

# LAWS THAT DEMAND GENEROSITY AND GIVING: THE BELIEVER MUST NOT HOARD, BE HARD-HEARTED OR TIGHT-FISTED DEUTERONOMY 15:07–18

## *Introduction*

Poverty is a reality. Some people are poor, genuinely poor. As children, they never received the education or training that enabled them to earn a decent living. No one was around to encourage them to secure adequate education or job training skills. All kinds of things can cause poverty:

- lack of education
- health problems
- age
- accident
- loss of job
- some natural disaster
- divorce or desertion
- economic recession or depression

The causes of poverty are innumerable. As Scripture declares, “There will always be poor people” among you (Deut 15:11). What is to be our attitude toward the poor? Toward helping them? Toward meeting their needs: feeding, clothing, housing them? Are we going to be hard-hearted and tight-fisted? Or compassionate, generous and giving? Poverty — the poor among us — was of great concern to God. For this reason, God led Moses to preach the message of this compassionate section of Scripture: *Laws that Demand Generosity and Giving: the Believer Must Not Hoard, Be Hard-hearted Nor Tight-fisted*, Deuteronomy 15:1-23.

- I. The law of debt release: must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against debtors (vv. 1-6).
- II. The law of generosity, of giving to the poor: must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against the poor (vv. 7-11).
- III. The law of releasing slaves: must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against workers (vv. 12-18).
- IV. The law of giving all first-born to the LORD: must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against God (vv. 19-23).

### ***I. Deuteronomy 15:07–11 The Law of Generosity, of Giving to the Poor: Must not Be Hard-hearted nor Tight-fisted Against the Poor***

There was the law of generosity, of giving to the poor. The believer must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against the poor. This law is a heart issue: it deals with the human heart and speaks to the human heart. The issue is not about outright gifts to the poor but about making loans to the poor, lending the poor person whatever he needs. Standing

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there preaching to the Israelites, Moses declares: you must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted toward your poor brother.

1. The law is clearly stated: you are to be generous, open-handed, and freely lend whatever a brother needs (v. 8). As stated, the law deals with making loans not with free gifts. This does not mean that free gifts are never to be given to the poor. Of course, there are times when free gifts are needed just as there are times when loans are needed. Some poor could never pay back loans due to being physically handicapped, helpless, unemployed, too young or old or a host of other reasons. At such times, free gifts must be made to the poor; they must be fed, clothed and housed. This is the direct responsibility of society so long as the poor are among us. But when the poor are able to pay back loans, then loans are to be made to them and not free gifts. They are to be responsible citizens within the community. This is the law God is declaring through His servant Moses.
2. But note the warning that Moses gives to the Israelites: the believer must not show ill will by giving nothing to a needy brother (v. 9). Some Israelites might refuse to help the needy if the year of debt release was near. A loan to the poor during the sixth year would mean that the creditor would have to bear the loan for an extra year: he would not be able to collect the loan during the seventh year. Because of the year of debt release, a tendency not to make loans to the poor could easily arise within the hearts of the Israelites. This law was given to combat the tendency to be hard-hearted and tight-fisted.
3. Moses declares the strong motivation for giving generously, for giving without a grudging heart. If God's people will give generously to the poor. He promises to bless them in their work and labour. Everything they put their hands to will be blessed: their work, employment and all their other activities. God will prosper them and do so significantly (v. 10).
4. But note the tragic fact: Moses is very aware of the seed of selfishness and covetousness that is within the heart of man. Consequently, he foresees the failure of God's people to be generous, foresees their failure to obey this commandment (v. 11). He declares: there will always be poor people among you.
5. However, the command stands, and Moses re-emphasizes it. He cries out: "I command you: be generous — be open-handed to your brothers and to the poor and needy in your land" (v. 11).

**Thought 1.** The lesson for us is clear. We must be generous to the poor, give to meet their needs. We must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against the poor. Our hands must never be closed; rather, they must be open to help the needy of the world. However, we must never indulge the poor nor give license to them if they are able to work and earn a living, yet they do not. We must never indulge nor give license

to irresponsibility. Indulging laziness and slothfulness only causes the growth of irresponsible behaviour, the corruption and deterioration of society. The poor must be responsible human beings, responsible for doing what they can to strengthen society. They owe a debt to society, and they must pay that debt, making every contribution they can. They are a part of society, and they are responsible for strengthening society — just as much as any other person. Therefore, they must work if they are able.

