

Doing Things God's Way

It was inevitable, I suppose. Christianity had begun as a Jewish sect. Its roots were deep in the Jewish scriptures, and it's *raison d'être* was a Jewish Messiah who had fulfilled a plethora of Jewish prophecies. So when *gentiles* began seeing and accepting the life-saving truth of Yahshua's mission, the question naturally arose: can gentiles be Christians without becoming Jews first? What, precisely, was the correlation between the Law of Moses and the saving grace of Yahshua?

The way the early *Ekklesia* dealt with the problem is recorded in Acts 15. **"While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the Christians: 'Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'"** The Torah had never tied circumcision—or any other law—to the atonement for sin. Only the shedding of blood could achieve that. Paul, being an expert in the Law of Moses, knew that, so he called them on their error. **"Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length. Finally, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted...."** *Phoenicia and Samaria? Antioch?* These were gentile and mixed-blood territories. Laid between the lines here is a remarkable transformation of spirit. Not that long before, devout Jews like Paul and Barnabas might have avoided any and all contact with gentiles out of sheer inbred national arrogance. But now, a believer was a believer—and a brother—wherever you found him, and whoever you found him to be.

The center of the *Ekklesia* was still in Jerusalem, however, so that's where they went to iron out the issue. **"When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry."** Interesting. Yahshua had told the Apostles to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading outward. But hardly anybody had left their comfort zone yet. It wasn't until things got *uncomfortable* that the Christians in Jerusalem would follow Yahshua's instructions. **"But then some of the men who had been Pharisees before their conversion stood up and declared that all Gentile converts must be circumcised and be required to follow the law of Moses...."** The very reason Paul had come back to Jerusalem was that "men from Judea" had come up to Antioch trying to bind the Church in Jewish religious traditions. Here we learn

who had probably sent them—converted Pharisees who, unlike Paul, didn't understand that the Law of Moses had been given for our edification, not our salvation—it was a window into the heart of God, not a doorway into His kingdom.

“So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: ‘Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe.’ We saw how this happened in our previous chapter. **“God, who knows people’s hearts, confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave him to us [Jews]. He made no distinction between us and them, for he also cleansed their hearts through faith. Why are you now questioning God’s way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus....”** The phrase “special favor” here is the Greek word *charis*, meaning “grace, particularly that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, or acceptance, for a kindness granted or desired, a benefit, thanks, or gratitude. It’s a favor done without expectation of return, the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to man, finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver; unearned and unmerited favor. *Charis* stands in direct antithesis to *erga*, works, the two being mutually exclusive.” (Zodhaites) Peter’s audience thus understood that God’s grace and our works could not *both* be the path to salvation, so **“there was no further discussion, and everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles....”**

James, ever the practical one, formulated the appropriate course of action: **“When they had finished, James stood and said, ‘Brothers, listen to me. Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. And this conversion of Gentiles agrees with what the prophets predicted. For instance, it is written: “Afterward I will return, and I will restore the fallen kingdom of David. From the ruins I will rebuild it, and I will restore it, so that the rest of humanity might find Yahweh, including the Gentiles—all those I have called to be mine. This is what Yahweh says, he who made these things known long ago....”** His recommended advice to the gentiles would apparently absolve them from following the Torah, at least in the same way that Jewish believers did. Unfortunately, this differentiation has been the source of confusion and misunderstanding ever since.

The idea was to make it clear that gentiles did not have to become *Jews* before they could be saved. Yahweh had demonstrated the point Himself by filling the fledgling gentile believers with His Holy Spirit before they’d even *thought* about keeping the Law of Moses. **“And so my judgment is that we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God...”** He did, however, add a few caveats: **“except that we**

should write to them and tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals. For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.” (Acts 15:1-21 NLT) Everything James added back in (and it wasn’t much) was directly related to the health of the congregation, whether physical or spiritual—things from the “Owner’s Manual” side of the Torah. None of these things were among the *signs* with which Israel was supposed to communicate Yahweh’s plan of redemption to the nations—things like circumcision, observing the Sabbath year, or keeping the holy appointments (the seven *miqrym*). Israel’s role remained Israel’s.

This, unfortunately, is where the whole thing tends to go sideways. The things that *weren’t* said have been tortured, twisted, tweaked and transmogrified over the intervening years until the simple intentions of God have been all but lost. Yahweh was not throwing His Law out the window, as is the usual Christian take on this. God’s word may get misunderstood, mistranslated, and misapplied, but it is never abrogated (not by God, anyway). Even the smallest detail will remain true until it is all brought to fruition (see Matthew 5:18).

Our confusion isn’t accidental, of course. Satan has done what he could to shape and bend doctrines within the Church. But if we’d all pay closer attention to what Yahweh actually told us, there would be far less misunderstanding and far less error. At the time of Constantine (early in the fourth century) a concerted—and satanic—effort was made to remove or downplay all things Jewish from the practice of Christianity. Using this passage and others as “proof texts,” the Church systematically attacked the Torah, alternately abusing and neglecting it, burying some of its rich truths and symbols so deep they’re only just now coming back to light. It became an article of faith that *the Law of Moses had been “nailed to the cross,” and therefore had no value; gentile Christians could ignore all this “Jewish” stuff, because it was outdated, obsolete, and of no further use.* Nothing, my friend, could be farther from the truth.

Inadvertently contributing to our confusion is Paul’s observation that **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”** (Galatians 3:27-29)

This seems at first glance to be saying that there is no difference between Jews and gentiles. And there isn’t, as far as our *salvation* is concerned: we are all “children of God through faith in Yahshua the Messiah.” However, this truth speaks of position, not function. Only a fool would deny that there are biological differences between men and women, or societal differences between slaves and free men. In the same way, Yahweh maintains a spiritual distinction between Jew

and gentile believers in the way they are to *function* in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Jews delivered the Messiah to a lost world; the gentiles (some of us) gratefully accepted the gift God had sent. The Jews were to be the bearers of Yahweh's signs; gentiles were the intended audience, the readers of those signs. The Jews were to be a holy people, "set apart" from the nations by Yahweh; gentile believers were "called out" of the world for His purposes. These subtle differences—which have nothing to do with the means or reality of our salvation—were designed by Yahweh to form a complete circle, a symbiotic system in which all of the parts work together toward the goal of mankind's perception of His plan for our reconciliation.

In short, Jews have a different job to do than gentiles. If I may wax metaphorical for a moment, in the body of believers, Christ is the head, the Brain. So perhaps we could compare the Jews to the heart, and gentiles to the lungs in this body. The heart and lungs don't do the same things; they have separate, though related, functions, but both are necessary if the body is to survive. They both have to perform their respective functions—functions that are directed by the Brain. Now, if the heart were to conclude that because it's sooooo important, every part of the body should have to pump blood like it did, the body would be in trouble. Sure, pumping the life-blood throughout the body is an essential task, but no more so than absorbing the breath of life—the Spirit—for the body's use. Worse, if the heart decided to start "reinterpreting" the signals coming from the Brain, the body would find itself in quite a fix. *Lub-dub lub-dub is boring—I think lub dubity shamalama ding dong doink would sound better.* Or if the lungs made an executive decision: *exhaling is not as virtuous as inhaling, so we're not going to do that any more. I don't care what the Brain said to do—we're in charge of breathing down here.* As silly as it sounds, that's all too often what we see in practice in the Body of Christ.

What was supposed to happen was a distinction of function between Jewish and gentile believers, though we are all part of the same body. Although the Church at this time was composed of both Jewish and gentile believers, it is never even suggested that the Jewish contingent drop their day-to-day observance of the Torah. But Peter's point had been taken: **"burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear"** was tantamount to **"questioning God's way."** Let's pick up the narrative in Acts 15: **"Then the apostles and elders and the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision.... This is the letter they took along with them: 'This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but they had no such instructions from us.... For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols,**

from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:22-29 NLT)

In the end, only three words of admonition were handed down. First, “not eating food that had been sacrificed to idols.” This was not a dietary precept, but a spiritual one. Paul later pointed out that although there was nothing intrinsically evil or even different about such food, eating it could easily cause a brother of tender conscience to stumble by emboldening him to do something contrary to what his inner compass was telling him. There are obvious parallels for us today: don’t hang out in bars, even if you’re only drinking soda pop; don’t condone your boss’s dishonest business practices, even if it endangers your job; don’t do anything that might encourage a “weaker” brother to do something he would ordinarily consider sin—even if it’s never explicitly forbidden in the Bible.

Second, “not consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals” seems to be an echo of the most fundamental of the Mosaic dietary laws—a precept that had a history going all the way back to Noah’s day. As we saw in our previous chapter, the life is in the blood; therefore, it’s sacred. Not to mention toxic. I said “seems to be” because eating blood *was* associated with pagan religious practice. It’s possible that the elders at Jerusalem were concerned about this as much as they were the health issues.

Third (and last), they warned against “sexual immorality.” This too was intimately associated with paganism, but you don’t have to be a pagan to fall into sexual sin. As Paul later wrote: **“Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”** (I Corinthians 6:18-20) Though the Torah had specifically forbidden a plethora of extra-marital sexual practices (see Chapter 3 of this book), the Antioch letter doesn’t address any particular Mosaic instruction. But nobody who had the Spirit of God within them had the slightest doubt what was meant.

And what was the reaction to this letter among the gentile Christians at Antioch? **“There was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.”** (Acts 15:31 NLT) What did they find so encouraging? Why did they rejoice? Because, as Peter had candidly admitted, the Torah had proven impossible for the Jews to keep. So the gentile believers would not be asked to bear this burden; they wouldn’t be required to become Jews—with all of the attendant privileges and responsibilities that entailed—in order to become Christians. I find it fascinating, however, that precisely the same reaction—rejoicing, happiness, delight—is seen of those who love and study the *Torah*: **“Blessed [i.e., happy] is the man [whose]... delight is in the law of Yahweh, and in His law**

[Torah] he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:1-2) Apparently, if you're a child of God, you're blessed if you do *and* blessed if you don't—try to keep the letter of the Torah, that is. The only way this could be true, of course, is if the Law was never meant to be a job by which we could earn our own salvation, but rather was a path upon which we could walk hand in hand with our Heavenly Father as He taught us about His goodness, His love, and His design for our well-being.

