

LESSONS IN LIVING

*Around the World in 40 Days: A loving look at world religions from a
Christian perspective*

Part VI: What a Christian Can Learn from Judaism

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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First Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 15: 1-15 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It is kind of a Christian mythology that the God of the Jewish scripture is mean and the God of the New Testament is this loving, kind person. They are both much more complicated than that. We are looking at two books that most people don't even touch in liberal Christian traditions Leviticus in particular. A lot of people don't realize some of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament are actually coming from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," Jesus didn't come up with that that is from Leviticus. Here is our second scripture reading from Leviticus 25. Obviously I have chosen passages that represent the whole chapter but I invite you after church to check and make sure I am not making things up.

In this year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. If some from your country become poor and are unable to support themselves among you help them as you would an alien or temporary resident so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest of any kind from them but fear your God so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. I am your God who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and be your God.

We are going around the world and learning from different religions around the world. In some ways Judaism will be the hardest because most of us have learned about Judaism from a Christian context and there is nothing that shuts ears and eyes as much as putting someone else in your context. The idea that the Jewish scriptures are the porch to the real house which we happen to live in is really funny because we are going to look at Islam next week and they do that to us. Where Jesus says somebody else is coming and that is the one to listen to and they say "well he is talking about Mohammed." So we need to realize that it doesn't feel too good when somebody else pulls the rug out from under you.

So we are going to look at Judaism on its own terms and not try to convert or change anybody but to respect, honor and realize that God speaks to people all over the globe not just to Presbyterians. We are going to look at something that has been censored from Scripture. It is in scripture but you will not hear these verses preached on by any sane preacher. You pretty much have to find somebody crazy to preach on Jubilee. Jubilee was a foundation for the new nation of Israel when it moved into the land. The whole

song went "you were mistreated when you were slaves. I am giving you this land but I want you to treat people differently. I want you to remember when a wanderer comes through your land or an alien or somebody who is poor what it was like when you were a slave. I want you to treat them the way you would have been treated." Jubilee undergirds the entire law of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Now it wasn't very convenient and people didn't like it so it was just kind of ignored.

When Jesus begins his ministry he is not starting a new religion. What he was calling people to, was the roots of their own truth the parts of Judaism that were being ignored. Do you remember his first sermon? He goes into the temple and he says "I have come to preach good news to the poor. I have come to preach release of captives." That is not original with Jesus. He is talking about Jubilee. He is talking about a time when you reshuffle the deck. That once every seven years, once every forty-nine years, once every fifty years you redistribute the wealth. That if people have really messed up, have lost their land or they don't have land you reshuffle the cards. If people have fallen into poverty you reshuffle the cards. If people have actually sold themselves as slaves you let them go. Pretty remarkable human rights, universal human rights not perfect but the beginning, a new dawn. It was ignored.

The interesting thing is that Christianity has ignored it just as much. Have you ever wondered why Christianity has not saved the world? We have taken the core out of social justice. It is out, it has been expunged. My mom used to make us hot toddies when we had a cough. You know the recipe for hot toddies? A hot toddy has lemon juice, honey and whiskey. My mom would make it with lemon and honey and call it a hot toddy. It never seemed to work. A hot toddy without the whiskey is actually lemonade which has very limited medicinal properties. It is the same point when you think about bread which has lost its vitamin content like most bread. When you buy bread and it doesn't have vitamins in it than it is not really bread. It is not really food if it doesn't give you nourishment. In the same way if you take Jubilee out of Christianity the social justice message "on earth as it is in heaven" when we take that out of Christianity we are not really talking about what Jesus was talking about.

