

Giving God What's Right

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- [0 : 0 0] So a few years ago, when Hannah and I were living at another house, we were trying to get rid of our couch, but the problem was that the couch was sitting on the second floor, and our house was quite narrow, so our stairway was actually quite narrow and steep.
- So to try to move that couch was a bit difficult. So we asked our neighbors to help us, and they graciously did, but it was a scary thing to do.
- Just looking at the guy who was standing on the bottom of the stairs trying to catch the couch, it's just a mess. But we did it in the end, and so the next day we decided to express our thanks by giving them a nice box of chocolate.
- They deserved it, right? The gift as a symbol of our thanks was rightfully theirs, both because they had done us a favor in the first place, and also because we willingly gave it to them as a symbol of our appreciation.
- I think that's what's happening with our passage. That is, last week we read about God's blessings that the Israelites would get if they obeyed, and the curses if they disobeyed.
- [1 : 3 1] But as Andrew reminded us, God's goodness never depended on Israel's obedience in the first place, right? He had been good to them by saving them from Egypt, even before Israel had any chance to obey or disobey.
- And so in this chapter we see God allowing the people to respond to God's unmerited goodness by giving him what's rightfully his as an expression of their thanksgiving.
- So how do people express their thanks to God? Well, in this chapter we see primarily two ways. First, by giving God what they voluntarily give, what they voluntarily vow to dedicate.
- And second, by giving God what they must devote to him, because it belongs to God. So first, we see the dedication of people in verse 1 to 2 in our reading.
- The Lord said, oh sorry, let's just look at the Bible to verse 1 to 2. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, if anyone makes a special vow to dedicate a person to the Lord by giving the equivalent value, and then in verse 3 to 7, these are the values.
- [3 : 0 0] So the Israelites could dedicate people, themselves or their family members, as an expression of thanksgiving. So they might say, God, if you save me from this calamity, I'll give myself to your service.
- Or kind of like Hannah in the book of Samuel, who said, Lord, if you give me a son, then I'll give him, I'll dedicate him to your service.
- Now, Hannah really did give her son Samuel to the tabernacle for the rest of his life. But the majority of the people who were dedicated could not work in the tabernacle or in the temple, because only priests were allowed to work there.
- So what would happen then? Well, God gave a way for them to dedicate a person by giving some money instead as a symbol of that dedication.
- And that's why the amounts outlined in verse 3 to 7 are actually quite high. The average wage during that time was apparently about one shekel per month.

[4 : 12] And so to dedicate an adult man, for example, would cost them a 50-month salary. That's more than four years. Now, we know that this is not the value of the human being dedicated.

We have seen a few weeks ago that the value of human being is, for God, infinite. Just like if you kill a person, then you get killed. The value is infinite.

And regardless of genders, regardless of age brackets, the value of every human being is infinite. But these amounts that God set here in this chapter were apparently normal slave values outside of Israel.

Now, this doesn't mean that these people are sold as slaves. No, they were dedicated. And again, this doesn't mean that God is sexist by valuing the men more than the women.

It's symbolic. The values of the slaves there were symbolic, meaning that these people were dedicated to be God's servants, to be God's slaves.

[5 : 28] And the high payment symbolized that. By paying that high amount, the person making a vow was basically saying, Lord, I dedicate my son to your service.

And as a sign of my vow, the previous four years of my work belong to you. I don't keep any of it. And so, even though only priests could do priestly duties, non-priests could also be dedicated to God's service in response to God's goodness.

It's just that most of the time, it's symbolic through giving money. But of course, many people, especially the poor, would not have been able to pay such a large amount.

Right? So, in verse 8, God says, if anyone making the vow is too poor to pay the specified amount, the person being dedicated is to be presented to the priest who will set the value according to what the one making the vow can afford.

So, even poor people could still express their thanksgiving through dedicating themselves. Money is not an issue for God.

[6 : 45] Just dedicate yourself and then you pay what you can afford. And then in verse 9 to 13, the people could also dedicate their animals.

I've put the passages on the screen because they're not part of our Bible reading. So, in verse 9, if what they vowed is an animal that is acceptable as an offering to the Lord, such an animal given to the Lord becomes holy, meaning it will be sacrificed.

They must not exchange it or substitute a good one for a bad one or a bad one for a good one. If they should substitute one animal for another, both it and the substitute become holy.

They both will be sacrificed. If what they vowed is a ceremonially unclean animal, one that is not acceptable as an offering to the Lord, the animal must be presented to the priest who will judge its quality as good or bad.

Whatever value the priest then sets, that is what it will be. If the owner wishes to redeem the animal to get it back, a fifth must be added to its value.

[7 : 58] So, they could dedicate a sacrifice, a sacrificeable animal, which would be sacrificed, or they could dedicate an unclean animal like a horse or a donkey, and it would be given to the priests to be valued.

If the person wanted to get it back for some reason, they could redeem it by adding 20% to its value. Now, here we also see God's preempting people's tendency to cheat and not follow through with their vows.

