus (Matthew 19:7–8; Mark 10:3–5; John 5:46–47) also refer to Moses’ authorship. This excludes of course the account of Moses’ death in Chapter 34. The book was probably written around 1406 BC, near the end of the Israelites’ forty years of wandering in the wilderness (1446–1406 BC), when they were in the territory of Moab, where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea (1:5).

Moses spoke more from his heart in this book, in contrast to his matter-of-fact style in Leviticus and Numbers. **The key theme in Deuteronomy is total commitment to the Lord and obedience to all His commands.** This is set against the backdrop of God’s love relationship with His people. Deuteronomy is essentially a covenant renewal document, in which Moses urged the people back to the covenant God initiated with them at Sinai (Exodus 19–20). It is actually structured like the suzerain-vassal (or “king to conquered people”) treaties that were popular at the time. The passage we will study is found in the section of stipulations of the covenant (4:44–26:19): “This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt....”

***Information for leaders, which does not have to be covered in the group discussion:***

While the Law of Moses is filled with specific laws that relate to the treatment of the poor, we cannot cover all of them in one discussion. They involve such things as feeding the poor (or alien or widow) in your home free of charge; lending money to someone in need without interest; paying workers’ wages promptly; not harvesting to the very edge of the field (or leaving some olives on the tree, etc.) so some was left there for the poor to gather; and not to pick up fallen fruit or dropped sheaves of grain, so that the poor could retrieve them. For further study in this area, see Exodus 22:25–27; 23:10–11; Leviticus 19:9–10, 13; 25:1–55; Deuteronomy 24:10–15, 19–22; 26:12–15. The Old Testament in general commends those who are generous and give freely and warns those who “shut their eyes and close their ears to the poor.” For further study in this area, see Job 31:16–23; Proverbs 14:20–21; 17:5; 19:7, 17; 21:13; and Ezekiel 16:49.

**STUDY THE PASSAGE: Deuteronomy 14:28–15:11**

1. Let’s read Deuteronomy 14:28–15:11. Would some volunteers read aloud Chapter 14:28–29, 15:1–6, and 15:7–11?

What are the people commanded to do in Chapter 14:28–29?

The Israelites were commanded to tithe regularly (14:22). “Tithe” means “a tenth”; it was a tenth of what a person produced, whether in livestock, grain, or fruit. Tithes were to be given annually, at the “end of the year,” meaning the end of harvest time, or in the fall. Tithes supported three different needs:

- The **Levites and the priests**, who served the Lord in the temple, did not own land, so they had no means of supporting themselves (Leviticus 18:21–28);
- A communal **meal** shared by all the Israelites in celebration of the Lord’s provision for them, in His presence, signified by “at the place He will choose as a dwelling for his Name,” (Deuteronomy 14:23);
- The **poor**, that is the aliens, fatherless and widows.

### How would this impact the poor in Israel?

The Levites were also expected to tithe from the tithe they received, and every third year the tithe to the poor was gathered. Thus, God had built into His people’s yearly calendar and normal routine **a way of providing for those who may not have had what they needed to live!** Perhaps He knew that the poor would not get cared for if it were left up to individuals’ own inclinations. In total, people may have been asked to give 28% of their income through the three tithes. The tithes would be collected in the third and sixth year, and then the year of canceling debts [see below] would occur in the seventh year (Kalland, p. 102).

## 2. What was commanded in Chapter 15:1–3? How often were they to do this?

At the end of every seven years, Israelites were to **cancel all debts that fellow Israelites owed them**. It appears from the context that this command was for the total cancellation of debt and not just postponing collection for one year. In Exodus 23:10–11, farmers were told to leave their fields dormant every seven years, making it impossible that year for the poor to be able to repay a debt. The ultimate cancellation of debts every seven years would have a much more profound affect on Israelite economy and society than would a one year postponement. This would explain verses 4–5: the way to make sure there would be no poor among them was to make it possible for people to get out from under a heavy load of debt (Kalland, p. 104).

