

## **January 18: The Kingdom of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-17, 23, 35-42)**

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Welcome to our series called Kingdom Economics. We're kicking off our new year by exploring all things related to money, resources, and how to build a better community using the gifts and assets we have. The Bible has a lot to say about these topics, because God is fundamentally interested in a more equitable world, and we get to be a part of that important work.

Before we jump into today's Scripture, I invite you to pray with me.

*Liberating God, help us to see your vision of Jubilee for our world. Lead us into the freedom you desire for us, and empower us to actively live out that freedom, building communities of Jubilee that reflect your creative intention. Amen.*

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How many of you know that 2026 is a very special semiquincentennial year for our nation? If you Google that word on your phone, fireworks will start going off on your screen. That's because "semiquincentennial" is a very fancy way of saying that this is the United States' 250<sup>th</sup> birthday.

And there are a lot of events planned to celebrate this milestone together. Some go on throughout the year, like logging volunteer hours so that 2026 becomes a record-setting year of service; or inviting students to compete for trips to historic sites by writing essays about what America means for them; or selecting a male and female high schooler from every state and territory to compete in The Patriot Games.

As Independence Day draws near, however, there are bigger and grander events planned, like an Ultimate Fighting Championship on the White House Lawn on June 14 and a Great American State Fair on the National Mall on June 25. It all leads up to main event: July 4 itself, exactly 250 years after the day our Declaration of Independence was signed, birthing us as a new nation.

Here's what's going to happen on that momentous day: as it begins, a trumpet blast will sound throughout the whole land, and liberty will be proclaimed to all of us who live here – not just personal freedom, but liberty from all debts of any kind. Everyone who has gained land or capital or assets over the last 50 years, or who has inherited what was gained during that time, will have to release it, and everything will return to its original owners back in 1776 when our nation was founded - which means that the property this church is on will once again belong to the Suquamish Nation. What a day that will be!

Okay, so that's *not* what is going to happen on July 4 of this year. But if we were following the Old Testament law of Jubilee, that is how we would have celebrated every fifty years since our nation began, and it's what we would do again this year. The Kingdom of Jubilee is a radical upside-down economy that directly challenges the status quo; not just of our nation, but of every nation and culture throughout history.

Here's how we're going to explore God's radical call to Jubilee together this morning: first, I'll put the original law of Jubilee in context; then, I'll talk about how Jesus embodied and instituted Jubilee in his own life and ministry; and finally, I'll explore the divine intention behind this law and what it might look like for us, as Jesus-followers who long for justice and freedom, to live out Jubilee in our own lives and community. Here we go!

I'm going to start by taking us back to ancient Egypt, a powerful and wealthy empire built on the backs of enslaved human beings and sustained through exploitation. God's people, the Israelites, were trapped in this system, forced into slavery and powerless to rescue themselves. In their misery, they cried out to God, and God heard and remembered them. Through a series of mighty acts, God liberated them from the political, military, social, and spiritual power of their oppressors and led them out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

The Israelites were free, but they struggled to live into their freedom. They had been enslaved for so long that when they encountered challenges, their gut reaction was to long for the secure status quo of the Egyptian empire, even though it meant returning to slavery. It's in that context that God gave them the Law through Moses. The Old Testament law was an identity statement; a set of concrete guidelines that would enable the Israelites to live as YHWH's liberated people, to form a nation that reflected God's character and God's intentions to the people around them. That law was encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, which are all about loving God and loving your neighbor; and then elaborated on in the extended commentary that makes up much of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

The specific Jubilee law that we read today is from Leviticus, and it elaborates on the fifth commandment, to keep the Sabbath Day as holy. Now, I grew up thinking that keeping the Sabbath day holy meant wearing a dress (which I hated as a child), and going to church, and not working – but Sabbath is much more radical than that. The Biblical laws about Sabbath institute a periodic reordering of society and the economy, with regular resets to restore the holistic justice God intends.

First of all, the Sabbath meant that once a week, everybody and everything got a rest – not just landowners, but all their servants, all enslaved people, all foreigners and immigrants, even the animals and the land itself would get a rest. Whether you were rich or poor, slave or free, human or not, Sabbath was the same for you – a weekly economic equalizer.

But that wasn't all – Sabbath laws also dictated that each seventh *year* be set apart for God. During this year, no farming or resource extraction would take place. Nobody would do any work on the land – instead, humans, animals, and the land itself would rest. Anyone who wished could take what the land naturally produced that year to feed themselves and their families, recognizing that it was a free gift of abundance from God, but landowners were not allowed to harvest in order to sell or to stockpile. *And*, every seventh year was to be a year in which debts to neighbors and community members were released, and all Israelites who had become enslaved because of economic loss were freed: so that, in the words of the law, there would be “no poor people among you” (Deuteronomy 15:4). Every seventh year was a mini-economic reset to interrupt personal trajectories of both poverty and wealth accumulation.

