

1. How do we practically keep our focus on God? That question is my lesson title. If God wants us to use our lives to make a difference for Him, does that mean we have to think about Him every moment of the day? Of course that's impossible, let alone the practical stuff we have to do in our lives. That's why God set up a set of rules for the Israelites to follow, that have other benefits, but the primary thing they all have in common is they help them get their focus on God. Now let me describe the various topics of these two chapters and then I'll show how they help those Israelites (and us) keep their focus on God. Then I'll talk about how we apply these laws to our own lives.
2. The good news is the topics are easy to describe. The first two verses describe a ritual performed among those living in the Promised Land. The idea is not to look like them. Next there's a whole bunch of verses saying in effect eat this and don't eat that. I'll get into the specific's of that diet in this lesson, but the short version is that it makes the Israelites think about God when they eat. In the next set of verses, the issue is earning a living and a practical way of thinking about God is to have the Israelites give a portion of their income to God, so they know they have to set aside part of what they earn when they work. From there, we get into issues about borrowing and lending. In short when we borrow or lend, these rules make us think about God and helps the borrower as well as benefits the lender.
 - a) My other good news is that's the whole chapter: Think about God based on how we look, how we eat, when we work and based on our dealings with other people. Of course there are lots of interesting little lessons about the specifics of each of these things. The central idea of these chapters is here are ways we can focus on God as we go through our day.
 - b) OK, so what? The point is as I love to say, the greatest purpose one can have in life when we use our lives to make a difference for God. Even better is when we do what we enjoy doing anyway, and find a way to do what we enjoy for God's glory. The problem is that we easily get our focus off of Him as we're easily distracted. Therefore, God set up a great system of reminders for the Israelites for them to keep their focus upon Him while doing what needs to be done in order to live out our lives.
 - c) So are we Christians required to say, eat as required in these chapters? Are we required to do or not do these things to keep our focus on Him? The short answer is as a Christian we're free to do whatever we want whenever we want. We can't sin enough to ever lose our salvation, so the issue isn't salvation. As I was once taught, I'm free to steal all I want and do all the harm I want. The issue is, how much harm do I want to do? Do I want to live to make a difference for God, or waste the most valuable thing God gives us: time? To state the obvious we can't change our past, but we can learn from it and use the time we have left to make a difference for God. But what about practical stuff we have to do every day? That's what these chapters are all about, rules given for us to think about God as we do practical stuff.
 - d) I admit that is confusing. Do we have to obey these laws or not? The short answer is no, but they do teach us lots of things about how God protects us, guides us and teaches what is best for our lives as I'll cover through this lesson. That leads to an important question: what can we do practically, to keep our focus on what He desires we do as we go through our day? A good habit is starting one's day in prayer and bible study as well as time with God through the day. It's not about earning salvation or points with God, but about using our lives to make a difference for Him. If the greatest way to have joy is to think in terms of 1) Jesus, 2) others, 3) yourself, (the acronym that is the definition of joy) then practically doing things to keep our focus upon God is a good habit to have that joy. Therefore, let's go through these two chapters as we learn how those Israelites were to focus upon God and consider how we too, can keep our focus upon Him.

3. Chapter 14, Verse 1: You are the children of the LORD your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, ² for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession.
- a) To understand these two verses, one has to understand that the people living in the land of Israel that were about to be conquered did this as a sign of loyalty to their gods. If you know the story of Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal in 1st Kings Chapter 18, we had just that: prophets of Baal, cutting themselves to show their loyalty to that god. Until a few months ago, I never realized that some people do have a problem where they would purposely cut themselves as part of a ritual. If you're like me and gone all of your life and never heard of this issue, know that it exists and for some young people it is an issue.
 - b) The underlying point is to not to act be like non-believers. If we're going to use our lives to make a difference for God, we have to avoid the practices of nonbelievers. I have seen many people changed their life instantly when they become Christians. I've seen others who have to go through counseling and get help to overcome past issues. To the few of you that do struggle with this issue of cutting oneself, I've learned there's help one can get to deal with that issue as well as realizing there's a God who loves us just as we are, who wants to see us live healthy and as a witness for Him.
 - c) For the rest of us who don't deal with this issue, the point is not that we have to be perfect to be a witness for Jesus. However, we should live differently enough that others realize there is something about our lifestyle that is attractive to them. Remember that Jesus said people will know we are Christians by our love for one another. There are multitudes of people who've converted to Christianity simply because one believer showed kindness to them and lived in a way that showed a kindness and spoke of the truth and peace of Jesus without people having to earn their way to salvation.