This all begs the question: if you're a gentile, what's the Law for? According to Yahshua, the whole Law was summarized in two commandments: love Yahweh, and love your fellow man. He said that if we loved Him, we would show it by keeping His commandments, and He defined *that* as believing in the one sent by Yahweh, i.e., Himself. (John 6:29). Acts 15 makes it clear that "keeping His commandments" is not synonymous with observing the letter of the Torah—for gentile believers, anyway. For the gentile, following the *spirit* of the Torah is what it's all about. Sadly, most Jews don't realize that the Torah points directly and unequivocally toward their Messiah. And most Christians don't realize that the Torah reveals the heart of God, a heart that was demonstrated in the life of Yahshua. Both sides are prone to error because they don't perceive the underlying meaning of the Law: it's not an arbitrary list of rules; it's not a method for us to achieve our own reconciliation with our Creator; and it's certainly not supposed to be the basis of a religion designed to make us feel better about our place in the world. In tech-speak, the Torah is a "T-1 line" into the heart and mind of Almighty God. We twist it to our destruction, and we ignore it to our shame.

With that in mind, let us return to the Torah. Jewish believers should observe these precepts because they are a people set apart for the glory of Yahweh. Gentile believers should take them just as seriously because the Spirit of God dwelling within them testifies that this is what Yahshua wants us to do. But Jew or gentile, Christians are bound not by duty, but by love.

BUSINESS PRACTICES

- (170) *Do no wrong in buying or selling.* **"If you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor's hand, you shall not oppress one another."** (Leviticus 25:14) Because the sentiment is covered by a boatload of other Mosaic precepts (*don't steal or covet; keep honest scales, don't move boundary markers, etc.*) the rabbis aren't exactly *wrong* with their reinterpretation of this mitzvot. But the context of the supporting verse reveals a meaning deeper

than merely being honest in one's business dealings. It is within the Law of Jubilee (something we'll look at more thoroughly later in this chapter). If we look at the surrounding verses, Yahweh's real agenda becomes clear: **"In this Year of Jubilee, each of you shall return to his possession. And if you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor's hand, you shall not oppress one another. According to the number of years after the Jubilee you shall buy from your neighbor, and according to the number of years of crops he shall sell to you. According to the multitude of years you shall increase its price, and according to the fewer number of years you shall diminish its price; for he sells to you according to the number of the years of the crops. Therefore you shall not oppress one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am Yahweh your God. So you shall observe My statutes and keep My judgments, and perform them; and you will dwell in the land in safety. Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell there in safety."** (Leviticus 25:13-18) Jubilee came once every fifty years (i.e., once in a lifetime, for all practical purposes). Every Israelite who had "sold" his land during the preceding half century (see #226) would get it back at Jubilee. In practice, this meant that the land was worth less and less as the year of Jubilee approached, for its lease value was related to how many crops one could raise on it. The admonition, then, is for both buyer and seller to refrain from taking opportunistic advantage of the situation—the approaching Jubilee. Buyers were to respond in love and fairness to a brother in need, and sellers were not to capitalize on their brothers' kindness or generosity.

The Jubilee is a metaphor for the coming eternal state, a time when believers' debts (read: sins) will be forgiven in practice as they now are in promise. Because of its symbolic nature, Jubilee was intended to be rehearsed by Israelites living within the Land, not by gentile believers living somewhere else. For gentiles, its message is: Yahshua has provided for our redemption, though our debt was impossibly large; therefore we are to also to forgive those who "owe" us. Freely we have received; freely we should give. Don't oppress your fellow man.

- (171) *Do not make a loan to an Israelite on interest. "If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit. I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God."* (Leviticus 25:35-38) Again, this passage is related to Jubilee—God's quintessential picture of gracious forgiveness. Which of us has not fallen on hard times? Oh, not materially, necessarily, but spiritually we have all become debtors. Yahweh has taken pity upon us, paid off our

debts, and put us on our feet. Should we not do the same thing for our brothers?

It is with deep sorrow that I must note that our entire monetary system today is based on a violation of this precept. In America, as in most of the rest of the world, money is *based* on debt. With little or nothing of intrinsic value to back it up, wealth is created out of thin air in tandem with loans—if every debt were paid off today, our entire money supply would cease to exist. Hardly anybody understands how our central banking boondoggle—I mean *system*—really works, of course; if we did, we would descend on Washington and New York *en masse*, pitchforks and torches in hand. Required reading: *The Creature from Jekyll Island: A Second Look at the Federal Reserve*, by G. Edward Griffin. (Copyright 1994-2002, American Media. www.RealityZone.com)

We (or is it just me?) are entirely too reluctant to trust Yahweh with our finances. Rather than living simply and within our means, we indulge our every whim and then feverishly scheme and calculate how to make ends meet. All too often, our solutions involve shortchanging the charitable end of the spectrum—not just by giving less to advance Yahweh’s cause, but also oppressing our brothers by selling what we should be giving away or taking advantage of others’ misfortune by buying things cheaply. One I am personally guilty of: *The house is priced under-market because the owners are getting a divorce and need a quick sale—we can make a killing here*. When are we going to learn that our Father owns *everything*? It’s an insult to Him to doubt His willingness to meet our needs—and to demonstrate that doubt by taking advantage of our fellow man.

(172) *Do not borrow on interest (because this would cause the lender to sin).*

“You shall not charge interest to your brother—interest on money or food or anything that is lent out at interest. To a foreigner you may charge interest, but to your brother you shall not charge interest, that Yahweh your God may bless you in all to which you set your hand in the land which you are entering to possess.”

(Deuteronomy 23:19-20) It’s a fine sentiment, I suppose: don’t cause your brother to stumble by offering incentive to sin. But the rabbis have missed the point. The burden is upon the *lender*: he must not take advantage of a brother in need by making a profit on his misfortune. If God has blessed him to the point that he has more than he needs, he is not to leverage that blessing into a growth industry.

Yahweh makes a distinction here between “brothers” and “foreigners.” Those outside the fellowship of faith are not under God’s protection—by their own choice. Yahweh understands that there is a time-value to money.

But we are to conduct our business relationships with fellow believers as if we were dealing with God Himself. Would we charge Yahshua interest? Would we demand guarantees and collateral from Him? Of course not. We should be aware that He regards what we do for “His brothers” as being done for Him—*personally*. Remember the admonition concerning the separation of the “sheep from the goats” in Matthew 25.

In the real world, especially today, especially in America, we needn't be “poor” to feel like we need to borrow. But it's an illusion, for the most part. We have forgotten how to distinguish between needs and wants. If we borrow, we become debtors, and debt is a chain: one from which Yahweh would spare us. **“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.... Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”** (Romans 13:8, 10)

- (173) *Do not take part in any usurious transaction between borrower and lender, neither as a surety, nor as a witness, nor as a writer of the bond for them. “If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor's garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious.”* (Exodus 22:25-27) Although I don't disagree with what the rabbis said here, it isn't supported by the text, not all of it, anyway. The transaction in view is once again between the lender and the borrower (not a middleman). Yahweh is giving a real-world example of how collateral ought to work. The acceptance of a pledge is never to hinder or endanger (or as Leviticus 25 put it, *oppress*) the lender. A man's coat may be the only thing of value he could leave with you to ensure that he pays his debt, but if it's the only thing between him and pneumonia, make sure he gets it back when it gets cold. Use your imagination. I'm sure you can come up with half a dozen examples that fit our contemporary situation: a man's car, tools, home—you get the picture. In practical terms, if you can trust his word, what good is collateral? And if you *can't*, why are you expecting him to pay you back?

Again we see that the lending relationship in view is between “any of My people.” That is, if the borrower honors Yahweh, you (the God-fearing lender) ought to be able to trust him to keep his word and pay you back, for he didn't make his promises to you as much as he made them to God Himself. If he stiff's you, he'll answer to Yahweh—and he knows it (or ought to). Contrast this to what Solomon says about loaning money to strangers (i.e., those with whom you don't share a familial relationship with Yahweh): **“He who is surety for a stranger will suffer, but one who hates**

being surety is secure." (Proverbs 11:15) A "surety" is an old fashioned word for a guarantee. It's true on personal, corporate, and national levels: if we guarantee the performance of those who don't answer to Yahweh, we will suffer for it.

- (174) *Lend to a poor person.* **"If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him: you shall not charge him interest."** (Exodus 22:25) The word "if" (Hebrew: *'im*) is more positive than it may seem in the English. It means "when" or "whenever" as much as "if." It is a given under the Law that an Israelite with means will not oppress his less fortunate brother by refusing him a timely loan, nor, as we see here, is the lender to charge interest—to make a profit on his charity. Conversely, it is also a given that a man will not borrow money if he is not in dire straits—and certainly not if he has no intention of repaying the loan. Accepting a loan under such false pretenses is tantamount to stealing (see Exodus 20:15). Bear in mind that Yahweh put mechanisms in place in Israel through which the poor could provide for themselves (see Mitzvot #41-52 in Chapter 2). And in the larger sense, Israel was promised (Deuteronomy 28:1-14, etc.) abundant temporal blessings that would make poverty in the Land an aberration rather than the status quo, if only they would heed Yahweh's laws. In other words, this never should have been much of an issue.
- (175) *Do not demand from a poor man repayment of his debt, nor press him, when it becomes clear that he cannot pay.* **"If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor's garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious."** (Exodus 22:25-27) Maimonides has been caught padding the list again. We've already seen the supporting text of this Mitzvah in #173, and we've seen similar passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The bottom line here is that we are to be merciful, generous, and forgiving, for Yahweh is all of those things toward us. As far as not requiring repayment of loans, Yahweh never actually said anything about it. The closest He got was in a parable told by Yahshua (Matthew 18:21-35) in which a king forgave a gargantuan debt owed by a servant who asked for mercy, only to see him turn around and refuse to forgive a relatively small debt of a fellow servant. The point was not that the king had no right to press the first servant to repay his debts—the debt was real: *somebody* had to make up the shortfall—and that turned out to be the King Himself. But because the king was merciful, His servant should have been merciful as well. What made the king angry was not the debt, but the first

servant's unforgiving attitude. The carryover to our redemption and its intended effect upon our lives is self-evident. The "king" is Yahweh, and the "debt" we owe is due to our sin. Because God has forgiven us, we likewise should forgive those who have wronged us.

