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God's Economics: The Owner

Leviticus 25:18-24

For the past two weeks, I've been trying to tease some thoughts about economics out of the ancient biblical book Leviticus. Now Leviticus was written more than 2500 years ago, in a different language, for a society that bears little resemblance to ours, so there is no obvious reason to expect it to have anything to say about economics for people like us, living in a world of computerized banking, stock markets, interest rate management, and inflation indexes. But it hasn't been a complete loss. For instance, Leviticus takes a stand for the concepts of private ownership of property and the dignity and necessity of hard work (which should please our economic conservatives) and also for the concepts of mandated societal support for the poor, environmental care, and debt forgiveness (which are right up the economic liberals' alley). So it would seem that every one of us, no matter which side of our economic cultural divide we happen to be on, can say, "Look! Some of our ideas are right there in the Bible! And also some of theirs!" That, by itself, is worth thinking about.

But a couple of weeks ago I touched briefly on a couple of biblical economic practices that seem to have no connection to our time at all. I slid right past them then, but today I want to look at them more closely. The first is the concept of the Sabbath year. Leviticus 25 mandates that every seventh year, all farmers in that agriculture-based society were to let the land rest. Don't plant any seed at all. Just eat what grows on its own. The second is the concept of the Jubilee year. This comes after seven Sabbath years. Seven times seven is forty-nine, and the next year, the fiftieth year, is the Jubilee. On the Jubilee year, all debts are forgiven, but it goes even farther. Any land that has changed hands in the preceding half-century reverts back to its original owner. So if you did well on your farm and managed to buy some of your neighbor's fields to expand your crops, that land would go back to your neighbor's family on the Jubilee.

Think for a moment about the implications of both these laws. Like, in a land where your livelihood is based on farming, how can anyone survive taking a year off? This wouldn't just affect one year, after all. If you don't plant anything one year, that also means you don't have any seed to plant the next year. Sure, there would be some volunteer grain that grows on its own during the Sabbath year, but will even that be there on the eighth year? I get it that it's good to let land lie fallow sometimes, but all of it at once? That's crazy. Can't we just divide the property into seven sections and each year let one section have its own Sabbath? Wouldn't that work just as well without, you know, causing famine?

Or take the Jubilee year. On the one hand, there are some attractive things about this idea. A fifty-year property reset would absolutely preserve family farms and discourage corporate factory farms. And no matter how land-rich somebody got, it would be temporary. Ted Turner and Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos could buy as much of Montana as they wanted, but it wouldn't stay in their families forever. In a sense, no one could buy land at all; the best you could do is lease it until the Jubilee. This would make generational, inherited wealth much more difficult to acquire and maintain. On the other hand, in that world, only those who were descended from the original owners could truly own anything. The rest of us would be renters. We might work hard and save to finally be able to buy a house of our own, but in the end, all that work and sacrifice would get tossed out when the Jubilee rolled in. I don't know about you, but that would definitely affect *my*

motivation. And how would we determine those “original owners,” anyway? How far back do we go? So, as far as I can see, in the Sabbath and the Jubilee years we have some economic ideas that may have worked all right for a small, homogeneous, agricultural people that shared a common faith and ancestor – although I’m not convinced they worked all that well even then – but it is impossible to imagine anything like this working in our modern, multi-cultural, urbanized nation of immigrants.

But if we can’t use these biblical concepts as they are written, what are we supposed to do with them? Do we just pretend they don’t exist? (Spoiler alert: that is by far the most common response.) Or do we look for something behind them, some principles maybe, that may still have some meaning for us?

We read Leviticus 25:18-24:

¹⁸ You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. ¹⁹ The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. ²⁰ Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ ²¹ I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. ²² When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. ²³ The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. ²⁴ Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

First, let’s look at the Sabbath year. God recognizes the problem of taking a year off in a farm, and he has an answer: “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure that on the sixth year you have bumper crops – enough for three years. See? Problem solved.” Now your first reaction to that might be, “Yeee-ah, that’s easy to say.” At least that was my first reaction. I wasn’t sure I had that much faith, just to count on God to provide crops sufficient to tide me over for three years. But then I realized I wouldn’t have to have faith at all. God’s promise is to give the bumper crops *before* the Sabbath year. This isn’t a test of the Israel’s faith; it’s a test of their obedience. God will provide in the sixth year enough to last for three years, and when that happens, the Israelites have a choice. Do they obey God’s command and let their lands lie fallow for a year, living on the surplus? Or do they go ahead and plant anyway so as to keep building up more and more. God promises, “I will see that you have enough.” And the people get to decide for themselves if they are going to be content with enough, or if they’re going to try to amass *more*.

It’s the manna story all over again. In the wilderness, God gave the Israelites manna – just enough each morning to feed them for that day. If anyone tried to set some of it aside for later, it got wormy and rancid. *Except* that on the sixth day, the day before the Sabbath, God provided double manna, and this time the extra manna would *not* spoil, so that people could rest on the Sabbath and still have enough.

Here’s the Sabbath year principle. God promises enough. No more. Give us this day our *daily* bread. But some of us, especially in wealthy nations, end up with more than enough: maybe because of our own hard work, maybe because of inherited money, maybe because of having been given more opportunity than others, or being really good at a job that happens to pay more than others. For *whatever* reason, some of us have more than we need. Some of us much more. The question Leviticus asks us then is: Are we going to stockpile that surplus, then devote ourselves to adding more and more to it, or are we going to recognize that God has given us enough and use the surplus in obedience to God?

Now let's look at the Jubilee year. Totally impractical in our economy. I don't see any way in the world this could work now. But does it perhaps offer us an underlying principle, like the Sabbath year did? Look back at our reading: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.* Now it becomes clear. This whole whack-a-doodle idea of doing a hard reset on property ownership every half century only makes sense if you start with the presupposition that none of us own anything, anyway. It all belongs to God. The land that the Israelites "owned" had been signed over to them by God, not for their possession, but for their use. And the possessions that we have God has permitted to us, not so that we can be blessed, but to enable us to better obey God. Everything that we have is on consignment. Or, even better, it's venture capital that God has invested in us, hoping to see us turn it into obedience and justice and righteousness and works of compassion and courage and protection for others. When we treat our "possessions" on this earth as our rightful due, to be hoarded away and protected from loss and added to indefinitely, then we have become a bad investment.

So let me try to wrap up not only this message but the whole Economics-from-Leviticus sermon series. There are, in fact, some important economic principles in this ancient priestly book. Hard work and personal responsibility matter and should be rewarded. But we are not just responsible for our own welfare; we are a community and are responsible for others as well, especially those in need. Those are the principles we talked about over the last two weeks, and they deal with how we relate to each other. The lessons from this week, though, deal more with how we view the whole idea of possessions. What Leviticus seems to say is that we own nothing. Everything we have is a gift of God, who has promised to give us *enough*. And everything that we have that goes over and above *enough* is an opportunity for us to use it in obedience to God.

No, I don't think this means that we must all give everything away after we've met our basic needs. Some may be called to do that, but not everyone. That "personal responsibility" thing involves caring for our families, which may include saving for college, saving for retirement. Nor do I think we should obsess over every penny and deny ourselves the delights of this world. Jesus didn't. He loved a good banquet, and remember, when he changed water to wine, he made the good stuff. Obedience to God is a broad concept and may be different for each person. I'm not telling you how to spend your money; that's between you and God. What I am saying, however, is that that *is* between you and God. Whatever you do with the property and blessings that God has lent to you for a while, let it be done in partnership with the original owner. Let it be done with gratitude, with generosity to others, with compassion for the struggling, and with joy.