Someone in your group might ask why this command only applied to fellow Israelites and not to foreigners. Without taking too much time, you could explain that Israel was to have a unique type of society because of its covenant relationship with God. They were to have a special sense of

interrelatedness as family (Kalland, p. 104). And, they were to reflect their relationship to the Lord to the rest of the world (Deuteronomy 4:20; 14:2; 28:9–14; Isaiah 43:10, 20–21; Malachi 3:17–18). Peter used this same idea and applied it to the church in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:9–12). Outsiders were not expected to obey the Jewish laws, and neither were the Israelites required to apply all their laws to their dealings with outsiders.

This same idea applies to Christians today. Our relationship with God is through the New Covenant, which Jesus made possible by His obedient life and substitutionary death—both carried out in our place. Now we are to love, worship, and obey God from the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, the church accurately reflects God to the world, or as Jesus put it, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Just as there were certain Old Covenant laws that applied just between the Israelites, so there are particular commandments that apply exclusively to those within the family of God (Matthew 18:15ff: “If your *brother* sins against you...”).

### **3. Would someone read Exodus 23:10–11 and another read Leviticus 25:1–7?**

**In these two passages, what else were the people commanded to do every seven years?**

The Israelites were told to not sow or harvest their land in the seventh year. The land was to get a rest, a Sabbath, and anything that grew on its own was available food for the people, their hired help, the temporary resident, the animals (Leviticus 25:6), and the poor (Exodus 23:10–11).

### **4. Why might God have insisted on a day of rest once a week and a year of rest once every seven years?**

Every seven days there was to be a Sabbath. Sabbath means “to cease” or “to desist.” It originated in creation with God ceasing His creative activity and resting on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2–3). God “rested,” but it was not because He was tired and needed a break. He simply did not work on the seventh day. God’s people were to reflect this same pattern in honor of Him. Israel was to cease from working on the Sabbath. It became known as a day for the Lord, and a time of rest.

The Sabbath was not a day simply for human enjoyment and it was never a day to work overtime for monetary gain. Observing the Sabbath was essential

to Jewish life and an absolute command. Violating the Sabbath was punishable by death (Exodus 31:13–17; 34:21; 35:2–3; Leviticus 19:3, 30; 23:3, 38).

We can see God’s mercy in commanding a day for rest since unlike God man does get tired. But the Sabbath was much more than a day to catch up on sleep or to recharge one’s emotional batteries. It was a weekly reminder that the people **rested in or relied on God for everything**. Ceasing from work meant they had to trust Him to provide. It also reminded them that they were not the most significant factor in the productivity of the land or trades. God was the one who fed them; without His sending rain or providing fertile soil, they could not grow crops. God was the one who caused their businesses to flourish; without Him protecting them from hostile neighbors, they would not have a stable environment to conduct business or store up wealth.

The number seven is significant in Scripture mainly because of creation and the institution of the Sabbath. It is, however, also associated with the notion of completion, fulfillment, and perfection. There are *numerous* references to seven in the Bible: feasts lasted 7 days; the Day of Atonement was in the 7th month; Joshua marched around Jericho 7 times; Daniel’s famous prophecy in Chapter 9 is about 70 “sevens”; there were 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 bowls in the book of Revelation; and God is said to have a 7-fold Spirit (Revelation 4:5). While all of this is very interesting, **the significance of 7 to our study is its connection with the Sabbath.**

**Note:** By Jesus’ day, regulations concerning the Sabbath had taken on grand proportions; keeping manmade rules became almost an obsession. Jesus often conflicted with the Pharisees due to their misunderstanding of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–11). But Jesus never taught against the basic principles of keeping the Sabbath.

**\*What principles do you think we could learn from observing the Sabbath?**

The Sabbath was key for the Jewish people who were covenanted with God through the law given at Sinai. As Christians, we are also covenanted with God but through grace, extended to us at the cross of Christ. The significance of Sabbath for us is that we have entered a spiritual “rest” because of God’s grace. We no longer work for our salvation, but instead trust (or rest) in what Christ has accomplished for us (Hebrews 4:1–11).

