

The True Basis of Social Concern

by Ray C. Stedman

The twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus is very appropriate to Palm Sunday. As the first verse tells us, it was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. God gave most of the book of Leviticus to Moses as he stood in the entry door of the tabernacle. There the LORD unfolded the sacrifices and the ceremonies, the rituals and the cleansings – all of which speak of the work of Christ on our behalf. They have to do with redemption, with handling the problem of evil in the individual heart. But when God speaks about government he speaks from Sinai. The Ten Commandments were given from Sinai and this revelation of Chapter 25 was given at the same time. Therefore, God is speaking as the King of the nations. And it was in that character that our Lord entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – the “triumphal entry.” He and his party took their way down the orchard-clad slopes of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and up into the city. He was riding on a donkey, and he came fulfilling the prediction of Zechariah the prophet:

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass. {Zech 9:9
RSV}**

He had previously fulfilled the prophecy that a prophet greater than Moses was to come. All of his ministry up until then had been prophetic, piercing unto the heart of this nation, showing them what was needed, and turning them back to God. And in a few days he was to stand as the great high priest and offer himself as the Passover Lamb for the sins of the nation and of the world. So in our Lord's ministry he fulfilled those three great, significant offices of Israel: prophet, priest, and king.

It is as King that God speaks to Israel here in Chapter 25 of Leviticus and gives to Moses the information and regulations concerning the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee. Israel was intended to have a king because it was a sample nation. We will never understand fully why God selected this people to be his chosen people in the unique way that the Scriptures set forth unless we recognize that they were to be a demonstration, a model nation, to teach the rest of the nations how God operates in the world, how he desires and intends to run every nation. This is why what was said to Israel regarding government is so significant. It is a representation of God's relationship with the other nations of the world.

In the first seven verses you have the instructions concerning **the sabbatical year**:

The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, “Say to the people of Israel, When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a sabbath to the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land a sabbath to the LORD, you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. What grows of itself in your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather; it shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. The sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you; for your cattle also and for the beasts that are in your land all its yield shall be for food.” {Lev 25:1-7 RSV}

We are already familiar with the weekly sabbath, with the fact that God had marked out one day in seven to be observed by this people as a day of rest from labor. You recall that as we looked at that together we discovered that it is a very important principle. This sabbath lies at the heart of everything God does, from creation on, because he is trying to drive home to human hearts an absolutely necessary truth, one which is fundamental to our humanity, and that is that we must operate out of rest. Haven't you discovered that in your own life? It is so stressful when we are filled with anxiety and pressure, and when in all our frenetic activity we get restless and feverish and upset, and we press on thinking that it all depends upon us, that we've got to get everything done ourselves. It drives us crazy, because we don't have enough time nor energy and we don't have the opportunity we need!

But God is trying to show us that that was never his design for human lives. Men are to operate out of rest. Rest is dependence upon the activity of Another. When you rest and relax and depend on someone else you are invoking the activity of a second Person. And that is the fundamental secret of humanity which God labors to teach us all through the Scriptures, in the Old and the New Testaments alike. He is prepared to work through us – not apart from us, not with folded hands on our part – but in our activity to be there, supplying what it takes to get done what is necessary. That is the secret of rest. And when the weekly sabbath was observed it taught the people that this was to be true of the individual.

Now we come to the sabbatical year. Not only was one day out of seven to be rested, but one year out of seven. Every seventh year Israel was to let the land rest for a year. They were not to sow any crops nor to reap anything. They were not even to prune the vineyards but were to let the trees and the vines grow without hindrance. They were even to eat nothing which grew of itself, but were to let the land lie entirely fallow. You recognize that this is a very important principle of horticulture. You can write the U.S. Department of Agriculture and they will send you pamphlets which urge you to allow your land to rest every now and then. The result will be, as this passage tells us in Verse 6, an increase of yield. You will get much more out of the land if you let it rest periodically, because it needs to rest.

Today we understand that this is a fundamental scientific fact, on the physical level, already anticipated here in this ancient book. But it is far more than that! Never restrict your interpretation of Scripture only to the level of the physical life. It is also to be applied to the spiritual realm. The sabbath is applicable, as God is teaching us here, beyond the life of the individual to society at large. What he is trying to drive home here is that if there is a recognition of, and dependence upon, God's ability to work in social life, in interpersonal relationships, in government, a very important result will obtain which cannot be obtained in any other way. There will be fruitfulness in life.

