

Sabbath Sermon: We are Debtors

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First Fruits Ministries, an affiliate of Corner Fringe Ministries

Torah Portion: Mishpatim (Judgements): Exodus 21-24; 2 Kings 11:17-12:17; Jeremiah 34:8-22; 33:25-26; Matthew 17:1-11; 26:20-30; 1 Timothy 6: <http://tinyurl.com/bdauvrui>.



Shabbat Shalom, brothers and sisters. When the LORD Yeshua said to us, “if you love Me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15), many of our generation might be inclined to answer as the wealthy young man in Matthew 19 and ask Him: “Which ones?” Some might argue, in an attempt to limit the commandments, ‘you know, the LORD said that all the law and the prophets hang on the two greatest commandments: to love the LORD your God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself,’ and they would be right; all the commandments are summarized by these, but they would be wrong if they argued that these are the only commandments we need to know or keep. Yeshua also said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18). Look around you today. Are all things fulfilled? Have Heaven and Earth passed away? Is the world presently a perfect Eden? Our hearts can certainly experience a measure of the Kingdom of God here in this place, the downpayment of our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God’s Holy people (Ephesians 1:14), but we are still “working out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), and the New Heaven and New Earth have yet to come. We’ve covered several times before that the word “fulfill,” pléroó (πληρώω) in Greek is often misunderstood as “finished” or even “abolished,” but such a contradiction can’t possibly be correct. Yeshua literally said He did not come to abolish the law or prophets. He said “do not think” that I came for this purpose, a crazy statement at the time considering who He was speaking with. Why would Jews think that He came to do that? They expected their Messiah to teach the commandments to the whole world, and actually, that is precisely what He did. The only reason for the LORD to exhort His people in this way was because He knew what false teachers would later teach, and He wanted to warn His Holy people to beware of them. When properly understood, the word pléroó (πληρώω) means to fill to individual capacity, or to show the fullest meaning and purpose for what was intended from the beginning. It means to make perfect. We must thus conclude that every jot and tittle of the law was fully explained by the example of our LORD Yeshua. This doesn’t mean that He fulfilled it, so we don’t have to; rather, it means He fulfilled it so He could show us how to do it, too. He was our Teacher, our Master, our LORD, and because He loves us, He taught us what we should do for our own good. He called us to be His disciples, to follow Him, to do what He did.

This is why Yeshua said in John 13:34-35, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” If we love Yeshua, our hearts greatest desire ought to be to obey the Truth in every jot and title of the written law and prophets according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, the LORD said: “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26). When we know Yeshua and fully believe in and rely on what He has done for us, we will obey His commandments in the same way that He did, we will follow His example, like baby chicks waddling around following their mother hen, not doubting her for a moment and depending on her protection. Yeshua even said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” He is willing to gather us to Him and protect us under His wing and to help us do His will, but are we willing to follow Him as He has asked? If we are willing, and if we do follow Him, Yeshua has said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.” He is the vine, we are the branches, and when we are with Him, following Him in every way, depending on Him, we can do whatever He wills for us to further the Kingdom of God. He intended for us to be a part of His Body, desiring the health of the whole by doing what is good according to His Word. If we love one another as He loved us, thus fulfilling the law and the prophets in our lives per His example, we become His disciples whose purpose is to multiply His efforts, to do greater works than He, and to make new disciples who will do the very same thing. And this is the very reason why He explained: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The law and the prophets comprises God’s love language for us. It’s His heart beat. We ought to cry out like the psalmist, “Oh how I love your law” (Psalm 119:97)! It is dead on the pages of the Bible without full faith in the LORD, but when we know the LORD, it lives in us and bears fruit for the Kingdom in everything we say and do. This is something that applies significantly to our Torah Portion reading this week, which I hope to be able to show you.

