

# CHAPTER 15

In this chapter Moses gives orders,

- I.** Concerning the release of debts, every seventh year (v. 1-6), with a caution that this should be no hindrance to charitable lending (v. 7-11).
- II.** Concerning the release of servants after seven years' service (v. 12-18).
- III.** Concerning the sanctification of the firstlings of cattle to God (v. 19, etc.).

## ~~15:1-11~~ DEUTERONOMY 15:1-11

### THE YEAR OF RELEASE

Here is,

**I.** A law for the relief of poor debtors, such (we may suppose) as were insolvent. Every seventh year was a year of release, in which the ground rested from being tilled and servants were discharged from their services; and, among other acts of grace, this was one, that those who had borrowed money, and had not been able to pay it before, should this year be released from it; and though, if they were able, they were afterwards bound in conscience to repay it, yet thenceforth the creditor should never recover it by law. Many good expositors think it only forbids the exacting of the debt in the year of release, because, no harvest being gathered in that year, it could not be expected that men should pay their debts then, but that afterwards it might be sued for and recovered: so that the release did not extinguish the debt, but only stayed the process for a time. But others think it was a release of the debt for ever, and this seems more probable, yet under certain limitations expressed or implied. It is supposed (v. 3) that the debtor was an Israelite (an alien could not take the benefit of this law) and that he was poor (v. 4), that he did not borrow for trade or purchase, but for the subsistence of his family, and that now he could not pay it without reducing himself to poverty and coming under a necessity of seeking relief in other countries, which might be his temptation to revolt

from God. The law is not that the creditor shall not receive the debt if the debtor, or his friends for him, can pay it; but he shall not exact it by a legal process. The reasons of this law are,

**1.** To put an honour upon the sabbatical year: *Because it is called the Lord's release*, v. 2. That was Gods year for their land, as the weekly sabbath was God's day for themselves, their servants, and cattle; and, as by the resting of their ground, so by the release of their debts, God would teach them to depend upon his providence. This year of release typified the grace of the gospel, in which is proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord, and by which we obtain the release of our debts, that is, the pardon of our sins, and we are taught to forgive injuries, as we are and hope to be forgiven of God.

**2.** It was to prevent the falling of any Israelite into extreme poverty: so the margin reads (v. 4), *To the end there shall be no poor among you*, none miserably and scandalously poor, to the reproach of their nation and religion, the reputation of which they ought to preserve.

**3.** God's security is here given by a divine promise that, whatever they lost by their poor debtors, it should be made up to them in the blessing of God upon all they had and did, v. 4-6. Let them take care to do their duty, and then God would bless them with such great increase that what they might lose by bad debts, if they generously remitted them, should not be missed out of their stock at the year's end. Not only, *the Lord shall bless thee* (v. 4), but he *doth bless thee*, v. 6. It is altogether inexcusable if, though God had given us abundance, so that we have not only enough but to spare, yet we are rigorous and server in our demands from our poor brethren; for our abundance should be the supply of their wants, that at least there may not be such an inequality as is between two extremes, ~~2~~ 2 Corinthians 8:14. They must also consider that their land was God's gift to them, that all their increase was the fruit of God's blessing upon them, and therefore they were bound in duty to him to use and dispose of their estates as he should order and direct them. And, *lastly*, If they would remit what little sums they had lent to their poor brethren, it is promised that they should be able to lend great sums to their rich neighbours, *even to many nations* (v. 6), and should be enriched by those loans. Thus the nations should become subject to them, and dependent on them, as *the borrower is servant to the lender*, ~~22~~ Proverbs 22:7. To be able to lend, and not to have need to borrow, we must look upon as a great mercy, and a good reason why we

should do good with what we have, lest we provoke God to turn the scales.

**II.** Here is a law in favour of poor borrowers, that they might not suffer damage by the former law. Men would be apt to argue, *If the case of a man be so with his debtor* that if the debt be not paid before the year of release it shall be lost, it were better not to lend. “No,” says this branch of the statute, “thou shalt not think such a thought.”

**1.** It is taken for granted that there would be poor among them, who would have occasion to borrow (v. 7), and that there would never cease to be some such objects of charity (v. 7), and that there would never cease to be some such objects of charity (v. 11): *The poor shall never cease out of thy land*, though not such as were reduced to extreme poverty, yet such as would be behind-hand, and would have occasion to borrow; of such poor he here speaks, and such we have always with us, so that a charitable disposition may soon find a charitable occasion.

