Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the news stories from last week was that around 560,000 beneficiaries have borrowed nearly $2 billion from the Ministry of Social Development for things like dentist bills, car repairs, and electricity. And the average amount of borrowing is up $500 per borrower from three years ago. Another news story was that the government is spending $1 billion every three months on emergency housing. And we could add reports about growing queues at foodbanks, schools providing breakfasts and lunches for hungry children, and increasing numbers of beggars on the main streets of pretty much every town and city in New Zealand.

And at the other end of the spectrum, seven of New Zealand’s top 10 richest people have a net worth of over $2 billion dollars. Four years ago, there were only four in that bracket. And New Zealand’s richest person has seen their net worth go from $7.5 billion to $12.8 billion in those four years.

Now, statistics are just that – statistics; they don’t tell the whole story. There are a whole variety of factors that are relevant to the figures I have given you. Nevertheless, a common trend in all societies is for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. And that is a key concern of Leviticus 25. God did not want any of His people to fall into a life of absolute poverty or slavery. So these rules were designed in part to force the ‘haves’ – the rich in Israel – to care for the ‘have-nots’ – the poor in Israel. This was God’s ‘social welfare system’ for Israel, if you like.

And we have already learned in this sermon series that laws like these – civil laws – were intended for Israel; they were not intended as universal laws for all countries at all times. But there are principles in these laws that we can apply today. Benevolence means to show kindness and generosity. And those saved by God’s benevolence in Christ ought to show benevolence toward others. But there are other wonderful concepts and terms in this chapter that are pictures of the gospel, which have their ultimate fulfilment in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let’s consider the **GOSPEL AND BENEVOLENCE LESSONS IN ISRAEL’S SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM**. And as we have done with many of the chapters of Leviticus, we will divide our time in half and begin with an **EXPLANATION** of the laws in this chapter before we consider some **APPLICATIONS** that arise out of the chapter for us as New Testament believers.

1. So first of all, a few words of **EXPLANATION** about these social welfare laws. And there were three categories of laws – Sabbaths for the land, redemption of land, and redemption of the poor. Let’s look at each in turn:
   1. The first is the **Sabbaths for the Land** that we see in verses 1-22.
      1. Once the people had arrived in the Promised Land, verses 1-7 explain that every seventh year, there was to be no sowing of crops, no pruning of crops, and no harvesting of crops. People and animals were allowed to eat the fruit or vegetables or seeds each day, as verses 6-7 explain, but there was to be no farming activity, if you like. And there were several reasons for this command:
         1. The **Fourth Commandment** requires us to work six days and to rest on the seventh day. And we need that rest. We are refreshed and revitalized so that we can return to our work. Well, **verse 4** explains that the land also needed rest. Continual sowing and composting and fertilizing and harvesting would take its toll on the land, so it was to have one year, every seven years, to rest and recover. And what this taught the people of Israel is that they *and the land* were to work together under the sovereign rule of the Lord; they both *belonged* to the Lord. And the Lord shared the land with the people for their *use* but not their *abuse*. And in this way, the land would provide for the food needs of the people.
         2. And this was a **powerful theological lesson**! Look at **verse 20**. As you know, sowing and harvesting is an annual cycle; you sow a crop in spring and you harvest it in Autumn. So if you did not sow a crop in the seventh year, you had no harvest the next Autumn. And when you finally were able to sow in the eighth year, the harvest would not come in until the ninth year. So that means that the harvest of year six and whatever grew on the ground or in the trees and vines in years seven and eight had to last all the way through to year nine – three whole years! So this command was about **trust** – the people had to trust that if they honoured the Lord by keeping this commandment, He would provide them with enough food for each day of those three years!
         3. But this command also had the effect of **equalizing the rich and the poor**. For six years, you had to grow your own food or buy it at the market. And the poor were cared for through the gleaning laws, which required farmers to not reap to the very edge of the harvest and to leave on the ground whatever they dropped during the harvest, for the poor to gather. But in the seventh year, *all* food was available to *all* people, all year long, including the poor and the slaves and non-Israelites and even animals; they were all allowed to go and eat fruit and vegetables and seeds from the fields and trees and vines for their daily food. So it was basically back to Eden. In Eden, Adam did not own the land and he had not planted the crops, but God made all the fruit and vegetables available to Adam as food. And it was the same for everyone in the Sabbath year!