But first, this understanding that the law must be mixed with Spirit, and the Spirit with law, brings up a dichotomy in the Christian life that I’ve been contemplating recently. It takes great discernment to navigate, a discernment I personally still need help mastering, and with faith, He is helping me. I’m sure you’ve all wondered about this question to some degree yourselves as you’ve come into knowledge of the Truth, and it is this: Why do some people who confess the name of Yeshua not see the law of God in all of its glory? Why do they so strongly reject it, as if the law is sin—something the Apostle Paul said it is “certainly not” (Romans 7:7). In fact, Paul wrote that the law, which he said is “holy, just and good,” actually “explains” sin (Romans 7:7). Incidentally, it also explains righteousness, or that which is “holy, just and good” (Romans 7:12). And this very principle is why the law is not sufficient to save us, because its whole purpose is to identify the perfect Way of God, something we are incapable of achieving on our own, as well as all the ways we might fall short. Lest we say as Paul exclaimed, “O wretched

man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" and die in our sins with no hope, we too must follow Paul who followed Yeshua and look to Messiah Yeshua and His sacrifice to redeem us from our sin, a gift of grace we don't deserve, and "thank God," who has delivered us "through Messiah Yeshua our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25). And this grace, we ought not turn into lewdness (Jude 1:4) by continuing in sin, for "Messiah is NOT a minister of sin" (Galatians 2:17); rather, we ought to turn away from sin to follow Yeshua in all of His ways because of our salvation. We ought to "go and sin no more," as Yeshua commanded those He had forgiven (John 5:14, John 8:11). For He has promised that He will say, "depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (John 7:23), even if these say "LORD, LORD," and we know that "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). But to those who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Yeshua" (Revelation 12:17, 14:12), He will say, "well done good and faithful servant ... enter into the joy of your LORD" (Matthew 25:21).

And so, how is it that we ought to make disciples in this atmosphere, as we have been commanded to do, with those who reject the law and rather follow after the traditions of the Christian elders who misdirected their steps? This is that dichotomy I've been pondering. On the one hand, the LORD says, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces" (Matthew 7:6). If there is any commandment of the LORD my heart wrestles with more, I'm not aware of it. I've wondered: If He leaves the 99 sheep in pasture and goes after the one who is lost on the cliff, shouldn't I do the same? (Matthew 18:12-17). I think there is a call for us to do this, for sure, but if you look at the whole section I have up on the screen, you'll see that it is the Father's will that no one should perish, and yet He says very clearly that many will perish and He will tell "many" to depart from Him. Their departure from God is by their own choice. We pursue a brother or sister who is lost for sure, we preach God's Word in season and out of season, we speak before the authorities and the magistrates the Word that the Holy Spirit puts on our lips, we use discernment to follow the procedure for going after a brother caught up in sin in Spirit and Truth, not treating it as a formula, but as a guide. "The letter kills, the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). But then, we also have to leave the rest up to God, because we are not God and without Messiah Yeshua we can do nothing (John 15:5). If the LORD loves us enough to give us free will to love Him or not—to follow Him or not—then He certainly expects us to love others enough to let them go if they don't want to hear the Word of the LORD. I find myself struggling to discern when it is too soon to walk away with the pearls of God treasured up in my heart and when the time has come to pack up and leave. But as I struggle with this question week-by-week, I ought not struggle, and neither should any of you. The LORD has told us what is good (Micah 6:8), He has admonished us to do it and to teach it to others, and He has said that we will be rejected by many who simply don't want to hear it. He said they're not rejecting us, but they're rejecting Him (Luke 10:16). He said we might even suffer persecution for it (Matthew 10:22), and elsewhere He said if we're not suffering persecution we're not doing it right (Hebrews 12:7-8). Of course, that comes with the caveat that the persecution is only a sign of our obedience if it is on account of righteousness's sake (Matthew

5:10), and so that leads us back to the beginning of our message. If we love Him, we must keep His commandments.