- (176) *Do not take in pledge utensils used in preparing food. "No man shall take the lower or the upper millstone in pledge, for he takes one's living in pledge."* (Deuteronomy 24:6) Food has nothing to do with it, and the supporting verse makes that plain (at least to me). The point was that a man's ability to earn a living was not to be infringed upon by requiring that he put up the tools of his trade as collateral. In other words, don't take a miller's millstone, a farmer's ox or plow, a weaver's loom, etc., in pledge for a loan, even if they are the only things of value a borrower may have. I get the feeling that the rabbis specified food-preparation utensils because they wanted to be able to broaden their horizons in the collateral department—thereby circumventing the clear intent of this precept.
- Yahweh didn't altogether forbid the taking of pledges to secure loans, for He wanted to protect lenders from potential abuse at the hands of shifty borrowers. At the same time, He clearly doesn't like the concept of resorting to legal means to minimize risk. His ideal is "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no," in other words, be as good as your word. If you borrow, pay your debts—as quickly as you can. If God has blessed you with a little more than you need to get by, don't be afraid to "risk it" helping someone in need. Consider that the overabundance you've received may have been given to you for that very purpose.
- (177) *Do not exact a pledge from a debtor by force. "When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you."* (Deuteronomy 24:10-11) I'm pretty sure the rabbis got this one wrong. If one found he had to use force to extract a pledge, he would simply refrain from making the loan. I think this has more to do with protecting the dignity of the borrower. He feels bad enough that he's in need of the loan; to have the lender invade his home and extract the pledge in front of the man's family would be adding insult to injury. It's no sin to be poor (though it's no great honor, either). A man should be treated with dignity and respect, whatever his station in life.
- (178) *Do not keep the pledge from its owner when he needs it. "And if the man is poor, you shall not keep his pledge overnight. You shall in any case return the pledge to him again when the sun goes down, that he may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before Yahweh your God."* (Deuteronomy 24:12-13) This repeats the precept outlined in #173.

In God's economy, mercy outweighs justice, kindness trumps correctness, and compassion is worth more than fairness. When Yahweh called Abram, he "believed God and it was accounted unto him as righteousness." Here we see something very similar. The lender here is seen trusting not in the borrower, not even in the collateral that was offered to secure the loan, but in Yahweh Himself. He's saying, *It doesn't matter all that much if I get reimbursed; God will take care of me nevertheless. But I refuse to see my brother shivering in the cold just because he hasn't paid back his debt. I will extend mercy to him, even though justice says I'm not required to.* This attitude is seen as "righteousness" before Yahweh.

- (179) *Return a pledge to its owner.* **"And if the man is poor, you shall not keep his pledge overnight. You shall in any case return the pledge to him again when the sun goes down, that he may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before Yahweh your God."** (Deuteronomy 24:12-13) This is merely the affirmative statement of negative Mitzvah #178. Maimonides is puffing this thing out like a seventh grader's term paper. The question may be properly asked, however, why *Yahweh* repeats this seemingly anachronistic tenet so many times. The answer becomes obvious when we realize that (1) we owe Him an impossibly large debt, (2) that the "pledges" we make to "do better" aren't worth the breath we expend on them if done in our own efforts, and (3) that if He "held our pledges," that is, if He held us to our word, we would all die of exposure before the night was over. We are entirely dependent upon His mercy. We are lost forever without His grace. The "garment" He provides—the righteousness of His salvation—protects us from the world and the judgment that follows. He never withdraws that protection, no matter how much we "owe."
- (180) *Don't take a pledge from a widow.* **"You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow's garment as a pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and Yahweh your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing."** (Deuteronomy 24:17-18) Taking a widow's protective outer garment as collateral against a loan is seen here as an example of "perversion of justice." Widows, orphans, and "strangers" are scriptural pictures of helplessness, and Yahweh invariably goes out of His way to protect and provide for them in His Law. Here He reminds us that He delivered us when we were slaves to sin—when we were as helpless as widows and orphans, as alienated as strangers in a foreign land. We are therefore to follow His lead by providing mercy and justice to those less fortunate than we are, whether materially or spiritually.
- (181) *Do not commit fraud in measuring.* **"You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume."** (Leviticus 19:35) This is a

corollary to the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not steal.” The point was not so much that measurements had to be accurate, but that no “injustice” was to be done in their application (a condition, of course, that was most easily achieved by measuring accurately). The first thing in Moses’ list is the one we tend to skip over: “do no injustice in *judgment*.” The Hebrew word for judgment, *mishpat*, means a verdict, judicial sentence, or formal legal decree. When weighing and measuring the evidence in a case, those judging are to be careful in their assessments. Injustice is to be avoided at all costs, whether it’s a case of murder, or a case of pickles.

- (182) *Ensure that your scales and weights are correct. “You shall have honest scales, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe all My statutes and all My judgments, and perform them: I am Yahweh.”* (Leviticus 19:36-37) Continuing the thought from the previous mitzvah, we see that measuring “justly” depended on using accurate paraphernalia, scales that balance properly and precisely accurate weights against which to measure the commodities being bought and sold. (An ephah is a unit of dry measure, approximately two thirds of a bushel. A hin is a unit of liquid measure equivalent to about one gallon.) The modern equivalent might be: don’t roll the odometer back on that used car you’re selling; don’t pad your hours when billing your clients for the time you’ve spent on their behalf, etc.

Another example: I used to design packaging for a living. One of my clients, a poultry merchandiser, refused to feed their chickens and turkeys antibiotics, even though this was standard industry practice. Why? Not only because of the health risks associated with administering subtherapeutic levels of antibiotics, but also because it was dishonest: these drugs raised the water weight of a growing bird by up to fifteen percent. So Shelton’s Poultry was (no doubt without realizing it) following the Law of God in this respect, though they were practically alone in heeding their convictions and their conscience.

Yahweh is saying something very basic here: don’t cheat each other. Then, as He does so often, He reminds us *why* we shouldn’t cheat. It’s because of who He is—the One who saved us, the One to whom we owe our very existence. His world, His rules. Bottom line: if we can’t trust Him to take care of us in petty financial matters, we can’t trust Him at all.

- (183) *Don’t possess inaccurate measures and weights. “You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a heavy and a light. You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. You shall have a perfect and just weight, a*

perfect and just measure, that your days may be lengthened in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who behave unrighteously, are an abomination to Yahweh your God.” (Deuteronomy 25:13-16) This is the negative counterpart to the affirmative mitzvah we just listed. It’s all the same principle. Restated here in Deuteronomy, we see how the cheating was accomplished: a dishonest merchant would keep two sets of weights, a heavy one for measuring what was being paid to him, and a light one for measuring what he was selling. It’s cheating, theft, dishonesty, robbery, oppression—and Yahweh hates it. Any way you slice it, it betrays a lack of trust in Yahweh’s provision. The precept, however, came with a promise: if the Israelites would be honest in their business dealings, their “days would be lengthened in the land Yahweh was giving them.” As we know from history, unfortunately, their dishonest, cheating hearts eventually got them thrown out of the Land. Remember—Yahweh doesn’t change: the principle still applies today.

EMPLOYEES, SERVANTS, AND SLAVES

- (184) *Do not delay payment of a hired man’s wages. “You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.”* (Leviticus 19:13) Delaying payment (not just for wages, but for anything) is a form of oppression, and Yahweh considers it evil. To withhold payment of a legitimate debt, even temporarily, is seen by God as *robbery*. I’ve been on both sides of this equation, as an employer and as an employee (and as both contractor and client). I’ve felt the anguish of not knowing if the check was going to arrive on time, of not knowing if I’d be able to feed my family because some bureaucrat was holding my wages “all night.” I’ve also witnessed the puzzled gratitude of my suppliers when I paid what I owed them several weeks *early*. I can tell you from experience, doing business God’s way is a lot more fun.
- (185) *The hired laborer shall be permitted to eat of the produce he is reaping. “When you come into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container. When you come into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor’s standing grain.”* (Deuteronomy 23:24-25) The rabbis have blown it big time here (and in the next two mitzvot) by applying this precept to hired laborers. Could it be they were trying to engineer a loophole? *Sure, I’ll pay you: you can eat your fill of my produce while you’re harvesting my crop, but don’t expect a penny more.* This is not about employees, but about “neighbors,” that is, fellow Israelites or strangers who were passing through and got hungry. (Yahshua

and His disciples fell into this category from time to time.) As the text plainly indicates, this is part of God's "welfare" system—it's designed to take care of travelers and wayfarers. As we saw during our discussion of Yahweh's provision for the poor (Mitzvot #41-50), God provided the land and its increase; it was therefore His prerogative to make it available to whomever He chose—to the landowner first, but also to those in immediate need.

- (186) *The hired laborer shall not take more than he can eat.* **"When you come into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container. When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain."** (Deuteronomy 23:24-25) There is a wonderfully practical balance here between the rights of the landowner and the needs of the wayfarer. The "neighbor" could walk through a field or vineyard and help himself to as much as he could carry—in his stomach (which only holds about a quart). No sickle or pruning hook, no container to haul away the booty, no equipment at all other than your bare hands and digestive tract would be allowed; this wasn't a *raid* God was authorizing—it was charity. Thus there were practical limits to the impact such "harvesting" could have on the farmer's crop. Again, the precept has absolutely nothing to do with relations between a landowner and his hired laborers.
- (187) *A hired laborer shall not eat produce that is not being harvested.* **"When you come into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container. When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain."** (Deuteronomy 23:24-25) Pardon me, Maimonides. Your agenda is showing. This is *not* about making sure your field hands aren't getting overpaid. This is about reflecting Yahweh's mercy, sharing God's bounty, recognizing His provision, and emulating His generosity. It's the very antithesis of the ugly attitude of imposing submission on those who find themselves beneath you on the economic scale in this world.
- (188) *Pay wages to the hired man at the due time.* **"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to Yahweh, and it be sin to you."** (Deuteronomy 24:14-15) Is there an echo in here? This is the same precept we saw under Mitzvah #184. We shouldn't be too surprised to find a lot of the same things first

mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to be repeated in Deuteronomy, for it is the record of Moses' delivering the Law to a whole new generation of Israelites—whose rebellious parents had died in the wilderness. Here we are told (as if we didn't know) why the hired laborers were to be paid promptly: they were poor, and their "hearts were set" on receiving what they had earned with the sweat of their brow. Been there; done that. Most of us have cried out in distress to Yahweh at some point, seeking protection from someone's abuse. I would simply note here that *being* the oppressor somebody is complaining to God about would be a very, very bad thing.

- (189) *Deal judicially with the Hebrew bondman in accordance with the laws appertaining to him. "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."* (Exodus 21:2-6) This is only incidentally a precept about temporal master-slave relationships. In actuality, it is an elaborate metaphor of our ability and privilege to choose Yahweh. First, we see the ubiquitous six-plus-one pattern here, which should by now tell us instantly that Yahweh is instructing us about His plan for mankind—six thousand years of "work" and a millennium of "rest."

Next, we learn an often-misunderstood lesson about liberty: freedom is *neutral*. It's not important in itself; what's significant is what you're freed *from*. Who is the master from whom you wish to be released? Release from the service of a cruel taskmaster would be a good thing, of course. But be advised: escape may be more difficult than it looks. Parts of your old life of servitude could be hard to leave behind. This is obviously a metaphor for the service of Satan, a life of sin. Our acquaintances and addictions are part of our old life: if we aren't prepared to let them go, we will never be truly free.