4. Verse 3: Do not eat any detestable thing. ⁴ These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, ⁵ the deer, the gazelle, the roe deer, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep. ⁶ You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews the cud. ⁷ However, of those that chew the cud or that have a split hoof completely divided you may not eat the camel, the rabbit or the coney. Although they chew the cud, they do not have a split hoof; they are ceremonially unclean for you. ⁸ The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses.
- a) I have to admit, one of my favorite bits of trivia to teach in the bible, is why the Israelites only were allowed to eat certain animals certain ways. Before I get into that, let me say we don't have to memorize this list of animals that we can and cannot eat. While there are certain health benefits here, remember that there was no refrigeration back then. The way that the Israelites ate did give them better health benefits for millennia. However, that is a separate topic from what I'm about to bring up here.
 - b) If you read my lesson on Leviticus Chapter 11, I covered this exact same topic back then. Remember what Deuteronomy is: A big speech to the second generation of Israelites that came of out Egypt, how they're to eat while living in the Promised Land. Also recall that God fed this generation for the last 40 years by raining down "manna" from heaven. Here we're learning that the "manna" will stop soon, so the Israelites have to hunt and slaughter animals in order to eat and no longer just slaughter animals for sacrifices to God.
 - c) OK, onto the main point: The only animals that the Israelites were allowed to eat were the one's who have "split hooves" and "chew the cud". If one looks at the feet of these animals one will see the hoof is either split or not. The point to learn has nothing to do with eating only the split hoof animals. The idea of a split hoof is it's a visual reminder to choose the right way to go in life. Chewing the cud is about chewing food before it is digested. For example pigs don't chew their food, but just swallow whole what they eat. That is here to remind us to think about the decisions we make. Now consider when we read and think about God's word, it gives us the wisdom to make the right decisions in life.

- d) The point is when the Israelites eat, they had to think about the type of animals they ate, as it made them focus on God. Just as animals that have split hoofs and those that chew their food remind us to think of the way we "go" in life and contemplate the decisions we make, so thinking about the decisions we make affect our lives.
 - e) One of the points taught in the New Testament is that Jesus declared all foods to be clean. (See Mark 7:19 and Romans 14:20 as examples.) Obviously refrigeration and how food is prepared was no better at Jesus time than Moses time, so why the change? One reason is that since Jesus paid the full price for our sins, we look to Jesus as proof of our salvation and don't try to prove our worth to God based on how we eat. The Israelites at the time of Moses used their diet as a way to prove their loyalty to God. For Christians, the way we prove our loyalty is not by our diet, but again, by the love we show for others. That's why we Christians are not required to live by a certain diet. If we choose to eat a certain way for health reasons, that's a separate topic. The issue here is what is and is not required of us as Christians in order to be a good witness for Jesus in this lifetime.
 - f) In the meantime, back to food and what the Israelites can and cannot eat:
5. Verse 9: Of all the creatures living in the water, you may eat any that has fins and scales. ¹⁰ But anything that does not have fins and scales you may not eat; for you it is unclean.
- a) The point here is that the Israelites can eat fish, but only certain types of fish: Those that have fins and scales. That's why Orthodox Jews to this day don't eat lobster or crab. So why only fish that have fins and scales? Again, it is a reminder to keep one's focus upon God in the first place. Think what fins do: They guide the fish through the water. Think of the bible: It guides us in the decisions we make. OK, what about scales? Those protect the fish from harm. Think of the bible as protecting us to make the right decisions in life. My simple point is God's using what we eat as examples of ways we can keep our focus on Him based on what we do and don't eat.
 - b) Again, Christians aren't required to eat this way as Jesus declared all foods clean. If one does choose to eat a certain way for health reasons, that's acceptable as well. The point is for us to find ways to keep our focus upon Him.
 - c) OK, we've covered land animals and fish. Now it's time for birds.
6. Verse 11: You may eat any clean bird. ¹² But these you may not eat: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, ¹³ the red kite, the black kite, any kind of falcon, ¹⁴ any kind of raven, ¹⁵ the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, ¹⁶ the little owl, the great owl, the white owl, ¹⁷ the desert owl, the osprey, the cormorant, ¹⁸ the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.
- a) Like the land animals, the good news is we don't have to memorize this list of birds. We mainly need to understand what they have in common and that's the reason they're on a Jewish "no-eat" list. The answer is, all these birds are predators. So if that's the case, why didn't Moses just say, "don't eat any birds that are predators? Why name them? I believe the answer is for us to think about them. Birds that eat the dead carcasses of other animals don't respect life. This doesn't mean God wants us to be vegetarians. The issue's focusing our lives upon God and one of doing that is by our diet.