And so, as I work on mastering the discernment to know when to walk away from the unteachable and when to persevere—when to cast the pearls of wisdom that come only from God’s Holy Word toward those who might treasure them—I can’t help but learn from the Word of God itself. We are “being saved” (1 Corinthians 1:18) as we live this life, and though the LORD exhorts us to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), we can never say in this life that we are without fault or that we have fully arrived at that perfection. Paul writes in Philippians 3:12-14: “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Messiah Yeshua has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua.” And so it is OK, I believe, to continue to work on these things as we study the Word of God day and night, just like the LORD commanded us, so that it can be firmly imprinted on our hearts and guide us in all righteousness. The important thing is that our heart desires to serve Him, to seek Him and to obey Him because we love Him, and to show everyone else why we have this love in our hearts for the One who both created us and redeemed us. Peter wrote, “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:15-17). I think the only way that it’s possible to do this is to listen to what the LORD said to His servant Joshua, who brought Israel into the promised land. The LORD said: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

And so, as I was meditating on this question—namely, how to reach those who perhaps don’t want to be reached—the LORD showed me a passage that I want to share with you next, and I think this is the best answer to the question that I have for you today. In Isaiah 55:6-11, we read: “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” The LORD’s

ways are above our ways, His thoughts above our thoughts. Some things in the Word we will not understand right away, but our duty is to read His Word; to seek a relationship with the LORD by reading His love letter for us both day and night. We ought to cherish the Word, every word of it. Didn't Jacob wrestle with the LORD in the wilderness and exclaim that He would not let Him go without a blessing? Shouldn't we do the same? The LORD blessed Jacob and called him Israel, and He sent him away with a limp. Like Jacob, we will never be the same after we receive the blessing of the LORD's grace on our lives, and we ought to never let Him go until we receive it, also. We ought to seek the LORD while He may be found, to call upon Him while He is near. We ought to read His Word day and night in relationship with the Holy Spirit of God and seek the LORD with all our heart, not letting Him go until we receive a blessing, so His Word will enter our heart and will not return to the LORD void. We should expect the Word to change us. That is its purpose. And when it changes us, there ought to be no hesitation in our hearts to share it with everyone. How could we not love our neighbor—even our enemy—and share this Word that blesses us with everyone we encounter. Yeshua said in John 12:50: "And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak." The Word of God is life to us, and it is life to everyone who hears it and accepts it and never lets it go. This is why the LORD says, "let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him." It's up to the wicked man to make the decision to do this. All we can do is love him or her by teaching the Word of God. It's time to move on when the person will simply not forsake his or her own way or he or she walks away in sin. But our prayers ought to persist, as must our ministry to preach the commandments of God, for the Word, which lives in Spirit and in Truth, will never return to Him void.

The hardest place for me, and I suspect some of you, is to know the LORD and love Him as fiercely as I do, and want to share that love with everyone, but to have it flatly rejected. It is rejected primarily because it is not understood, and it is not understood because of disobedience and doubt. The LORD says, "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). That means we have to wrestle with the Word as Jacob did until He blesses us. If someone reads the Word and gives up because he or she has applied modern sensibilities to something that has a completely different intent when understood according to the love of God, then that person has lost a treasure greater than the most precious pearl on the whole Earth. We're going to look at one of the more significant examples of this today. Someone might say that the LORD gives us the desire to seek Him, and I think this is true, but we play a role in this, also. John said quite simply "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him" (1 John 3:1). Paul said "a veil lies" on the heart of those who do not know Messiah Yeshua when they read the Scripture, but the veil is taken away when one turns to the LORD (2 Corinthians 3:15-16). Thus we have to show others the hope we have in Messiah Yeshua, and when they see the peace and joy we have in knowing Him, perhaps they too will seek after Him in His Word.

But the law serves as a mirror for us, James wrote, when we understand it with faith. In other words, it helps us to see the way we are in reality in comparison with the way God desires us to be, and any disparity ought to convict us to change so we can be more like the image God has designed us to become. He writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the LORD; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:5-7). Without this faith, we see the Word as the world sees it, and it won't make sense to us. James writes that the man without faith is a natural man who looks in a mirror and doesn't see what needs to be changed. He forgets his image when walking away from it. The Word of God is meaningless for a person without faith, maybe even counter-productive. But when we have faith and also become "doers of the Word, and not hearers only," because we have sought the Word with all of our hearts with faith in Yeshua, this is when we can "look into the perfect law of liberty and continue in it" and then be "blessed in [everything we] do" (James 1:22-25). The Word of God will bear fruit when we seek it with all of our hearts, when we ask God for wisdom and then seek Him in His Word, without letting go. We have to wrestle with the Word until we receive the blessing, and then and only then, we can walk away from the Word in freedom and be changed forever, so long as we never look back.

