DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 15

*The Year for Canceling Debts*

**At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. 2 This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. 3 You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. 4 However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, 5 if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. 6 For the Lord your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. 7 If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. 8 Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. 9 Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. 10 Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. 11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.**

**15:1–2** Luther comments that such a charitable model of business would limit the amount of litigation and disputes in a nation, and that it would make creditors rightly more cautious in lending (AE 9:144). See note, v 6. This model does not likely apply to today’s economy since the law applied only to the “brothers” of Israel, who were connected by tribal kinship. Foreigners were not protected by this rule (v 3). (TLSB)

**15:1** *every seven years.* See Ex 23:10–11; Lev 25:1–7. (CSB)

*grant a release*. Not insist on repayment. (TLSB)

**15:3** *require payment from a foreigner.* Since he was not subject to the command to allow his fields to lie fallow during the seventh year, a foreigner would probably be financially able to pay his debts if asked to do so. (CSB)

**15:4** *there should be no poor among you.* Because of the Lord’s blessings (vv. 4–6), and because of the sabbath-year arrangement (vv. 7–11). This “year for canceling debts” (v. 9) gave Israelites who had experienced economic reverses a way to gain release from indebtedness and so, in a measure, a way to equalize wealth. Cf. the provisions of the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8–38). (CSB)

In the land the Lord was giving His people, there would always be plenty for everyone—old and young, sick and healthy. It was God’s will that His people would harvest and use the produce of the land in a charitable manner, and that the people’s strict obedience to God’s commands would alleviate poverty. (TLSB)

**15:6** *you will lend.* If Israel failed to follow the Lord’s commands, the reverse would be true (see 28:43–44). (CSB)

God was not absolutely opposed to credit-based business. (TLSB)

*you shall not borrow*. Such a rule would protect the Israelites from being dominated financially, which could open the way to cultural and religious domination by the idol-worshiping nations. (TLSB)

**15:7–11** It was sinful to ignore a brother in need. This teaching is taken up in the NT. (TLSB)

**15:7** *not harden your heart*. People were forbidden from willfully refusing to help the poor. (TLSB)

**15:10** God’s people should not hoard wealth as a source of security. Instead, God called the wealthy to trust that He would always provide bountifully for them through their work and their business dealings; He called them to live out this trust in freely sharing with those in need. (TLSB)

**15:11** *There will always be poor people.* See also Jesus’ statement in Mt 26:11. Even in the best of societies under the most enlightened laws, the uncertainties of life and the variations among citizens result in some people becoming poor. In such cases the Lord commands that generosity and kindness be extended to them. (CSB)

People, through no fault of their own, would be vulnerable to falling into poverty (e.g., the elderly, the sick, widows and orphans, and refugees). (TLSB)

*Freeing Servants*

**12 If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. 13 And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. 14 Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. 16 But if your servant says to you, “I do not want to leave you,” because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, 17 then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your maidservant. 18 Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free, because his service to you these six years has been worth twice as much as that of a hired hand. And the Lord your God will bless you in everything you do.**

**15:12–14** In order to find a way out of poverty, God’s people in need could sell themselves into slavery to their fellow Israelites. This, however, could only be for a limited time (up to six years), and upon release, poor workers were to receive enough to sustain themselves independently (so as not to have to resell themselves into slavery). (TLSB)

**15:15** *Remember.* See note on 4:10. (CSB)

**15:16–18** Describes how an Israelite could voluntarily enter into lifelong slavery. This possibility is envisaged as happening when a master and slave have established a mutually beneficial (even caring) relationship. The master or mistress of the slave would be obliged to receive the person as a slave and so be responsible for their care and provision. (TLSB)

**15:16** *because he loves you.* In Ex 21:5–6 an additional reason is given: The servant may want to stay with his family. (CSB)

**15:17** *take an awl and push it through his ear lobe.* See note on Ex 21:6. (CSB)

**15:18** *worth twice as much as.* A Hebrew servant worked twice as many years as the Code of Hammurapi, e.g., required for release from debt (see chart on “Ancient Texts Relating to the OT”). Other ancient legal texts, however, support “equivalent to” as a possible translation of the phrase. (CSB)

*The Firstborn Animals*

**19 Set apart for the Lord your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. Do not put the firstborn of your oxen to work, and do not shear the firstborn of your sheep. 20 Each year you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he will choose. 21 If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the Lord your God. 22 You are to eat it in your own towns. Both the ceremonially unclean and the clean may eat it, as if it were gazelle or deer. 23 But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.**

**15:19** *Set apart … every firstborn male.* Because the Lord saved his people from the plague of death on the firstborn in Egypt (see Ex 12:12, 29; 13:2 and note; 13:15). (CSB)

The Israelites consecrated the firstborn male to God as a reminder that He provided all their livestock (12:6; Nu 18:17–19). (TLSB)

**15:21** *If an animal has a defect … you must not sacrifice it.* See note on Lev 1:3. (CSB)

Only the best was fit for sacrificing to God and for sharing in religious celebration. The people’s sacrifices were not intended to be offerings made in order to placate God’s wrath. Rather, God provided them with the best animals, which were used for making them clean from guilt and for feasts. (TLSB)

**15:23** See 12:16, 24; see also notes on Ge 9:4; Lev 17:11. (CSB)

**Ch 15** Since the Lord would generously provide for His people, He commands them to be generous with one another. Today, the existence of poverty in the Christian community is a scandal, and the cry of those in need in any community goes up before the Lord. In the Church, you have brothers and sisters given to you by God. This means that you can always be confident God will provide for you when you are in need, and that you can help others knowing that God will give you more than enough to live life to the full. • Gracious Father, grant me wisdom in caring for my brothers and sisters in Christ. Since You have adopted me in Holy Baptism, help me give and receive in ways that honor You. Amen. (TLSB)