On the other hand, what if your Master is kindhearted and generous? What if He has given you "everything that pertains to life and godliness?" What if the work you've been given to do has been a joy to perform, significant and fulfilling? And what if you've built a family within His household with whom the bond of love is sweet and enduring? If, as the poet said, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," then

perhaps liberty is not necessarily such a good thing after all. I'm speaking, of course, of having Yahweh/Yahshua as a master. Some of us have spent years in the service of God: we could conceivably say to ourselves, "I've paid my dues—I'm through." But retiring from this life is like leaving the best job in the world—how could we possibly top it? (The paycheck ain't so great sometimes, but the benefits and retirement plan are to die for.) Freedom from Christ is like freedom from health, love, security, from life itself—it's something no sane man would want. It's no accident that every letter writer in the New Testament called Himself a servant of Christ at one point or another (Paul, James, Peter, and Jude did so in their salutations, and John spoke incessantly of "keeping His commandments," which is what a servant does above all else.)

So what do we do when confronted with our "freedom" from the God we love? According to the passage at hand, we have the option of declining to leave. We can approach the doorpost (Hebrew: *mezuzah*: the place where God's word was to be displayed—see #21) and ask the Master—Yahshua—to pierce our earlobe with an awl. In this we are following our Messiah: the piercing is voluntary, involving blood and pain, but the Master subsequently adorns our wound with a golden ring, the symbol of eternity in the service of the King.

As long as we're this deep into symbols, perhaps you'd indulge me in a bit of poetry, a song lyric I wrote a long time ago describing my own salvation experience:

*When did I first dare to leave the realm of unnamed fears,
Of summers marred by constant thoughts of winter's tears?
And when did I become aware: this soul-invading peace
That follows like a shadow on a sunny day?
No one but a fool would wish to be released.*

*When did God untie the cords to set my spirit free
To join in heaven's joyous dance, eternally?
I can't recall the hour or day God's Spirit entered mine,
And yet as I relax my hold on all I am,
His Holy Spirit fills the void with His design.*

(190) *Do not compel the Hebrew servant to do the work of a slave. “If one of your brethren who dwells by you becomes poor, and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave. As a hired servant and a sojourner he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the Year of Jubilee. And then he shall depart from you—he and his children with him—and shall return to his own family. He shall return to the possession of his fathers.”* (Leviticus 25:39-41) I find it fascinating that Yahweh never forbade slavery. He regulated it, mitigated its abuses, incorporated a temporary form of it into His welfare system, and used it as a springboard for His metaphors about service, but He never outlawed it. Perhaps He wanted us to come to grips with the fact that this side of heaven, we’re all “slaves” to something or other, whether good or evil, God or Satan.

This mitzvah has less to do with the *type* of work assigned to the bondservant than with the attitude of the master. A *slave* was property: you could buy or sell him, and if someone injured or killed him, it was the *master* who was reimbursed. But Israelites were not to “own” their brothers. If a man became poor and “sold himself” into the service of a fellow Israelite, he did not become a “slave,” but rather an indentured servant—sort of a “contract laborer.” He was not “owned” by the master, but was sort of “leased.” There was a term during which he would serve the master in exchange for a financial consideration—paid up front to satisfy a debt or support the man’s family. The master was to treat him as he would any hired laborer—with respect and dignity.

Most significantly, there was a time limit to his period of service. Leviticus 25 is all about the Jubilee, a once-every-fifty-year (i.e., once in a lifetime) occurrence, and thus we are being given a picture here of being granted release from our labors at the end of our lives: not our physical lives, but our lives as slaves—our lives bound to sin. Our freedom from that condition is pictured by Jubilee. There is, however, a variant on this Law that releases the bondservant after *six* years. “**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.**” (Deuteronomy 15:12) As a practical matter, Yahweh didn’t want Israelites selling themselves into bondage for their entire lifetimes. So the Sabbath year represents a sort of mini-Jubilee, in which many of the same things (debts, lands, servitude) were released. In the Sabbatical year, the once-in-a-lifetime picture is lost, but Yahweh’s mercy, forgiveness, and provision are seen even more clearly.

(191) *Do not sell a Hebrew servant as a slave. “...For they are My servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.”* (Leviticus

25:42) Continuing the thought from the previous mitzvah, we see that Yahweh's instructions concerning Israelite bondservants prohibited their being re-sold as ordinary slaves. The stated reason was that they were actually *Yahweh's* servants first (being Israelites and believers), and only bondservants to their earthly masters in a secondary role. The lesson for Christians should provide confidence and comfort: once we are Yahweh's servants—once we have asked the master to pierce our earlobe with His awl against the doorpost of testimony—we will never again be “sold” into sin. Satan can never own us. This is about as strong an evidence for “eternal security” as it gets. I should hasten to add, however, that since we *are* servants of God, He has the right to administer discipline as He sees fit. Read the story of David in II Samuel, I Kings, and I Chronicles. If Yahweh did not hesitate to discipline one so close to His own heart when he sinned, we should expect nothing less.

- (192) *Do not treat a Hebrew servant rigorously. “...You shall not rule over him [an Israelite bondservant] with rigor, but you shall fear your God.”* (Leviticus 25:43) A direct parallel is drawn between the fear—the reverence—of Yahweh and the treatment of one's bondservants. As we saw in #191, the servant is primarily Yahweh's; he is only being “loaned” to his earthly master, who is *also* a servant of Yahweh's. In effect, the “master” was being told not to mistreat the servant of Another. As believers, we need to remember that we all serve the same God. We may find ourselves higher or lower in the “pecking order,” but mercy rolls downhill. If we have received mercy, we should dispense mercy.
- (193) *Do not permit a gentile to treat harshly a Hebrew bondman sold to him. “He shall be with him as a yearly hired servant, and he shall not rule with rigor over him in your sight.”* (Leviticus 25:53) As we have seen, this entire chapter concerns the law of Jubilee. Here we see what is to happen if the indentured servant's master is not an Israelite, but a gentile living in the Land. Let's pick up the narrative in verse 47: “**Now if a sojourner or stranger close to you becomes rich, and one of your brethren who dwells by him becomes poor, and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner close to you, or to a member of the stranger's family, after he is sold he may be redeemed again.**” This, the law of redemption, is the main point of the passage—not the gentle treatment of Jewish servants. “**One of his brothers may redeem him; or his uncle or his uncle's son may redeem him; or anyone who is near of kin to him in his family may redeem him; or if he is able he may redeem himself....**” The servant's family can, at any time, buy back the man's “contract” from his master. In other words, even though he has sold his services to another, the bondservant still belongs to Yahweh. He himself cannot be sold.

How is the redemption price determined? **“Thus he shall reckon with him who bought him: The price of his release shall be according to the number of years, from the year that he was sold to him until the Year of Jubilee; it shall be according to the time of a hired servant for him. If there are still many years remaining, according to them he shall repay the price of his redemption from the money with which he was bought. And if there remain but a few years until the Year of Jubilee, then he shall reckon with him, and according to his years he shall repay him the price of his redemption. He shall be with him as a yearly hired servant, and he shall not rule with rigor over him in your sight....”** As we saw with land that was sold/leased to another, value is determined by how much productivity can be expected between now and Jubilee. The closer the time, the less the bondservant is worth to the master.

“And if he is not redeemed in these years, then he shall be released in the Year of Jubilee—he and his children with him. For the children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God.” (Leviticus 25:47-55) Is there more to this than meets the eye? I believe there is. We now live in “the times of the Gentiles.” Israel has “sold herself” into bondage because of the spiritual poverty she has endured since her national rejection of Yahshua at Calvary. Yahweh is not (at present) dealing with His people Israel in any direct way. But that’s about to change. The most ubiquitous prophetic theme in the entire Bible is the eventual restoration of Israel to a place of fellowship with Yahweh through Yahshua their King—an earthly thousand-year Messianic Kingdom.

And when will that begin? On Jubilee—the *ultimate* Jubilee—commencing with the Day of Atonement spoken of in Zechariah 12:10 in which Israel will at last recognize her Messiah. As time marches toward this prophetic rendezvous, the Jews’ “value” to the world will be whittled away until there’s nothing left, just as stated in the law of Jubilee. As Daniel put it, **“When the power of the holy people has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished.”** (Daniel 12:7) A mere five days after this Day of Atonement, after the remnant of Israel has watched their Messiah annihilate their enemies at the Battle of Armageddon, the definitive Feast of Tabernacles will usher in the Millennial reign of Yahshua. The year, unless I’ve misread the obvious signs, will be 2033—two thousand years, forty Jubilees, since Christ paid the required price to redeem us all from our service to Satan. In the intervening years, some Jews, perceiving that they had been released, left their old master. The rest continued their servitude in ignorance, working for their adversary until released by the Law of Jubilee.

All of this sheds new light on the significance of the mitzvah we originally started out examining, **“He shall not rule with rigor over him in your sight.”** Even though Israel has been in bondage for the last two millennia, their gentile overlords have been warned by Yahweh not to treat them harshly. They have rarely listened.

- (194) *Do not send away a Hebrew bondman servant empty-handed when he is freed from service. “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 Yahweh has blessed you with, you shall give to Him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today.”* (Deuteronomy 15:12-15) Justice says: *You agreed to work for six years for “X” amount of money. You were paid and you have fulfilled your contract. You’re free to go, but you will receive nothing more.* Mercy says: *Your poverty forced you to sell your services for six long years, and you have faithfully fulfilled your contract. But now you’re no better off than you were when you started, so as a bonus, your former master will “stake you” so you can begin anew—food, supplies, opportunities: whatever it takes to get an honest, hardworking man like you on your feet for good.*

As I said before, mercy trumps justice in God’s book. Rectitude is good, but love is infinitely better. It’s a fine thing to be correct, but Yahweh prefers us to be compassionate. Beyond that, if this, like the previous mitzvah, has a prophetic component to it, it would be demonstrated in any of a hundred passages like this: **“Thus says Yahweh Almighty: ‘Behold, I will lift My hand in an oath to the nations, and set up My standard for the peoples. They shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am Yahweh, for they shall not be ashamed who wait for Me.’”** (Isaiah 49:22-23) The restoration of Israel will ultimately be an international affair, with the redeemed gentile survivors of the tribulation joyously aiding in the final regathering and restoration of Yahweh’s people to the Land of Promise. I realize that represents a 180-degree turnabout from their attitude today, but today the nations serve Satan, not Yahweh. And like I said, that’s all about to change.

- (195) *Bestow liberal gifts upon the Hebrew bondsman or bondwoman (at the end of their term of service). “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 Yahweh has blessed you with, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today.” (Deuteronomy 15:12-15) This, of course, is merely the affirmative restatement of #194’s negative mitzvah. As we have seen so often in precepts concerning mercy or redemption, there is a reason attached to the commandment: Yahweh has blessed us, restored us, and given us freedom and prosperity. As far as it is within our powers, we are to do the same for our fellow man.

