

19 November 2023

God's Economics: Communal Responsibility

Leviticus 19:9-18

We read Leviticus 19:9-18:

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

We are continuing our attempt to think about economics and faith through the prism of the ancient priestly law codes of Leviticus. Last week, I pointed out that the laws of Leviticus call for every family to own its own land. In the context of the Ancient Near East, this is – to put it mildly – weird. What was normal for that time and region was for the king or emperor or Pharaoh to own all or most of the land, and for the common people to be share-croppers for the king. But Israel was to be different. In ancient Israel, families were to own their own land and be responsible for their own work and enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

Having said that, though, I should make clear that private ownership of land did *not* mean that Israelites were rugged individualists with no obligations to the larger community. Today we encounter some of the laws that put limits on individualism. Look at the first law that we just read: *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.* Wait, what? Why would you leave some of the crops unharvested? *You shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.* This is part of the common-sense realism of the Bible. The reality of life is that even in a system in which supposedly everyone should be able to support themselves from their own land, there will be poor people. Maybe a storm or other disaster wiped out their crops, maybe there was death or disease in the family, or maybe they are non-Israelites and *don't* own land. Whatever the reason, in every society there are going to be hungry people. So, the law says that those who have bountiful crops are to leave some of their bounty unharvested. Don't reap every inch of your field. Don't go back after the reapers and pick up all the stalks they missed. Don't strip every bunch of grapes from your vines or every fig from your trees. Leave some for the hungry to

come along after you and gather your leavings. Those of you who remember the Book of Ruth, this is what Ruth was doing. This is how the two childless widows Ruth and Naomi survived.

Two things to notice about this law. First, this is not a handout. The poor still have to work for their food. If anything, they have to work harder, because they're gathering scattered scraps. Farmers are not commanded to give people food; they're commanded to give them opportunity. (It's kind of like the manna that the Israelites ate in the wilderness. God didn't serve them hot meals; God gave them stuff that, if they were willing to do the work, could be gathered and kneaded and baked into hot meals.) And the second thing to notice about this scripture is that this was not a suggestion. This was not an encouragement to give to charity if you felt like it. This was a law. Those who had more than they needed were required by law to make sure that some of their extra went to those who didn't have enough.

Moving on in the chapter, in verses 11-12 we find a restatement of some of the Ten Commandments: don't steal, don't lie, don't take the name of the Lord in vain, with one important clarification. After "don't lie," it goes on to specify, "and that means don't deal falsely in business." Leviticus permits none of this hedging about how "Oh, this isn't really lying. This is just how business works." No, lying is lying. *You shall not deal, or conduct business, falsely.* Verse 13 then spells that out even more: *You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.* Being trustworthy in your business dealings includes your employment practices. Just the other day, I heard that the most common form of theft in the United States is wage theft, and earlier this week a major employer here in Eau Claire announced "backsies" on their promised employee pension contributions. Leviticus says, don't. Pay in full. Pay on time. Pay as promised. You will treat your workers with respect.

And who else are we to treat with respect? Verse 14: *You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.* A part of this code of ethics is that Israel is to treat those with disabilities with respect. At first glance that might seem a little odd in this context: the rest of this passage has to do with business, after all. But there is a connection. The law against wage theft basically says, "As the employer, you are in a position of power over your workers. You will not use that power to take advantage of them." The law regarding people with disabilities simply extends that: "You will not take advantage of *anyone* just because you can. Not the deaf, not the blind, not the poor, not the foreigner. Nobody."

The next verses expand apply this principle to the justice system – which at that time was primarily the elders of a village sitting in the city gates to settle disputes. *You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.* Again, in its context, this law is amazing. In the ancient world, justice was not understood as equal treatment for everyone. Justice meant treating people according to their caste. That meant treating nobles as superior, soldiers as worthy, townspeople as respectable, peasants as inferior, and slaves as animals. Justice wasn't about equality but about maintaining the proper orders of society by giving the proper amount of respect to each caste. But Leviticus says, "you will not defer to the rich; nor will you show partiality to the poor." Justice is the same for everyone. For its time, this is about as radical as it gets.

One more thing to note from our reading, in verse 16: *you will not profit by the blood of your neighbor.* So you might hear that law and think, "What does that even mean? How would anyone profit by someone else's blood?" So let me rephrase it. *You will not make a profit for*

yourself by exploiting the weaknesses or misfortunes of others. And now we can think of a lot of examples. I think of the fly-by-night “charities” that pop up out of nowhere to collect donations every time there’s a natural disaster, or in fact any charity that spends more money on marketing appeals than it actually gives to its stated cause. Or take the people who call senior citizens at home offering them worthless insurance or subscriptions that are impossible to cancel. (My mother’s started lecturing those callers: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself! What would your mother think if she knew you were scamming old people for a living?” They hang up in a hurry. I’m glad Mom’s found a hobby.) Once again, it feels like Leviticus is ahead of its time here. It’s not that there weren’t scoundrels in the ancient world – obviously there were – but rather that Leviticus calls on the people of Israel to protect the vulnerable from those scoundrels.

So let me step back and summarize what we’ve read up to this point. First, everyone in Israelite society was supposed to have a chance to support themselves, ideally by farming their own land, but one danger of that private, individual ownership idea is that people can begin to believe “I’ve got mine, and I have no responsibility for anyone who has less. That’s their problem.” Leviticus soundly rejects that. Those who were poor, for *any* reason, were to be given the chance to gather the gleanings from other people’s fields. That was the law. Second, those who faced particular obstacles – for instance, foreigners who did not own land or people with disabilities – were to be treated with the same respect and given the same opportunities as others. This applied not only to economics but also to justice. All were to be equal under the law: native-born and immigrant, rich and poor. No group was to be above the law, and no group should have to fear the law more than anyone else. Finally, shady business dealings were unacceptable. You will not profit by exploiting the vulnerable, by shorting your workers’ paychecks, by false advertising, by pyramid schemes or anything else. The law of God applies to your business life, too.

But we can boil all this down to a simple principle: Even as we are free to pursue our own economic advancement by our own labor, we are still responsible for others. We are a community. If there are those who are hungry outside our comfortable homes, that’s *not* just their problem. It’s ours, too. We are to find a way for all to support themselves. Now in our society, Conservatives and Liberals tend to support quite different methods of doing this, and that’s a debate worth having. My own guess is that any effective plan to eliminate poverty would need every idea that’s out there. From the perspective of Leviticus, though, the only thing that is not acceptable is to turn your back on the poor. But I should let Leviticus speak for itself. Let me read again from the final verses of our scripture, which includes the law that Jesus himself called the Second Greatest Commandment, Leviticus 19:17-18: *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your community. . . You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*