



A BIBLICAL MODEL OF GIVING & RECEIVING: FOLLOWING GOD'S LAWS WITH GOD'S HEART

<< INTRODUCTION >>

In our desire to be obedient to God, we seek God's Word in the Bible. We pray and we search our own hearts in response to God's instructions and invitations and we then take a good long look at our lives: our choices, relationships and activities. Sometimes we are encouraged by what is happening with our heads, hearts and hands as we weigh them against the words we read in the Bible. Sometimes we are challenged to change and grow.

No greater way am I challenged, than in my response to the very clear laws in the bible regarding justice for people and communities that are affected by the worst of our world's material poverty, slavery, personal vulnerability and forgotten-ness. I am unable to read Deuteronomy, Leviticus, any of the prophets, the life of Jesus...in fact practically every part of the bible, without being challenged that not every part of my life or our lives as a nation or globe, or even church, reflects God's heart and plan for the world.

I tend to lose heart, however, when I try to keep laws - I often fail. Thankfully, the bible offers us much more than law-keeping as a way of life. It offers a window into God's heart and stories of how God's people have been part of God's grand redemption plan. I hope that, as we reflect on some of God's justice and generosity laws and parts of the story of Ruth, you will learn more about following God's laws with God's heart and how this works out in your own life.

“Generosity toward the poor goes hand in hand with contentment or inner freedom. One can give only to the extent to which one recognises that all things belong to God and can be possessed only when they are put in relation to the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

<< DAY 1: A BIBLICAL LAW >>

A good place to start understanding the heart of God is to take a look at how God orders our lives through laws and instructions for holiness.

READ | Leviticus 23: 22 & Deuteronomy 24: 17-22

If these verses feel foreign to you in your context, think about the principles that they teach. Firstly, do not perpetuate injustice upon already alienated people who need your help rather than to be used by you to your advantage. Secondly, do not consider all your gifts to be only for you or your family. These laws are the entry point into a just and generous life- they are not the whole picture of economic justice, but they are a really good place to start. Allow these instructions to challenge the assumptions that you make about your time, treasures, talents and relationships.

Most Christians believe that giving and tithing is an integral part of our faith, but how have we attributed a percentage of money to that practice rather than allowed a transformation of our attitude towards everything that we have?

The overlooked wheat sheaf, the second shaking of olives- they are not for you. And, they are not only the second-hand or less valuable parts of the harvest- they are just as good as everything else you have harvested and used for your own survival and comfort.

On a personal note: I find sharing my relationships the hardest thing: inviting someone who needs company, or doesn't "fit in" to a Sunday lunch with my family - that's hard!

RESPOND | Questions

- What are the ways that vulnerable people are exploited in our day and age?
- What part might you be playing in this, even if inadvertently?
- What is the harvest of your life- time, things, skills, money or relationships?
- What assumptions have you made about this harvest and what might it look like to leave good portions of it aside for those who are vulnerable and in need of it for their survival?



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<< DAY 2: A BIBLE STORY >>

If law-keeping is challenging and a little bit lifeless, what about a story to get us thinking, planning and living a life more in line with Gods' heart?

READ | The book of Ruth: Chapters 1-4

When the Israelites of biblical times gathered to listen to this story, they would have noticed key words and made some important connections. The book of Ruth is like a tutorial on the practice of the gleaning laws that we discovered yesterday.

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the laws instruct God's people to leave parts of their crops aside for the poor, the alien, the widow and the fatherless. In their times, as in ours, these groups of people represented the most vulnerable in society. Ruth and Naomi were both widows; Ruth in particular was an alien in the land. Even in chapter one, the audience would have already identified them as those entitled to the charity of God's people, through the practise of gleaning.

In society, there are many charitable organisations that seek to respond to the needs of vulnerable people and it can be easy to "out-source" our acts of compassion and generosity to them. While the work that such organisations do is critical and they need the financial assistance of every generous person who donates to them, it is important that we discover more about how our individual and church lives can tell a story like this one of Ruth and Boaz.

RESPOND | Questions

- Who are the most vulnerable people in your community today?
- How have you and your church structured your lives to allow for their survival through generosity?
- How could they be included in your community to work alongside others?