 - b) So what's wrong with predator birds? Yes we can discuss how what they eat affects what we eat, and that's one reason in an era of no refrigeration or proper cleaning. I believe the issue God wants us to think about is respecting life. Just as these birds attack other lives for their food, so God wants us to respect the lives of those around us. In effect, to have this diet is a reminder to not murder. But isn't eating meat murder? No, because as I like to state, the greatest purpose animals can serve is food for humans. With that said, to not eat predator birds is a reminder that we're to respect the lives of humans we encounter.
 - c) Before I move on to the next category, notice the pattern God is setting up for us. We're to only eat certain land animals as certain ones remind us to focus on God's word and think about it. The fish diet also reminds us that God guides our lives if we let him. The bird diet reminds us to respect human life as these birds don't respect lives of other creatures.

7. Verse 19: All flying insects that swarm are unclean to you; do not eat them. ²⁰ But any winged creature that is clean you may eat.
- a) Personally, I would find eating any bugs disgusting, but I suspect if one is desperate, one would eat anything. One of the famous bible stories about John the Baptist is that part of his diet consists of wild locusts, which is a food that's not prohibited. Believe it or not, as we discover why certain bugs are allowed and others are not, it will teach us why John's diet featured this food. (Reference: Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6.)
 - b) The short version is that insects that swarm such as bees and flies are forbidden. Yes I'm happy about that as I wouldn't touch those. However, winged creatures that leap off the ground such as locusts are permitted. What's implied but not stated here is that bugs that don't fly are also forbidden. The idea is that insects that are capable of leaping off of the ground are acceptable. To explain, remember the concept that for Christians, "this world is not our home" as the old song goes. We're to live to make a difference for Jesus, as our home is in heaven. Therefore, the picture of bugs that are capable of jumping off the earth into the sky is a reminder that we're to "leap off" this world to make a difference for God. The point's to remind us that living for God is also about helping others see that there is more to life than what exists in this world. In other words God wants us to "leap off" this world as to care about serving Him.
 - c) Believe it or not, that leads me back to John the Baptist. I admit I never thought about this before, but I think one reason that strange fact about his diet is in the Gospel, is that John's job was to lead people to get their focus off of themselves and "leap" into the bigger world of thinking about God and the fact He's entered the world He created.
 - d) With that strange thought in mind, God wants us to eat animals that "divide the hoofs" to remind us to consider the decisions we make. Animals that chew the cud also remind us to think about our actions. Then we can eat fish with fins to remind us that God's guiding our lives for His glory as well as protecting us with the visual picture of fish scales. Then God wants us to respect life, which is why predator birds are listed. Finally, we're to help make a difference in the life of others, which is the picture of insects that have the ability to leap off the ground into the sky. Before I move on, my gratitude to a famous (past on) preacher named Ray Steadman. By his writing ministry, I learned this set of principals.
 - e) We're there also practical principals for the Jewish nation to eating this way? Throughout history, it is recorded how Jewish people survived some of the horrible historical plagues that Europe suffered in the Middle Ages, largely due to their diet. Sadly, many Jews were killed in riots as they were blamed for those plagues, as they didn't suffer the same fate as non-Jewish people. As I mentioned a lesson or two back, there is a wonderful book called "None of these diseases" (by Dr. S. I. McMillen MD), which gives a historical background to support how the Jewish diet protected them for millennia.
 - f) OK, one more long verse on diet, and then we can move on:
8. Verse 21a: Do not eat anything you find already dead. You may give it to an alien living in any of your towns, and he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. But you are a people holy to the LORD your God.
- a) So this verse is essentially saying Jewish people cannot eat animals that die naturally, but it's ok to sell it to strangers! The issue isn't the "forbidden" animals, but the one's they're allowed to eat and how they die. Yes they're practical aspects to this, about what's in and not in a dead carcass. What's more important is that God wanted them to be respecters of life and by killing the one's they are to eat, they're realizing they are taking life from other creatures in order for us to keep on existing in our own lives. In other words, this verse is here to remind us to respect life and only kill what's necessary for us to live. So why sell dead carcasses to foreigners? Remember when Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead, you follow me?" (Matthew 8:22 or Luke 9:60), same principal. Let me explain:

- i) The point is that those interested in God keep their focus upon Him. That's why God set up this set of eating laws to keep our focus upon Him as we eat. By letting strangers eat what's already dead, it's a reminder that people who don't care about God are in effect "already dead" and eat what's dead. This isn't about not being a good witness for God, it's about the idea of "what's dead, is dead". That's why we read Jesus saying, "let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22, Luke 9:60) as it's similar to the principal of letting the "dead" spiritually eat what's already dead.
- 9. Verse 21b: Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk.