**2.** In such a case we are here commanded to lend or give, according to our ability and the necessity of the case: *Thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand*, v. 7. If the hand be shut, it is a sign the heart is hardened; for, *if the clouds were full of rain, they would empty themselves*, <sup>211B</sup>Ecclesiastes 11:3. Bowels of compassion would produce liberal distributions, <sup>212B</sup>James 2:15, 16. Thou shalt not only stretch out thy hand to him to reach him something, but thou shalt *open thy hand wide unto him, to lend him sufficient*, v. 8. Sometimes there is as much charity in prudent lending as in giving, as it obliges the borrower to industry and honesty and may put him into a way of helping himself. We are sometimes tempted to think, when an object of charity presents itself, we may choose whether we will give any thing or nothing, little or much; whereas it is here an express precept (v. 11), *I command thee*, not only to give, but to *open thy hand wide*, to give liberally.

**3.** Here is a caveat against that objection which might arise against charitable lending from the foregoing law for the release of debts (v. 9): *Beware that there be not a thought*, a covetous ill-natured thought, *in thy Belial heart*, “*The year of release is at hand*, and therefore I will not lend what I must then be sure to lose;” lest thy poor brother, whom thou refusest to lend to, complain to God, and it will be a sin, a great sin, to thee. Note,

(1.) The law is spiritual and lays a restraint upon the thoughts of the heart. We mistake if we think thoughts are free from the divine cognizance and check.

(2.) That is a wicked heart indeed that raises evil thoughts from the good law of God, as theirs did who, because God had obliged them to the charity of forgiving, denied the charity of giving.

(3.) We must carefully watch against all those secret suggestions which would divert us from our duty or discourage us in it. Those that would keep from the act of sin must keep out of their minds the very thought of sin.

(4.) When we have an occasion of charitable lending, if we cannot trust the borrower, we must trust God, and lend, hoping for nothing again in this world, but expecting it will be recompensed in the resurrection of the just, <sup><465></sup>Luke 6:35; 14:14.

(5.) It is a dreadful thing to have the cry of the poor against us, for God has his ear open to that cry, and, in compassion to them, will be sue to reckon with those that deal hardly with them.

(6.) That which we think is our prudence often proves sin to us; he that refused to lend because the year of release was at hand thought he did wisely, and that men would *praise him as doing well for himself*, <sup><468></sup>Psalms 49:18. But he is here told that he did wickedly, and that God would condemn him as doing ill to his brother; and we are sure that the *judgment of God is according to truth*, and that what he says is sin to us will certainly be ruin to us if it be not repented of.

**III.** Here is a command to give cheerfully whatever we give in charity: "*Thy heart shall not be grieved when thou givest*, v. 10. Be not loth to part with thy money on so good an account, nor think it lost; grudge not a kindness to thy brother; and distrust not the providence of God, as if thou shouldst want that thyself which thou givest in charity; but, on the contrary, let it be a pleasure and a satisfaction of soul to thee to think that thou art honouring God with thy substance, doing good, making thy brother easy, and laying up for thyself a good security for the time to come. What thou doest do freely, for *God loves a cheerful giver*," <sup><471></sup>2 Corinthians 9:7.

**IV.** Here is a promise of a recompence in this life: “*For this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee.*” Covetous people say “Giving undoes us;” no, giving cheerfully in charity will enrich us, it will *fill the barns with plenty* (<sup><1180></sup>Proverbs 3:10) and the soul with true comfort, <sup><2800></sup>Isaiah 58:10, 11.

## <sup><1552></sup>DEUTERONOMY 15:12-18

### THE YEAR OF RELEASE

Here is,

**I.** A repetition of the law that had been given concerning Hebrew servants who had sold themselves for servants, or were sold by their parents through extreme poverty, or were sold by the court of judgment for some crime committed. The law was,

**1.** That they should serve but six years, and in the seventh should go out free, v. 12. Compare <sup><1212></sup>Exodus 21:2. And, if the year of jubilee happened before they served out their time, that would be their discharge. God's Israel were a free people, and must not be compelled to perpetual slavery; thus are God's spiritual Israel called unto liberty.

