

“Care for Those in Need”
Deuteronomy 23:19-20, 24-25; 24:6, 10-15, 19-22
October 11, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning, we continue our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs God’s people as to how they are to live in the land.

Today we’ll look at a few passages focused on the same theme that are scattered over two chapters.

So, let’s hear now from portions of Deuteronomy 23 and 24.

And as we do, please listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{23:19} “You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. ²⁰ You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that Yahweh your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.”

Then from chapter 24:

^{24:6} “No one shall take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge, for that would be taking a life in pledge.”

A few verses later we read:

^{24:10} “When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge. ¹¹ You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. ¹² And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. ¹³ You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before Yahweh your God.”

And then down to verse 19:

^{24:19} “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that Yahweh your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²² You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”

And finally, back to the end of chapter 23:

^{23:24} “If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. ²⁵ If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we gather this morning because we love your Word.
We know that your revelation to us
offers more wisdom than the wise of the world,
it gives us more understanding than the great thinkers of the world,
it gives us deeper understanding than the old and experienced of the world.
It holds us back from evil,
and keeps us from straying from you.
Teach us now from your word, we ask.
In Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:97-104]

Introduction

Our text this morning is about how God's people are supposed to relate to the poor and those in need.

And this is a concern that the Book of Deuteronomy and the Law of Moses in general spends a good bit of time on – it comes up not just in these chapters, but in a number of other places.

And as it does, what I think we see, is that our texts, as part of a larger system in the Old Testament law, call God's people to provide for those in need, in ways that are kind and that restore their dignity and peace, because that's how the Lord treats us, and so that's how he calls us to treat others in their need.

Let me say that again: What I think we see here is that our texts, as part of a larger system in the Old Testament law, call God's people to provide for those in need, in ways that are kind and that restore their dignity and peace, because that's how the Lord treats us, and so that's how he calls us to treat others in their need.

Let's consider that one piece at a time.

Part of a Larger System in the Old Testament Law That Call's God's People to Provide for Those in Need

First, these laws we've heard from this morning are part of a larger system in the Old Testament law, calls on God's people to provide for those in need.

And it's a system that really is quite radical, and doesn't fit into modern secular models, because it affirms a right to private property, while also qualifying that right in several significant ways, in the interest of caring for those in need.

In many societies, the wealthy tend to accumulate more and more, while the poor seem to end up with less and less over time. And the fortunes and misfortunes, the hard work or the grave mistakes of the previous generation, can largely determine the lives of the generation that follows – especially in negative ways.

But in ancient Israel, among his people, God called for something different. Acknowledging that over time, some people will do well, and others poorly – some will have success, others will struggle, and their struggles will effect not just themselves, but the next generation, God commanded ancient Israel that every 50 years, on the Year of Jubilee, all lands were to be returned to the families they were originally allotted to – evenly divided among the families of Israel. [Leviticus 25:10,13] Though inequalities might grow over the years and even decades, every generation, there will be a partial reset, and a redistribution of the land, which was each family's primary means of providing for themselves. This law, if obeyed, would have had a massive effect on poverty in Israel, preventing the kind of generational struggles we often see in the world.

But that wasn't all God put in place. Because as great as that might be for those who struggle, 50 years is a long time. And so, on top of that, God gave his people a law that all debts were to be forgiven every 7 years, giving relieve to the poorest and most indebted every 7 years. [Deuteronomy 15:1-11]

But seven years can also be a long time. If a person developed such a debt that they could no longer provide for themselves and their family, what could they do until that 7th year? Well, for that God allowed a system of indentured servitude, where a person could agree to serve another for those six years, in order to have their debts paid off, and the one they served would also be required to take care of them and provide for them, in addition to paying off their debts. And so, they had daily bread, in addition to relief from their debts.¹ [Deuteronomy 12:15]

And so, whether at the level of generational poverty, or at the level of dealing with debt carried over the course of seven years, or at the level of destitution in the years between – on all of these levels, God provided systemic care and protections for those who might fall into need. All of that has already come up in the law of Moses.

Our laws this morning look at needs on an even more immediate level. They look at needs for daily bread, for seasonal food, and for immediate financial provisions.

Take a look at our texts again.

In the first three texts we have laws about loans. And we can tend to misunderstand the emphasis here.

¹ We might add that the laws which allowed someone to remain an indentured servant were also a provision for those who felt they couldn't handle the responsibility of providing for themselves well. If they found someone who took good care of them, whom they liked working for, then they could voluntarily request to become that person's permanent indentured servant. And the one they worked for would be obligated to care for them, just as they would be obligated to work. And so, those who would struggle to work their own land were also provided for, along with their families. [Deuteronomy 15:16-18]

There's debate within church history on whether or how these texts might apply to things like commercial loans. That's a very interesting topic, but it's not where we're going to focus this morning. Because the primary form of loan in view here is what we might call a "charity loan." This is a loan to a neighbor who is in need.