 - a) I need to separate this half a verse for it's own little discussion. If you know anything of the topic of a "Kosher" (Jewish) diet, you'd know that Jewish people never eat meat in the same meal as dairy products. As a simple example, cheeseburgers are not kosher. All of that diet is based on this half verse here of not cooking goat in it's mother's milk. They've separated meat and dairy to avoid that idea from ever happening. Do I believe Christians have to eat this way? No, and that leads me to my next point.
 - b) What has been discovered in the last few hundred years was some writings from this area that showed that one of the religious rituals of this culture was to cook a young goat in the milk of it's mother. Yes it's disgusting and yes it was some sort of religious practice meant to bring good fortune to those who did it. God's saying to the Israelites, "I found that idea to be disgusting as it doesn't respect animal life, so don't do likewise". Therefore, to make sure they never mix mom's with kids, they avoid dairy and meat in the same meal.
 - c) So why don't Christians have to observe this law? As I stated in my lesson introduction, I believe God wants us to do "practical things" to keep our focus upon Him. God set up the diet of the Israelites to keep their focus upon Him as they eat. However, since Jesus paid the full price for our sins and declared all foods clean (as I stated earlier in this lesson) we are free to eat cheeseburgers as Jesus says He's concerned about what comes out of us, (e.g., bad words, bad habits), then what we put into us. Yes good eating affects our health but that's a separate topic. God declared all foods clean for Christians so we can focus on what comes "out of us" and not worry about what goes "into us" as we keep our focus on Him as we go through our day.
 - d) OK, now that we've digested food for half a lesson, time to move on.
- 10. Verse 22: Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.²³ Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.²⁴ But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away),²⁵ then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose.²⁶ Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice.²⁷ And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own.
 - a) The first topic we had in this chapter is about keeping our focus on God when we eat. The second big topic is about keeping our focus on God when we work. The point is they had to separate part of their income for God. Today we call that "taxes". Remember that these Israelites didn't have to pay taxes to a government, but in effect, paid them to God as He watched over them.
 - b) Let me explain what is a tithe and what these Israelites had to pay. A tithe means a tenth. Actually if you study carefully the first five books of the bible, there are three "tithes" that these Israelites had to pay. Two are done every year and one is done every three years. If you add that up, it means they had to allocated 23.33% per year of their income to give to God. If you know the modern tax system, that's a lot less than what we pay today, so we can't complain about this. Let me explain that as it ties to the passage here.

- c) One of the three tithes is what's given to the priests so they can live. When those Israelites got to inherit the land of Israel sections of land were given to all the tribes except one. The one that didn't get any land had to be scattered through the land to be priests to the other tribes of Israel. Since these priests couldn't "work" the land (farming or raising animals) their payment was 10% of everyone else's income.
 - i) Before we move on, stop and think what Christians are called to do: We are to be God's witnesses in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, Jesus talking). The point is God wants us to go be His witnesses to a lost and dying world. The same way these priests were to be scattered among the rest of those people, so God wants us to be about "His business" which is to be witnesses for Him in this world. In that sense, all Christians should be like priests as we're scattered everywhere to be a witness for Jesus.
 - d) All of that leads me to describe the second tithe given every year. This is tithe described in these verses. Reread these verses and notice that the Israelites got to eat the tithe along with the priests in these verses. To put it simply, this tithe is for all the annual holidays as we'll read about in the next lesson. In order to pay for those holidays, all Israelites had to give a second tithe to pay for all the food there. It was a way for all the Israelites to gather together several times per year to keep their focus on God.
 - e) Two other things to catch about this second tithe: The first is that if it's too hard to carry a "tithe" to this festival, they could sell their harvest for cash and bring the cash. If one was a farmer, they could cash out their crops and bring the money for this requirement.
 - i) The second thing I want you to notice is the emphasis on rejoicing. It wasn't as if God is saying, "OK, you lose 10% of what you got for this festival, try to make the best of it". It was meant as a time for joy. It was a time to stop our normal routine as together with other believers and be grateful for what God has provided us. Think of it as we gather together in church and giving part of our income so that a church can survive and thrive. This is why Paul emphasizes the fact we're to be "cheerful givers" (2nd Corinthians 9:7). If we give at church because "we have to", then we're better off keeping our money. Like the Israelites here the giving should be a joyful volunteer effort so we can make a difference for God in our lives.
 - f) What about the third three-year tithe? Hang tight, that's the topic of the next two verses.