- (196) *Redeem a Hebrew maid-servant.* “If a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her.” (Exodus 21:7-8) This is a subset of the law of redemption designed to protect women from abuse. The word translated “go out” (Hebrew: *yoset*) is “used of going forth from one’s homeland into exile.” (B&C) Thus it doesn’t mean, *Keep your female bondservants indoors*, but rather, *There are different rules in effect for female bondservants*. The obvious problem was the potential for sexual abuse. Harlotry, especially selling one’s daughter into this life, was strictly forbidden: “Do not prostitute your daughter, to cause her to be a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry, and the land become full of wickedness.” (Leviticus 19:29) There were, of course, many legitimate non-sex-related roles for female bondservants to fulfill in a master’s household, so the practice of “leasing” one’s daughter into indentured servitude was not forbidden.

It was inevitable, however, that occasionally a man who had brought a female bondservant into his household would notice her qualities and decide she would make a good marriage partner—either for himself or for his son (see #198). In that case, if she failed to please her master after the betrothal, he could no longer treat her as an ordinary slave girl, but would be required to let her family redeem her. He was specifically prohibited from selling her to a foreign master.

Of course, slavery and indentured servitude aren’t terribly common any more. So is this precept obsolete? No. Once again, think prophetically. Israel has fallen into spiritual poverty, and has sold her daughters into the service of the world. Yahweh is announcing here that they cannot be sold to Satan; He reserves the right to redeem them—to restore them to His

family. The “daughters of Jerusalem” have not pleased their masters in exile, but they are under Yahweh’s protection. He has already paid the price of their redemption. We now await their realization that they are free to go back home.

- (197) *Do not sell a Hebrew maid-servant to another person.* “If a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her.” (Exodus 21:7-8) This is the negative counterpart to the previous mitzvah. Maimonides is padding the list again.
- (198) *Espouse a Hebrew maid-servant.* “...If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her. And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her [i.e., the betrothed bondservant’s] clothing, and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money.” (Exodus 21:8-11) Continuing the thought from the previous mitzvah, we see that the rabbis have done some judicious editing, and have therefore missed the whole point.

There are some big “ifs” here. *If* the female bondservant is “wife material,” then she is no longer bondservant material. You can’t have it both ways. In the same way, Israel, who has become the bondservant of the world through her spiritual bankruptcy, had (and has) the opportunity to be betrothed to the Master (Yahweh), or to His Son (Yahshua), in which case she would cease to be a bondslave, but would become a wife with all the rights and privileges of any wife—no matter what she was formerly. And what was that provision about “another wife?” It’s pretty obvious, this side of Calvary. Yahweh is referring to the Church, the Ekklesia—the other woman, His second wife, the bride of Christ. The Law here is flatly stating that if (actually, *when*) Israel accepts Yahweh’s marriage proposal, she will not be a second-class wife—a concubine, as it were—but will be a *real* wife, loved equally with her sister, the Church. As always with metaphors, if you put too much stress on them they’ll start to fray around the edges, but the central truth remains: God loves both Israel and the Ekklesia, even though Israel has sold herself into bondage temporarily.

- (199) *Keep the Canaanite slave forever.* “Moreover you may buy the children of the strangers who dwell among you, and their families who are with you, which they beget in your land; and they shall become your property. And you may take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them as a possession; they

shall be your permanent slaves.” (Leviticus 25:45-46) This one must have driven nineteenth-century abolitionists crazy. Is Yahweh *promoting* slavery? Not really, although for the sake of His illustration, He is permitting it. Yahweh is making a distinction here between those who would be set free through the law of Jubilee (the central subject of Leviticus 25), and those who would not. In other words, this is a lesson about the eternal status of *non-believers*.

Yahweh’s people, represented here by Israel, are protected by the Law of Jubilee: every fifty years they are granted total forgiveness. God through His Law redeems them from their bondage and debt. “Strangers,” however, are representative of those who are not under Yahweh’s protection; therefore the general amnesty of Jubilee does not apply to them. I hasten to note that this is not a statement defining one’s salvation or damnation based on race or culture. As I’ve said till I’m blue in the face, Israel’s job was and is to bear the signs of Yahweh’s redemptive plan—and this is one of them: they’re playing the *role* of the saved, whether or not they are actually followers of Yahweh as individuals. In the same way, the “strangers” are cast in the role of the unsaved. The point is simply that unbelievers will remain in bondage permanently. There will be no day of grace for them because they have no covenant relationship with Yahweh. Jubilee’s forgiveness is for God’s people, not Satan’s.

(200) *Do not surrender a slave who has fled to the land of Israel to his owner who lives outside Palestine. “You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him.”* (Deuteronomy 23:15-16) Unlike Maimonides, Yahweh doesn’t actually specify the origin of the slave or his master here, for a very good reason. This is a poignant picture of flight from the oppression of slavery under sin to a new life under Yahweh’s protection. One dealing with a runaway slave had three logical options: he could return the slave to his former master, re-enslave the runaway for his own use, or set him free. Yahweh is hereby commanding His people to take door number three.

This is, at its core, a scathing denunciation of religion—*all sorts* of organized religious practice. Most people follow what they were taught as children: whether their parents were Hindus or Buddhists, atheists or Muslims, Catholics or Protestants, they naturally start out doing and believing the same kinds of things their parents did. But now and then, a person notices the *neshamah*, the “God-shaped vacuum” within him and endeavors to delve beyond the humdrum going-through-the-motions

existences being lived by those around them. At this point, they have “escaped from their masters.” But what happens to them? All too often, they are simply re-enslaved into something worse than the existence from which they were fleeing. If a nominal Muslim looking for a deeper faith doesn’t leave Islam, he becomes a terrorist or suicide bomber. The Buddhist seeker ceases being a productive member of his society and becomes a holy parasite, a monk, a living contradiction of outward asceticism achieved through total self-absorption. And what happens to those who wish to turn to Yahweh? As often as not, they are told to exchange their slavery to sin for another form of servitude—rules, rituals, and traditions, or worse, submission to ecclesiastical tyranny under self-appointed religious leaders. As Yahshua put it, **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”** (Matthew 23:15) But the Torah says to stop oppressing the runaway slave; let him enjoy his freedom. **“Jesus answered [the Pharisees], ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.’”** (John 8:34-36)

- (201) *Do not wrong a runaway slave.* **“You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him.”** (Deuteronomy 23:15-16) The rabbis have drawn a distinction here between not returning a runaway slave to his owner and treating him well. Okay, whatever. More specifically, the Law says not to treat him as a second-class citizen because he used to be a slave, but accept him without prejudice. I personally know two pastors with checkered pasts—drugs, crime, prison—who are now serving Yahshua with enthusiasm and gratitude. Where would their congregations be if Christians had held their former bonds of slavery against them? If Yahweh has redeemed a person, if he has fled from his old life of slavery to sin, then according to Yahweh, he may “dwell in our midst.” Let’s face it: we have all been slaves at one time or another. If we exclude the one with obvious sins in his past, we must exclude ourselves as well. To the heavenly Gardener, the best slug in the yard is pretty much the same as the worst one.
- (202) *Don’t muzzle a beast while it is working: allow it to eat and enjoy.* **“You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.”** (Deuteronomy 25:4) Yes, Yahweh is concerned with the welfare of animals as well as of men. This precept, however, is not talking exclusively about “livestock rights.” Paul quoted this twice (in I Timothy 5:18 and in the following passage) to

demonstrate that one who works in ministry has a right to derive a living wage from such work. This is why we have salaried pastors today. Note, however, that although the ox had a right to munch on some grain as he worked, he was not given the deed to the wheat field, nor was he given the authority to plow the whole thing under and put up trendy condos to sell at an obscene profit to rich yuppies. Rather, his “living” was predicated on his participation in providing nourishment to the community.

Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth about his rights as an Apostle (rights he freely relinquished in order to avoid becoming a stumbling block): **“Don’t we have the right to live in your homes and share your meals? Don’t we have the right to bring a Christian wife along with us as the other disciples and the Lord’s brothers and Peter do?”** This sentence sets the remuneration bar high enough to support one’s family, not just a subsistence wage for the pastor himself. **“Or is it only Barnabas and I who have to work to support ourselves? What soldier has to pay his own expenses? And have you ever heard of a farmer who harvests his crop and doesn’t have the right to eat some of it? What shepherd takes care of a flock of sheep and isn’t allowed to drink some of the milk? And this isn’t merely human opinion. Doesn’t God’s law say the same thing? For the law of Moses says, ‘Do not keep an ox from eating as it treads out the grain.’ Do you suppose God was thinking only about oxen when he said this? Wasn’t he also speaking to us? Of course he was. Just as farm workers who plow fields and thresh the grain expect a share of the harvest, Christian workers should be paid by those they serve...”** I couldn’t have said it better myself. It’s handy when scripture provides commentary on scripture, don’t you think?

“We have planted good spiritual seed among you. Is it too much to ask, in return, for mere food and clothing?” Paul’s point is that spiritual nourishment should be rewarded with physical sustenance. Yet he didn’t capitalize on that principle. **“If you support others who preach to you, shouldn’t we have an even greater right to be supported? Yet we have never used this right. We would rather put up with anything than put an obstacle in the way of the Good News about Christ...”**

He then reminds us that this is nothing new in God’s economy: **“Don’t you know that those who work in the Temple get their meals from the food brought to the Temple as offerings? And those who serve at the altar get a share of the sacrificial offerings. In the same way, the Lord gave orders that those who preach the Good News should be supported by those who benefit from it.”** (I Corinthians 9:4-14 NLT)

VOWS, OATHS, AND SWEARING

- (203) *A man should fulfill whatever he has uttered.* **“That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to Yahweh your God what you have promised with your mouth.”** (Deuteronomy 23:23) This points out something few understand these days: when you say something, you’ve said it before Yahweh Himself. If you make any “statement of fact,” it’s as if you’re “swearing on a stack of Bibles.” You’ve *automatically* “sworn” that your words are true. If you’ve said you’d do something, your words are a promise you’ve made to God—even if you weren’t promising anything *to* Him, but merely to some other human. Yahweh, in short, expects us to keep our word, to tell the truth—whether we’re “under oath” or not. A promise to the least of men is a promise to Him.

Not surprisingly, Yahshua sounds irritated as he discusses the hypocrisy of swearing on this or that as though the greater the thing sworn upon, the more truthful the statement must be: **“You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘Do not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say, don’t make any vows! If you say, ‘By heaven!’ it is a sacred vow because heaven is God’s throne. And if you say, ‘By the earth!’ it is a sacred vow because the earth is his footstool. And don’t swear, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Don’t even swear, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.** (Matthew 5:33-37 NLT). That’s pretty clear, isn’t it?

