

How to Be Human: A Jubilee Spirituality for All of Us - Becoming Jubilee

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Preacher: Daniel Dixon

- [0 : 00] Please join with me in prayer as we continue our series in Luke tonight. Creator God, you are the one who restores and who redeems us.
- The earth is yours and everything in it, and we are humbly and gratefully here to enjoy the life you've given us, to enjoy the peace that you have given us.
- May we receive your jubilee, and may we extend it to those around us as well. Amen. Give me one second while I adjust this mic, because it is falling off of my ear.
- Sorry. All right. If I haven't met you before, my name is Daniel. I'm an elder here at the table.
- I have been a part of the table for about a year now. If I seem a little bit fatigued tonight, it's because it's Women's World Cup season. Who is staying up until midnight watching? Right?
- [1 : 12] Right? Waking up at 5 a.m.? Wonderful times ahead of us, y'all. It's going to be rough, but we can do it. We can do it. We can get those 5 a.m. games on our TVs.
- I believe in us. Have you ever loved something so much that you wanted to keep it to yourself? You loved it. You cherished it.
- You enjoyed it, and it was yours. When I was younger, I lived in Oregon. I lived in Northern California. I may or may not have been considered a hipster.
- I may or may not have been pretentious. I'll let you decide that for yourselves. But I was, shockingly, part of the indie music scene there. I don't play any instruments, but I loved finding new small bands.
- I loved going to small concerts in basements and garages and experiencing new music. And if you've ever been a fan of independent music or followed indie bands, you might have seen a phenomenon where a smaller band becomes popular.
- [2 : 15] They get their big moment, their break. And the folks who were there since day one feel this sense of, yeah. I knew this band back when they were just starting. I saw their first concert in that garage on that street down in California.
- This feeling of, I was one of the original fans. I was there first. Normally, that's accompanied by this bittersweet feeling that the band's new popularity is kind of ruining the experience.
- The new fans don't really get it as much. They're not really as part of it as much as the old fans were. And while those sentiments can definitely be true at times, there's overall an expression of, I want this to be for me.
- A kind of exclusive, arrogant, this is my band, my music. For me, that thing that I used to love so much that it was just for me was coffee.
- I love coffee. I love the history of it. I love the production of it. The creation of it. Everything about it is just wonderful to me. So, when I lived in Northern California, there was a coffee shop there that I consider to be the only good coffee shop in the area.

[3 : 34] It was in a kind of along the highway sort of town. There was really only a Starbucks there and a McDonald's there and then this coffee shop.

So, I went there one day to order a macchiato. Walked in, ordered it, and the barista very politely started to explain to me what a macchiato was and how she was going to make it for me.

I was a little bit annoyed. I know what a macchiato is. It is one shot of espresso. It is a small amount, like this much, foamed milk.

That's a macchiato. And I kind of said that to the barista. I said, I know what a real macchiato is. I've had them before. And as she started making my coffee, she said, wonderful.

That's great. It's just that we get a lot of people here who their only experience with coffee is at Starbucks. And I want to make sure that they get something here that they like, that they know about, that they know what to expect.

[4 : 39] I said, a lot of people end up really liking what we make for them, though. I laughed and said, yeah, you know, macchiatos at Starbucks are just straight up sugar. It's not coffee.

Starbucks was my pretentious name for Starbucks. They do kind of burn their coffee. And it was kind of like a dig at its subpar coffee.

It would be a, we know what good coffee is. Let's kind of like revel in our collective superiority. And as she finished the drink, she just kind of stared at me.

She didn't laugh at my Starbucks joke. Didn't even say, that's just kind of a bad joke. Just kind of stared at me for about five, ten seconds. And then said, yeah, there are a lot of legitimate critiques about Starbucks.

But they're what a lot of people know and what a lot of people enjoy. So we try not to come across as a, we're better than Starbucks coffee shop.

[5 : 49] We want people to experience coffee in a new way. We want to keep it accessible for them. We want people to experience coffee. Here's your macchiato. Here's your macchiato. So I took my tiny cup of espresso with a small amount of foamed milk and sat there, feeling shame in that moment.