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<< DAY 3: WHEN THINGS GO WRONG >>

Sometimes we need to read a story a few more times to really mine the gold out of it. This story has some hidden clues that may come as a shock to you.

READ | Ruth 2:8-9; 2:14-16; 2:21-23

In these verses, there is very clear repetition. I have learnt when encountering repetition in the bible to pay special attention to it. In this case, there is a clear sense of warning and protection. Boaz, a relative of Naomi, in whose field Ruth finds herself gleaning, warns her to remain there and instructs his workers not to touch, rebuke or embarrass her, even if she gleanes in the wrong places. Naomi reiterates that in another field she might get harmed. Touch, harm, rebuke, embarrass. All pretty strong words for this story.

What had been happening in other peoples' fields to other gleaners of the day, such as to cause these warnings to be given so strongly to the vulnerable Ruth? Is it possible that in fields belonging to God's people, who were obeying God's gleaning laws, other vulnerable people were being taken advantage of, hurt, shamed or mistreated? What had gone wrong with this practice? What do you think of this law-keeping that seems to have led to injustices being perpetuated against the very people it was designed to care for?

In very practical terms, I have seen vulnerable people being shamed when Christians donated unsuitable items to them. Unwashed clothing, broken household items and out of date food, given to someone who already feels outside of mainstream society, can do just as much harm to someone's identity as more obvious injustices.

RESPOND | Questions

- In your context, have you ever seen charity lead to the shame or harm of the very people it was designed to help?
- What would it mean for you and your church to be like Boaz and make sure that on your watch, this does not happen?



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<< DAY 4: TO WHOM AM I 'RESPONSIBLE?' >>

Remembering who we are as the people of God now, is crucial to understanding the laws and stories of the Old Testament.

READ | Ruth 2: 20 and Luke 10: 25-37

It could be easy, from reading this verse, to interpret the whole story of Ruth in the light of family responsibility- looking after our blood relatives, as indeed it turns out that Boaz is a close relative of Naomi's family. However, in light of the life and teachings of Jesus, we must consider to whom we are responsible and who we are called to reach out to with acts of mercy.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus responds to the question: "Who is my neighbour?" by telling the story of someone who shows mercy and kindness to someone in need and making the conclusion that his act was neighbourly. Jesus, with his parables and the acts of his life, shows us that the boundary lines we often put in place regarding who we should help and how we should go about it are just that: our boundary lines and not God's.

As a people who read the story of Ruth, and indeed the gleaning laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, under the new covenant of Jesus, what do we understand when we read the story of the good Samaritan, or the words of Jesus who says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17).

RESPOND | Questions

- To whom am I a Boaz?
- What does it mean to be a kinsman-redeemer in my society?
- Whose safety and inclusion do I see as my responsibility, beyond the confines of my own family or immediate neighbourhood?



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<< DAY 5: MOVING FROM CHARITY TO RELATIONSHIP >>

*Sometimes it takes more than just doing the right thing
from a distance to put right the wrongs in the world.*

READ | Ruth 3: 7-18 and 4: 1-12

If we stopped reading Ruth at chapter two, then we would make some important adjustments to our lifestyle, spend more time noticing the marginalised people in our world and perhaps even stop doing some things we realised were harmful to them, but we wouldn't be half as challenged or changed as we should be! While all those things do require significant adjustments to our lives, nothing changes us more than relationship and friendship. I have never been more challenged than when I have taken the chance to become friends with someone who I am more accustomed to helping from afar. I have also never been more enriched. I remember one cold winter night, visiting some people who sleep on the streets near my home. We took a few blankets and some hot soup. After spending some time chatting, getting colder by the minute, one lady turned to me and said: "Please visit us again, don't worry if you have nothing to bring, just come and chat."

Boaz asks for, listens to and responds accordingly to Ruth's whole story. He makes significant choices and changes to his own life and doesn't stop until she is reinstated to a secure place in society. He also exclaims in Ruth 3:10 that Ruth has shown him kindness by choosing him above the younger men, thus commenting on his blessedness as a recipient in this interaction, not only a giver. This extraordinary response seems to bring in an often overlooked dynamic: the interdependent nature of the Ruth, Naomi and Boaz story, and hence the beauty of God's heart when the dignity of all role-players is pursued. Boaz and Ruth did what was required relationally for their cultural context.