So, in verse 10, it says, they must not exchange it or substitute a good one for a bad one. God knows that people could easily say after making a vow, Lord, if you save me from this calamity, I'll give you that horse over there.

And then, after he's being saved, he's like, oh man, I wish it would have been that one instead, the bad one that I dedicate instead of that one. That happens all the time, right?

I'm currently on Facebook Marketplace trying to trade my guitar, and that happens so often. Like, oh man, I wish I had offered this one instead of that one. So, God says, if you substitute the dedicated animal with another one, both will be sacrificed.

[9 : 18] So, don't make a rash vow. And if you do make a vow, follow through. And then, the system of dedicating a house and a land is similar to this one.

So, in verse 14 to 15, if a house is dedicated, it belongs to the priests, and if the person wants to redeem it, then they can pay 20% extra.

It's also the same with the dedication of land in verse 16 to 21, except that the land is expected to be redeemed by the original owner in the year of Jubilee, which we have covered a few weeks ago, you know, to make sure that everyone would have a land to work on so that no one could fall too deep into poverty.

This is also the case with the dedication of a non-family land in verse 22 to 25. You know, sometimes, because of poverty, someone had to sell their family land to another person, and this other person could choose to dedicate that land to the ministry instead.

And in the year of Jubilee, the land would go back to its original owner. Again, for the same reason, to make sure that no one would fall too deep into poverty.

[10 : 45] But again, we see here God's preempting people's tendency to cheat. Again, in verse 20, apparently, there were cases where the land that had been dedicated was sold to someone else.

Now, this is cheating. So, if that happened, the land would forever become the priests. It cannot be redeemed. So, that's a quick sort of overview of the regulations for voluntarily dedicating people or things to God's service.

But there were also people and things that the people had to devote, not dedicate, but devote to God, because, again, they rightly belonged to Him. So, in verse 26 to 27, people could not dedicate the firstborn of animals because the firstborns always automatically belonged to God.

Why is that? Because in the book of Exodus, remember, God killed the firstborns of the Egyptians to liberate, to free the Egyptian slaves, but He passed over the firstborns of the Israelites.

And then He said, the firstborn of every womb belongs to Me because of that, because He has saved them. He has redeemed them. And so, by giving them to God, the people were giving to God what's rightfully His.

[12 : 18] And then, in verse 28 to 29, some things and some people were devoted to destruction, often because God commands it.

So, like in the book of Numbers, where God commands that the Midianites be destroyed completely, and this is one of the things that we need to struggle with, right, when we read the Bible.

But, yeah, these people or things could not be redeemed when they have to be devoted to destruction for God. And then, finally, in verse 30 to 33, there's the giving of the tithe, you know, a tenth of every harvest or animal produce.

This wasn't voluntarily given. This was mandatory because it rightly belonged to God, the King of Israel who gave them the land of Canaan and then who would make sure that the land would yield abundant blessings every year.

So, tithes belonged to God, but tithes could be redeemed, again, by paying 20% extra. And, again, we see here people have the tendency to cheat, right, by swapping the good harvest in the 10% with the bad one.

[13 : 36] But, if they did that, then both would become gods. So, God had been good to Israel before they were obedient or disobedient to him.

God had been good by liberating them from Egypt, by saving their firstborns, by giving them the land of Canaan, by giving them harvest every year, by giving them manna and water in the wilderness.

And, here, in this passage, we see God allowing the people to respond to his goodness by giving him what's rightfully his as an expression of their thanksgiving.

Like me giving my neighbors a box of chocolate because I am thankful. Not so that they would help us move the furniture, they have already done that, but because we're thankful.

Or, like, when I was 12, went to school and I heard that a friend just lost his mom, and then I thought about all the good things that my mom had done to me, so I went home from school and I said to my mom, mom, I'll be a good boy from now on.

[14 : 57] Of course, that was not always the case, but I dedicated myself to her as a son, not so that I could be her son. I was already her son, right?

But because I suddenly appreciated her as my mom and I wanted to express that thankfulness to her. So that's the point of the story.

But, I think the fact that this chapter is placed at the very end of the book of Leviticus carries a theological implication.

Because it's a bit weird, isn't it? If we think about it, at first glance, it would be more natural if the book ended with chapter 26. You know, after 25 chapters of laying out rules and regulations, God says in chapter 26, if you obey all these rules and regulations, you'll get blessings.

If you don't, you'll get curses. Period. The end. That's the end of the book. That will be logical, right? But no, the book continues.

[16 : 03] There's one more chapter which lays out the regulations for dedications. Why? Well, I think the implication of this chapter is that the whole book of Leviticus is an expression of the dedication of the whole Israel as God's holy people.

Many times throughout the book, God reminds the Israelites, I am the Lord your God who redeemed you out of Egypt. He has bought them. They are rightfully his.

And the whole book of Leviticus is basically a way of living that enables Israel to devote themselves to the holy God by living holy in every aspect of life.

Chapter 27 contains practical expressions of the whole book, that is, dedications and devotions. But they could dedicate themselves and their families and their houses and their lands and their animals only because all of them are rightfully gods in the first place.

God has bought them and they were God's redeemed servants. But here comes the problem and we know this.