Persecution comes from following the Word in this way because the enemy does not want us to continue to walk with the blessing of God. The enemy is doing everything he can to get us to look back, to get us to consider that our old life of ignorance is superior to our new life in freedom. Paul exhorts Timothy how to overcome this pitfall in 2 Timothy 3:12-17, where we read: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Scriptures Timothy knew from his childhood were none other than the law and the prophets, and when we recognize this, we can understand that Paul is giving the same message that we've been focused on all along. Evil men and imposters are going to try to twist the Word to their own advantage, and their fruit will be rotten; they will deceive and they will be deceived. While those who are following after Messiah Yeshua will accept correction from the Word of God, we understand that the Word is meant to change us into men and women who resemble Yeshua, to humble men who do the good works the LORD has shown us from the beginning. — This introduction to our Torah Portion reading this week may feel like a review of what I speak about often, but as my brother Pastor Stephen Opoku mentioned last Shabbat

in His sermon at Corner Fringe Ministries, “repetition is the mother of all learning.” But not only that, I want to tackle a few concepts in the Word that are specifically targeted by the enemy to lead people astray. We’re going to take a scenic route, as Pastor Daniel likes to say, before arriving at the spiritual Truth that I believe the LORD is teaching us. I’m going here specifically because I believe the LORD wants to equip us to stand firmly for every letter of His Word, and some of this material is difficult. When the LORD said “not one jot or one tittle” of the law shall pass away until Heaven and Earth pass away, the “jot” comes from the Greek word “iōta” (ἰώτα), the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet which can be compared to the Hebrew “yod,” and “tittle” comes from the Greek “keraia” (κεραία), which means “little horn,” referring to the stroke above an abbreviated word, such as the mark in the word “don’t.” The English word “tittle” itself comes from the Latin word “titulus,” which means the same thing, and in the Hebrew it refers to the smallest mark made in the written word. We might consider the apex dot above the letter “shin” (שׁ) or “sin” (שׁ), which governs the proper pronunciation of the letter. Not to get too granular—pun intended—but the point here is that we ought to consider the Word of God in its fullness and in its most insignificant judgment, because even there is a lesson that God has for us as we pursue a relationship with Him and the life He offers to us.

The name of our Torah Portion is “mishpatim” (מִשְׁפָּטִים), which means judgments. Another translation might be “ordinances,” and it refers to the finer points of the law of God that can be derived from the Ten Commandments, or Aseret Ha’Devarim, meaning “the ten words,” and other commandments or mitzvah (מִצְוָה). Now, I say to you again, evil men and impostors have focused on some of the ordinances of God in this week’s reading and many have used them to deceive others, while being deceived themselves, but God has intended these judgments to be a blessing on His people, and they are indeed a blessing. You will see that as we reach the spiritual interpretation at the end, but even the material interpretations have value for us. I’ve avoided this discussion in years past, because the LORD had not yet revealed how to explain His Truth in this section, but I believe He has shown me a few layers of meaning here that I want to share with you in the hope that it brings glory to His name. It’s a dangerous discussion, for if you don’t listen carefully, it will be easy to misunderstand what I’m saying and maybe even use my words against me. I honestly expect someone to do just that, but it’s my duty to teach the Word of God, and so that’s what I’m going to do, particularly as it pertains to the subject of slavery. Let’s start off the discussion by reading the passage I want to spent most of the rest of our time on today in Exodus 21, verses one through six: “Now these are the judgments (mishpatim (מִשְׁפָּטִים)) that you shall set before them: If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.” First of all, the word “servant”