And commentators note that that may be what's behind the distinction made in 23:20 – that what's in view there is not someone facing poverty, but a foreign merchant seeking a commercial loan. There, interest is allowed.

But an earlier text in Deuteronomy makes it clear that what's mainly in view here is a neighbor who's seeking a loan because they're in need. Deuteronomy 15 says: "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that Yahweh your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be." [15:7-8]

The main focus of this text is not commercial loans for the businessman or investor, but charity loans to the poor.

Lending here was a form of charity. And part of what made it a form of charity was the law we mentioned earlier: that every seven years, these debts were forgiven. And so, a charity loan was essentially a way of saying: "I'm giving this money to you, to help you. If you're able to work and get ahead, and pay me back before we get to the year of release, then good. But if by the seventh year – the year of release – you're still struggling, then this no longer a loan, it's a gift."²

These are the kinds of loans in view in our text this morning.

But in addition to these laws, we also have a call for God's people to provide in other ways for seasonal and daily needs of the poor.

We see provision for seasonal needs in verses 19-22 of chapter 24. These are the gleaning laws. An Israelite who had land and was growing crops is essentially ordered to be less efficient, in order to leave food that could be harvested in his field, and on his trees, and on his vines, for those in need. [see also Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22] The needy could come themselves, or send a more able-bodied family member [as Naomi did with Ruth] to harvest the grain and fruit that remained.

This was a sacrifice for the hardworking farmer. The Israelite who obeyed this law would have a bit less themselves for the coming year. And they had done the work to grow that food – working the land, planting, and tending their crops. But they were still to leave some behind for others – others who might come to harvest, but who did not sow or work like they had. This was a seasonal provision for those in need.

In addition to that, there were also daily provision. We see this in chapter 23, verses 24 and 25. This was a provision for the poor or for travelers. If you were walking through someone's field,

² We can note that this dynamic was so well known among the people, that Moses had to warn them not to avoid charity loans close to the year of release – in Deuteronomy 15 Moses said: "Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him." [15:9-10]

you could gather grain or fruit from it, and eat it then and there. You couldn't take a basket of it home – but you could eat as you walked through the field. You could get food for that day, even though you hadn't planted or tended it.

Each of these provisions, from daily food up to generational needs every 50 years all make up a system of laws in the Old Testament that call on God's people to provide for those in need in a variety of ways.

Providing for Those in Need in Ways That Are Kind and Restore Their Dignity and Peace

That's the system of provision God puts in place.

But what I think is interesting about our texts this morning is that much of their instruction is not about the provision itself ... but it's about how God's people are to provide it: how they are to treat those in need as they provide for them.

Because what we see here is that God called his people to provide for those in need in ways that were kind, and that restored their dignity and peace.

Consider the peace of those in need.

Taking on a loan with interest, with firm requirements to repay it, might have provided for the immediate needs of the poor in ancient Israel, but it would have added great anxiety and fear and uncertainty for the future.

But verses 19 and 20 of chapter 23 command that no interest can be charged on loans to those in need, and if they do not recover from their poverty, the loan would be forgiven in just a few years. Instead of fear and insecurity, such charity loans restored peace for those who were struggling.

But not only did God call for his people to provide in ways that brought peace to others – he called on them to provide in ways that were kind.

A giver of a charity loan could be tempted to impose punishment or pressure on someone in need, to try to teach them a moral lesson, or to try to push them to repay the loan more quickly. They would do this by taking an item as a pledge for the loan that the poor recipient could not live without – something like the hand mill they needed to make bread, or the cloak they needed to keep from freezing.

But verses 6 and 12 and 13 from chapter 24 all prohibit such behavior. The giver of a charity loan could not impose this kind of paternalistic punishment or self-interested pressure on those who sought help from them. Instead, they had to be gentle and kind, not taking anything in pledge that would harm the recipient of their charity.

God called his people to provide for those in need in ways that were kind, and that restored their peace.

But also, God called his people to act in ways that would preserve and restore the dignity of those in need.

For example, the law of God here protects the privacy of the poor and guards them from humiliation. We see this especially in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 24.

There, someone giving a loan to a poor neighbor, was not permitted to enter the poor neighbor's house to take a pledge – or collateral for the loan. They had to wait outside, and the poor neighbor would bring it out to him. This had a few effects. For one, it kept the giver of the loan from acting like he owned his neighbor – he couldn't just barge into his home and take whatever he liked as pledge. It also kept the giver from embarrassing the poor neighbor, walking through his home and seeing how little was there. On top of that, it kept the giver from overly scrutinizing the need of his poor neighbor. From what was visible to the public – the poor neighbor's herds, or crops, or lack thereof, the giver could make some general assessment of his neighbor's need. But the giver wasn't allowed to go through his neighbor's house and to appraise the worth of everything he saw there. Even when seeking aid, the poor man had some measure of privacy.