- (204) *Do not swear needlessly.* **“You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain, for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”** (Exodus 20:7) It’s interesting that *this* verse was chosen to support the idea of not swearing needlessly: it has almost nothing to do with taking oaths. As we saw in the previous mitzvah, in fact, it is God’s will that we don’t swear at all (that is, don’t make vows or give testimony that must be backed by things that are more reliable than our own word). The “need” for swearing or taking an oath should never arise.

But since the rabbis brought it up, let’s look at what the actual Hebrew words of this most enigmatic of the Ten Commandments *really* means: **“You shall not take** (*nasa*: lift up, accept, advance, bear, tolerate, respect, regard, or yield to) **the name** (*shem*: the position, individual nature, designation, honor, authority, character, mark, fame, name, reputation, or report) **of Yahweh your God** (*elohiym*: supreme and mighty one, deity) **in an evil** (*shav*: destructive, beguiling, false, evil, ruinous, idolatrous, harmful, devastating, wasteful, immoral, deceptive, or dishonest) **way. For Yahweh will not exonerate** (*naqah*: cleanse, acquit, hold blameless, or leave unpunished)

him who accepts (*nasa*: lifts up, accepts, advances, bears, or tolerates) **His character** (*shem*: position, individual nature, designation, honor, authority, character, mark, fame, name, reputation, or report) **being used in a deceptive** (*shav*: destructive, evil, devastating, desolate, wasteful, beguiling, immoral, idolatrous, false, deceptive, or dishonest) **way.**" (Exodus 20:7)

The Third Commandment therefore has nothing to do with taking oaths or swearing (not directly, at least), and everything to do with using the name of God—Yahweh—properly and with respect. The unfortunate English translation of the Hebrew word *shav* (destructive, false, evil, ruinous, idolatrous, harmful, devastating, wasteful, immoral, deceptive, dishonest, etc.) as “vain” (which in this context means empty or frivolous) is part of the problem. This erroneous word choice has led generations of people to believe that saying the name of God (a name most people don’t even know) in a flippant or irreverent way is what He’s prohibiting here. They believe that the commandment merely means that we shouldn’t say things like “God damn it” or “I swear to God....” While profanity—using His name in a common or disrespectful way or taking Him lightly—is indeed a bad thing, implied here and warned against explicitly elsewhere in scripture, the Third Commandment has a far deeper meaning: we are not to accept or advance anything that is false, deceptive, or destructive in Yahweh’s name, or associate these things with His character, or say that they’re His word. He won’t ignore it when we choose to worship counterfeit gods, for He is holy—separate from His creation.

In a remarkable and tragic miscalculation (and I’m probably being far too kind here—it smells more like purposeful and satanic deception) the rabbis eventually took this verse to mean that the name “Yahweh” couldn’t be spoken at all, for fear of inadvertently “taking it in vain.” The inevitable result was that the nation of Israel eventually forgot who their God was. Jews today call Him *HaShem*—“the Name.” And the loss was not confined to Israel: virtually every English Bible translation consistently renders the revealed name of God (Yahweh, which means: “I am”) as “the LORD”—neither a translation nor transliteration; it’s a blatant fraud. Thus Christians usually don’t know who God is, either. Not by name, anyway. It’s enough to make you *swear*.

- (205) *Do not violate an oath or swear falsely. “You shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am Yahweh.”* (Leviticus 19:12) This is more serious than the rabbinical wording suggests. “Swearing by Yahweh’s name falsely” is tantamount to “profaning” the name (*shem*: the character or reputation) of God. The Hebrew word for “to profane” is *chalal*: “to bore, that is, by implication, to wound, to dissolve;

figuratively to profane a person, place or thing, to break one's word." (S) In other words, when we as believers in Yahweh don't keep our word, we are inflicting wounds upon the very reputation of our God in the eyes of the world. Paul pointed out the damage such hypocrisy causes: **"You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written."** (Romans 2:23-24; cf. Ezekiel 36:22-23)

Yahshua also had something to say about breaking your word, and it wasn't pretty: **"Blind guides! How terrible it will be for you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple'—you can break that oath. But then you say that it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.' Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold, or the Temple that makes the gold sacred?"** Tell you what: Let's take the Temple out of the equation. Look out for a guy named Titus Vespasian. **"And you say that to take an oath 'by the altar' can be broken, but to swear 'by the gifts on the altar' is binding! How blind! For which is greater, the gift on the altar, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? When you swear 'by the altar,' you are swearing by it and by everything on it. And when you swear 'by the Temple,' you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. And when you swear 'by heaven,' you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne."**

(Matthew 23:16-22 NLT) His point, as usual, was to stop playing games with the truth. Our "yes" should mean yes, and our "no" should mean no.

- (206) *Decide in cases of annulment of vows according to the rules set forth in the Torah.* **"If a man makes a vow to Yahweh, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. Or if a woman makes a vow to Yahweh, and binds herself by some agreement while in her father's house in her youth, and her father hears her vow and the agreement by which she has bound herself, and her father holds his peace, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement with which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father overrules her on the day that he hears, then none of her vows nor her agreements by which she has bound herself shall stand; and Yahweh will release her, because her father overruled her."** (Numbers 30:2-5) There are other specific cases, which we'll look at in a moment, but I think we can see what's going on from these first few verses. Note first that the rabbinical mitzvah is one hundred percent correct for a change: *follow the Torah*. Good call, guys. The most striking thing about this passage is there are slightly different rules for women than there are for men in the matter of making vows. The knee-jerk reaction of the feminists, of course, is to cry "foul!" But as usual, Yahweh is using our family relationships to teach us deeper truths about His love, protection, and covenants. This has nothing to do with "keeping women in their place."

Basically, this is the rule: men who make vows must keep them. Period, end of story. However, under certain circumstances, women's vows may be annulled by the men whom Yahweh has assigned to protect them—their husbands or fathers. But there are limits even here. A protector has only a limited time to annul the vow his wife or daughter has made: he must decide on the day he hears of the matter; he may not “sleep on it.” This would have the effect of weeding out the “annulment material” to obviously frivolous, emotionally driven vows. Examples we might relate to: (1) A daughter vows to quit the cheerleading squad in order to spend more time on her studies—Dad knows there are pros and cons to weigh here; he would probably honor his daughter's decision and let the vow stand. (2) A daughter promises to kill herself if Johnny doesn't ask her to the big dance—Dad doesn't have to think about it; he'll annul the vow immediately.

Moses lists several other cases, all of which are similar: **“If indeed she takes a husband, while bound by her vows or by a rash utterance from her lips by which she bound herself, and her husband hears it, and makes no response to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her agreements by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband overrules her on the day that he hears it, he shall make void her vow which she took and what she uttered with her lips, by which she bound herself, and Yahweh will release her. Also any vow of a widow or a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her.**

“If she vowed in her husband's house, or bound herself by an agreement with an oath, and her husband heard it, and made no response to her and did not overrule her, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband truly made them void on the day he heard them, then whatever proceeded from her lips concerning her vows or concerning the agreement binding her, it shall not stand; her husband has made them void, and Yahweh will release her. Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void. Now if her husband makes no response whatever to her from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or all the agreements that bind her; he confirms them, because he made no response to her on the day that he heard them. But if he does make them void after he has heard them, then he shall bear her guilt.” (Numbers 30:6-15)

Okay, so what's the point of all this? God *isn't* saying, “Women are silly, emotional creatures who need a man around to keep them from doing stupid things.” Anybody who's ever known a man knows that women don't have a monopoly on stupid. This isn't *about* men and women—it's about Yahweh and us. As we have seen, He has ordained a

structure for the family that symbolizes the relationship we share with Him. In this metaphor, Christ is the Head of the family, and we believers are His bride. Or put another way, Yahweh is our Father, and we are His children. The Father/Husband gives us a great deal of freedom, but because He loves us He's willing to protect us from our own emotions, doubts, faults, wishful thinking, and yes, even stupidity. At one end of the spectrum, men say, "I love you, Father. I promise never to let you down again," and they mean it; but He knows they won't keep that promise, no matter how hard they try. On the other end of the spectrum, men go through periods of despair when God seems a million miles away, and in their darkest moments they deny that He even exists. But Yahweh is patient and merciful, willing to open the door of His kingdom to repentant, seeking hearts even at the eleventh hour. Did you catch the Messianic overtones in the last sentence? **"If he does make [the vows] void after he has heard them, then he shall bear her guilt."** Our *Protector* (Yahshua) will bear the guilt *we* have incurred through our rash oaths and actions—actually, He already has.

- (207) *Do not break a vow.* **"If a man makes a vow to Yahweh, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."** (Numbers 30:2) Whether a man's vow is to Yahweh or to another man, he must not break his word. In point of fact, a vow to a person is a promise before God—He sees no difference. Of course, no one is forcing you to give your word. So consider carefully what you promise to do, including the implied promises of daily life—the "written-between-the-lines" stuff. Stand behind your workmanship. Be on time. Read the contract. Give your employer a full day's work for a full day's pay. Don't take out a loan if you're not sure if you can repay it—and that includes slapping down your credit card for something beyond your budget.
- (208) *Swear by His [Yahweh's] name truly.* **"You shall fear Yahweh your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name."** (Deuteronomy 10:20) When we take oaths, when we give our word, we are doing it before Yahweh, whether we realize it or not. As we saw in the Matthew 5 and 23 passages quoted above (#203 and 205), the Jews of Yahshua's day had developed a complicated hierarchy of things you could "swear on" that gave you greater or lesser wiggle room in your truthfulness, depending on how exalted the object of the oath was perceived to be. Yahshua and Moses both condemned this practice. Here Moses says, in so many words, "When you swear, do it in Yahweh's name. That way, you'll be serious about telling the truth." Of course, the rabbis subsequently arranged it so you couldn't even *speak* His name, which

made taking oaths on it a little difficult. But the verse at hand makes it clear: God's people were to revere Him, serve Him, cling to Him, and appeal to Him as the absolute standard of truth.

- (209) *Do not delay in fulfilling vows or bringing vowed or free-will offerings.* **“When you make a vow to Yahweh your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for Yahweh your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to Yahweh your God what you have promised with your mouth.”** (Deuteronomy 23:22) For the umpteenth time: keep your word. Fulfill your promises. Perform your vows promptly. Don't make promises you can't keep, and if you can avoid it, don't make commitments based on uncertain future events, for you don't know what will happen tomorrow. Whatever you say or do will be weighed against Yahweh's perfect standard of righteousness, so don't take these matters lightly.