 - g) Before I get there, let me discuss a related idea. Why don't we Christians give exactly 23% to God? Wouldn't it be easier to say, we as Christians have to give exactly 10% or 23% of our income to God? Then we know exactly what we have to do for giving. It's so we can be "cheerful" givers and not do it as a requirement. God wants giving to be from the heart not out of an obligation. It should also be done secretly as Jesus taught to "not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing" when it comes to giving. The point is when we give God's well aware of it as well as maybe the accountant at our church. Giving should never be to receive a round of applause. It's better to have eternal rewards and not any in this lifetime for our giving. OK, with that stated, onto "Tithe #3":
11. Verse 28: At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns,²⁹ so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.
- a) A lot of churches will "pass the plate" every now and then a second time to help out the needy in our community. That's in effect what this third tithe (once every three years) is all about. This is caring about the less fortunate around us. What God promised them was that He would bless them Israelites so much if they trusted in Him, it wouldn't hurt them financially to give not only the "double tithe" but a third tithe every three years to help out the less fortunate and be a good witness to others based on all the good things God gives us in our lives. It's not about "how much" it's about using our resources to help others.

- b) So are you saying if we give to God, we'll never be poor? I am saying you can't out give God, period. Giving is a practical way of saying we trust God to provide for our future. I'm not saying if we give 10% or 23% of our income, God then has to bless us by magically giving us more than we give. We don't give in order to receive more from God. We give as to make a difference for God in the world around us. The blessing we get from giving is usually not financial, but the joy of making a difference in the world around us. With that happy thought stated, time for Chapter 15:

12. Chapter 15, Verse 1: At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. ² This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. ³ You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. ⁴ However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. ⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

- a) Let's start by remembering the big picture: The idea is God wants us to keep our focus on Him and He thinks of practical things we do to give us places and times that we can focus on Him. First we had eating. Then we had working. (That's essentially Chapter 14 in two short sentences.) The next concept we have is borrowing and lending. The problem is we can be so worried by debt or someone owing us a debt, we can get our focus off of God as we worry about that debt.
- b) As someone who runs my own business I've let both of those things bother me in the past. I've had people owe me sums of money and I get obsessed with it. I've also had times as I struggled with debt and how I was going to pay off that debt. Looking back in hindsight I'm amazed how God's gotten me through both of those situations. In neither one of those situations did I ignore the problem, but worked to solve it. The issue isn't avoiding debt or borrowing, the issue is worrying about it. When times come when we get obsessed with debts legitimately owed to us or we owe to others, that's when we should pray often to let go of the fears and let God deal with the outcome on His timing in both situations. Yes I still did the footwork, but I trust the outcome to Him.
- c) All of that thought leads me back to these verses. God set up this system for the Israelites that after seven years all debts are cancelled. Some argue that it just means all debts will be forgiven every seventh year. Others argue it means that if we have those debts we are given an extra year to pay them off. So does this mean if I have run up a big debt on my credit card, I can demand forgiveness? Of course not. The point here is that we can trust God to provide for us even if someone cheats us out of what they owe us.
- d) Let me explain this idea another way. Many years ago, I had someone who borrowed a good sum of money from me and never paid it back. This is someone I knew well and did trust him. The way I had to let it go was to pray for that person daily. No I never did see him again after that, but praying daily for his salvation and well being got me to forgive him of his debts. I saw him as someone who needed Jesus and not someone that owed me a lot of money. Would I let him borrow from me again? No, as to do so would be foolish on my part. One of the reasons that the Lord's Prayer includes the concept of us forgiving others is God wants us to have peace with Him. Just as we trust God's forgiven all of our sins, we have to let go of how others have hurt us.
 - i) What about those who've hurt us physically or really hurt a loved one? Yes I still believe in the justice system as much as possible. The issue isn't justice, the issue is letting the worry about it eat us up internally. God wants us to forgive them so we can have internal peace even while we're dealing with the government to bring the person or group that did this to justice.

- e) Coming back to the verses, the idea here is about forgiving others of their debts as we do trust God to provide for us despite what literal debts are owed to us or we owe to others. Just as the Israelites were to focus on God based on what they could eat and how they did earn a living, so they had to trust God in the issue of debts both owed and owed to them.
 - f) It may help to remember that there were no prisons in those days. When someone owed you money, you can legally require them or a family member to work for you as a slave in order to pay off that debt. We'll get more into that in the next set of verses. Realize that it applies to these verses as well. If one Israelite owed a large sum of money to another they had up to seven years to pay off that debt before the person is to be released. As I stated, a classic debate on this issue is whether or not one is just free the "seventh" year or if one is permanently forgiven after seven years. There is also a "fiftieth year" release of debts that is definitely permanent, and we'll discuss that in another lesson.