RESPOND | Questions

- What are some of the ways you can identify, that people are left out of the mainstream of society?
- What could it look like for you, your family and church to ask for, listen to and respond to their stories in relationship and friendship building ways?
- Have you ever overlooked the invitation to be a recipient of kindness in a relationship because you were so focused on the apparent needs of the other?



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<< GOING DEEPER >>

You may be a busy professional, currently unemployed, a student, a retired person, a parent. You may be very young or very old. You may be materially rich or materially poor. Wherever you find yourself in life and society, I hope that you have been able to consider the questions posed at the end of each of the days and that they have led you into some new thoughts about your life and its place in the mission of God.

A study like this really only starts to get our minds and hearts going. We may become challenged, encouraged, inspired, confused, annoyed or troubled. It requires something more to move from a head and a heart reaction to a life and choices action. As children in the family of the people of God, these laws and stories invite each one of us into a life response by the God whose mission in the world is to renew, redeem, reconcile and restore all things to himself.

It is seldom and unlikely that we will be required to take action and start to respond to these thoughts on our own. Whether we live alone or with a big family, in a retirement village or a student residence, our lives are shared with the world around us. Every decision we make affects other people. It would be a great idea for you to talk with your church family about any thoughts that have been provoked through this study. There may be others who have had similar thoughts and feelings and you could do something to respond together.

Jesus spent his years of ministry discipling people through stories, relationships, actions, choices, questions and words. As his words and life disciple us through the bible, we have the opportunity to join in discipleship relationships with others, whether they be our children, peers or colleagues.



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<< LOOKING OUTWARDS >>

We are living in interesting times. It is not easy to ignore the levels of pain and discontent in our country and world. Spend some time comparing the kinds of words used in the passages we studied and other places in scripture that speak about injustice, with the newspaper headlines that you read this week. How have things changed in the world? How has the church made a change?

Think back to the history of your own country. Where have you seen God guide, command, comfort and save? South Africans often talk about the miracle of the birth of our new democracy. Miracles as described in the bible almost always involved people- people who were willing to step up and take a risk to be used by God, like Moses, David, Gideon, Jesus and his disciples, the people of the early church, even the young boy with five loaves and two fish.

Just like these stories, the miracle God brought about in South Africa required ordinary men and women to take risks and bring about peace. As we face the deep needs of our society and seek to respond to God's laws with God's heart, we can be the people who step up and take the risk by being part of God's miracles in this generation.



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<< ADDITIONAL READINGS >>

READ | Leviticus 25 8-54

Isaiah 61: 1-4 and Luke 4: 16-21

We have read about the gleaning laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus but they actually fit with other, even more complex laws, that address a much wider system of economic justice. The Leviticus 25 passage that you just read details the law of Jubilee. In this law God addressed three things: land, debt and slavery. This law was designed to ensure that injustice would not be perpetuated century after century and rather that something like a “reset button” would be applied to the society of God’s people, ensuring that those who had lost land would have it restored and those who were in economic or personal captivity would be set free. Unlike the gleaning laws, these ones do not have a book of Ruth showing how it was done. Instead, there is no evidence that the Israelites ever obeyed these laws and there is much said by the old testament prophets about the consequence of this disobedience.

We next hear about the concept of Jubilee in the book of Isaiah, at chapter 61, referred to as the year of the Lord’s favour: good news to the poor. It is remarkable that hundreds of years later, Jesus in the temple of the Lord, starts his public ministry by quoting directly from this Isaiah passage, as quoted in Luke 4. As Jesus states that he has come to declare the year of the Lord’s favour: the good news to the poor, he declared the start of an ongoing Jubilee campaign for all people who follow him. We no longer have to worry about whether the Israelites of old did or didn’t obey this law- as we follow the one who came to fulfill the law, we can enter into a life of Jubilee, ensuring that we do indeed preach good news to the poor!

Just like you did with the gleaning laws and parables, spend some time asking what this looks like for your life and community in this day and age.



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