All of this protected the poor neighbor's dignity: from embarrassment, from undue scrutiny, from a sense of subservience towards the giver.

The dignity of those in need was also restored by encouraging them towards personal agency. Verses 14 and 15 of chapter 24 try to avoid a situation where a poor man is prevented from working because his need is too immediate, and wages from work will be delayed. Instead, wages must be given the day the man works, encouraging those who are able to work, to do so.

Similarly, the gleaning laws encourage those who can go out and work in the field, to harvest their own food for themselves and their family – not needing to beg, but able to harvest the food for themselves.³

And the possibility of paying back charity loans before the year of release gave those in need the dignity of being able to repay the gift they received, if they were able.

In all of these ways, God called on his people not just to provide for those in need, but he called on them to provide for them in ways that were kind, and that restored their dignity and their peace.

How God Treats Us

That's what God calls his people to do.

But why does he call for it? Why does he expect this of ancient Israel? Why does he expect this pattern of behavior from Christians today?

There are, of course, many voices out in the world who would argue against this kind of treatment of the poor: "Don't you realize," they might say, "that if you provide for the poor, they'll never learn to work? They should feel insecure – and not at peace. They should feel ashamed and embarrassed – that will teach them to get their act together. Once they've picked themselves up by their bootstraps, and put their lives back together, that's when they can have dignity, that's when

³ Faithful Israelites could even give extra in this way while preserving that dignity. In an early interaction with Ruth, the Moabite widow, faithful Boaz instructs his fieldworkers to intentionally drop some sheaves in the field as they harvest, so Ruth can glean from them as she works behind them. [Ruth 2:16]

they can have peace.” Plenty of voices out in the world advocate for such an approach, and we may find ourselves thinking along similar lines.

So why should we treat those in need in the way that Deuteronomy calls us to?

Our text gives more than one answer to that question. But the most important answer it gives, I think, is in verse 22 of chapter 24. There Moses says: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”

“Remember that you were a slave.”

The past tense there is key for the Israelites. You “were” a slave. But you’re not anymore.

And why weren’t those Israelites slaves anymore?

It wasn’t because they’d purchased their own freedom. It wasn’t because they were clever enough to escape their own troubles. It wasn’t because they fought their way out by their own strength. It wasn’t because they picked themselves up by their own bootstraps.

It wasn’t because they rescued themselves from trouble.

It was because Yahweh, the God of the Bible, came, and he freed them.

And when Yahweh freed them, he didn’t do it in a way that humiliated them, or embarrassed them. He didn’t shame them or make them feel like their future was uncertain, or like they were worthless for needing his help.

God provided for them, and he did it in a way that was kind. He did it in a way that restored their dignity and their peace. And because God had treated them that way, in their need, he called on them to treat others in need, in the same way.

And he calls for the same thing from his people today.

Because, as we discussed last week, we too, were slaves – slaves to sin. [John 8:34; Romans 6:16]

We were spiritually poor and in debt – not merely in a financial sense, but in a cosmic sense – we were spiritually bankrupt before our Maker. We were utterly needy, and had worked up a debt we could never pay off.

But then Jesus, who was rich in every way, became poor, for our sake, so that by his poverty we might become rich [2 Corinthians 8:9] – so that by his sacrifice, he would not only paid off our debt, but he would provide for our daily need, he would shower his riches upon us, and he would provide a way forward, for us to grow and follow him.

And when he provided all this, for our great need, he didn’t humiliate us, but instead he came to us in humility. He did not crush us with criticism, but he received shame we deserved on the cross. He did not press a new insecurity onto us, in order to teach us a lesson for what we’d done, but he came alongside us, and he gave us peace not just over our past but also over our future. He gave

us dignity, and a noble calling to live as his people. He was kind and loving, and a brother to us, as he provided for us in our need.

That's how he treated us when we were in need.

And so how could we treat those who come to us in need with contempt? How could we refuse to care for them? How could we be bitter with them, when Jesus was so kind to us? How could we shame and harshly critique them when Jesus has been so gentle with us? How can we punish them for their needs, when Jesus has been so gracious to us?

Jesus has shown us a generosity that is gentle and kind, restoring our dignity, and giving us peace. How can we then refuse to do the same for others?

Our texts, as part of a larger system in the Old Testament law, call on God's people to provide for those in need, in ways that are kind and that restore their dignity and peace, because that's how the Lord treats us.