And then, there was the year of Jubilee, which took place after seven cycles of Sabbath years – in other words, every 50<sup>th</sup> year. Jubilee was the most radical economic reset of all. On the Jubilee year, not only would the land rest; and not only would debts be repaid, and not only would enslaved Israelites be liberated; but *also*, all of Israel's land would return to the families and clans who first settled it. No matter what happened in the past 50 years to cause families to lose or sell their land – whether it was a catastrophe or a poor choice or just laziness – they'd get it back again. And no matter what happened in the past 50 years to cause wealthy landowners to acquire more land – whether it was force or extortion or savvy investing – they would have to release it. On the first day of the Jubilee year, when the trumpet sounded, every single Israelite would once again be a free citizen living on their ancestral land, with access to its means of production. Jubilee interrupted generational trajectories of poverty and wealth accumulation, because no matter what happened with a person's parents or grandparents, everybody who lived to age 50 would get a fresh economic start sometime in the course of their life – a shakeup that provided good news to the poor and humbled the rich.

There was one more important thing about Jubilee – it began on the annual Day of Atonement, the day on which the Nation of Israel would corporately confess

how they had strayed from God's Law in the past year. Through their contrition and the sacrifices of atonement offered by priests, the people of Israel would be forgiven and restored to full relationship with Yahweh. The practice of Jubilee was a social and economic restoration, and the fact that it was coupled with the Day of Atonement suggests that God sees strong a connection between spiritual, social, and economic righteousness – they're all related.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether or not the ancient nation of Israel ever even tried to carry out God's radical instructions about the Year of Jubilee. What we do know from the Old Testament history and the prophets is that the people of Israel struggled to maintain righteousness and justice in their land, that they rejected the countercultural demands of God's law in favor of living like the nations around them. Eventually, God's people were conquered by Assyria and Babylon and forced to live, once again, under the thumb of empire. And as the Israelites languished in exile, they remembered and reimagined the Year of Jubilee – not as a demand of the law, but as a divine promise of freedom for them. Listen to Isaiah 61:1-2, a prophecy about coming restoration:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.

"The year of the Lord's favor" – that is a reference to the Year of Jubilee, when God's coming messiah would proclaim good news to the poor, liberating the oppressed people of Israel to once again live as God's free nation.

And if that prophecy sounds familiar, it's because Jesus repeats it in Luke 4:18-19, in a small synagogue in Nazareth, right at the beginning of his ministry, before announcing that "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). No wonder all present spoke well of Jesus and his gracious words – he was proclaiming Jubilee, the good news they had been longing for. However, within a few minutes, their praise turned to fury, because Jesus started naming God's previous mercy to Gentiles, people outside of the Jewish nation, suggesting that the Jubilee liberation he proclaimed wasn't only for Israel, but would spill out beyond their carefully held borders.

Within an hour of hearing the long-awaited Day of Jubilee proclaimed in their midst, Jesus' listeners tried to throw him off of a cliff. They had fundamentally misunderstood the purpose of Jubilee, the divine intention behind its creation – and so when it finally came, it wasn't good news at all. And by rejecting the good news of the One who both proclaimed and embodied Jubilee, by refusing to be a part of Jesus' upside-down Jubilee Kingdom, they also rejected the personal and communal liberation Jesus came to establish.

So what is the intention behind God's Jubilee laws? How did Jesus fulfill the promise of Jubilee and establish a Jubilee Kingdom? And what does it look like to live into this divine vision for our society and our economy, in our own time and our own community?

I believe that God established the whole Sabbath cycle: one Sabbath day a week, one Sabbath year in seven, and one Jubilee year in fifty; to continuously remind the people of Israel of who God is, of who they are, and of who they are called to be. For God, remembering is active, formative, and embodied – you become and do what you hold in your mind. Sabbath and Jubilee laws prompt Israel – and us – to remember and course-correct so that we can be re-formed into a people who reflect the harmony and goodness of creation, as well as God's good intentions for a liberated and just community.

First, God's Jubilee laws reminded the Israelites of who God is: the sovereign, gracious owner of the land they lived on and the resources the land provided. The Promised Land wasn't an inheritance they were entitled to; it wasn't something they had worked or fought for and therefore deserved; and it wasn't a commodity to be accumulated and hoarded. The Promised Land belonged to the God who rescued the Israelites from slavery. In Leviticus 25:23, God says, "The land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." It was a blessing and a responsibility, something to be held in trust and stewarded in line with God's character and intentions.

If lived out, God's Sabbath and Jubilee laws would continually move Israel towards economic equity and social equality. They would combat the dehumanizing powers of debt, slavery, and landlessness, as well as the impulse to acquire more and more and still never have "enough". As Israel followed the laws, they would remember God's preference for the poor. As they celebrated the Day of Jubilee and the Day of Atonement together, they would remember that God desired spiritual, social, and economic righteousness.

Having to rest every seventh day and every seventh year would also prompt the Israelites to trust in God's abundant provision and care. They would allow the land itself to rest and rejuvenate rather than seeing it as nothing more than a means of production. The laws would train God's people to be content with God's "enough," receiving it as gift instead of entitlement. They would remind the Israelites of God's intention for the free flourishing of all creation.

