

## OT PROPERTY STEWARDSHIP: AN OPPORTUNITY AND AN OBLIGATION

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“It’s the economy, Stupid!” This phrase was the mantra of the 1992 presidential election that kept Bill Clinton focused in his campaign. Economic interests are always a major factor in election years. The appeal of material well-being is common to all, and even when all are prospering, the economy and compulsory redistribution of wealth to the poor have been perennial issues.

In the colonial era, Puritan ministers would preach seasonal “election sermons” to lay out the Bible’s spiritual qualifications and virtues expected in godly leaders. In our modern elections, spiritual concerns and the pursuit of God’s blessing glimmer only faintly among discerning voters who believe the Bible.

This essay first will compare the roles and success of voluntary agencies versus the government in helping its poor, followed by a survey of the OT ideal of the jubilee where every family of every generation had an opportunity to glorify God through its stewardship of the family estate.

### ***Social Benefits of Religion***

Religion binds people together around common values and shared metaphysical interests. The word, in fact, comes from the root *religio*, meaning “to bind together.” Religious communities are bound together horizontally by their common values, as well as bound vertically to God. Religious accountability is both horizontal and vertical.

Religious communities can be very useful in offering economic relief in the larger community. Religious altruism at the grassroots level not only is effective in meeting the short-term physical needs of the poor, but because the help is personal with a design of lifting the needy, it can lead to long-term life changes for “down-and-outers.”

Sadly, big government welfare has usurped the charitable role that local religious groups used to oversee. Before the era of state interventionism, hospitals, orphanages, and other relief agencies were managed by churches and synagogues. Today the federal government, under a loose interpretation of the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution, has become more than an economic safety net for its inhabitants—it has turned into a cash cow for welfare queens; it has locked needy families in a cycle of dependence; and it has bought votes for officials promising greater handouts.

Federal welfare is big business. Indiscriminate and routine handouts have become so entrenched that welfare recipients expect government aid and treat it as a right instead of as a

briefly needed gift. That would not be the case if local charitable groups worked with individuals to assess and supply the needs of the poor. Then economic relief would be seen for what it is—gratuitous charity.

Of course, no government is the ultimate benefactor of the poor. Government does not provide for the poor, but taxpayers do. As taxes grow with ballooning entitlements, some citizens, even with a generous heart, begin to think in terms of suffering *because of* the poor instead of suffering *with* the poor.<sup>1</sup> It does not help that the largesse of the state intermediary is impersonal and that bureaucratic layers disconnect the tax paying givers from the recipients. Direct charity, on the other hand, gives immediate relief with personal encouragement that may include training in skills and opportunity for self-help.

Especially when religious charities offer a hand to the needy, it is a hand up as well as a hand out. Religious communities generally are interested in making converts as well as doing alms. Acts of mercy help quicken an interest in the values of religion. Beneficiaries may be moved by compassion. These new disciples henceforth may be prodded by community peer pressure, yet the stronger pull on them may be their newfound personal interest in godly virtue. This is something that government can never instill, for the magistrate has power to push, but not to inspire. Government can effect change only through force, or otherwise by throwing money at problems, but in matters of economic opportunity for struggling individuals or businesses, government offers the most encouragement by getting out of the way of charitable enterprises and free market forces.

With regard to the government's encouraging a general prosperity that lifts all boats, it does serve an important role in preserving certain western institutions that are rare in many parts of the world. Robert Sirico sums up the institutions that have made the United States economy the envy of the world:

When we speak of the common good, we need also to be clear-minded about the political and juridical institutions that are most likely to bring it about. These happen to be the very institutions that socialists have worked so hard to discredit. Let me list them: private property in the means of production; stable money to serve as a means of exchange; the freedom of enterprise that allows people to start businesses; the free association of workers that permits people to choose where they would like to work and under what conditions; the enforcement of contracts that provides institutional support for the idea that people should keep their promises; and a vibrant trade within and among nations to permit the fullest possible flowering of the division of labor. These institutions must be supported by a cultural infrastructure that respects private property, regards the human person as possessing an inherent dignity, and confers its first loyalty to transcendent authority over civil authority. This is the basis of freedom without which the common good is unreachable.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Freedom and Stewardship in the Promised Land***

The common good in ancient Israel was a covenanted goodness arranged by the God of the Mosaic covenant. When Israel took possession of the promised land, the twelve tribes were given territorial allotments based on primogeniture and the relative size of their population. Clans and families within the non-Levitical tribes were apportioned family estates that were designed to stay within the control of those families throughout succeeding generations.<sup>3</sup> The fruitful land is a key element of the early biblical covenants; God intended the land as a means of blessing to his servants and he expected them to harvest a yield from the earth. They were stewards of God's land.<sup>4</sup>

Still, God allowed families to hold title to their estates to ensure rights of claim and inheritance. However, if forced by debt or sudden poverty to sublet parcels or to mortgage all of the family estate, the loss of stewardship would not be forever. The Year of Jubilee every fifty years was the economic leveler that returned the property to the original family. Under this divine plan, everyone at some time in his life was guaranteed an opportunity to use the family estate to invest in and reap a harvest from the land.

