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# LK 4:18-19 : THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOUR

No. EE38

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After His baptism and temptation (Lk 3:21-22; 4:1-13) the Lord Jesus started His public ministry. Matthew and Mark describe His preaching in general terms as follows: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15).

Luke tells us that He preached one of His first sermons in Nazareth. Quoting from Isa 61:1-2, He applied the text to Himself and claimed to be the long awaited Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... Today this scripture is fulfilled ..." (Lk 4:18-20).

This, in a nutshell, was Jesus' mission to this earth. This is why God sent Him. For this the Holy Spirit equipped Him. His mission was to restore. This is what He proclaimed and what He would do.

In v.19 His entire mission is summed up in eight words: "*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*" What is the meaning of the expression "the year of the Lord's favour"? It is generally accepted that this is an allusion to the Old Testament *jubilee year*.<sup>1</sup>

## The sabbath and jubilee years

God provided the covenant nation with a detailed calendar by mouth of His servant Moses. Six days of

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1. William Hendriksen, The Gospel of Luke, p.254; S. Greijdanus, Lucas, p.116; J.H. Yoder, Politics of Jesus, p.34-40.

labour had to be followed by a seventh day of rest, *the sabbath*. But there was also to be a "week" of years: After six years of labour the seventh was to be a year of complete rest - *the Sabbath year*. There was even more. After seven sabbath year cycles (i.e. every 49 years) the fiftieth year had to be kept as a year of rest - *the Year of Jubilee*. (Ex 21:1-6; 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-55; Dt 15:1-18).

□ The *sabbath year* had three focal points:

- The *fields* were not to be cultivated. The natural yield of the land had to be left for the poor and the animals. God would bless the harvest of the sixth year so that there would be sufficient for two years.
- All *unpaid debts* of the preceding years had to be written off, even that of the sixth year.
- The *slaves*, those who as a result of unpaid debts had become the property of creditors during the preceding years, had to be freed. What is more, their owners had to provide them with the means to get back on their feet (Dt 15:13-14).

□ The laws applicable to the sabbath year also applied to the Year of Jubilee, but there was one additional prescription:

Ownership of all *land* that had been alienated in the preceding fifty years because of the owners' inability to pay their debts, had to be restored to the original owners. This made the permanent enrichment or impoverishment of families impossible, because restoration occurred every one or two generations. This rule also applied to land that had been sold. Of significance here is the fact that the purchase price of land was based on the number of harvests that remained until the next Year of Jubilee. In effect these transactions were therefore leases, rather than sales.

□ It is not clear to what extent the Jewish nation honoured God's precepts regarding the sabbath

and jubilee years. However, the Bible states quite clearly that their failure to do so was a major reason for the exile, which lasted for more or less seventy years - the time of rest lost by the land because of the people's disobedience (Lev 26:32-35, 43; 2Chron 36:21; Jer 34:13-14).

One of the reforms introduced by Nehemia was to enforce the sabbath year (Neh 10:31), and extra-biblical sources confirm that the Jews did, in fact, keep these institutions after the exile.<sup>2</sup>

## The meaning of the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee

### Everything belongs to the Lord.

Why could land not be sold permanently? Because it belonged to the Lord: "The land must not be sold permanently, *because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants*" (Lev 25:23). Why could fellow Israelites not be enslaved permanently? Because they too belonged to the Lord: "Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves" (Lev 25:42).

People, all of them, even the richest of the rich, are only stewards, managers - never owners in the true and final sense of the word.

### God is wonderfully merciful - especially towards the weak and the poor.

The jubilee principles address the three most important factors inherent in socio-economic injustice: natural resources (land), human resources (slavery) and the economy (debt). Abuse of these things has been the underlying cause of almost every revolution in history. God's decrees, on the other hand, were intended to bring about a normalisation and relaxation of these factors amongst His people. The playing field had to be levelled on a regular basis - the poor not having too little, the rich not too much.

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2. Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol 5, p.190.

## **The Lord's people must imitate His mercy.**

It was the responsibility of especially the rich and the powerful to level the playing field. In this fallen world political revolutions always start at the base of the social pyramid. The moment that numbers balance power, violence erupts. But among God's people the normalisation process must be the other way round. The rich and powerful must take initiative. Then things happen peacefully. Then there is appreciation and harmony!

## **The liberation principle being prescribed here is rooted in God's great deeds of liberation.**

It is clearly spelt out in Lev 25:55: "...for the Israelites belong to me ... They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God," and in Dt 15:15: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today." Liberation, remission and restitution therefore had to be cheerful and grateful response. It is significant that both the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee started on the Great Day of Atonement - the day of forgiveness and removal of sins.

## **God takes care of His loved ones**

Not only did the poor have access to the regrowth on the fallow land, but the obedient rich too were assured of God's care. The final harvest in the sixth year always yielded sufficient for two years (Lev 25:20-21). The Lord even promised *more*: those who obeyed His commands would prosper: "Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to" (Deut 15:10; cp. also v.4-5).

## **The Lord's year of grace**

In Nazareth Jesus said that *the principles of the sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee also characterize His Messianic kingdom*. It would not, however, last only for one year or while He was here

on earth. His kingdom would last for all eternity, and so would these principles.

This truth puts into perspective several statements in the New Testament and has major implications for the citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

### **1. Those who are in Christ have been liberated.**

They are no longer slaves of the flesh, the world or Satan (Eph 2:1-10). They are free! They no longer toil on the treadmill of legalism, they are no longer powerless in the grip of sin, they are not intimidated by the fear of death.

### **2. The redeemed must pass on to others with jubilation that which they have received.**

We should be people who joyfully liberate, pardon and give away. After all, nothing belongs to us in the absolute sense of the word. Everything belongs to our Father.

In Lk 6:27-36 Jesus gives a striking description of how the jubilee principles should find expression in our lives. This is the way His disciples should live! They must be jubilant dispersers of help, acceptance, forgiveness and earthly possessions. Even their enemies should be showered with charity!

### **3. These jubilee principles apply everywhere.**

The Jews had to be reminded again and again that the Lord Jesus had come for all nations (23-27). In fact, those who try to keep the jubilee principles only for themselves, will forfeit the blessings. This is what happened in the case of the Jews.

### **4. The Messianic kingdom brings complete restoration of everything destroyed by the Fall.**

At the heart of the Old Testament institution of the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee lies the principle of restoration.

Christ, God's *Last Adam* (1Cor 15:45, 47), came to reclaim that which Adam and Eve had lost. In fact, He has already and finally earned the reward that Adam would have received for consistent obedience. And He will eventually bring it to final

realisation. Therefore all who have been united with Him, will freely have access to the *Tree of Life* (cp. Gn 2:9; 3:22-24; Ez 47:7, 12; Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14).

Now already true believers live in the Year of Jubilee in principle, but an eternal Year of Jubilee awaits them, in which the abovementioned principles will be a never-ending and perfect reality in their lives!

## **The hole in the ear-lobe**

In Ex 21:5-6 and in Dt 15:16-17 provision is made for the dedication of a beloved slave. A slave who had come to love his master and did not wish to leave him at the onset of the Year of Jubilee, could give himself freely to his master. He would then have to stand against a doorpost and his master would take an awl and push it through his ear-lobe into the door. *This would serve as a sign of voluntary loving surrender and bond-service.*

This is the wonder of redemption through Christ. We are no longer slaves, but children of God. And yet we still ask for nothing more than to serve our Lord with everything in us! He has written His commands on the tablets of our hearts. We are His loving bond slaves!

*Do you have a hole in your ear-lobe?*

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