[17 : 25] Israel failed at dedicating themselves to God as his servants. In Isaiah 42 we hear God lamenting, who is blind but my servant?

And deaf like the messenger I sent, who is blind like the one in covenant with me? Blind like the servant of the Lord. And then in verse 24, who handed Jacob, that is Israel, over to become loot and Israel to the plunderers?

Was it not the Lord against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways. They did not obey his law. Israel has failed in the Old Testament even to be God's dedicated servants.

They did not give God what is rightfully his. They failed to be holy. They failed to fully dedicate themselves to God's ways.

But it's not just Israel, is it? It's all of us. In Romans 1 we are told the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, all people who, and in chapter 3 Paul makes it clear that everyone sins who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

[18 : 48] And then in verse 21, for although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. Meaning they paid no dedications, no devotions, no expressions of thankfulness.

That's us often, isn't it? If we think about it, Israel is not the only one that belongs to God. All humans belong to God. We were created by him and God still gives us good things in life to the believers and the non-believers.

He is our creator and he is our provider. It's only right to give our thanks to God by dedicating ourselves to him. But we all have failed, haven't we?

I have failed. We have failed to be holy in the past or even now. We have failed to dedicate ourselves to him completely.

And instead we play around with idols. We dedicate ourselves to our money, self-image, achievements. I do sometimes.

[19 : 59] we have run away. We have vowed to dedicate ourselves to things other than God. In a sense, we're like that person in the text who sells his land to someone else even though it's been dedicated to God.

We sell ourselves to idols even though we belong to God. We sell ourselves to sin and death.

But what did God do? He did not give up on his treasured possession. He redeemed us back.

He brought us back, not by paying 20% extra, but by paying the infinite cost in the death of his son. That's how much he wanted us.

Imagine being one of the people in this text, right? after vowing to dedicate their house, for example, they realize that they've made a mistake, that they still need the house, they still want the house, and they want to get it back.

[21 : 07] They go to the priests, and then the priests say, sure, pay 120% of the value. They must desire the house pretty badly to want to pay that much.

What about God? God lost us, so to speak. Not because he has rashly made a vow, but because we ran away and dedicated ourselves to idols.

We sold ourselves. In biblical language, we prostituted ourselves to idols, but he redeemed us. He paid the infinite value of the blood of the Son of God to buy us back so we could be his treasured possession forevermore.

That's how much he loves us. So if you're sitting here and you haven't dedicated yourselves to God, you haven't taken the payment that Jesus has offered to buy you back by dying on the cross, please consider how much God loves you.

your idols don't love you. You dedicate your life to your money, to your job, to people's praises, but they don't dedicate themselves to you.

[22 : 28] They will suck the life out of you. But God loves you, and if you dedicate your life to him, you'll find that he has dedicated himself to you first by sending his son to die on the cross for you.

We all need that God, don't we? Because we all need someone who loves us that much, and no one loves us better than God who created us and redeemed us by dying on the cross.

No one, not even ourselves. Would you die on the cross and suffer on the cross for yourself? So let's dedicate our lives to him. to the rest of you who have received the payment that Jesus has made on the cross, you have been redeemed, meaning you have been bought back.

So now we can dedicate ourselves to God again. We belong to him. We've been purchased. In our second reading we read, therefore I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God's mercy, in view of what Jesus has done to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. God has redeemed us. He has bought us. So we ought to dedicate ourselves to him.

[24 : 01] And we don't just dedicate 10% of our income or our first born child. We dedicate all to God because he has paid it all through the death of his one and only son.

So how do we do that? How do we dedicate our lives to God? Well, we dedicate all that we have to God's service. The passage continues.

We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve.

If it is teaching, then teach. If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

All that we have and all that we are must be dedicated to God because he has bought us. We are his. But Paul here gives us some examples of how we can express that total dedication and that is by using what God has given us to serve others.

[25 : 20] So serving people is an expression of our dedication to God. God has to serve in. What area can you serve in?

Last month I encouraged the people in my small group to consider their gifts, their talents and possessions and think about how they could use them for God's mission.

So I asked them, if you could go anywhere in the world with no barriers, or you could stay here, again with no barriers, to serve people by bringing good things and to spread the gospel, where do you think you could use what God has given you to serve the kingdom?

Your skills, your personalities, your assets, where would you go? What would you do? I encourage you to think about it too.

Perhaps you can teach in Cambodia. Perhaps you can use your business acumen to help the poor people in Haiti. Perhaps you can mentor children here in Melbourne with Kids Hope.

[26 : 34] Talk to Barry about it. Perhaps you can mentor the younger people in other congregations. Lead Bible study, lead a service, play music.

What gifts has God given you? Friends, our whole lives belong to God. We have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus.

Let's dedicate our whole lives to Him as a holy, living sacrifice. Let's pray. Father, we thank You for Your goodness towards us that You have shown most clearly through what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

Help us through Your Spirit to dedicate ourselves to You, to love You with all our hearts, our minds, our souls, our strength, and to express that through loving and serving others as we love ourselves.

In Christ, our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.