      2. And this notion of equalizing the rich and the poor is a central part of the next Sabbath law – the **year of Jubilee**. After seven sets of seven years, so 49 years, a Jubilee year was to be observed in the 50th year, as **verse 11** explains. And Jubilee year began on the Day of Atonement, as we see in **verse 9**. So on the day that the people celebrated freedom from sin by the blood of a lamb, a whole year of freedom began.
         1. Again, there was to be **no sowing and reaping**. All food was available to all people, including the poor, as verse 11 explains.
            1. And some of you might have calculated that this meant two ‘no-farming’ years in a row – the 49th year – a Sabbath year, and the 50th year – Jubilee? And that may well be how it was but commentators also have all sorts of alternative calculations about exactly when and how Jubilee was observed, but I will leave you to look those up in your own time if you are curious.
         2. Another part of Jubilee was that if anyone had had to sell their land during the 49 years, because of some form of hardship, **the land was to be given back to the original owner in Jubilee**.
            1. Now, Israelites never sold their land to each other, outright. **Verse 23** is clear about this: “*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity … you shall allow a redemption of the land*.” You see, when the people of Israel arrived in the Promised Land, the land was divided up among the 12 tribes. And the pasture–land in each tribal region was divided up and every family was given a portion of pasture–land. Some lived on their pasture land but others eventually settled in cities but retained their portion of pasture-land. And so, what happened was that if times got tough, a price was calculated based on how many harvests there would be from your pasture-land until the next Jubilee year. And that price was paid to you as a lump sum. That’s what **verses 15-16** describe. So it was more like a lease than an outright sale. But when Jubilee year came, the use of the pasture-land reverted back to the original owner.
            2. And the theological point of this is spelled out in **verse 23** where the Lord says, “*The land is mine*.” God had given this land to the people of Israel. They were stewards of the land. But it was also their inheritance; their permanent portion of the land of promise. And the Lord used Jubilee to reinforce the *permanence* of their inheritance.
         3. So Jubilee was a huge deal! It taught the people about God’s sovereign rule and ownership of everything. But it was also designed to prevent total poverty in each generation. The Lord did not want a few people to become greedy landowners who took advantage of the misfortune of others. So sooner or later, you always regained your land.
   2. But Jubilee was a kind of a last-gasp, back-stop measure. Ideally, if the people truly loved God and His law, they would love their neighbour, and Jubilee would not be needed in all expect the most desperate cases. And that is what **verses 23-38** are about and the laws for the **Redemption of Land**.
      1. If someone became poor and had to sell his land, there were several ways that his land could be redeemed. From **verse 25**, a close relative could buy it back.
         1. Can anyone tell us what book of the Bible has a kinsmen-redeemer as a key theme? **Ruth**. Do you remember the story of Ruth, boys and girls? Because of a famine, Elimelech had sold his land and taken his family to Moab. And much later Naomi, his wife, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, came back to Israel. And Ruth met Boaz, who was a close relative of Naomi. And eventually he redeemed the land that had belonged to Elimelech and restored it to Naomi and Ruth. So this was redemption by a relative.
      2. **Verses 26-27** explain how the man himself could buy it back himself if he became prosperous later on.
      3. And from **verse 28**, if none of these options were possible, every 49 years, as we have seen, as a kind of ‘great reset,’ to borrow a modern term, the land was to go back to the original owner.
      4. And in **verses 29-34**, various situations of different persons and circumstances are addressed, but we won’t go into those details today.
      5. The key point of these laws was the prevention of total poverty and maintaining an inheritance for every family in the land of Promise. Again and again in the law, God reminds Israel that He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. And He brought them into a land with “*cities [they] did not build, and houses full of all good things that [they] did not fill, and … vineyards and olive trees [and crops] that [they] did not plant*.” So because God was their redeemer, a redemption which they in no way deserved, and because God provided them with land and houses and food, they were to show the same generosity to the poor of Israel; they were to look for any possible way to redeem the land. This was love of neighbour in action.
   3. And we see this same principle with the last section of laws, in **verses 35-55**, which are about the **Redemption of the Poor**.
      1. In the ESV, **verse 35** uses the term “*brother*,” but most other English versions use the term “*countryman*.” So it is not primarily a family connection here but a congregational connection. It is similar to how we as Christians refer to each other as ‘brothers and sisters.’ And the point of this section is that the wealthy in Israel were to care for their countrymen who had fallen on hard times. So an interest free loan was to be provided so that he could plant a crop or purchase goods to sell or supply services, in the hope that he did not slide further into debt and shame.