in this passage is “eved” (עֶבֶד) in Hebrew, meaning “bondservant” or “slave”—someone who is in bondage to a master. So the evil men and imposters Paul mentioned in His admonition to Timothy might aim their fiery darts right here and ask, “So God condones slavery?” It would be an understatement to say that the very question misses the point, but the answer is “no,” I don’t believe God condones slavery at all. I believe God recognizes the human condition of slavery and attempts to steer His people toward His perfect way that would ultimately be realized in Messiah Yeshua, who has freed all of the nations from their bondage to sin and death, the curse brought upon by the evil one. In the meantime, the LORD instructs His people to treat strangers and foreigners with love and justice, and any servants with compassion, regardless of why they have come into servanthood. He says in Exodus 23:9: “you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Let’s back up and look at the Ten Commandments for a moment in Exodus 20 so I can explain one possible surface-level meaning for what we’ve just read about slavery. We see that “God spoke all these words, and among them was the commandment “lo teegnov” (לֹא תִגְנוֹב), meaning “you shall not steal” (Exodus 20:1,15). When we understand that “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4), which means, violating the commandments and judgments of God, we ought to consider for a moment the Lord’s Word to Moses in Exodus 32:33: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.” He’s referring to the Book of Life here. Just to confirm this, consider what the LORD said through the prophet in Ezekiel 18:4, where we read: “Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die.” Solomon agreed in Proverbs 11:19 where he wrote: “As righteousness leads to life, so he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death.” Is God referring to death in this physical life or the second death of the soul here? Both, I believe, especially if the person who has committed the sin continues in it and multiplies sin upon sin, perhaps adding false witness to his theft, or even murder, and this is what it means to “practice lawlessness.” That being said, the death penalty may seem a little harsh for someone who takes a cookie from the cookie jar without the owner’s permission, but is it really? We serve a Holy and perfect God. Can we really stand before His pure righteousness if there is any impurity in us at all?

In Deuteronomy 30:11-16, the LORD reasoned with His people, saying “For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess.” Keeping the commandments, the statutes and the judgments, the mishpatim of God, are life and good, and

violating them are death and evil. It's really that simple. If we willfully violate them, according to perfect justice in the Spirit, there is nothing to expect but death. Knowing this, we ought to understand the LORD's mercy is far greater than we can fathom. Considering how often we fall short of perfection, God's mercy is frankly beyond understanding. He truly is "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty..." (Exodus 34:5-7).

Let me show you a few examples of this from this week's reading, then. In Exodus 22:1, we read "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep." In Exodus 22:4, we read: "If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double." In Exodus 22:7-9, we read: "If a man delivers to his neighbor money or articles to keep, and it is stolen out of the man's house, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. If the thief is not found, then the master of the house shall be brought to the judges to see whether he has put his hand into his neighbor's goods. For any kind of trespass, whether it concerns an ox, a donkey, a sheep, or clothing, or for any kind of lost thing which another claims to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whomever the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor." There is so much nuance in between these verses and around them, and I'd love to have the time to discuss it all, but I want to focus in on a question that follows logically from what we've just read. Why would someone steal an ox, donkey, sheep, clothing, money or any other goods? Is it not because they lack whatever they are stealing and because of covetousness in their hearts they have acted out in sin to claim it for themselves? What other reason is there for theft other than for the thief to claim something that they do not have as their own? If this is true, and I believe that it is, then how is the thief going to repay double, let alone four or five times? Logic explains that the thief who is caught and now owes restitution to his neighbor for the sin he has committed would have no other recourse than to work off his debt, and this is one of the primary origins of slavery in Scripture on a contextual basis.

We also know from Proverbs 22:7, "The rich rules over the poor, And the borrower is servant to the lender." To cover all bases, it's certainly possible that debt can lead to servanthood also. We read in Exodus 22:14: "And if a man borrows anything from his neighbor, and it becomes injured or dies, the owner of it not being with it, he shall surely make it good." If he can't make it good, servanthood is likely to result. We see an example of this in 2 Kings 4, where "A certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, 'Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves.'" This story, due to the grace and mercy of God, worked out for the widow, because the widow's husband feared the LORD. Elisha miraculously multiplied the oil in her home so she could pay off her husband's debt and reestablish herself—God cares for widows and orphans who love and trust Him. I don't want to go too far into that story, for it takes us too far away from today's message. The point is that

debt is another way to find oneself in servitude, and for those of us who have suffered with debt in our lives, all I can say is that the struggle is real. Thank God for His mercy.

