

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for May 30: Show others godly grace

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A split-second decision made as a teenager changed the course of his life. Despite the fact that he was the son of a convicted felon and he was being raised by a single mom, at age 16, Dwayne Betts was at top of his class. Yet, on a whim, he and a friend made the regretful decision to commit a carjacking. That choice landed him in jail for nine years.

Behind bars, Betts decided to try and prove his life was more than the 30 minutes it took him to commit the crime. He finished high school, starting tutoring fellow inmates and began writing poetry. When he was released from jail, he entered community college and eventually got an academic scholarship to the University of Maryland where he studied writing.

Now, he is an author, a husband and a father. In an interview with CNN, Betts talked about wanting to be an example for his son. He said, "You can be more than any one mistake you make." Everyone deserves a second chance at life.

This week's lesson is about the year of jubilee. The year of jubilee is an opportunity for people in debt and for slaves to be set free. God provides them with an opportunity for a second chance at life.

Sabbath keeping is a spiritual discipline that truly is a gift from God to us. We literally are commanded to rest from our work. Sabbath is so important that God includes it in the Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:8-10).

In Leviticus 25, God instructs the people to take this discipline even further. Every seven years, the land was to get a Sabbath rest; it was to be left uncultivated. Anything that grew spontaneously could be harvested by slaves or even temporary residents. Otherwise, the land was to be left alone.

To people who made their living by agriculture, this must have seemed extreme. Remarkably, God extends the practice of Sabbath even further. Every seven times seven years, is to be a jubilee year.

The freedom produced from the practice of jubilee was threefold. First, jubilee meant freedom for families who had gotten too far in debt and subsequently had lost their land. Through jubilee, once a generation, every 50 years, those who had acquired others' ancestral land had to return it.

By requiring the Israelites to return the land to its original owner, God reminds the people that everything they have belongs to him anyway. God tells the people, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (v. 23).

Second, jubilee meant freedom for Hebrew slaves. In biblical times, it was not uncommon for men who incurred debt to be forced into slavery as a form of payment. The release of Hebrew slaves was a response to God's gracious deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Third, jubilee meant release from working the land for a year, a Sabbatical year. The land was to be given rest, just as God's people rest one day out of every seven. The people were told not to cultivate the land for an entire year.

But how would they eat? God assured them that if they followed his commands, "I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years" (v. 21). Letting the land go uncultivated for a year reminded Israel that God alone was their provider and

sustainer.

The key verse in this entire passage is: “Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God” (v. 17). In God’s kingdom, we are our brother’s keeper. The old idiom of looking out for No. 1 is not an option.

Jubilee was a chance for Israel’s brothers and sisters who have gotten into trouble to be set free. Jubilee also was intended to prevent the wealth of the nation from being concentrated into the hands of just a few people. It helped ensure a class of rich landowners did not emerge over a mass of landless servants.

How can we practice jubilee today? One unconventional way for Christians to support the spirit of jubilee is by supporting the estate tax. The estate tax, or death tax as it is sometimes called, is levied against inheritances when people die.

On the surface this sounds wrong. Families should be able to pass on money and land to their children, right? Yet, the estate tax is one of the few mechanisms in the United States that we have in place to ensure the gap between the rich and the poor does not continue to expand exponentially. Like the year of jubilee, the estate tax helps ensure the wealth of the nation is not concentrated in the hands of just a few, because as Yuki Noguchi notes in a story for National Public Radio, “Historically, the gap between the rich and poor expands when the estate tax decreases.”

The year of jubilee is a radical notion. Figuring out how to incorporate this principal of debt relief and generosity into our lives is challenging. It goes against the grain of America’s consumer driven, individualist culture. Yet, through jubilee God ensured the slate was wiped clean for the Israelites once in their lifetime, should not people today have the same chance?