 - g) The important lesson of these verses is first, to avoid debts as much as possible and if we are in a situation where debt is owed to us or we owe it to others, do what we can to end that situation and give our fears about to God. As my wife puts it, "Do the footwork and give God the fears of what could happen". Does this mean we permanently forgive others of their debts after seven years? My answer is if they haven't paid you by then, it's never going to happen. I promise you credit card companies don't use this verse, so the reality of debts we owe to banks is always there and we have to do what we can to get out of any debt. So does that mean I'm against say getting a home loan? That's different, as we have to borrow what we can legitimately afford to pay in order to have a place to live. We only have a problem when we're borrowing what we truly can't afford to pay back.
 - h) What about when financial disasters occur like the loss of a job? This is why one needs to build up a "rainy day fund" to help ourselves when such times eventually occur as much as possible. Remember that living in the Promised Land is all about trusting God with all aspects of our lives, including our finances. That's the underlying point of these verses.
13. Verse 7: If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. ⁸Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.
- a) The short version here is to show kindness to people in need. The reason these verses are here is one can think back then, "Why should I lend you money now, as the seventh year is coming up quickly and you'll never pay it back?" The issue of course is kindness. Just as God provides for us, He wants us to be a good witness to others. So does that mean we give to everyone who asks of us? If that we're true we'd be broke in no time. Obviously we need to have good judgment in giving and no we're not always perfect at this. I recall one time I gave some money to someone claiming to be hungry. I saw her a few minutes later at a drug store buying cigarettes with the money I gave her. I didn't say anything as she spotted me and ran off before I could confront her.
 - b) I have to admit, I admire people who prepare for giving. I know some who keep baggies of food in their car to give to those who beg of them. I know professional beggars exist as well as drug users and mentally ill people. Notice verse 11 says that there will always be poor people in the land. Jesus effectively said that as well. (See Matthew 26:11). The idea is that we as Christians trust that God will provide for us, so we should have the attitude of caring about others just as we trust God cares for us.

- c) The essential idea of these verses is not to see others and think, "Hey the fact that you are poor is your problem. I can't help you as the year of "debt release" is coming up or some other excuse such as I have my own problems to deal with." If we expect God to provide for us, then God wants us to be a good witness to others and "put our money where our mouth is". Of course we need good discretion in giving, but we can't take it with us in the next life, so use money as a tool to be a witness for God and not hoard stuff for ourselves.
14. Verse 12: If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. ¹³ And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴ Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.
- a) If you recall about a page back I said there're no prisons built yet in the Promised Land? Well that brings up the issue of what do I do with someone who owed money to someone else? The answer back then was if they couldn't pay off the debt they had to work for free for that person to pay off the debt. Literally family members could be sold into slavery to pay off such debts. The point here is that sooner or later that debt was paid off. Either the person was released as the 7th year was upon them or the debt was literally paid off. The verses here are saying after it's done, you don't say to the person who owed you money or the family member who served you, "OK you're done, out the door you go, good luck".
 - i) Instead God wants us to show kindness to others. The text is literally saying for us to not send them out empty handed. Remember these Israelites were once slaves in Egypt and just as God rescued them and provided good things for them as they left Egypt, so God wanted the Israelites to show kindness to others when the debts are paid off. Again the underlying principal is being a good witness to others even after "debts" are paid off.
 - b) Let me ask a different question about these verses: why six years of service and the person is then free on the seventh one? Why not one year or ten? Remember the lesson theme is about ways we get our focus upon God. Almost all people know the Genesis account that God created the world in six days and rested on the 7th day. I won't get into the argument of literal days or era's of time. The point is we associate God's creation with six days and He then "rested" on the 7th day, whatever that meant. The point here is just as God rested on the seventh day, so He wants the people who trust in Him to "rest" their debts for one year as well. So if one had a big credit card bill, can we tell the bank it's been seven years, stop bugging me? Hardly. That's why it's a classic debate whether or not the debts owed in this passage are permanently forgiven or just for one year. The principal of this text is about letting go of the worry about debts. If God "rested" on the 7th day, then we too can and should rest from our worries about debts owed as well as debts owed to us.
 - c) Meanwhile, the main principal of this text is for the Israelites to recall that they were born in slavery and just as God released them with gifts in hand, so God wants them to show a form of kindness by also giving gifts to those who've paid off their debts to them. This is a principal for Christians as well. We too, were "born slaves" in the sense that before we came to Jesus we were slaves of sin whether we realized it or not. When we got to a state of mind where we realized we didn't have to earn our salvation, we became free. God is saying effectively, remind others when they're debts to you are paid off, that they're now free of eternal debts as well. We should give them gifts to remind them of their freedom just as God's given us the gift of eternal freedom in Him.
