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## A Self-Guided Exploration of our Bicentennial Celebration Theme

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The Jubilee, found in Leviticus 25, appears at first as just a set of laws and regulations. In fact, it was the third tier of regulations regarding Sabbath – renewal. A Sabbath day had been declared by God for the renewal of people and a Sabbath year had even been commanded for the renewal of the soil/earth. In Leviticus 25 we find the third tier, regulations seeing to the renewal of the social systems of the world.

The Jubilee is not law, but rather a practice of making all things new that was written into the law. The law and Jubilee are not one and the same. The law is the vehicle by which the social reality was carried, but the law is particular to a specific time and place, Jubilee is timeless. In order to invoke Jubilee as a framework for our bicentennial celebration in 2017 and 2018, it is necessary for us to separate what is law bound in time and what is Jubilee for all times. One way to do that is to use the old, proverbial idea of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law as a guideline.

Here are some exercises to help us do just that:

### **Example:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:13-17**

What is the letter of the law in this short passage?

Land cannot really be sold. What is described is more of a rental agreement. It may be “purchased” for only the period of time before the next Jubilee (every 50 years). The price of land is proportional to the number of harvests remaining before.

But what is the spirit of the law?

Land may never permanently be taken from the hands of those to whom God had originally given it. This would prevent anyone from ever losing their family land permanently, provide a moment of “reset” or even “redemption” every 50 years for the family. It would also prevent anyone from doubling up their land and

thereby their yield and using the extra profit to purchase more land, and more land, and more land. It allows economic incentive to those who do well without allowing anyone to go entirely without and without allowing anyone to get obscenely ahead of others. The spirit of the law is justice, equality, access to resources, perhaps even forgiveness if the loss of land was the result of poor decisions or behavior.

Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?

We could by ensuring that penalties for bad behavior or the consequences of bad actions do not last forever. We would have to envision ways to work redemptively instead of punitively. We would by creating systems that allow people to learn lessons and try again.

The church can participate by advocating for these systems in the broader culture and by modeling them in church life through actions such as making sure leadership positions are regularly rotated (nobody holds authority for too long), and by contributing to organizations working toward these ends, etc.

What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

There are lots of populations, but the prison population comes to mind for me. I think of sentencing practices in the effort to "crack down on crime", but actually end up simply warehousing humans in unredemptive places. This is penalty without the opportunity (or at least a very difficult opportunity) to redeem oneself and return to society and productivity.

### **Day/Week 1:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:18-24**

This section is a reiteration of the Sabbath Year regulations listed just before the Year of Jubilee (25:1-8). It might be helpful to know something about the agrarian practice of letting fields lie fallow. Take a few minutes to research that topic if you need to.

- What is the letter of the law in this short passage?
- But what is the spirit of the law?
- Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?
- What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

### **Day/Week 2:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:25-28**

- What is the letter of the law in this short passage?
- But what is the spirit of the law?
- Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?
- What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

### **Day/Week 3:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:35-38**

- What is the letter of the law in this short passage?
- But what is the spirit of the law?
- Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?
- What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

### **Day/Week 4:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:39-46**

This is where dividing timeless Jubilee from culture-centered law become most important. This passage, and others following it, at least implicitly condone slavery. While it is true that servitude in these early cultures was not quite the same as the more recent American slavery, it is still to be understood as a vile practice.

Nonetheless, it was a part of the culture of that day. Can we find anything salvific in a text that does not go as far in the direction of justice as we might wish in the modern world? Let's find out.

- What is the letter of the law in this short passage?
- But what is the spirit of the law?
- Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?
- What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

### **Day/Week 5:**

#### **Read Leviticus 25:47-55**

- What is the letter of the law in this short passage?
- But what is the spirit of the law?
- Even if the letter of the law is impractical, impossible, or even inconceivable in today's world how might the spirit of the law still be practiced? And how might the church/our church participate in that?
- What populations, issues, or aspects of modern life might be changed if Jubilee concepts were practiced now? *How* might they be changed?

### **Summary:**

Can you identify the pursuit of God's justice in the spirit of these regulations? How about liberty? Or Mercy? Redemption? Forgiveness? Stewardship?

Did you notice that the year these regulations are to begin is marked by the playing of a horn? Did you find any other hints of celebration within?

How do you think the celebration of our 200<sup>th</sup> year could inform and energize our pursuit of Jubilee in 21<sup>st</sup> century Rochester, New York and beyond?