      2. But if that did not work and the man was unable to pay back the loan, **verse 39** explains that he was to become a **hired worker** to whomever it was that had lent him money. But the Lord was very clear, an Israelite could not be the slave of another Israelite; he never became the property of a fellow Israelite. And if he was redeemed or if Jubilee came around, he was released from the service and the debt.
      3. And we will say more about this later, but the Israelites were allowed to buy non-Israelite slaves. And there was no automatic Jubilee release for them; they were passed from father to son as part of the inheritance, as **verse 46** explains.
      4. And then, finally, in **verses 47-55**, we see the rules for if an Israelite became the slave of a Non-Israelite who lived in Israel. An Israelite slave could be redeemed and he was to be released at Jubilee. And in **verse 53**, slaves were not to be treated ruthlessly. And these provisions were because the Lord had rescued His people from slavery in Egypt. So He did not want them to be slaves to each other or the permanent slaves of anyone. Only the Lord was to be their lord.
   4. Well, before we move on our application section, here is an Old Testament history test for you: How did Israel do in regards to this social welfare program? Think about the prophets; did they come to Israel to praise the people for the justice and compassion that they regularly showed to widows and orphans? No. It was the opposite, wasn’t it. Greed and corruption and injustice became the norm. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Did you know that there is not a single record of a Jubilee celebration in the whole Old Testament?! In fact, commentators who have searched through the Bible and non-biblical sources suggest that there were very few Jubilees ever observed and after the exile, even the Sabbath year was not observed.
      1. The prophet **Amos** said that exile was coming in part because the rich “*sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals*.”
      2. In **Isaiah 5:7** we read, The Lord “*looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land*.” So the very thing that these laws were designed to prevent, greedy landowners, cruel slave-owners, and total poverty became commonplace in Israel.
2. Well, that brings us to the second section of the sermon, which is **APPLICATION**. What gospel and benevolence lessons for today arise out of God’s social welfare program? Well, there are at least three lessons that we can walk through fairly quickly.
   1. The first is the magnificent **gospel themes**.
      1. The Sabbath year is another part of the beautiful theme of salvation **rest** that is so prominent in Scripture. It starts way back in the Garden of Eden with God resting from the work of creation on the Sabbath Day as a pattern for our week. And when Jesus came to earth He said, “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*.” And the rest He offers is the rest of knowing that your sins are forgiven, that you have become an adopted child of God, and that your eternal destination will not be the fiery pit of hell but the joys and delights of the new heavens and the new earth.
         1. In **Hebrews 4** we read: “*There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience*.”
         2. Do you know this rest? Are you confident that heaven is yours? Your answer will be ‘yes’ if you have repented of your sins and believed in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And if you have not yet done this but you do want to enter into God’s rest, then go to Him in prayer, today. Say, Lord God, I confess that I am a sinner who has broken your commandments. Please forgive me because of Jesus’ work on the cross. And you will find rest for your soul! And you can then begin the life of learning more and more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus as part of a congregation of believers.
      2. Another wonderful gospel theme is **Jubilee**. Earlier in the service we read **Luke 4**. That is where Jesus said that He had come to “*proclaim good news to the poor … to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*.” And He began this work as He went about Judea and preached the gospel and healed the sick and raised the dead. But of course, all those that He healed and raised, eventually got sick and died again. So the full and permanent Jubilee is the one that you and I can enjoy today, in part, when we are released from our debt of sin by faith in Christ, and in full, when we are with the Lord Jesus in paradise, where we will be entirely free of sin and disease and death and the devil!
      3. Another wonderful gospel theme is the **Kinsmen redeemer**. **Isaiah 59:20** says, “*And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression*.” And **Isaiah 60:16** says, “*You shall know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour and your Redeemer*.” Only the Lord Jesus Christ can redeem us from our spiritual poverty; can rescue us from slavery to sin; can bring us into true freedom as we submit ourselves to His word and Spirit.
      4. So again, I ask you, is Jesus Christ your Saviour and Lord? Do you enjoy the rest and jubilee and redemption that can only be found in Him?
   2. Well, as we continue to think about this chapter, it would be remiss of me to not say anything about **SLAVERY**. What do we say to those who reject Christianity, in part, at least, because of the Bible’s acceptance of slavery? And in the history of the church there have been many professing Christians who have argued for slavery because of provisions like the ones in Leviticus 25.
      1. Well, a good starting point is **Genesis 1**, which teaches that all men and women are created in the image of God, which makes them worthy of being treated with dignity and respect.
      2. But given that truth, why do we find provisions for slavery then here in Leviticus? Well, it might help us to view slavery in the same way that the Bible speaks about **divorce**.