It appears that God wanted every generation to be free to exercise an economic stewardship grounded in the family inheritance. At the same time, this system checked greed, power grabs, economic oppression, and visions of amassing large land holdings.<sup>5</sup> By avoiding the possibility of large corporate farms taking over the country, the reversion of property to its original owners guaranteed a widespread, working middle class.<sup>6</sup> Thus was prevented a permanent system of social classes; it gave everyone the opportunity to start over, economically and socially, and it placed all on an equal social footing.

The universal renewal in the Year of Jubilee reminds us of God's concern for human liberty. God wants his people to be free and self-determining under his law. How apropos that William Penn should choose a freedom verse from the jubilee passage when he commissioned a special bell to commemorate fifty years of religious freedom in Penn's colony! People can still read this verse on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all inhabitants thereof" (Lev 25:10).

It is important to remember the root and purpose of this economic freedom in the promised land. Leviticus 25:9 informs us that the jubilee commenced on the Day of Atonement in the fiftieth year. Before there could be social and economic freedom, there had to be spiritual freedom. The offering on the Day of Atonement sealed a deliverance from sin and death, and it symbolized the coming final sacrifice of Christ. The real release that liberated people was deliverance from guilt that brought peace with God. Only when sinners were reconciled to their Maker could they begin to act like free men who lived in the fear of God.

Spiritual emancipation, then, is the root of social and economic freedom. The end of our freedom is not self-indulgence, but rather the service of God, who grants opportunities of stewardship before him. With opportunity comes obligation.

One practical area of responsible stewardship before God was using personal freedom and God-given means to show mercy. Should there be any needy in the land, charitable provision was made for them. Landowners as stewards were to use their profits in honor of their

Maker, remembering that their forefathers also had been poor slaves in Egypt. God's people were commanded to lend to brothers in need, and to give freely to the poor.<sup>7</sup> In this way God tested the heart of his stewards with a promise of prosperity for their fidelity to him. The jubilee release kept before their minds this question: "Is the land for our use only, or for God's larger purposes?"

Since God had redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt (Lev 25:42), none of them was again to be reduced to the status of a slave (v. 39). Poverty could, even at its worst, reduce an Israelite to a status no less than that of a hired servant, and then only until the Year of Jubilee (v.40). God's chosen child was not to be oppressed (vv. 43, 46). Indeed, as citizens of God's kingdom, masters and servants had become brothers together (cf. Neh 5:7-12; Phlm 16). In its widest application, only through loyalty to God could Israel as a nation ever hope to be free and independent of other masters.

Finally, it should be noted that the restitution of Israel's property appears to have had a typical significance, for the secure possession of the land by its individual Hebrew owners served as an acted prophecy of blessings of the coming Messianic age (Isa 61:1-3). The year of Jubilee foreshadowed the restoration of all that has been perverted by mankind's sin, the establishment of the true liberty of the children of God (Luke 4:17-21), and the deliverance of creation from the bondage of corruption to which it was subjected on account of human depravity (Rom 8:19-23).

## **Conclusion**

There is a connection between accountable stewardship and national prosperity. People need to be free to find economic opportunity while being held responsible by God in the use of their freedoms. A conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God brings a person a spirit of industry, prosperity, and charity.

For what it brought and for the future it depicted, the Jubilee in the promised land was the closest thing on earth to a realized utopia. Fortunes were restored, fraternity and unity were lived out, the bounties of the land were enjoyed before the Lord without any toil during the year of celebration. It could only get better if God himself removed the curse and dwelt in the midst of his people. And that was the portent of the year-long festival.

Jubilee means "sound of the trumpet." The Year of Jubilee commenced with the sound of the trumpet and a joyful shout. At the end of history there will be a trumpet blast, and the land that has been groaning will rejoice, and the saints will celebrate when the curse is removed and God's justice prevails at the glorious return of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> For this thought I am indebted to Ryan Messmore's essay, "A Moral Case Against Big Government" found in the Heritage Foundation's *First Principles Series*.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Sirico, President of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, in his essay, "Socialism, Free Enterprise, and the Common Good" as printed in *Imprimis* 36:5 (May 2007): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Stewardship of family estates is biblical and contrary to the humanistic ideal of communism. Leading up to the French Revolution, Rousseau wanted to tear down all property lines and fences. Babeuf claimed in his "Plebian Manifesto" that "the land belongs to no one."

<sup>4</sup> “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me” (Lev 25:23).

<sup>5</sup> Lev 25:17. Jezebel used force to confiscate the vineyard that Naboth insisted was a family property (1 Kgs 21:3).

<sup>6</sup> Hammurabi (ca. 1800 B.C.) and the kings of other Middle Eastern countries proclaimed periodic “releases” or “clean slates” to bring a return of economic balance. Otherwise absentee creditors would have amassed large real estate holdings. But whereas these proclamations were random and by royal decree, the Mosaic Jubilee was by law scheduled to follow a generational pattern. This law reinforced the idea that God himself was owner of the land and that his people were stewards upon it, rather than allowing the king to be the deciding factor above God’s law and the land’s God (Lev 25:23).

<sup>7</sup> Deut 15:7, 8, 10, 15.