 - i) Suppose we think, "Yes I'm saved, where's my free stuff, and why should I give a portion of my stuff to someone just because they paid off their dues to society or to me for what they did?" First, Jesus promised that all He gets as eternal king we'll get to share with Him for eternity, so our "stuff" is coming. Next, the idea of gifts to others is about showing kindness to others and putting them before us.

15. Verse 16: But if your servant says to you, "I do not want to leave you," because he loves you and your family and is well off with you,¹⁷ then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your maidservant.
- a) We now come to my favorite part of this lesson. I didn't mention this part in my opening comments as I left it as a surprise for anyone who made it this far. First let me explain the literal aspect of these verses, and then how they apply to us. The literal aspect is that if a servant is so happy being a servant of his master, he can choose to permanently remain a servant. The ceremony to permanently remain a servant is literally to have a hole placed in one of your ears. Kind of like when a girl first gets their ear's pierced. The last part of Verse 17 says "Do the same for your maidservant". That just means it can be a man or a woman that goes through this ritual.
 - b) OK, so a slave is so happy to be a slave in some cases, they choose to remain so for the rest of their lives. Why is this here and why should I care? Think about what you and I are in our relationship with Jesus: Isn't like volunteer slavery? Isn't that relationship about when we choose to be His slaves for life? Being a Christian is not about power and glory in this lifetime, but literally choosing moment by moment to do God's will and humble ourselves like the lowest of slaves in order to do God's will for our lives.
 - c) With that said, let me return to my lesson theme: all the situations described in these two chapters describe ways we can keep our focus upon God as we go through our lives. Here at the end of Chapter 15 is a ritual describing how one can become a permanent slave of a master if one chooses. The reason that ritual is here at this point is to remind us, that if we do spend our days at our meals, when we work, when we deal with debts and other parts of life thinking about God and trying to do the right thing, we become "volunteer slaves" to God whether we realize it or not. To me salvation is not just about the first moment we do commit our lives to Jesus, but about the lifestyle choice we make of serving God in all aspects of our lives. Therefore, if we do focus on God as we go through our day, we will become like this slave making this choice whether we realize it or not. That's why we get this little ritual here near the end of the chapter.
 - d) There is one more way some commentators see this passage, and others see it as a stretch: It is the fact that Jesus was "nailed to wood", so He too become a volunteer slave for all of our sins. Just as Jesus freely choose to give His life so we can have life, so He chose to be "nailed" to wood, just as this ritual mentions putting someone up against a door as others put that pin through our earlobes. Anyway there theory's there if you think it fits.
 - e) Meanwhile, we have a few verses left to go in this chapter:
16. Verse 18: Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free, because his service to you these six years has been worth twice as much as that of a hired hand. And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.
- a) The last set of verses focuses on those who had debts and what happens to them after the release of those debts. In this verse we focus on the person who received the payment of service for that debt. The point is to realize that if someone legitimately is in debt to us, and they work to pay it off, such a person is worth twice that of a hired servant, because we didn't have to pay them to be our slave. Effectively this is saying be grateful that the person in debt worked for free to pay it off as they'd be more valuable to us than someone we hire to work for us. That "slave" is more loyal as it is their duty to do what they have to do then someone just working for us for the money. The text here is saying when the slave's duty is done, don't be tempted to keep them as a slave after they have finished paying off their debts.
 - b) If you think, what does any of this have to do with me? Our life here is all about bartering for goods and services. We often get into situations where it's like "volunteer slavery" in order to earn a fee for a service. The point here is that when that transaction is completed don't hesitate to show gratitude for others for services they've volunteered to give us.

- c) The point is one way we do live as servants for Jesus is to show gratitude to others for services they've performed for us. I'm convinced it's a duty of Christians to show joy to others whether we feel it or not. It's not how we feel that matters nearly as much as our attitude toward others around us. We're always a witness for Jesus. One simple way to be a good witness is about showing gratitude for what we receive. Assuming I believe it to be true, what does it have to do with these verses? These verses are essentially saying when someone has volunteered to be a slave to us in order to pay off a debt, be grateful for what they've done and don't just "shoe them off" as if to say "I'm done with you".
 - i) Let me give a practical example. Suppose we just paid someone to cut our grass for us. Once the job is done and we've paid them, don't just say, "OK, I'll see you next week when it grows back". Show gratitude for the fact they volunteered to do that job in exchange for payment. Showing gratitude is a wonderful way of expressing joy to others even if they volunteered to do that service for us for a set fee. That's the practical aspect of this verse and how it applies to our daily lives.
17. Verse 19: Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. Do not put the firstborn of your oxen to work, and do not shear the firstborn of your sheep. ²⁰ Each year you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose. ²¹ If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. ²² You are to eat it in your own towns. Both the ceremonially unclean and the clean may eat it, as if it were gazelle or deer. ²³ But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.