But let's get back to thievery, for there are some verses that bring us back to the initial point I made in this section; namely, that the punishment for sin is death. Consider Exodus 22:2-3, where we read: "If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft." There's a lot here, but the first point is simple: If a property owner catches a thief in the act, he has the right to kill the thief. So long as he reports what happened right away, he will have no guilt for doing so, because the punishment for sin is death. He cannot delay in reporting the incident; however, or an assumption of guilt will be levied against him. Why would he not report such an incident right away? It's suspicious, isn't it? These judgments of God are perfect, they're wise, and they're just. But notice what happens next. If the thief is not slain in the incident, he will have to make full restitution, and if he can't make restitution, he will be sold into slavery for his theft. Again, there is a lot of complexity we could discuss here, but what I want to focus on is the justice and mercy of God. While the thief deserves death, the LORD provides Him with mercy and also freedom. As we read earlier, if a man is sold into slavery, "he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing" (Exodus 21:2).

The mercy doesn't end here, though. Deuteronomy 15 provides a little more detail about the LORD's heart for grace. Here in verses 12-15, we read: "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today." What a remarkable thing. While the slave could just be a debtor, admittedly, the Scripture makes no distinction. The slave also could be a thief, sold into slavery for his theft. Not only must the master release the slave in freedom after seven years, but he also has to provision the slave liberally with goods. Is this not grace! In Deuteronomy 15, the LORD explained that the mercy stems from the idea that all of Israel served as slaves in Egypt, and the LORD redeemed the whole nation, even though they didn't deserve it. It is for that reason that the LORD asks His people to offer grace to their neighbors, even if they don't deserve it. And here's where I want to highlight the first spiritual layer of meaning that we should glean from this section in Exodus. Consider what Yeshua says in Matthew 6:14-15, where we read: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Is this not what the LORD is commanding in Exodus?

I don't want to get too far off track here, but related to this point, the LORD also said in Matthew 5:44-45, "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." In Exodus 23:4-5, He said, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it." The Word of the LORD is eternal and the message is one. Whether someone steals from you or whether they are your enemy for another reason, you shall treat the enemy the way you want to be treated. The LORD calls for us to go out of our way to help—even those who have wronged us—because when we do this it might bring the person to repentance, and that is the LORD's desire for all men. Relatedly, the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:19-20, quoting Proverbs 25:22, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'" To heap burning coals on one's head is not a literal phrase, but rather refers to the conviction a person will feel if his enemy is doing good things for him. It is this type of experience that causes the hard hearted to consider the grace of God. It is such love and kindness that brings someone who has refused to see the goodness of God to reconsider their position. If they don't do it, then the wrath of God is waiting. Remember: the LORD will not clear the guilty—the ones who refuse to repent.

So that being said, let's backtrack and talk about the evil men and imposters who deceive while being deceived, for these could be construed as enemies of ours whom the LORD desires to bring to repentance. These could even be the type of men who owned slaves in early America and treated them with harshness well beyond any example in Scripture we can point to, or some of the horrendous things we hear about in the news today. So-called "missionaries" during the 1800s brought slaves what's commonly known as "The Slave Bible" to read in the British West Indies, and this so-called Bible contained only 232 chapters of the Bible's 1189 chapters, excluding passages that expressed the freedom Christians share as brothers in Messiah Yeshua such as Galatians 3:28 or the Book of Philemon, while emphasizing passages that stressed obedience to masters such as Ephesians 6:5. What happened to "every jot and tittle"? I don't need to detail the harshness that slaves endured during this time period. It was abhorrent. It was egregious. And such treatment was directly opposed to the Word of God from our reading this week. Whenever you see people removing sections of the Word of God to suit their own purposes, we know definitively that they are false teachers and they need to be called out on it, hopefully to bring them to repentance. That being said, the solution to their sin is the whole counsel of God, which rebukes false teaching with the Truth of Scripture. Even within our reading in Exodus, we can see the heartbeat of God is grace toward slaves, regardless of whatever reason they have fallen into their servitude. We read in Exodus 21:20: "if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished." While a master is not punished if his slave survives a few days, there is a caveat to this in Exodus 21:26-27, where we read: "If a

