

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Leviticus 25:8-28, 35-43

“Jubilee!”

Charles Wesley holds the world record, as far as we know, for hymn-writing. He published over 6000 hymns in his lifetime, and wrote 2000 more. He and his older brother John were Anglican ministers who became the founders of Methodism; they and their friend George Whitfield did more to change the moral, spiritual and social climate of England and the American colonies than anyone in the mid-1700s.

We all know the most famous of Charles' hymns: *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, *O for A Thousand Tongues*, *Love Divine*, *And Can It Be*, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, and so on. Among the other thousands, many are preserved in the *Sacred Harp* tradition – the hymnal of “Shape Note” singers - and none of them is a greater favorite than *Lenox* - the tune name, which is how all Sacred Harp hymns are known. The first verse and refrain run:

*Blow ye the trumpet, blow!  
The gladly solemn sound,  
Let all the nations know,  
To earth's remotest bound:*

*The year of Jubilee has come!  
The year of Jubilee has come!  
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.*

What is this *Year of Jubilee* that Wesley wants to celebrate? It is named after the Hebrew *yobel* – the ram's horn trumpet that was blown on Yom Kippur. *Leviticus 25* describes the “Sabbath of Years” – 49 years – when the Law requires that among God's people the land is allowed to rest, debts are canceled, slaves are redeemed and released, and land

is returned to ancestral families. The accumulated differences in living situations are leveled, at the command of the LORD, every 50 years. Just imagine!

Nobody is sure how long this was practiced in ancient Israel, but some of the principles survived the observance. A person of God must not be hardhearted or tightfisted to a countryman who is poor and in need; “*you must not lend him money at interest, or sell him food at a profit.*” When someone in dire poverty has sold himself into servitude, in the year of Jubilee his family or friends must redeem him.

Why these instructions for the people of God? Because “*every Israelite is mine,*” says the LORD, and he may not be owned by another; because “*the land is mine, and so may not be sold permanently*” and can only be leased. Just as the weekly Sabbath reminded people that they needed time to rest and worship and know that the LORD was their provider and deliverer, in the seventh year debts must be canceled and the land allowed to lie fallow, and in the 50-year Jubilee people and lands were restored – because God is the owner and provider of all good things, and nobody will starve by not working the Sabbath, or not sowing or reaping in the seventh year, or returning lands and slaves in the Jubilee.

The early Christian Church took up the concept of Jubilee. Their Latin translation of Psalm 100 – *Jubilate Deo!* – took up the idea of celebration, jubilation, making a joyful noise of gratitude to the Lord. In 1300, the Pope

declared there would be regular Jubilee Years, times of forgiveness of sins, of pilgrimage, and of celebration. The years quickly became irregular – the most recent was declared by John Paul II in 2000 as “a Great Jubilee,” with special emphasis on confession, forgiveness, and restoration. In Europe, though it passed largely unnoticed here, a strong movement arose that aimed at canceling the debts of impoverished Third World nations, led by singer Bono, supported by British Prime Minister Blair, and many other Christian leaders.

By now some of you are no doubt muttering “European Socialism!” Notice then that all this has deep biblical roots; that it was the command of the LORD to his people, it was enshrined into the Law at Sinai. No “left-wingers” made this up! If you want to read God’s view of human economics, you will have to include the Jubilee and its concepts of redemption, forgiveness, and restoration.

So what has this to do with us? Several basic things. Sabbath observance is God’s plan for human rest, worship, and good deeds, and about depending on God to provide for you when you stop working and worship him. You will not starve, and the world will not stop turning, if you take a day off – even if that’s a Monday, as it is for me!

Excess profit-making, where a few people ending up owning all the chips, all the land, all the people, all the money, is clearly condemned by God. The LORD says the poor will always be with us, but that it *should not* be that way, because we live in places and time of great abundance. So he makes a principle of restoration, so that the poor are not continually ground down.

How about charging interest, or making a profit from selling to the poor? Does our system exploit the least well off? Does NY State promote lotteries? In our economy, my credit card company (under a transparency law now forced upon it) tells me on my bill that if I only make minimum payments on my debt (which they clearly encourage), it will take me over 20 years to pay it off. In

that time I will have paid twice as much in interest as they loaned to me!

Think about your home mortgage. I estimate that in 14 years here, I have paid back maybe 20% of the principal, but already paid the company interest exceeding 120% of the original loan amount. And of course they expect me to pay as much again in the future, either by repaying the remaining principal when I sell the house, or paying interest for another 15 years! Now imagine your mortgage company writing to you and saying “we have already received from you over 140% of what we loaned you. That’s enough – your debt is now canceled, your principal owed is now zero.” That’s Jubilee! That’s jubilation!

My bank now pays me 0.2% interest on the money in my “savings account.” If I dip into the “overdraft protection” that is attached to my checking account, they charge me 18% interest on what I owe them. Is this spread excessive? Is this jubilation for banks? What would be a reasonable return for a bank or any finance company?

One famous local resident runs a “hedge fund” – he is known for his goodness and philanthropy – and he made “only 4 billion dollars” last year. Much of this comes from betting on which investments will lose value. Wall Street today has been described as a giant casino, where the “real money” is made by betting on the future price of things – no product is involved, and you can prosper in rising or falling markets if you bet well. Do you wonder why many ordinary people feel “the economic game is rigged” against them, and that some people are angry?

Is this how a responsible, civilized, “Christian” society runs things? There are times when laws are required to protect ordinary people, let alone the poor, from the predations of the rich. This is the Law of God. Volunteerism and philanthropy are wonderful things, Christian virtues, but in a fallen world they are in constant battle with greed and corruption. And God notices, God cares, God has acted, and God has given

instructions to his people on how they should act.

What has all this to do with Charles Wesley and his hymns? "*Blow ye the trumpet, blow!*" goes on to speak of Jesus making atonement and redeeming people who are captive to sin and hell; of giving back "unbought" the heritage we have "sold for naught." The "Gospel trumpet" says that grace has appeared in Jesus our Savior, and we can be made glad, we can receive liberty, we can be restored, because "the year of Jubilee has come, the year of Jubilee has come; Return, ye ransomed sinners, home!"

The Jubilee is the "year of the Lord's favor," when Jesus Christ, Redeemer of his people, comes to cancel their debts, free the slaves, restore the heritage that poor sinners have mortgaged. Guilt, anger, exploitation can be forgiven. Great chasms in society can be bridged. Does the news of God's Jubilee sink deep into our souls, and make us joyful? Do we know that we are released from our unpayable debts to one another, to society, to God our maker and protector; that by grace we can start over and live better? Easter is the start of the greatest season of Christian celebration, of jubilation, because "*the Year of Jubilee has come.*"

Let us pray...