Nevertheless, there will always be poor among us who have little and are unable to provide for themselves. Scripture is clear: it is our duty to meet their needs. We must help them. We must be generous and open-handed to them. If they are able to pay back loans, we must freely lend to them. But if they are unable to pay back loans, we must freely give to them. We must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against the poor.

*Mat 19:21* Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

*Luke 11:41* “But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”

*Rom 12:13* Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

*Acts 4:34-35* That there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

*Acts 11:29* The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

*Acts 20:35* In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

*2 Cor 8:2* In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

*Gal 6:10* Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

*Phil 4:16* For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

*Deut 15:7* 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 hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your poor brother.

*Prov 21:13* If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

*Prov 28:27* He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.

## II. *Deuteronomy 15:12–18 The Law of Releasing Slaves: Must not Be Hard-hearted nor Tight-fisted Against Workers*

There was the law of releasing slaves. The believer must not be hard-hearted nor tight-fisted against workers. This law does not deal with slavery in general but, rather, with a particular type of slavery. Sometimes a person sinks to the depths of poverty because he simply has nothing. He has no money with which to buy food or clothing or to keep a roof over his head. Neither does he have the money to pay his debts. When an Israelite faced such dire circumstances, he could sell himself and his labour to his creditor or to anyone else who would take him in and give him employment. He could serve the creditor, and his service would substitute for the repayment of the money he owed to the creditor (see *Slavery*, Deut 15:12-18. Also see notes, Exo 21:2-6; 21:7-11.)

1. Moses declared the law to the Israelites: they must set a slave free in the seventh year (v. 12). This is not a reference to the Sabbatical year but to the seventh year after six years of service. Immediately after labouring for six years, the person's debt was considered paid. He was to be freed on the seventh year. Note the compassion of the law: a person was not to send a slave away empty-handed (vv. 13-14). The person was to give the slave ample supplies or finances to begin life on his own.
2. There was strong motivation for God's people to obey this law (vv. 14-15). God had blessed them richly, making them prosperous and financially independent. Just as God had blessed them, so they were to bless — be generous — to the poor slave who was stepping out into the world to begin life on his own. But there was a second reason, a far more important reason why a person was to obey this law: God had redeemed Israel, had delivered them from Egypt and its slavery. Consequently, just as God had freed their forefathers, they were to free the slaves after they had worked to pay off their debts (v. 15). This law was to be obeyed: every person who was forced to sell himself and his labour to pay off a debt was to be freed.
3. But note the compassion and the understanding heart that were demanded: if a slave wished to stay because he loved the owner's family and was doing well with the owner, he was to be kept. His wish to stay was to be granted. In such a circumstance, the contract of a lifetime commitment to a property owner was to be sealed. The contract was the piercing of his ear and the pledge to serve his master for life (v. 17).
4. Moses encouraged a compassionate attitude: freeing a slave was not to be considered a hardship (v. 18). The person had laboured for six years without any direct income. He had laboured as a slave not as a common worker or employee. As a slave, he was available twenty-four hours a day not just a set number of hours as a common labourer would work. Moreover, the debt he owed had been recovered through labour. If he had not served during the six years, the debt would have been lost. The difference between the debt lost and the debt recovered by labour plus the difference

between the available hours of a slave and a common worker — all equal twice as much service as a hired hand. Think about this fact: this is the attitude you are to have toward freeing the slave. But not only this, if you obey this law and free the slave after six years of service, God will bless in all that you do. ■

### DEUTERONOMY 15:12–18 SLAVERY, BONDAGE

Slavery has been a part of society since the earliest days of human history. Every generation has witnessed the enslavement of millions of people. Men of power, the rulers and the wealthy of the world, have always sought more and more of everything:

=> more power	=> more land	=> more possessions
=> more recognition	=> more wealth	=> more pleasure
=> more honour	=> more property	=> more fame

One of the easiest ways to gain more of these things is through slave labour. Slave labour is cheap labour. Slave labour means more for the slave owner, whether the owner is the ruler of a nation, the board of a corporation, a wealthy individual or a crime syndicate.