SABBATICAL AND JUBILEE YEARS

- (210) *Let the land lie fallow in the Sabbatical year.* **“When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a sabbath to Yahweh. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to Yahweh. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land. And the sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you: for you, your male and female servants, your hired man, and the stranger who dwells with you, for your livestock and the beasts that are in your land—all its produce shall be for food.”** (Leviticus 25:2-7). As we have seen (#170, 171, 190-193, 199), the entire 25th chapter of Leviticus instructs the Children of Israel about the Sabbatical year and its heavy-duty, industrial-strength cousin, Jubilee. On the surface, this is a simple, low-tech way to ward off soil depletion. If the Sabbath was practiced faithfully, the land could be expected to produce more bountiful crops in six years than it would in seven if worked all the time without a break. Beyond that, it taught the Israelites to trust Yahweh. It took real faith to abstain from planting, or gathering the volunteer crop, and relying instead on Yahweh to make the provision of the previous years sufficient for their needs. In other words, the Law of the Sabbath Year flies in the face of human logic. It requires faith, just as abstaining from gathering manna on the Sabbath day required faith on the part of the exodus generation. It's the same lesson, scaled up.

Sadly, there's no Biblical indication that Israel ever systematically kept the Law of the Sabbath Year or Jubilee. I don't recall any "off-hand" mentions that "such and such an event took place within a sabbatical year." As a matter of fact, the Israelites' eventual expulsion from the land was due in part to their failure in this very thing. We read in II Chronicles 36:20-21: **"And those who escaped from the sword he [Nebuchadnezzar] carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years."** In other words, the Jews had neglected the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee for 490 years.

Was God really *that* concerned about soil nutrient depletion, or was there something else, something deeper, at stake here? Yahweh often comes down hard on Biblical "players" when they mess up His pictures. For example, Moses was denied entrance to the promised land because he struck the rock (a picture of Christ) instead of speaking to it to obtain life-giving water, as he had been told to do (Numbers 20:7-13). And I think that's what's going on here. Israel's failure to let the land enjoy its sabbaths destroyed a picture, a prophetic metaphor, of something Yahweh was trying to teach us about His plan of redemption. The whole idea of the Sabbath Year was to trust God for our provision when it seemed more logical to work for it ourselves. If we apply this principle to our reconciliation with Yahweh, it all becomes clear. Every religion on earth says you've got to work for it, either with the giving of alms, or the performance of rituals, or the practice of self denial, etc. But Yahweh says, "In the end, you *can't* work for it. You can only trust Me to provide for you." Provide what? Eternal life—an everlasting relationship with our loving Heavenly Father.

But what's the meaning of the six-plus-one formula? We saw it in God's description of the creation, and again in the Fourth Commandment (the Sabbath day), and now here in the Sabbath Year. What is Yahweh's point? Taking into account Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8, where the principle is stated that with Yahweh one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day, it appears that God is telling us about the timing of His redemptive plan. Man will have six thousand years to work, learn, grow, and figure things out. But on the seventh day (i.e., the seventh millennium) our work will be superfluous. We will enter the Kingdom through the graciousness of the King, or not at all.

- (211) *Cease from tilling the land in the Sabbatical year. "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie*

fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat.” (Exodus 23:10-11) If you’ll recall from the previous mitzvah, what grew voluntarily, either grain or fruit, was to be left unharvested during the Sabbatical year. This mirror passage in Exodus refines our understanding a bit. It seems that though the *landowner* wasn’t to harvest what grew of its own accord for profit, the poor could still gather what they needed to keep body and soul together. It makes sense: since they didn’t own the land, it didn’t matter how bountiful the crops had been in the previous years—they still didn’t have any reserves. The rules, presumably, were unchanged from other years—they couldn’t harvest with a sickle as if they owned the place. But neither they nor the beasts of the field would starve to death, either.

Is there a counterpart to the “poor” in Yahweh’s plan of redemption as pictured in the Law of the Sabbatical Year? Perhaps. The “poor” of the earth are those who haven’t formed a saving relationship with Yahshua—not those actively opposed to Him, but rather the merely “lost,” the searching, the hungry. They see the servants of the Landowner (Yahweh) working busily doing “religious things” most of the time: giving alms, gathering for worship, seeking for the Master’s lost sheep—that sort of thing. Though the servants know about and rely on His grace, this fact is sometimes hard for outsiders to see because of all their busyness. But the Landowner instructs them to occasionally leave the work and trust His provision—to favor Mary over Martha. If the “servants” do this, the “poor” will have an opportunity to see the trusting relationship the servants have with their Master. If, however, the servants ignore the Landowner’s directives and keep on practicing “churchianity,” the trust that should be evident will be hidden, and the poor will remain hungry and destitute.

- (212) *Don’t till the ground in the Sabbatical year. “In the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to Yahweh.”* (Leviticus 25:4) This is merely the negative statement of affirmative Mitzvot #210 and #211. It’s not really a separate precept.
- (213) *Do not do any work on the trees in the Sabbatical year. “[In the seventh year] you shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.* (Leviticus 25:4) This isn’t a separate precept either. Yahweh didn’t provide an exhaustive list of the things you couldn’t do during the Sabbatical year because His intended meaning was quite clear and simple: *Don’t provide for yourself—I will provide for you. Just relax and trust Me.* His precepts are usually detailed enough for us to understand the concept, but not so detailed that “religious practice” is required to carry them out. *That* is man’s fault.

- (214) *Do not reap the aftermath that grows in the Sabbatical year in the same way it is reaped in other years. “What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land.”* (Leviticus 25:5) Maimonides, it seems, is trying to pull a fast one here. Yahweh is *not* talking about not harvesting the *aftermath*, that which is left over after the first pass by the reapers. He’s saying “During the Sabbatical Year, leave the fields, vineyards and orchards untended—*period*.” For that matter, even in a normal year, going back over the fields with a fine-tooth comb wasn’t supposed to be done, because the gleanings were to be left for the poor. See Mitzvah #41: “...**nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest.**” (Leviticus 23:22) If we trust Yahweh, we won’t obsess over every bushel—or every dollar. When we purposely let some of our income “slip through our fingers” in the interests of our fellow man, trusting God to look after us anyway, Yahweh is honored.
- (215) *Do not gather the fruit of the tree in the Sabbatical year in the same way it is gathered in other years. “You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land.”* (Leviticus 25:4-5) Again, the precise wording of the rabbinical mitzvah is calculated to provide a possible loophole for the landowner. The “way it is gathered” has nothing to do with it. God’s precept is clear: don’t harvest your crop at all during the Sabbatical year. The poor may come in and gather the volunteer crop to sustain themselves, but no work is to be done by the landowner or his staff, and no profit is to be made from the bounty of the land. “**The seventh year you shall let [your land] rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove.** (Exodus 23:11) The principle applies equally to all of the fruit of the soil—grain fields, orchards, vineyards, and olive groves. We are to be reminded that all of this is a gift from Yahweh. We have nothing that He did not provide. Including our salvation.
- (216) *Sound the Ram’s horn in the Sabbatical year. “Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you.”* (Leviticus 25:9-10) The ram’s horn, or *shofar*, was not blown to inaugurate the Sabbatical year (as the mitzvah says), but rather Jubilee—the fiftieth year, or more to the point, a special Sabbath year immediately following the seventh Sabbatical year in the series. (We’ll discuss Jubilee more fully under

mitzvot #221-226.) Although Yahweh’s mandated calendar year began in the spring (on the first day of Nisan, two weeks before Passover—see Exodus 12:2), Yahweh set the beginning of Jubilee at the sixth miqra, the Day of Atonement, on Tishri 10—in the fall. It should be noted that this is *not* the day celebrated as “Jewish New Year,” a.k.a. *Rosh Hashanah*, which is a rabbinical error left over from the Babylonian captivity set to coincide with the *fifth* miqra, the Feast of Trumpets. Sufficiently confused?

We need to ask ourselves: what’s the connection (in Yahweh’s mind) between Jubilee and the Day of Atonement? As we shall see, Jubilee is the day of liberty—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have the slate wiped clean. Debts are forgiven, captives are set free, and lands revert to their original owners. And the Day of Atonement is its spiritual counterpart: the sins of the nation of Israel were covered—atoned for, counted as having been satisfied—through the sacrifices offered on this day, once each year. What we see is a picture of total freedom, total forgiveness, provided by Yahweh through the sacrifice of His Anointed, Yahshua, in the year 33 A.D.—a Jubilee year, I might add. Yahshua Himself predicted this in His Nazareth sermon recorded in Luke 4:16-21, in which He applied Isaiah 61 to Himself. It’s worth noting that the next Jubilee year from our perspective will fall in 2033—precisely 40 Jubilees later. Could it be that Yahweh has something special planned?

“Jubilee,” by the way, is a transliteration of the Hebrew *yobel*, meaning “the blast of a horn, specifically the signal of trumpets; hence the instrument itself and the festival thus introduced:—jubilee, ram’s horn, trumpet.” (S)

- (217) *Release debts in the seventh year.* “**At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called Yahweh’s release.**” (Deuteronomy 15:1-2) Part of the Sabbatical Year program was the general release of debts. There are some underlying assumptions that need to be kept in mind, of course: first, this was designed to be done within the borders of the Land, among Israelites exclusively, in the simple, closely knit agrarian society that existed in the centuries after the exodus. It’s clear from the verses immediately following these that gentile borrowers were *not* to be released from their debts (see #57 and 58). Second, it’s also pretty clear that the precept was never intended to be pressed into service in a society with the culture of debt to which we have subjected ourselves today. Yahweh wasn’t advocating buying a new car on credit or running up the balance on your credit card just before the Sabbath year so you’d be “forgiven” under

the Law. This wasn't a license to steal. Third, there were no such things as institutional lenders in those days. If someone borrowed some money or provisions from his neighbor, it was because he had fallen on hard times—presumably through no particular fault of his own (laziness, drunkenness, etc.), and apparently as a temporary condition—as in “Loan me a few shekels until the barley harvest.”

Still, I'd like to see those who insist that we must all keep the letter of the Torah in order to work our way into Yahweh's good graces toe the line on this one. They're generally all too happy to abstain from pork, wear the *tsitzit*, and worship on the seventh day—and deride those who don't. But loaning freely and then turning around and forgiving the debts just because a date on the calendar has passed is generally considered to be too much to ask. Sorry, guys. You can't have it both ways. Even Maimonides, who weasels out of the underlying principle in favor of the letter of the Law every chance he gets, has this one right.

It's the underlying principle, of course, that runs no risk of being rendered obsolete by changing times and cultural shifts. It's the underlying principle that will endure forever with “every jot and tittle” intact. In the case of the Law of the Sabbatical Year, the principle is that the day is coming when all who belong to Yahweh will be forgiven their debts and freed from their chains.