man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.” The point in these verses is not that slave masters should be beating their slaves so that they die, or lose an eye or tooth; rather, the point here is that the slaves have value as human beings and ought to be treated with love and respect, and if they are not treated in this way, their masters ought to be held accountable. It’s important to point out the LORD’s heartbeat, for we have a God who loves His people, whether they are free or slaves. His law is not meant to save us, but rather it is meant to prevent us from going down the path toward death, to teach us what is good and evil. And the Spirit of the law is life to us.

In the modern day, slavery is prohibited by the law, and I believe this is good and a result of God’s will being executed through His church. The governing authorities rest upon the shoulders of Yeshua, and with the influence of His Gospel over extended periods of time, the whole of Scripture came to light and showed God’s heart that desired freedom for all the people of the Earth. Thus, slavery is now rightfully illegal, and I personally wish that it didn’t take place at all. As a quick aside, in our modern context, it might be useful for us to consider the slavery discussed in Scripture as more of a type of employee-employer relationship, and perhaps the Torah can apply in these relationships. I think Scripture offers some good principles that are helpful in this way, and that may be something to explore another time, but I also think we do God’s Word a disservice if we don’t recognize the history of humankind and the cruelty that people have exhibited toward one another, because if we try to wash over the history of slavery we could miss the move of God to free His people from bondage, despite man’s efforts to enslave one another. God freed His people from bondage in Egypt, and He freed them again from bondage in Babylon. To give us a hint of the spiritual meaning I’m going to arrive at last, the LORD also freed us from the bondage of sin and death. But going back to the surface-level, God explained to His people that they were not to mistreat the nations that lived among them, because of the history Israel itself experienced as the people who were being mistreated. Our reading in Jeremiah 34 explains a time period when Judah was not obeying the LORD’s simple law regarding slavery; namely, to set the captives free after seven years regardless of the reason for their captivity. I think the LORD’s reaction to Judah’s disobedience speaks volumes for how seriously the LORD values freedom from slavery, but also how seriously He desires His people to follow His Word. Here’s what we read in Jeremiah 34:8-11: “This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them: that every man should set free his male and female slave—a Hebrew man or woman—that no one should keep a Jewish brother in bondage. Now when all the princes and all the people, who had entered into the covenant, heard that everyone should set free his male and female slaves, that no one should keep them in bondage anymore, they obeyed and let them go. But afterward they changed their minds and made the male and female slaves return, whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection as male and female slaves.” (Jeremiah 34:8-11)

Often we men and women like to follow the dictates of our own hearts, but as we read in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." We backslide in sin when we disregard the Word of the LORD.

The LORD did not take kindly to this backsliding, pointing out Judah's hypocrisy that profaned the name of the LORD in the interim verses. From there, he pronounced total judgement upon Judah, as we read in verses 17-22 "Therefore thus says the Lord: 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and every one to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim liberty to you,' says the Lord—to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine! And I will deliver you to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth. And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, ...—I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth." The reference to bodies lying as meat for the birds of heaven and beasts of the earth reminds me of the Last Battle at the end of the age, when all who follow after the Beast will be slain by Yeshua and His army and eaten by the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, according to Revelation 19:17. As the section in Jeremiah continues, the Lord also announces the city of Jerusalem would be burned with fire and the remaining people would be taken into captivity, another prophetic template that will repeat at the end of the age. I want to tie things together before we move toward the last few points in today's message. Those who say LORD, LORD, but disobey the commandments of God are going to be destroyed by the LORD's judgment. The people of Judah here were God's Holy people, set apart for Him, but because they failed to release their servants from slavery as the LORD commanded, even though they did at first, but then reneged, God would pour out His judgment upon them. This judgment is coming on any people who practice lawlessness, while the LORD will offer grace to those who serve Him, whether they are slave or free, especially when they serve Him after repenting from sin.