Although we do not live under the specifics of every Old Covenant law, certain principles of covenant life remain unchanged. One principle is that of **stewardship**. God gave the Israelites everything they needed and more including the land (Deuteronomy 26:1–11), which He had promised to Abraham and his descendents (Genesis 12:2–7; 26:3–5; 28:13–15; 35:12; 50:24–25). However, the Lord told the nation that the land still belonged to Him (Leviticus 25:23). Thus, they were not free to do with it as they pleased, make as much profit from it as they could, or hoard as much grain for themselves as possible.

Out of reverent fear of the Lord, they needed to follow His command and redistribute some of what He had given them to others. As Christians, we must view whatever we “own” as really belonging to the Lord. Although we don’t have “The Law” telling us how, when, and to whom to give to, we ought to follow Old Testament principles and *regularly, deliberately*, and perhaps *systematically* give to those in our society who cannot provide for their own needs. In fact, it could be said that as New Testament believers, our giving and care for the poor ought to be well beyond what was expected of Old Testament believers and certainly beyond that of non-believers.

**5. What would be the impact of canceling debts every seven years (Deuteronomy 15:4–6)? What might be the impact of not farming for a year (Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 25:1–7)?**

This system of canceling debts every seven years would have prevented some in Israel from accumulating a lot of wealth and others from falling into desperate poverty. If you had a series of “bad” years and could not pay your debt, eventually the amount you owed would be forgiven, you could start over, and you could hope to regain some financial stability. On the other hand, those who were doing quite well could not take advantage of debts owed them by their “brothers.” While this system did not totally redistribute wealth and make everyone’s situation the same, as proposed in socialism, it did eliminate extreme wealth and extreme poverty.

Not farming the land for a year would benefit the land by allowing it to regain moisture especially in dry areas and reduce weeds or plant diseases. Today farmers prefer to use “crop rotation” which is planting different crops each season so that one crop is not grown year after year in the same field (“Fallow Land”). But, resting the land also meant that the people would practice living solely by faith since the crops that did grow would not have been by their direct efforts. It might have cultivated empathy for those who were less

fortunate and lived in dependence on God and fellow citizens—not just one year out of seven but on a daily basis. Having to live on what God provided during the seventh year might also curb greed and strengthen habits of giving thanks. Farmers in any culture have always been very dependent on the weather and soil conditions for good results. And needing favorable conditions, which would contribute to a good, harvest probably would point those in agriculture back to reliance on God the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

#### **6. Why might the people be reluctant to obey these commands?**

Reluctance to obey these commands would probably have stemmed from greed on the one hand and fear on the other. Some would have wanted more for themselves and their families, so they might have required all debts be repaid to them. Others might have been fearful that even if they obeyed, God would not have provided for them in the lifestyle they enjoyed during prosperous years or God might for some reason not bless them at all. So they might have tried to protect themselves, so to speak, and collect all the debts they could. The same reasons could have applied to not wanting to forego farming or even resting rather than working on the Sabbath.

#### **\*Which of these commands would be challenging for you to keep? Why might you not want to obey it?**

Human nature hasn't changed much. Many people still want to find security in tangible ways rather than trusting in an unseen God. We spend long hours at work not only for needed provision but also in hopes of creating a financial cushion to insulate us from any future discomfort. But there is no way for us to determine what would be "enough" to shield our families. Only God knows the future, and only He can be counted on to preserve us in times of financial downturns or in any other crisis.

#### **7. What promises did God make to motivate the people to obey (vv. 4–6)?**

God promised blessing and prosperity if the people would obey. Israel would be in a position of economic strength, loaning to nations yet borrowing from none. Note: Poverty was not a glorified condition in the Bible. Economic prosperity was often the sign of God's blessing. The wealthy, however, were commanded to be like God with their money, giving generously to those in need. Paul repeated this idea in 1 Timothy 6:17–18.