We will see this developed further as we go into this passage, for that is the significance of the sabbatical year.

With it is linked **the year of jubilee**, which follows immediately in the text, beginning with Verse 8:

“And you shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall be to you forty-nine years. Then you shall send abroad the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall send abroad the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family. A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be to you; in it you shall neither sow, nor reap what grows of itself, nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee, it shall be holy to you, you shall eat what it yields out of the field.”
{Lev 25:8-12 RSV}

Notice that the year of jubilee, which came every fiftieth year, was but the intensification of the sabbatical year. The sabbatical year was to be observed every seventh year. And when seven times seven had passed, forty-nine years, then the next year was declared the year of jubilee. This is very instructive because it indicates that whatever the sabbatical year stood for is to be worked out in principle and that the results will finally become fully manifest in the fiftieth year.

These numbers were chosen because they are symbolically significant. Seven is the number of perfection. So seven times seven is perfection fully manifested. In other words, God is saying that whatever the sabbath year stands for, if you allow it to run its full course, will manifest itself in a complete and open demonstration of something.

What is that something?

It is stated in one word in this text: *Liberty*.

This is the way you free people from social problems, injustices, and inequities. It all works out at last in a year of liberty.

I wonder if you caught the important words in Verse 10. They are quoted in a very well-known place. “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...” Do you know where? On the Liberty Bell, that great bell which stands for American independence. It was cracked, as you know, and now it hangs in Independence Hall, Philadelphia. Around the top of the bell are inscribed these words: ***Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof*** {Lev 25:10b KJV}. This is a wonderful manifestation of how much our forebears knew about the great principle which God is seeking to get across to men here in this teaching of the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee.

You see, rest must be at the heart not only of the individual but of society as well. There must be dependence upon the working of Another, upon the fact that God can do something in human events, that he knows how to work out relationships among the people. A recognition of that fact and an open door to allow him to do it will result finally in the working out of liberty. That is what this passage is saying to us so beautifully.

By the way, two consecutive years were to be observed as sabbath years: the forty-ninth year would be a sabbatical year, and the fiftieth was a year of jubilee. So there would be two years without the planting of crops. This created a problem which we’ll face in a few minutes: How were the people to eat during that time?

The year of jubilee was to be announced by trumpet. Trumpets always herald a new beginning. The first day of the seventh month was the feast of trumpets every year, and trumpets were sent out to announce the new year, a new beginning. Now in the fiftieth year, on the tenth day of the seventh month, was the great day of atonement, when the

blood of a bull and a goat was offered in the holy of holies and God made atonement for all the people. On that day the trumpet went abroad in the announcement of liberty. This is God’s very graphic way of teaching us that all liberty arises out of redemption. It arises out of the work of God in human affairs – cleansing and changing, forgiving and healing and restoring. If liberty doesn’t come from that, it can never be achieved.

We all tend to think that liberty is doing what you want to do whenever you want to do it. But nothing could be worse. There is no greater form of slavery. You need have only a little experience of it to see how empty, how binding, how boring that kind of life is:

I have been privileged to travel extensively and to speak oftentimes to rather wealthy audiences. I was in Hollywood, Florida, a few weeks ago, on the so-called “gold coast” of Florida. Every morning I taught the Scriptures to a crowd of five hundred or more. These people, I was told, represented well over a billion dollars’ worth of accumulated wealth. I had the opportunity to talk with many of them individually. I found that most of these, by their own testimony, though they had all the money to buy anything they wanted, had arrived at the place where they were suffering from what someone has so aptly called “destination sickness” – the malady of having everything that you want, but not wanting anything you have, and being sick and empty and lonely and miserable because you can do anything you want to do.

No, that is not liberty. Liberty, God says, is being freed from inner bondage, inner shackles of guilt and fear and anxiety and hostility. And it begins with redemption, with the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

It consists, you notice, of two wonderful elements. Liberty, God says, is for each person

- to regain his lost inheritance, and
- to have his broken relationships restored.