Now, let's get into the spiritual reality of our reading. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua." By writing this, Paul doesn't mean that people don't have these distinctions in the physical world, but He is saying that within the Kingdom of God, these distinctions are irrelevant because God has called all of us to serve Him and serve one another, and this perhaps is one of the greatest conditions of the New Covenant that can be seen prophesied right within our reading in Exodus. Let's look again at the verse we started this discussion with; namely, Exodus 21:5-6, where we read: "But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever." This verse may seem disturbing on the surface, but consider its spiritual meaning. Consider that we who are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, who are now one in Messiah Yeshua, those of us

whom He has freed from the bondage to sin and death, we are now yoked to Him, the one who freed us. We have declared that we love our Master and do not want to be apart from Him; in fact, we want to be bound to Him forever. We desire to cling to Him, and not let Him go until He blesses us. We have called upon His name in faith and believed, and now we want to follow Him wherever He goes. To do this, we must pierce our ear through with an awl against the doorpost; in other words, we must hear and obey the LORD who freed us by His grace offered on the cross. If we love Him, we ought to keep His commandments. Because we love Him, it will be our hearts greatest desire to serve Him forever.

I want to leave you with two passages that explain this in context with our message today. In Luke 4:18-19, one of the first things Yeshua did in His ministry was to announce freedom for the captives from sin and death. When He rose up to speak in His hometown synagogue, He read from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) He then explained to the crowd that this prophecy was being fulfilled in their presence. Consider that the spiritual hosts of wickedness, the principalities of darkness, these are the forces that held the people of God in bondage to sin before the advent of Messiah Yeshua. Before the freedom that Yeshua offered us on the cross, we had no hope for salvation on our own. The law could not free us, because our complete obedience was impossible, and the enemy took advantage of this by condemning us before God's judgment seat in Heaven. But Messiah freed us from the curse of death, which was the consequence for our disobedience to the law, by paying the price of our sin with His blood on the cross. And on account of this, Paul writes, "we are debtors" in Romans 8:12. There is a debt we can never repay that Yeshua has paid for us, and when we pledge ourselves to Him by picking up our cross and following Him, by allowing Him to pierce our ear through with an awl against the doorpost between Heaven and Earth, He adopts us as sons in His house where we can live forever. I hope you can see here that it is the grace offered by Yeshua, which frees us from slavery to sin, which ought to compel us to serve Him forever.

There is a verse in Romans that really solidifies today's message and expands on this last point, and I think it's critical we land here. We are freed from the curse of death for sin under the law and we are saved by grace, not by works, so that none of us can boast, and we have the power of God leading us to keep God's commandments. But how important is it that we hear and obey God's Word now that we have been saved? We read in Romans 6:15-23: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you

presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness....” We are slaves to righteousness, brothers and sisters, and while it may seem dystopian to those who are in spiritual blindness, it is a blessing indeed that in our slavery to God we are free indeed.

Paul continues: “... For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.” To be free in regard to righteousness is to be a slave to sin, which is a bondage that leads to death, because the punishment for sin is death. Whether a thief or a debtor, a murderer or an abuser of other people the LORD loves and cares for, there is no escaping the judgment of God for sin, no matter how big or small our sin happens to be. The only solution is freedom in Messiah Yeshua, who paid the penalty for sin so that we who trust in Him will not die but live forever in freedom with Him. But we are debtors, slaves to God, and because of His great gift for us, we ought to show our love for Him by keeping His commandments, every jot and tittle down to the most basic judgment. We read in Exodus 23:25-26: “So you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.” When our days are complete, will we sleep waiting for Him to raise us up to be with Him forever? Will we enter into the rest and joy of His Kingdom, eternally getting to know the One who is perfectly good? Only if we serve Him all the days of our lives, and we do this by keeping His commandments according to the Spirit in all faithfulness. Shabbat shalom.