We need to appreciate what the Lord has done for us. We need to be thankful for how he's treated us.

How God Calls Us to Treat Others in Need

And we need to see that because that's how God treated us in our need, that's how he calls us to treat others now, in their need.

The unbelieving world often doesn't treat those in need that way.

I began reading a book recently that examines how some government programs meant to serve those in need are often carried out in our country.

One recipient of a particular program summarized their experience by saying: "the systems are set up to really dehumanize [...] people" [Debra Guckenheimer, quoted in Lowery, 52]

One government official admitted that they had created policies that were meant to present those seeking aid with "multiple unsolvable dilemmas" [Quoted in Lowery, 88] "Offer something," the author summarizes, "but make it impossible to access." [Lowery, 21]

As one sociologist puts it, a climate of "punitive adversarialism" is often created [Spencer Headworth quoted in Lowery, 38] – the giver of help antagonistically questions the person coming for help, punishing them through the process, for having a need, and asking for assistance.

Rather than kindness, those in need often feel they experience hostility. Rather than dignity they feel dehumanized. Rather than peace, they feel fear and anxiety.

Of course, not all government aid is like that. But some is.

Deuteronomy reminds us that it should not be so among God's people.

For one thing, as Christians we should seek to influence our government, demanding that legitimate aid to those in need is administered in ways that are kind and that restore their dignity and peace, as God calls for in his law.

But second, Christians should make sure that we follow both the letter and the spirit of God's law in these matters.

When God's people help those in need, when Christians serve those in need, it should not be like the unbelieving world does it. It should instead resemble the way the Lord has served us.

First, that should be true at the level of institutional ministries of mercy.

As those who have been treated so kindly by the Lord, we should seek to partner with ministries that treat those in need with similar kindness – ministries like Tacoma Rescue Mission, the Good Neighbor Village, CareNet, and others who not only provide for those in need, but who do it with kindness, seeking to recognize and restore the dignity and the peace of those they serve.

We should do that as a church. And as we're able, we should take up that call individually as well. Many of you have in some way. And we can't all do everything. But we can ask: Is there a way that the Lord might be calling us to serve in these ministries or others like them – to serve those in need in ways that reflect in some way how Christ has served us?

On an institutional level, these texts also remind us of the importance of the work our deacons do.

What we have outlined this morning – what Deuteronomy describes – is not easy. Our deacons are called to be careful stewards of the funds entrusted to them, while also being open-handed and generous. They are called to try to determine the needs of those who come to them, while respecting the dignity and privacy of those who come seeking help. They are called to give without causing embarrassment, to come alongside people without causing shame, to reflect God's love and generosity while being faithful managers of what's been entrusted to them. And almost all the work they do in this area is invisible almost all of us, almost all of the time. It's difficult and thankless work that takes wisdom and care.

And so, we should appreciate the work they do. We should support them. We should pray for them. We should be thankful for their faithful service.

Because the Lord calls us, at an institutional level, as his people, to provide for those in need, in ways that are kind and that restore their dignity and peace, because that's how the Lord treats us.

But beyond institutions, and more broadly than just financial needs ... we are all called, as followers of Jesus, to treat those who comes to us with any kind of need this way.

Whether it's a friend or family member who comes to us with a financial need ... or a fellow Christian who comes to us with a spiritual need ... or a friend who comes to us with an emotional or personal need ... or a co-worker who comes to us with a wisdom need ... or a child who comes to us with a childish need ... lots of different people may come to us with lots of different needs.

Love and wisdom and circumstances in each situation will dictate to us exactly what kind of assistance we should give them – what each situation calls for.

But while what we give may vary depending on the situation ... we are always called to care for them in ways that are kind ... and that restore their dignity and peace.

We are not to lash out with impatience or frustration – because that’s not what Jesus did to us.

We are not to humiliate them with an attitude of condescension or sarcasm – because that’s not what Jesus did to us.

We are not to impose false uncertainty on them to scare them and rob them of peace – because that’s not what Jesus did to us.

But instead, as Jesus did for us, we are called to care for those in need in ways that are kind, and that restore their dignity and peace.

We are called to love them, just as Jesus has loved us.

Conclusion

Jesus, has rescued us from our need. He suffered so that we might be spared. He gave so that we might receive. He was distressed so that we might have peace. He walked in humility, so that we could have dignity.

And so, brothers and sisters, remembering how Jesus has loved and cared for us, let us also seek to love and care for all who come to us in need: meeting their needs with kindness and love, that restores their dignity and peace.

Being instruments of Jesus’s generous grace ... because we have first been recipients of his generous grace.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: Norton, 2004.
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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or

recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.