I am going to read some verses that we just mentioned and I want you to think about how radical this message is. I am not asking you to agree but it is one thing to disagree with something in scripture and it is something else to pretend like it is not even there. Verse thirty seven "you must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit." Thou shall not be a capitalist. Can you take it any different way? When you put a nation together and you care about the people you do not surrender responsibility for their well being to the market. You do not form an economic system that gets you rich at someone else's expense. You do not do that. I know what is going to happen after church. People are going to come up and say well what about a small time business person but that is not what we are talking about. Modern corporate capitalism is as far from the philosophy of Adam Smith as Cal Marx ever thought about being. Modern corporate capitalism cannot be democratic. Corporations are not democratic. They are feudal systems and when they take over nations because you want small government than that nation becomes a feudal system and you get to go vote every four years for somebody that makes you want to throw up. When you do have somebody that touches you deep inside and you believe in them they betray you because within the system of corporate capitalism you cannot solve any major problem in the world today. You cannot solve the healthcare problem because it is more profitable to deny people healthcare than to provide it. So if the bottom line is money where is capitalism going to go?

Now let me ask you a question that I ask about once a month. What is the most profitable business in the world? Please learn that. War. War is the most profitable business in the world. You will make more money in a time of war than in any other time hands down. You think Lockheed Martin is cutting us a deal? Halliburton? No. You make more money at a time of war than any other time and you can do it under the cloak of secrecy and they you take those public funds that develop the technology and you privatize the profit. So a very small group of people make enormous amounts of money and if there is a

cave in or when there is a cave in as there always will be it is the poor, the weak that have to lift up that load.

You must not lend money at interest or sell others food at a profit, not me but the Bible. It says in the Jubilee texts that there are not to be poor in the land. What kind of a nation closes its eyes when children develop brain damage because they don't get proper nourishment? What kind of nation, which would be the richest nation in the world, allows itself to have the same kind of neonatal death as a third world nation in certain parts of the population; only a nation that has surrendered responsibility. Here is the thing; there are no villains in this story. You are not going to find the evil person that did all this bad stuff unless you happen to look in the mirror because it is all of us. We all share in this. When we surrender our humanity to a system that is built on interest, not just free market but where you amass wealth because you own something and you can charge somebody to get to what they need there is going to be problems. I know that there are nice rich people. I know that but I also know there are nice cannibals but if you are captured by a tribe and somebody says "don't criticize Emu he is one of the nicest people in the world who would give you the shirt off his back" that is well and good but Emu is about to eat me. So we are not talking about being critical about another human being we are saying that system is very bad for me if I am being eaten. The prophets talked about great wealth in cannibalistic terms. If you don't believe me read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea.

God cares about the poor and the weak. They are not worth less because they don't have money. When we bomb somebody else's homes somewhere else and kill their children it hurts them as bad as when the Twin Towers fell. Everyday of the year is 9/11 in some countries. These texts call us to care and when we do not care we lose our own humanity. This is how Wendell Berry said it "Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand. It is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy." We are a star culture, a classist culture, as class based as any place in the whole world including where they have untouchables. We would rather watch stars dance poorly on television than honoring the humanity around us. The Jubilee texts call us out of that.

Then they talk about a release of captives. Do you realize that we live in the nation that has the highest percentage of people in prison of anywhere in the world? So when you think of Sadaam Hussein and the brutality of Hussein we have beat him. When you think about the cruel dictators in South America we have beat them. We are number one in the land of the free. Capitalism cannot do better in dealing with crime than prisons but we can. The principals of capitalism cannot deal better than war and prisons but the laws of the Sabbath can. The laws of Jubilee can.

The reason we don't realize what is going on is because of propaganda. Here is a wonderful quote from Alex Carey, "The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy." It is very visible in other parts of the world where we come, kill people to get democracy, let them vote but they vote for the wrong people but they vote for the wrong people so we invade again, vote again and people learn that if you do what America wants than you won't get invaded or bombed. We are captives too. I thought about doing a poll here and I don't want to embarrass anybody but the question is how many of you if given ten million dollars would have chosen a different profession than you have lived out in your adult life? How many of you if you had been free to chose a different way would have chosen a different way? My guess is it is ninety percent maybe. I know a lot of unhappy people. I know happy people too but they are usually lucky people as well. Most people spend five days a week in misery for two days of freedom. That is not freedom. Freedom is when you get to do what you want to do and you organize your life. If you went to other parts of the world they don't work fifteen hour days. The people that we are trying to save are often very happy people who feel free. We need to be free. The Jubilee texts call us to freedom. When you have