**2.** That if, when their six years' service had expired, they had no mind to go out free, but would rather continue in service, as having less care, though taking more pains, than their masters, in this case they must lay themselves under an obligation to serve for ever, that is, for life, by having *their ears bored to the door-posts*, v. 16, 17. Compare <sup><1216></sup>Exodus 21:6. If hereby a man disgraced himself with some, as of a mean and servile spirit, that had not a due sense of the honour and pleasure of liberty, yet, we may suppose, with others he got reputation, as of a quiet contented spirit, humble, and diligent, and loving, and not *given to change*.

**II.** Here is an addition to this law, requiring them to put some small stock into their servants' hands to set up with for themselves, when they sent them out of their service, v. 13, 14. It was to be supposed that they had nothing of their own, and that their friends had little or nothing for them, else they else they would have been redeemed before they were discharged by law; they had no wages for their service, and all they got by their labour

was their masters', so that their liberty would do them little good, having nothing to begin the world with; therefore their masters are here commanded to furnish them liberally with corn and cattle. No certain measure is prescribed: that is left to the generosity of the master, who probably would have respect to the servant's merit and necessity; but the Jewish writers say, "He could not give less than the value of thirty shekels of silver, but as much more as he pleased" The maid-servants, though they were not to have their ears bored if they were disposed to stay, yet, if they went out free, they were to have a gratuity given them; for to this those words refer, *Unto thy maid-servant thou shalt do likewise, v. 17*. The reasons for this are taken from the law of gratitude. They must do it,

**1.** In gratitude to God, who had not only brought them out of Egypt (v. 15), but brought them out greatly enriched with the spoils of the Egyptians. Let them not send their servants out empty, for they were not sent empty out of the house of bondage. God's tender care of us and kindness to us oblige us to be careful of, and kind to, those that have a dependence upon us. Thus we must *render according to the benefit done unto us*.

**2.** In gratitude to their servants, v. 18. "Grudge not to give him a little out of thy abundance, for *he has been worth a double hired servant unto thee*. The days of the hireling at most were but three years (~~2364~~ Isaiah 16:14), but he has served thee six years, and, unlike the hired servant, without any wages." Masters and landlords ought to consider what need they have of, and what ease and advantage they have by, their servants and tenants, and should not only be just but kind to them. To these reasons it is added, as before in this chapter (v. 4, 6, 10), *The Lord they God shall bless thee*. Then we may expect family blessings, the springs of family-prosperity, when we make conscience of our duty to our family-relations.

## ~~659~~ DEUTERONOMY 15:19-23

### CONCERNING FIRSTLINGS

Here is,

**1.** A repetition of the law concerning the firstlings of their cattle, that, if they were males, they were to be *sanctified to the Lord* (v. 19), in

remembrance of, and in thankfulness for, the sparing of the first-born of Israel, when the first-born of the Egyptians, both of man and beast, were slain by the destroying angel (<sup>(0131)</sup>Exodus 13:2, 15); on the eighth day it was to be given to God (<sup>(0223)</sup>Exodus 22:30), and to be divided between the priest and the altar, <sup>(0487)</sup>Numbers 18:17, 18.

2. An addition to that law, for the further explication of it, directing them what to do with the firstlings,

(1.) That were females: “Thou shalt *do no work with the female firstlings of the cow*, nor shear those of the sheep” (v. 19); of them the learned bishop Patrick understands it. Though the female firstlings were not so entirely sanctified to God as the males, nor so early as at eight days old, yet they were not to be converted by the owners to their own use as the other cattle, but must be offered to God as peace-offerings, or used in a religious feast, at the year's end, v. 20. *Thou shalt eat it before the Lord thy God*, as directed <sup>(0528)</sup>Deuteronomy 12:18.

(2.) But what must they do with that which was blemished, ill-blemished? v. 21. Were it male or female, it must not be brought near the sanctuary, nor used either for sacrifice or for holy feasting, for it would not be fit to honour God with, nor to typify Christ, who is a *Lamb without blemish*; yet it must not be reared, but killed and eaten at their own houses as common food (v. 22), only they must be sure *not to eat it with the blood*, v. 23. The frequent repetition of this caution intimates what need the people had of it, and what stress God laid upon it. What a mercy it is that we are not under this yoke! We are not dieted as they were; we make no difference between a first calf, or lamb, and the rest that follow. Let us therefore realize the gospel meaning of this law, devoting ourselves and the first of our time and strength to God, as a kind of first-fruits of his creatures, and using all our comforts and enjoyments to his praise and under the direction of his law, as we have them all by his gift.