

8 " 'Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 9 Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. 10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. 11 The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. 12 For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.

13 " 'In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property.

14 " 'If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. 15 You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. 16 When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. 17 Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God.

My mom, and the rest of our family, has a history of being embarrassed by my father's frugality. One of the ways his frugality most often manifests itself is when they drive all around a town or city looking for a restaurant—not just any restaurant—but a buffet. When I was a kid, we would drive nearly 70 miles from our home in Northwest Ohio to Fort Wayne, Indiana to eat at a restaurant with a large buffet because it was such a "good deal". Now what part of a "good deal" driving 140 miles round trip for dinner is—well, that's a bit up in the air for me. And I can't help but think that my dad's appreciation for buffets has more to do with the idea of all of those options, all of that food, than it does the actual price. There's something very attractive about the idea of something that never runs out—a table at which the options are seemingly endless, the dishes are kept full, and the mashed potatoes are always hot. A buffet is a picture of, in a word, abundance. And, at least for me, that's part of why a buffet is so enjoyable and, at the same time, disgusting.

And isn't that the way it can be with abundance? Especially if we're considering financial abundance. We think we want it—and when we get it we don't realize we have it. We think we want it—and there are times that, once we get it, we realize that it wasn't worth getting it. We think we want it—and when we don't have it, we rationalize not having it and judge and indeed go so far as to sometimes demonize those who do. I know this is what I used to do—judge those who had an abundance of those things that I did not have. And not only is it human nature to have difficulty in our relationships with people who have things that we want and yet don't have—and if you want to argue with me on that I invite you to come and observe the 3 and 4 year olds in my son's preschool class when they want something that someone else has—but in my case, my tendency to judge the "have's" came from a series of misinterpretations and biased translations of scripture I learned indirectly and directly from professors, colleagues, and various authors and scholars. As one of the scholars I've researched for my thesis wrote, "If we don't read [scripture] carefully, we may get the impression that Jesus simply has it in for rich people. But that's not right at all. In every one of [these often misinterpreted] stories, Jesus obviously cares for the rich; he is concerned about the quality of their lives and, specifically, about the condition of their hearts."¹ Indeed, for years I hadn't read scripture carefully enough which led me not only to judge those with wealth but also to judge myself and feel guilty about my own wealth which—while seemingly incomparable to the Donald Trumps and Bill Gates of the world—is, compared to most of the rest of the world—extravagant, I am only wealthy woman.

And while I still believe it's true that Jesus gave preference to the poor over the rich in most of his teachings, to consider that the incidents in which he lifted up a poor person as an example of faithfulness and discipleship—think of the widow who gave up her last two coins that was read here in worship last week—to think that Jesus blessing the poor was then also a blanket condemnation of the wealthy is a biased

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 54.

misinterpretation of the Word of God. If we look at the Bible in its entirety, we witness a theme of abundance. From the very beginning—in the Garden of Eden—God provided Adam and Eve with an abundance. Then there was Abraham—God promised him a life of abundance, telling him he would be exceeding fruitful, that he would give him all the land of Canaan—and all the milk and honey that was flowing there in. And then there were the Israelites who God rescued from a life of poverty and slavery and even when they were wandering in the desert for 40 years, God provided an abundance, if not a variety, of food, the manna that showered down on them from heaven and water that gushed forth from the rock. And then there were the Jewish prophets who were certainly not shy about criticizing the rich—but not because they were rich—but rather because they were rich at the expense of others—their richness necessitated that others be poor—something that was unacceptable to the prophets and indeed, as a Jewish prophet himself, a message with which Jesus continued. And that’s the problem, God created an abundance, created wealth, created human beings with the ability to create, earn, and gain wealth—God created that abundance for everyone, not just a privileged few. God intends that life for all God’s children—perhaps not perfect financial equality as espoused by some modern political and economic systems—but God created enough so that all could appreciate and enjoy abundance.

And there are no scriptures that make this more clear than these from Leviticus about Sabbath and jubilee. Every seven years, the Israelites let the land rest for a year and didn’t farm it, there was no production. Modern day farmers can attest to the practicality of this idea as it allows the land an opportunity to rejuvenate. God provided enough in the sixth year that the harvest was large enough to provide food for the seventh year as well. Crops that grew voluntarily were left for the poor and the animals. In addition to allowing for this Sabbath year every seven years, Leviticus also instructs the Israelites to observe a jubilee year every fifty years. The jubilee year was a kind of Sabbath year on steroids. In addition to taking a year off from production, all land was reverted to its original owners—even if they’d lost it through debt, all prisoners were released, all debts were forgiven. The jubilee year was a kind of once in a lifetime “re-do”; an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start over. But more than that, Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides stressed the “social and ethical benefit of the sabbatical and jubilee years. He emphasized that such sabbatical and jubilee laws are . . . meant to teach ‘sympathy toward others and promote the well-being of all.’ A significant side of these special years is to encourage and instruct Jews to be generous with those in need, to share their profits and products, and to be just in their business practices . . .” Another Jewish scholar teaches us that during the jubilee, “God commands us not to work the land and not to use its fruits, except for the poor, to remind us that the earth does not yield by itself or even by human cultivation. God’s goodness is displayed for all human beings in the sabbatical and jubilee years. God generously provides food for all, and human beings are to copy God’s goodness in their relationships with one another. Just as God grants food during the years of rest, human beings are commanded to leave produce for the needy and hungry, acting out of compassion and generosity.” The jubilee is an opportunity to give thanks for the abundance of the past, to trust God that there will be enough to enjoy in the present, and to rest for the production that will resume in the future.

And that, my friends, is what we will model in the coming year, in 2010, when we celebrate a year of jubilee here at the church. First, church leaders would like to take this opportunity to praise and thank God for the abundance this church has shown in the past few years as we’ve enjoyed double-digit increases in our budget. Second, we will take this year to “stand on the promises of God” trusting God that even in the midst of difficult economic times—we will have enough, an abundance even, as folks continue to give and to enjoy giving even without pledging. And part of that enjoyment is that we’re not asking for more, there’s enough at this buffet for now. In so far as we are able, all budgets for 2010 are frozen at their 2009 levels. If you’re able to give more, thanks be to God. But, in keeping with the spirit of jubilee, there is no pressure or expectation to produce more—to produce more wealth, more programs, more ministry. And third, as we enjoy a present without the pressure of production, we will be able to look forward and plan for the future in which God will be calling us to be and do more—but for now, we need a bit of a rest, we need Sabbath, an opportunity to feast at the buffet of blessings that has been set out before us and we will enjoy it together during 2010, during our year of jubilee. Thanks be to God.