prisons nobody is free. When you build a society so that nobody can get at you; you build a prison. Look at what we are doing to ourselves to feel safe so that nobody anywhere can get at us. We are building a prison and we will live in it. Here is the most controversial thing in the passage if it wasn't bad enough already. This is verse 23 from Leviticus 25.

The land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.

The Bible condemns permanent personal property because when you base your culture on property rights you make human rights secondary. They did have rights of usage but it was understood as belonging to the common good. You didn't have something like the King Ranch that can be seen from the moon belonging to a handful of people. Carl Marx was once accused...He was not the inspiration for this sermon let me say. I am quoting the Jubilee text and he was ripping them off. When he was asked if he was taking personal property rights away from people he said do you realize that ninety percent of the world already has no personal property. We are balancing the equation here. I know most people were very upset by what Arizona did and I was upset in most ways but I also had this little kind of sick joy because I am so glad when another state is dumber than Texas. It doesn't last long. There is something amazing about that idea of the personal property wanting to see other people's birth certificates when you stole the land. This whole strip is stolen land and now we want the people we stole it from to show their birth certificate. That is what property rights leads to so God says the world belongs to me which means it belongs to all of us. We have needs to touch the earth and to have a farm and to do that kind of thing but it needs to be in the context of the common good. None of us should feel that power means right of possession. Just because we have the power does not make the world ours. Just because we were born in the continental United States does not mean that we should be able to walk into other people's countries and take whatever we want.

When Jesus said that the Sabbath was created for human beings not human beings for the Sabbath he was radically transforming the idea of religion. Religion is for human happiness. Human beings were not made to grovel before God. Religion is a gift to remind us that the world does belong to us all. I am going to quote another socialist although this is not really socialism it is sharing. That is what I am talking about. I mean really to find a communist you would need a shovel. To find a real capitalist or a real communist...they are dead. We are talking about other historical eras. What we are talking about now is sanity. We are talking about sharing the world. We are talking about universal human rights. This is Eugene V. Debs. He was a communist who ran for president from prison and got two million votes. "Now my friends I am opposed to the system of society in which we live today not because I lack the natural equipment to do for myself but because I am not satisfied to make myself comfortable knowing there are thousands of my fellow human beings who suffer for the barest necessities of life. We were taught under the old ethic that a human beings business on this earth was to look out for them selves. That was the ethic of the jungle, the ethic of the wild beast take care of your self no matter what, no matter what may become of your fellow human beings. A Thousand years ago the question was asked 'Am I my brother's and sister's keeper?' That question has never been answered in a way that is satisfactory to civilized society. Yes I am my brother's and my sister's keeper. I am under a moral obligation to them that is inspired not by any maudlin sentimentality but by the higher duty I owe myself. What would you think of me if I were capable of seating myself at a table and gorging myself with food and saw about me the children of my fellow human beings starving to death?"

What does the world think of our Christianity when we let the world starve to death or languish? When we look at the religion that is going out into the world calling itself Christianity we see something very anemic. We see a hot toddy with a missing ingredient. We see bread that does not satisfy and what it is missing is the Jubilee, justice, release of captives, sharing the wealth, not charging each other interest and

getting rich on somebody else's misery. If we want to return to a real Christianity then we return to these roots in Judaism. In part they are other roots too but part of it is remembering what the prophets said and remembering what the Sabbath is about and what Jubilee is about and that Jesus' first sermon was to say that there is a world God wants where everyone is fed and everyone is clothed and I have come to tell you that it is time. It is time for God's world to become our world. "Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand. It is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy."

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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