In the ancient world, the entire economy of the world was based upon slavery. Slavery was the very way of life, the fibre and fabric of society itself. When nations conquered people in war, the people were enslaved by the conquering nation. The economy of that day was not a monetary economy (based upon money), but a *goods or materials* economy. That is, people swapped labour for housing, food, clothes. The poor people (the have-nots) of the earth had no way to survive apart from becoming the slave labourers of the rulers and the wealthy of society. They received housing, food and clothing by becoming the slaves of the powerful of the earth, by selling their labour (themselves) to the rulers and wealthy. As stated, this was just the way of life in the ancient world, the way the peoples of the earth lived and formed the society of their day. The very economy of the world — the trading of goods, merchandise, possessions — was based upon slavery. As in any society, there were both good and evil slave owners. However, as history has proven, the vast majority of slave owners exposed the evil of the human heart. The rulers and wealthy of the world took advantage of slave labour...

- housing the slaves in run-down, dilapidated shanties
- paying few if any wages
- giving little attention to medical treatment
- forcing the people to struggle for food and clothing
- demanding exhaustive labour

- giving little attention to working conditions and the environment
- mistreating through abuse, violence and rape

The one fact to remember above all others in dealing with slavery is this: most people in the ancient world had to hire themselves out as slaves in order to survive. They just had no other way to secure housing, food and clothing — the very basic necessities of life. This is the background that must be looked at when studying this particular law governing Hebrew slaves. When this background is understood, the purpose of God in giving this particular law is clearly seen. God set out to correct the terrible evil of human slavery throughout the world. This is seen throughout the entire Old Testament and the New Testament as well. (See note, Eph 6:5-9.)

However, in correcting the evil of slavery, keep one clear fact in mind: God could not demand the elimination of slavery all at once. This act would have caused terrible pain and suffering for the majority of people in the world.

=> Slaves would have immediately lost the housing, food, clothing and what little income, if any, they were receiving from their owners.

=> The rulers and wealthy of the earth would have reacted by law or violence against any slave who demanded that he be freed because he was following the commandment of the LORD God.

Very simply, if God had given a clear-cut commandment that all slavery was to be eliminated, the ancient world would have been thrown into a terrifying revolution and holocaust. Multiplied millions of people — any mass of slaves who attempted to follow the command of God — would have been slaughtered by the armies of the rulers and wealthy of the earth. This is the reason God moved progressively — ever so slowly, but progressively — in demanding that slavery be eliminated from the face of the earth. The commentator John Maxwell makes this observation:

*In studying the bond-servant law...one could ask why it was that Moses, a divinely commissioned leader, tolerated a form of slavery. The answer is to be found in [the] Scriptures.... We can see that he was slowly educating his people away from this form of servitude. Notice the following regulations:*

1. *The Hebrew servant was held for six years only; in the seventh year he or she was freed.*

**Deut 15:12** *If any of your people — Hebrew men or women — sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free.*

2. *Rigorous demands and harshness were forbidden.*

**Lev 25:43** *Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.*

3. *If a master inflicted serious bodily injury on a servant, that servant was to have his freedom.*

**Exo 21:26-27** *An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye. And an owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth.*

4. *A servant could acquire assets and might even save enough money to buy his or her own freedom.*

**Lev 25:47-49** *If a foreigner residing among you becomes rich and any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to the foreigner or to a member of the foreigner's clan, they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them: An uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in their clan may redeem them. Or if they prosper, they may redeem themselves.*

5. *Two special privileges were given to the servants: They were to be free from work on the Sabbath, and they were to participate in the great national feast times.*

**Exo 23:12** *Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.*

**Deut 16:11, 14** *And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name — you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you....Be joyful at your festival — you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns.*

6. *Upon the seventh year, a servant was to be freed and supplied “liberally” with food and other provisions.*

**Deut 15:13-14** *And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you.*

7. *As the nation matured, its laws toward slavery became more progressive. During Moses' lifetime, provisions which were at first intended only for male servants were extended to female servants.*

**Exo 21:7** *If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do.*

**Deut 15:17** *Then take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your female servant.*

8. *The idea of freedom (through seventh-year release) was continually kept before the master and his servant.*
9. *When a slave escaped from his master; the moment he touched Hebrew soil, he was free. (John Maxwell. *The Preacher's Commentary on Deuteronomy*, pp. 211-212).*

***Deut 23:15-16*** *If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them. □*