It is to get back what God intended you to have, to return to your property, to be able to be and act as God intended men to be and act when he made them in the beginning, to gain back all that was lost in the fall of Adam. It is to have all the broken, fragmented relationships restored, have all the middle walls of partition which have separated men and kept them apart broken down, to have all the differences of skin color and culture and class

evaporated, and to return to your family. That is the beauty of this picture. And it is to be a sabbath, a year of rest.

Verses 13-17 indicate more about this and are very significant:

“In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. And if you sell to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. According to the number of years after the jubilee, you shall buy from your neighbor, and according to the number of years for crops he shall sell to you. If the years are many you shall increase the price, and if the years are few you shall diminish the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God.” {Lev 25:13-17 RSV}

There is the meaning of the year of jubilee. It was to be the center of all commercial enterprise. Everything looked toward this liberation, this freeing of individuals. And according to the number of years left before the year of jubilee the price of land was established. A buyer paid a reduced price if the year of jubilee were near because in that year the land had to revert to its original owner, no matter to whom it belonged at the time. But if there were a long period ensuing, up to fifty years, a much heavier price was paid because, as God underscored in Verse 16, it was the number of crops which was being sold. “You are not buying the land,” he says, “you are buying the use of the land, that’s all.” God is trying to teach a great truth by this fact.

This is a paramount principle which will be developed further in the next few verses, for in Verses 18-22 you have the heart of this chapter. Here are gathered up **the great principles involved in the year of jubilee**, which is itself an intensification of the sabbath year. This is God’s effort to teach us that he is at work in government and society, as well as in an individual’s heart. We must make room for him and expect him to work there too, and if we do, it will make a fantastic difference!

“Therefore you shall do my statutes, and keep my ordinances and perform them; so you will dwell in the land securely. The

land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely. And if you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.” {Lev 25:18-22 RSV}

Here’s the answer to the question people would normally raise: “Well, if we have to let the land lie absolutely fallow for a year and cannot reap any crops or harvest any grapes or anything, how are we going to eat?” And God says, “That’s exactly what I wanted you to ask, because I’m trying to impress a principle upon you: It isn’t the land which supports you; it is I. I will make the land produce enough for three years. Every seventh year I want you to experience the fact that I am able to take care of you despite the outward circumstances, that it is I upon whom you are dependent, not the land, not your own energy and labor, although that is part of the picture. But that is not where your well-being arises. It comes from me. Every sixth year I’ll increase the crops so that the seventh year you can eat of the sixth year’s crops, the eighth year, the year of jubilee, you can still eat from that crop, and the ninth year, while another harvest is maturing, you will still eat from the sixth year’s crops; thus you’ll have all you need to eat.”

So God makes a beautiful three-fold promise:

- First, security: “Keep my ordinances and perform them, so you will dwell in the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely.” This forms a parenthesis. At the beginning and the end of this great promise he emphasizes that no one will attack you, no enemy will come against you, you’ll be safe and secure if you learn this principle of rest at work in government.
- Second, you will be able to produce the crop without struggle: “The land will yield its fruit.” With relative ease you can grow this crop. Arduous toil and sweat and pain and trouble and tears won’t be necessary. The land will readily produce its crop.

- Third, there will be a sufficiency of supply: “You will eat your fill.” All you can eat! Every seventh year, and every fiftieth year, you will have all you want, because God is at work.

Now, that is what God wants us to learn. But how sadly we have forgotten it! Once this American nation had strong glimpses of this truth. We even stamped it on our coins: “In God We Trust.” We wrote it on the Liberty Bell. But then we forgot it. We thought it all depended upon us. We no longer made any allowance for God to work. We failed to carry out the rest of the requirements of this chapter, as we will see, and our land began to fall apart – as any land does. Remember that Israel is a sample nation. It was given to us as an example of how God wants to act toward any nation. That is why these words are so important to us.

I have mentioned before that I’ve always been impressed by the instructive motto of the state of Hawaii. It is a result of the influence of the missionaries who first came to Hawaii in 1820. It expresses a great truth in the Hawaiian language: *Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono* which means, “The life of the land is preserved in righteousness.” That is what preserves a nation. It isn’t its Declaration of Independence, nor its Constitution. It isn’t its Congress, nor its laws. It is the righteousness of its people, the reflection of their recognition of their need for God, worked out in their relationships with one another.