Secondly, God's Jubilee laws reminded the Israelites that they were no longer slaves in Egypt and protected them from becoming the oppressive empire they were liberated from. Even though they had been rescued from miserable oppression in Egypt, God's people experienced a constant draw to adopt the exploitative practices of the Egypt-like nations around them. By practicing the Jubilee year, with its trumpet blast proclaiming liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants, they would be recalled to their identity as God's free people, and re-form their society into a community of Jubilee that resisted the systemic abuse and inequality of empire.

Finally, I believe that God's Jubilee laws reminded the Israelites of who they were called to be: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6) who embodied God's character and reflected it to the people around them, inviting them into the same kind of freedom and flourishing they lived out.

Sadly, ancient Israel was not able to resist the values of empire and live out Jubilee, nor has any other nation, including us. Despite our commitment to liberty and justice for all, we are not a Jubilee Nation. If you look at that slide, you'll see that in 2022, the United States held 31.5% of the world's wealth, despite having only around 4% of the world's population. Not only we have way more than our share of the world's resources, but they're not even distributed equitably within our border. [Next slide.] Over half of the world's millionaires and billionaires live in the United States, and they're just getting richer – last year, the United States led the world in billionaire gains – by a LOT! That's because the laws in our country are set up to enable the rich to get ever richer, claiming a larger share of resources – they're anti-Jubilee laws.

[Next slide.] Last week, Pastor Meg showed you some compelling graphics about inequality in our nation, and I'm adding this one. The red bars show *median* wealth for adults in several countries – what the majority of us hold – and the blue bars show *average* wealth for adults, which is skewed by the ultra-rich. In the United States, average wealth is five times more than median wealth – a larger discrepancy than any other country. This is the opposite of what is intended by Jubilee laws, which seek to even out inequalities.

In other words, there's little about our modern context and nation that welcomes God's radical, upside-down Jubilee Kingdom and its values, and when we try to live into that kingdom, we will meet opposition from all sides, including opposition within ourselves. Jubilee does not come naturally.

But Jesus, as the human embodiment of Jubilee, not only lived out the values of Jubilee in our world, he made it possible for us to be a part of it. Just like Atonement and Jubilee occurred together, restoring Israel's spiritual relationship to God as well as their social and economic relationships with each other, Jesus came to offer us freedom and restoration in every part of life, liberating us from our individual and communal bondage to sin, greed, and injustice, *and* freeing us to live out God's intentions for a just, equitable world. Everything is always being set free in Christ, and we are called to participate in his Jubilee.

One of my favorite examples of Jubilee at work is the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector, who collaborated with the Roman Empire and gained riches through exploiting his neighbors. Jesus saw Zacchaeus' longing for freedom, sought him out, and visited him; and in response, Zacchaeus announced that he would give away half his fortune to the poor and pay back four times the amount to anyone he had cheated. "Today salvation has come to this house," Jesus proclaimed (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus had been liberated: spiritually, socially, and economically, and was actively living out Jubilee values.

So how are we, as modern Jesus-followers, called to participate in and extend Jesus' Jubilee Kingdom? I can't give you all the answers, but I can offer some questions and invite us into a journey of prophetic imagination together. I also invite you to come to our Loaves and Fishes class, which will begin meeting again on Saturday, March 7, to delve deeper into what it looks like to create Ecosystems of Jubilee in our own contexts and communities.

First, how does our language of ownership – "my hard-earned money," "our house," "my tax-payer dollars," "our land," "our jobs," shape us and our approach to money and possessions? How might it change us if we consistently remembered that everything belongs to God? What is truly enough for us, and what would it look like to rest in God's enough, receiving everything as a gift from God to be stewarded in a way that reflects God's Jubilee intentions for the world? Would any of our spending, saving, budgeting, giving, and investing patterns change? Are there any loans we've given to others that we might

choose to release? What would it look like to celebrate and enjoy what we have, holding on to it with a loose grip? Would it be easier to let go of some of our margins, or ease up on our wealth accumulation, or rest more freely, or allow others to rest, if we remembered God as our abundant provider?

We can also think about how we use the physical resources entrusted to us as a church: this building and the land it's on. As our daycare finally gets going, how do we best steward our resources and assets to serve our community? How can we expand access to those who might not otherwise have the means to participate in what we offer? Are we using our parking lot as fully as we could? How could we develop that empty lot we have to extend access to those who need land or housing?

As citizens and voters, what does it look like to support policies that are in line with God's Jubilee intentions of equity and liberation for all the world, not just Americans? What are some organizations that work to expand asset ownership to those on the margins, or combat human trafficking, or address exploitative labor practices, or provide debt forgiveness? How could we partner with them?

July 4 this year is not going to be a Day of Jubilee – but did you know that Juneteenth, which commemorates the day freedom was proclaimed to the last remaining enslaved Americans, is often called a “Jubilee”? What are other moments of Jubilee that we can identify in the history of this church, or this community, or this nation? It's important to name them and celebrate them, to remember that God's Jubilee Kingdom is alive and active in our midst.

Everything is always being set free in Christ. May we hold on to that hope and live into the liberation God intends for us and for the world, with hands open to receive and to share. Amen.