         1. God’s ideal is marriage until death do us part. In **Malachi 2:16**, God says, “*I hate divorce*.” And yet, in Deuteronomy we find regulations for divorce. Why? Well, in **Matthew 19** Jesus explained that these regulations were given because of the hardness of human hearts. Because men and women live in a fallen world, such things as divorce and slavery do occur. And so, God gave rules to safeguard especially women and slaves.
         2. I don’t know if you have ever thought about this but there is no mention in the law of God about prisons. No one was put in prison for a crime. You had to make restitution. And if you could not pay for your crime, servant-hood or slavery was how you paid for your crime. But God did not want slaves to be mistreated, which is why He provided rules and regulations here and elsewhere in His law.
      3. But even so, when Jesus came, He did not specifically outlaw slavery, and the Apostle Paul told slaves to obey their masters, and he sent the runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his master, Philemon. But what we can also say is that the teaching of the Lord Jesus did set in motion the values that eventually broke the back of slavery as an institution. Jesus said that He came to serve, not to be served. In **Matthew** **20**, for example, He condemned Gentile slave lords and said that His followers should instead be like servants or slaves. And the Apostle Paul said that in the eyes of God, “*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 even as Paul returned Onesimus to Philemon, he encouraged Philemon to view Onesimus first as a brother in Christ.
      4. Some of you might have watched the wonderful movie, ‘***Amazing Grace***.’ It is about William Wilberforce and his long fight in the English Parliament to have slavery abolished. And it was principles like the ones we have laid out that led him, as a Christian, to fight for the abolition of slavery.
      5. So I trust this very brief explanation helps you understand slavery in the Bible, and why we too ought to support continued efforts to end slavery and sex-trafficking.
   3. And that brings us to our third point of application – **our Social Welfare**. Again, it would be remiss to just rejoice in the gospel and not say anything about the care of the poor.
      1. Now, I am not an economic expert and this is not the place for a detailed economic lecture, but I am sure you can see why this chapter is a favourite of those who believe in **Communism** – the idea that no one should own anything and everyone should have equal resources. And it is also a favourite chapter of those who believe in **Socialism** – the idea that a government should take money from the rich and redistribute it to the poor. And plenty of people would argue that pure **Capitalism** – the idea that you let markets run free and wealth will naturally ‘trickle down’ through society has often led to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. So what biblical principles for the care of the poor should we consider?
         1. Well, this is why we read James earlier in the service. **James 1:27** says, “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*.” And from the Bible’s perspective, widows and orphans were the poorest members of society. And James also says, “*Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?*” And he also says, “*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*.”
         2. It was because the Lord had redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt and graciously given them a place in a land of abundance and plenty that they were to be generous and compassionate to those who were in need. And we see exactly the same in **Acts 4** with the earliest Christian believers. As those who understood that they had been redeemed from slavery to sin and condemnation, by faith in Christ, we read that “*no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common … There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need*.” This was their *voluntary* response to salvation in Christ alone by grace alone.
         3. Brothers and sisters, whatever property or possessions or skill and abilities you have are given to you by the Lord. They, and you, belong to the Lord. **Ephesians 4:28** commands the believer to “*do honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need*.” We must actively look for opportunities to provide for the needy, as individuals and as a congregation.
            1. This is one of the reasons that we bring tithes and offerings to the Lord. They are to be used to assist those who are in need.
            2. And it is also why Christians were instrumental in setting up hospitals and schools and orphanages and interest free loan societies and housing shelters and pregnancy support services and foodbanks, etc.
            3. Whatever we have has been graciously given to us by God and so we should actively look for ways to be generous with those in need.
         4. And the only other comment I would make in this connection is that this sort of social welfare must be deed *and word* – gold *and the gospel* – the desire for physical relief *and spiritual relief*. What the hungry need is food and what the homeless need is shelter, but a full belly and a warm bed *without the gospel* doesn’t answer the deepest need of lost sinners, which is salvation in Christ and the sure hope of eternal life.

Well, as we conclude, **verse 9** tells us that the year of Jubilee began with the blast of a trumpet. The blast of the trumpet that we hear today is the preaching of the gospel. For the gospel announces freedom from sin and guilt and eternal condemnation, by faith in Jesus. But when Jesus comes again, His coming will be announced by “*with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet*.” And then those who have believed in Jesus will enter in to the perfect and full spiritual and physical Jubilee. May every single one of us enjoy Jubilee! And all God’s people said, Amen.