This is what this passage teaches. God will make full and abundant provision, supernatural supply, in these years.

The sad thing is that Israel never experienced this. Never once did they ever have a sabbatical year! In all their history they never trusted God enough to try it out and see what he would do. And so they never saw God’s supply. They never learned that he would keep his word. And this is the reason why, after 490 years of living in the land, the nation had degenerated to become a moral cancer. So God allowed the Babylonians to sweep them off the land and remove them to captivity. Jeremiah was told that they would be captives in the land of Babylon for 70 years because that is the number of sabbatical years they had failed to observe. You see how this underscores the truth that God always gets his way, despite man’s rebellion. You can never cheat God. He had been counting up all the years Israel had forgotten. The end of

the sixth year came and Israel didn’t have the faith to trust in God’s promise and so they planted their crop in the seventh year. And God let them go ahead. He doesn’t stop people if they insist on doing wrong. But he kept a record for 490 years, 70 of which were sabbatical years. At the end of that time he said, “Now we’ll give the land its rest, while you’re in captivity in Babylon.” And it did rest. Nobody used it. Nobody farmed it for 70 years because God wanted to impress this great truth upon his people.

Now **the purpose of the jubilee year** is given to us in three great principles, beginning with Verse 23:

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land.” {Lev 25:23-24 RSV}

Here is the reason God has instituted the year of jubilee:

1. It is, first of all, to teach this great fact: The land is God’s. It doesn’t belong to anyone else. “The land shall never be sold in perpetuity. It cannot be possessed forever. It belongs to me.” This is still true, is it not? You and I know that. We don’t really own our land. In fact, if we don’t pay taxes on it we will lose the right to it that we do have. We don’t own it as individuals, the government owns it. But even the government doesn’t own it.

I love history and I revel in the rich and glowing historic background of California. As I have driven around in the Mother Lode country and other historic regions, it has often struck me: Where are the people who once inhabited these places? Where are the ones who once walked here, who built these cities and owned these houses, and who ran things to suit themselves in that day? Where are they now? They said they owned the land, but they didn’t own it. They passed it on to us. And we don’t own it. We must pass it on to someone else. And God says again and again, all through life, “You don’t own this land; it’s mine.”

Just as an aside, this ought to settle the question now being debated in the United Nations: Who owns the land of Palestine – the

Arabs or the Jews? God says, “Neither. It’s mine. I’ll put there whomever I want to put there, and I’m not waiting for the United Nations to decide. The land is mine.”

2. The second great principle, deriving from the first, is: “You are strangers and sojourners with me.” That is, “This earth is not the end. The reason I want you to know that the land is not yours is that I want you to remember that this life is not all there is. You are only passing through, you are pilgrims, heading on to an infinitely vaster arena of life. What you are doing here is of great importance in connection with that, true, but this is not the end. This life is schooling you for the life which lies ahead, so don’t wrap yourself in the material things around you and live only for them. I want you to know that you are strangers and sojourners with me.”
3. And, finally, and even now this is a great and important, point, the third principle is: “And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land.” In the ideal situation, with God living and ruling among his people, he intended for them to live in this way: every seventh year they would let the land rest, and every fiftieth year they would grant a jubilee, when everyone would return to their own land, when all personal property would be restored, when slaves would be set free, etc. And this is a very graphic representation of the fact that God knows that even in such a condition there would still be inequities and injustices. So he says that they must allow the right to recover from injury and damage and loss of personal property. This is an indispensable principle in government. Governments must face up to the fact that they have the responsibility to grant the right to recover from a low economic state.

As you examine the rest of this passage you can see that is dealing with **the problem of economic distress**, with poverty:

- Verse 25: “If your brother becomes poor...”
- Verse 35: “And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself...”
- Verse 39: “And if your brother becomes poor beside you...”

- Verse 47: “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor...”