**8. Let's read Deuteronomy 15:7–11 again. What were the people commanded to do when they encountered a poor brother? What does it mean to be hardhearted and what would a tightfisted person look like?**

The Lord told His people to be openhanded and lend freely to a fellow Israelite in difficult financial circumstances. Elsewhere in the Bible, the Lord declares that everything belongs to Him (Exodus 19:5; Psalm 24:1), so we should view ourselves as stewards or trustees of God's possessions, not as owners of the material goods we have at hand.

To be hardhearted in Scripture is to be unfeeling or unmoved like a rock by another's trouble and pain. The classic example of what God did not want His people to do is found in 1 John 3:17: "If anyone has material possessions and sees *his brother in need but has no pity on him*, how can the love of God be in him?" To be tightfisted means to be reluctant to part with material possessions or money.

**9. Why is the thought expressed in verse 9 so wicked?**

What makes verses nine so wicked is that it revealed calculating selfishness, clearly immoral, evil, unbiblical thinking. The person condemned in verse 9 had realized that in just a short time, all debts would be canceled so he would never see his money again. It's still immoral to figure out ways to avoid obedience or to get around the laws of God. Such behavior in the Bible is characteristic of "the wicked."

**10. What does it mean to be "openhanded" or give "without a grudging heart"? What did God promise to those who gave generously?**

To be openhanded is the opposite of being tightfisted. A grudging heart is an unwilling heart that must be forced into obedience. It's possible to give and it's even possible to give a lot, yet not do it willingly. But that would not please God who has been so generous with us that He did not spare His own Son. As always, God looks beyond our actions to see our hearts. As Paul stated, God loves a "cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6–7).

God promised to bless the work of the generous. The clear implication here was that the generous would prosper materially. Some teach today prosperity is guaranteed to those who give and that a valid motivation for giving is that in the end, you'll be more prosperous if you give. While we are promised blessing when we give, this should never be our motivation. God, of course, is

interested in not just what we do, but also the condition of our hearts. He is always weighing our motives to see if they are pure. According to Jesus, we are to give, expecting nothing in return (Luke 14:12–14)!

## APPLICATION

**\*From these passages, how would you summarize our privileges and responsibilities as the people of God?**

**\* From these passages, what principles could we apply today in ministering to the poor and oppressed?**

**\*How do you think a person changes from being hardhearted, tightfisted, and begrudging into openhanded and generous?**

**\*Why do you think our attitudes are as important to God as our actions? What are your attitudes towards the poor?**

There is a principle in Scripture of authenticity and integrity. Our actions should match our hearts. Jesus was frequently teaching on this issue:

- it's not enough that you don't murder, you shouldn't hate;
- it's not enough that you don't commit adultery, you shouldn't lust in your heart;
- only a good tree will produce good fruit; the mouth speaks out of the overflow of what's in the heart, etc.

This was why He condemned/rebuked the Pharisees: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). The reason our attitudes are so important to God is that **our attitudes affect our actions greatly**. So if we make our attitudes right (and not just focus on our actions), then we will be sure to please God. As Jesus said, “Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Matthew 5:26).

**\*How could our group be more openhanded or generous towards those who are experiencing financial difficulty right now?**

**\*When could our group participate in the ministries our church has to the poor?**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Unfortunately, throughout history, poverty has been a fact of life: “There will always be poor people in the land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Jesus said the same thing to His disciples: “The poor you will always have with you...” (Mark 14:7). No society on earth has completely eliminated poverty. But poverty was not God’s intention for His people. He stated in Deuteronomy 15:4, “However, there should be no poor among you....”

We should not use this passage as a resignation to the inevitable, or an excuse for complacency. It is actually a call to generosity and compassion. If there is to be one place where poverty doesn’t exist, it should be in and around God’s people, the community of believers. This is what happened with the believers in Jerusalem following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Luke wrote, “Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need...There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:45; 4:34–35). [It is clear from the incident with Ananias and Sapphira that giving to the Apostles in Acts was *voluntary*. Their sin was not that they hadn’t given up everything, but that they had *lied* about what they had given (Acts 5:3–4).]

God’s Word is quite a challenge to us today, who are “affluent” by the world’s standards and who value individualism and privacy! This week, prayerfully consider how the Lord would have you and our group respond to His Word.



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