- (218) *Do not demand return of a loan after the Sabbatical year has passed. “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called Yahweh's release.”* (Deuteronomy 15:1-2) Maimonides is extrapolating here, but okay, he's made a good point. A debt forgiven under this Law is not just postponed for a year. It's eliminated, erased from the books, permanently expunged. Yahweh holds no grudges. If he has forgiven our sins, they are indeed forgiven, past, present, and future, never to be remembered or used against us ever again. The only way this is possible is that the debts are not technically *forgiven*—rather, they're *paid off*. If a bank “writes off” a bad debt, the loss is eventually spread over the whole customer base in the form of higher interest rates (or if the government has absorbed the loss, in the form of a hidden tax called inflation). Everybody pays; everybody suffers. But in God's economy, the debt isn't written off. Rather, God's own Son has paid our debt Himself—paid it off in full with the most valuable commodity in existence, His own blood.
- (219) *Do not refrain from making a loan to a poor man because of the release of loans in the Sabbatical Year. “Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your*

heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to Yahweh against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing Yahweh your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'" (Deuteronomy 15:9-11) We've already seen this passage in the context of taking care of the poor (#51). It should be an embarrassing indictment to the preachers of the "Health and Wealth" doctrine (i.e., that God wants all His followers to be rich and successful in every way, and if you're not, you haven't shown enough faith—*by giving generously so this TV ministry of ours might stay on the air; hallelujah, praise Jee-suzz*). In stark contrast with this sort of foolishness, Yahweh says, "**The poor will never cease from the land.**" Why does He allow some of His followers to suffer poverty while He blesses others with riches? It should be obvious by now: He wants those of us that He's blessed with this world's goods to give freely to His children without them, for by doing so, we are reflecting the attributes of the God whose mercy has been freely given to us.

In the context of the prophetic underpinnings of the Sabbatical Year, the lesson seems clear: as the time grows short, let us not cease to freely distribute the real wealth—the truth concerning the salvation Yahweh has made available to us. The "poor" in this case are those without this truth—the lost world. As with Yahweh's entire "welfare" program, the poor aren't forced to accept a handout. They are, rather, to be active participants in their own redemption. Belief is their prerogative. Remember, Yahweh never abridges our right to choose Him—or not to.

- (220) *Assemble the people to hear the Torah at the close of the seventh year.* "And Moses commanded them, saying: 'At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before Yahweh your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear Yahweh your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear Yahweh your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.'" (Deuteronomy 31:10-13) It's significant that a periodic public reading of the Torah—the whole shootin' match—was timed to coincide with the forgiveness and freedom wrought by the Law of the Sabbatical Year. And it's doubly significant that this rehearsal of the Law was to take place at the Feast of Tabernacles. Three separate concepts

have been woven together by the command of Yahweh—our release from debt, the Word of God that releases us, and the seventh and final miqra, prophetic of God’s promise to “tabernacle” or camp out among us for a thousand years upon the earth. The closer you look, the more seamlessly flawless the plan of God is shown to be.

But wait: it gets better. Remember back in Mitzvah #216 where we observed that Jubilee would begin on the Day of Atonement? If you’ve been keeping score, you’ve noticed that many of the same things are mandated for both the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee—the release from debt, freedom from servitude, the rest from our labors, and the miraculous provision of our needs by Yahweh (see #226 for the one exception). But with the association of the Sabbatical Year with the *Feast of Tabernacles*, as we see here, it becomes clear that Yahweh is implying a significant distinction.

In practice, by the time Jubilee rolled around (the year immediately following the seventh Sabbatical Year), there would have been precious little left to restore or forgive. Jubilee should seem like a mere continuation of the same blessed state of affairs. And that is precisely what we find in Yahweh’s prophetic program. After the thousand-year Millennial reign of Christ (beginning with the Feast of Tabernacles) the redeemed of God will move—after a few hiccups—directly into eternity. (The hiccups? Yahshua has a few last-minute details to take care of—the last of man’s rebellions, the Great White Throne judgment, and Satan’s final incarceration.) Whereas the Feast of Tabernacles (corresponding to the Sabbatical Year) is prophetic of God dwelling with man during the Millennium, the Day of Atonement (corresponding to Jubilee) speaks of the forgiveness of sin—that which enables us to dwell forever in sweet fellowship with our God in His new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem. Like the scapegoat of old, our transgressions will have been eternally banished. And we shall at last be holy, separated *from* our sin and separated *to* our Heavenly Father.

- (221) *Count the years of the Jubilee by years and by cycles of seven years. “You shall count seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years; and the time of the seven sabbaths of years shall be to you forty-nine years. Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants.”* (Leviticus 25:8-10) Here we see the timeline of Jubilee. Presumably commencing when the children of Israel entered the Land of Promise (verse 2) they were to keep track of time in

“septades,” cycles of seven years—six years of regular activity followed by one “Sabbatical” year in which the land was to rest, etc. After seven of these seven-year cycles, an extra Sabbath year, called *yobel* or Jubilee, would be celebrated. Thus as we reckon time in terms of decades and centuries in our culture, the Hebrews related to the passing of years in terms of septades and Jubilees. The last Jubilee celebrated in Israel was at the beginning of Bar Kochba’s revolt, in 133 A.D. This, of course, means that 33, the year of Yahshua’s passion, was also a Jubilee year.

Yahweh has never forced mankind to believe in Him. He has always arranged things so that trust was an essential element in the formation of a relationship with Him. To do otherwise would abridge our ability to choose to love Him, and that’s what He desires—fellowship with people who have *chosen* to love Him, who *want* to be with Him. This explains why He has been somewhat coy in communicating His plan of redemption to us. If he left us no intellectual or emotional wiggle room, we would have no choice but to accept Him. So He used metaphors, pictures, types, symbols, and dress rehearsals to demonstrate His plan: they’re available, even obvious, to honest and diligent seekers after truth, but opaque and mysterious to those who don’t really care. The pattern of sevens we see here is ubiquitous in scripture, from God’s description of creation in Genesis to the bowl judgments of Revelation. The number seven (including sevenfold, sevens, and seventh) occurs over 600 times in scripture, more than any other number. To dismiss the recurrence of the six-plus-one pattern as coincidence is therefore highly presumptive.

But what does it mean? I can’t claim to have all the answers, but it seems obvious and unavoidable to me that Yahweh is telling us (those who will listen) that He has ordained seven thousand years as the time of man upon the earth—that is, seven thousand years will pass from the fall of Adam to the Last Judgment. In other words, His plan of redemption will take seven thousand years to unfold. And the six-one split? For the first six thousand years, God will reveal Himself primarily through the pictures and symbols I mentioned earlier. But during the seventh Millennium, He Himself will dwell on earth among us, reigning as King of kings. Where we used to live by faith, we will then live by sight, for God will dwell among us.

It’s conceivable, of course, that I’ve missed the whole point, that there’s some other explanation. But if I’m right, you should be aware that the seventh millennium is due to begin on the Feast of Tabernacles, a Sabbath, October 8, 2033.

- (222) *Keep the Jubilee year holy by resting and letting the land lie fallow. “...It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee to you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of its own accord.”* (Leviticus 25:10-11)
 In this respect, as with so many others, Jubilee is just like any Sabbatical year. The point is that Yahweh has provided what’s needful *beforehand*. It’s up to the child of Israel to recognize the bounty of God during the six normal years, putting a portion of the produce of the land aside for the Sabbath year. It’s up to Yahweh to make sure what was set aside is sufficient for the Israelite’s needs when he can no longer work. Clearly, this is all a picture of God’s plan of salvation. We rely on Yahweh’s Messiah for our redemption; Yahweh makes His sacrifice sufficient for us.
- (223) *Do not cultivate the soil nor do any work on the trees, in the Jubilee Year. “That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee to you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of its own accord, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine.”* (Leviticus 25:11) This is basically the negative permutation of the previous mitzvah. The rules apply equally to fields, orchards, groves, and vines: don’t plow, don’t plant, don’t prune, don’t harvest, and don’t gather. When you’ve reached the Sabbatical year (read: the Millennium) or the year of Jubilee (read: the eternal state), it’s too late to cultivate a relationship with Yahweh, or harvest the fruit of the Spirit. You will have already made your choice (during the “normal” years) to trust Him or not.
- (224) *Do not reap the aftermath of the field that grew of itself in the Jubilee Year, in the same way as in other years. “That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee to you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of its own accord, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine.”* (Leviticus 25:11) If this Jubilee precept sounds like déjà vu all over again, it’s because we’ve already seen the identical mitzvah when discussing the Sabbatical year (see #214). The point is, Yahweh’s lessons for mankind are practically identical for Jubilee and the Sabbatical year: it’s too late to start trusting God after the big day has arrived. The minor differences we see are due to the fact that during the Millennium, there will still be mortal, earthbound populations—the progeny of the Tribulation believers who somehow made it through to the end alive—in addition to the immortals, those who, whether dead or alive, were gathered together with their Savior on rapture day. In the eternal state, however, *every* believer will inhabit his immortal, incorruptible, resurrection body (see I Corinthians 15).
- (225) *Do not gather the fruit of the tree in the Jubilee Year, in the same way as in other years. “That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee to you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of its own accord, nor gather the grapes of your untended*

vine.” (Leviticus 25:11) Yeah, like I said, trees, vines, fields—it’s all the same metaphor. Aren’t you glad Maimonides made a separate and distinct “law” out of this? We might have missed it altogether.

(226) *Grant redemption of the land in the Jubilee year.* **“The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption of the land.”**

(Leviticus 25:23-24) This is the sole functional difference between the Sabbatical year and Jubilee: “leased” land did not revert to its original owners at the end of the Sabbatical year. This only happened at Jubilee. Therefore, it behooves us to determine what the land symbolized. To me, it can mean only one thing in the grand scheme of things: the land symbolized the earth itself—the whole world. It is our inheritance, to be sure, but **“The earth is Yahweh’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.”** Beyond that, we, through the sin of our father Adam, “sold” the earth to Satan back in the Garden of Eden. Through the law of Jubilee, Yahweh is arranging for us to get it back, to reclaim our inheritance. In case you haven’t noticed, Satan hasn’t been a very responsible tenant for the last six thousand years. And in anticipation of Yahshua’s return, he intends to trash the place even more than he already has.

Now, here’s the scary part. Satan’s time *isn’t* up when Christ returns to reign in glory. He’ll still have a thousand years left to go before his lease expires. That’s the bad news. The good news is that his lawlessness has finally caught up with him, and he’s going to prison for the duration of his lease. When he gets out, however, he’s going to go right back to his old tricks, deceiving the nations and unifying them in battle against Yahshua and His people—it’s the battle of Magog all over again; with the same results, I might add (see Revelation 20:7-9). Only then will Satan’s “lease” be up, and he will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:10).

The Law of Jubilee teaches us that our spirits won’t be the only thing in creation that God will redeem. He will also buy back the very earth beneath our feet.