What are you going to do? These are God’s instructions on how to deal with poverty. We are not going to take time to read them now. You can study them through for yourself. But all the way through, this section is merely an amplification of the great statement in Verse 24: “And in all the country you possess, you shall grant a redemption of the land.” You must give an opportunity to recover from this situation. You must not merely shrug your shoulders and say, “Well, the poor are poor because they are too lazy to work,” or something like that. You’ve got to give them a chance to recover! You must not lock them into a condition which makes it impossible for them to recover. Recovery from poverty is a fundamental right which governments must learn to respect.

This is the great issue which seethes and throbs beneath the surface in every land on earth today. What is causing the sense of distress and injustice and inequity among peoples all over the world? It is the fact that they face a system which, at least in their view, does not permit them to recover out of poverty. They have no way of breaking the stranglehold upon them and of improving their economic lot. And God says, “You must do something about that. You must help your brother.” This is a word that governments must face.

The passage goes on to outline specific circumstances:

1. First, you must give a person the right to redeem his own land, Verses 25-34. If he can’t do that, listen to these words, Verses 35-38:

“And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.” {Lev 25:35-38 RSV}

You who have wealth, who have been blessed, must not forget the poor. You must not leave them struggling, unable to do anything about it. Even though they are so reduced that you have to keep them for awhile, you must do so. You mustn't just write them off. You can see that this economic concern is born from the recognition that God is at work in human hearts and lives and in human society.

2. The next division, Verses 39-46, takes up the case of slavery. No Israelite was to be a slave. They were permitted to make slaves of the people around them, because those people hadn't yet discovered the principle which makes for liberty – atonement and redemption – and until a person learns that, there is no freedom from slavery. But when they did learn that and became part of Israel they were never to be made slaves. They could be servants but never slaves.
3. And, finally, Verses 47-55, there must be the right, even then, to redeem slaves, to buy a person back and restore him to his dignity as a human being. All this is God's graphic way of teaching us that he can work in human hearts and human society. God has ways of changing people. And if we observe the fundamental principle of rest, of dependence on the activity of Another, and expect him to do it, then over a period of time it will work out to liberty.

What a commentary this is, and what a correction of the way we usually operate. We are always rushing around and putting Band-Aids on the cancerous sores of society – always trying to put out fires which breakout, without catching the arsonist. But God never does that. He strikes at the root of the problem. He says, "If you will deal with it at this level, then over a period of time it will gradually work out. In the meantime you must take care of those in need. But the result will be liberty, and men will be able to have their own property again. It will all come out into the year of jubilee."

Now, that has application on the physical level and we must not deny it. And it has application on the spiritual level. It is clearly evident that as we recognize this tremendous principle of God at work in human lives, liberty is the result.

History is full of illustrations of this fact:

- William Wilberforce, in the English Parliament, pleaded with great passion for an end to the African slave trade. He was motivated by the Christian concern of his heart and by his conviction that this was not God's choice for human beings.
- Behind most of the beneficial social movements of history has been Christian compassion and concern. This can be demonstrated even in the case of countries like Russia and others whose officials deny the presence of God in history – nevertheless, social concern arises from Christian sources.
- Florence Nightingale, whose work gave birth to the Red Cross, was motivated by Christian compassion, and by the recognition that God can do something to alleviate human misery.
- And I don't hesitate to say that in the civil rights movement of our own land, led by Martin Luther King and the others who gathered with him, and characterized by the hymn *We Shall Overcome*, there was a recognition that God is concerned with human affairs, and that he could and would work when people expected him to do so and gave him the opportunity. That is what works out in liberty.

So the final lesson of this chapter is summarized in this great statement: **"The life of the land is preserved in righteousness."**

God has a place in human history. God can work in your life as an individual and give you rest so that you do not operate out of anxiety and tension and hostility. And he can do the same in social situations. He can do it in a company, in a community, in a nation. To the extent that principle is recognized problems can be worked out without violence.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, help us to learn these principles. Forgive us for the folly of thinking that we have to do everything ourselves. Help us to learn the fantastically important lesson that we are dependent creatures, and that you're ready to respond to us if we recognize our dependence upon you. How much of Scripture has thundered this at us, and yet how we ignore it!

The True Basis of Social Concern

Lord, help us as a people to repent, to humble ourselves and seek your face, to cry out in prayer unto you, that you may

heal our land. We thank you for that promise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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