- a) These two chapters end (OK, the chapter numbers were not part of the original text, but you get the idea) with Moses reminding the people, "After we volunteer to be slaves to others and agree to show gratitude for things in life", don't forget to separate what's to be given to God, from ourselves. Again, remember that the main theme of this text has to do with practical ways of keeping our focus upon God as we go through our lives. One way we do that is to keep in mind that we give the first and best of what we get to God. The idea is to not use for ourselves what should be given to God.
 - b) Let me explain: In that farming culture, the Israelites were to dedicate the first offspring of an animal to God. It was a way of saying trust God to provide for the future by giving Him the first of our "increase". If that first born animal had a major defect, like being lame or blind, it wasn't given to God. The idea for us would be like saying, "OK, God I've done my work for the week and I've already spent what I want to spend, and I have two dollars left over, here you go". In such a case God's saying to us, "keep those two dollars as we're giving him the "blind and lame" as we're not trusting Him to provide for us."
 - c) So are you saying we have to give our first 10% of our income to God or "23.33% like these Israelites have to give? Of course not. However, I am saying we have to "put our money where our mouth is". If we really believe we've volunteered to choose to live our lives as God's slaves, then we back up what we say by our actions. One action is to give the first of what we earn to God to say effectively, we're trusting You to guide our lives so we can continue to make a difference for You in all that we do.
 - d) The text mentions something it said near the start of Chapter 12. Remember how I said in that lesson God doesn't say, "There is a city called Jerusalem that will be where we offer sacrifices and nowhere else". In the early history of the Israelites there, they had a number of places that was the location of the tabernacle. God's saying in effect, where it is, that's where they go to offer those sacrifices. The point for you and me is about not to be a solo act for God, but giving to Him the first of what we earn is about volunteering to be part of a church group, so collectively we can make a difference for Him.
 - e) Then the text talks about the animals that were not to be sacrificed. It says the Israelites may eat them wherever they feel it and they may eat it with the ceremonial unclean and the "clean". In effect this is a "bookend" comment as we covered this idea in Chapter 12.

- f) The final point in this chapter is about draining the blood. The point here is again, blood is associated with life. Those slaughtered animals gave their lives to be food for humans. By separating the blood, it reminded the Israelites that the animal gave its life so they can live longer just as Jesus gave His blood so we too can live forever.
 - g) Moses is going "full circle" on the idea of doing practical things to keep our focus on God in all aspects of our lives. Moses started these two "chapters" with food and he's ending it with "food" again. The text here started by saying eat only certain foods as a reminder of ways we can keep our focus on God. He ends this section by saying, "Give food to God what's meant to be given to God and the rest we can eat where and when we want". The idea is about giving God our first and our best and by doing that He promises to bless our lives in far greater ways than if we kept the best for ourselves.
 - h) This is the reminder that the best way to live is to "let go" of what we desire without God and He promises to bless us by that trust far more than if we keep the best for ourselves. The idea of having joy in our lives is about keeping our focus upon God as we go through our lives making a difference for Him by making a difference for others. God promises us that we will be blessed by living that way. The reminder here at the end of these chapters to "separate for God what's meant for God" is in effect the key point of the chapter. That is to use our lives for His glory. Because we easily get our minds off of God and onto what we desire to do for ourselves, God designed "practical ways" for those Israelites to keep their focus upon Him through their day. While we Christians are not required to eat any of these forbidden or accepted animals, the point is God wants us to keep focusing upon Him and thinking of practical ways to do that is the idea of this lesson.
 - i) What all of this comes down to is separating our lives in practical ways so we can make a difference for God in our lives. Finding ways to keep our focus upon Him is helpful as we easily get our focus off of the greatest purpose we have for our lives, using them to make a difference for God in the world around us. That's what He wants us to do with the time He's given us. No we don't have to ignore the realities of life in order to do that. The text of these two chapters focused on practical ways we can keep our focus upon God to use our lives and to make that difference. It's God's way of saying, I know you have to eat and have to work and have to deal with debts and debtors daily, but while we're dealing with all of that, do it in ways that keep your (our) focus upon Him so we use our lives for Him.
 - j) With that positive thought about volunteer slavery for God completed let's close in prayer.
18. Heavenly Father, help us not to waste the most valuable thing you've given us: our time. Help us to keep our focus upon You as we use our lives to make a difference for You. Guide us so we can use our time and our resources for Your glory in all that we do. As we go through our lives may we like these Israelites find ways to keep our focus upon You so that we as Your volunteer slaves glorify You by how we've lived out our lives. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.