Realizing that in my love for coffee, my desire to keep this for myself, I had forgotten one of the most fundamental principles behind coffee as a drink. It was meant to be shared with people.

And given my attitude at that point, I guarantee you that nobody would want to have a cup of coffee with me because I was going to critique everything that happened. I would be full of judgment towards it.

Now I'm still pretty personally pretentious about my own tastes in coffee. I still like making my Starbucks at times. But I realized that I was really deeply missing out on sharing something that I loved with other people.

So I could only share it in a way of, this is mine. I have the knowledge here. I have the expertise here. I know the right way to do this.

[7 : 03] Similar to discovering a new band that's really small and no one else knows about getting upset when more people find out about it. There's something kind of insidious that happens when we find something that we love that's meant to be shared.

We want to keep it to ourselves. So today as we're going to continue our sermon in the series in Luke, we're going to be looking at how Jesus teaches and embodies a spirituality grounded in liberation.

A jubilee spirituality that's meant to be shared with more than just yourself. That directly counteracts the desire to keep good news, to keep goodness to yourself, to your group, to people like you.

But before I move on to Luke, I want to set the stage a bit and look at the jubilee itself. So one of the clearest statements about the jubilee comes in Leviticus 25.10, which we're going to have on a slide up here, which reads, Consecrate the 50th year.

So the jubilee comes in the context of God giving laws to the people of Israel.

[8 : 25] They have just been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. God is saying to them, this is how you should live as people who I have set free. This is how you should live and how you should treat each other.

We see the culmination, the fruit of this in Deuteronomy 15.4, where God says to Israel, there will be no poor among you if you obey my voice, if you do what I command you.

There will be no poor in your society. However, throughout scriptures, we also see that God is a bit of a realist.

God knows that those commandments that will ensure that there are no poor in Israel are not going to be followed and puts in place different measures to restore back to the people of Israel the dignity, the self-worth, the grace that was given to them when they were freed from Egypt.

And the jubilee is one of those restorative measures. So basically this jubilee year happens every 50th year.

[9 : 30] In essence, it was a socioeconomic practice focused on restoration of land and restoration of people. Those two principles, restoring land, restoring people, had an underlying theological occurrence in this world that we're going to look at.

So we're going to start by just taking a look at two specific parts of jubilee and what that would have looked like. So we're going to look first at the restoration of land.

So jubilee was a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell their land out of economic need. So Leviticus 25 reads, if they, referring to someone who has sold their land, if they do not acquire the means to repay, what was sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the year of jubilee.

It will be returned in the jubilee and they can then go back to their property. So if you became poor, you had to sell some of your land, maybe all of your land, there are a few ways that you could get it back.

Someone who is part of your clan, part of your tribe could purchase it back for you. If you regain some of your wealth, you could also purchase it back.

[10 : 55] And it's stipulated you could buy it back at a fair price. But, let's say that neither of those things happen. No one in your tribe, no one in your clan can buy the land.

You can't buy it back either. In the 50th year, that land just gets handed right back to you. No interest, no questions on did you deserve your land back or not.

It's just land back right away, every 50 years, immediately. This land restoration would mean that people would regain economic independence, that they would restore the ancestral lands given to them by God, and they would have the means to provide for themselves and for their families again.

The second piece of jubilee was restoration of people. The jubilee year was a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become hired workers due to poverty.

So we see in Leviticus 25 again, it says, If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you.

[12 : 09] They are to work for you until the year of jubilee. Then they and their children are to be released, and they will go back to their clans, to the property of their ancestors.

Because the Israelites are my servants whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

So if you became poor, you might end up selling yourself and your family as a worker. Now when we hear slavery, we often interpret this in the North American context. This is not really that form of slavery.

It's a form of you and your family go and live with this other family. You live with them, you work with them. It is still servitude. It is still labor for another person.

Similar to the land restoration, there are still some stipulations here to protect people. If I had a hard worker who was working for me, I could not lend them money at interest.

[13 : 08] There are protections to still keep their dignity even if they were in service. And then the year of jubilee, the 50th year, you are free.

You and your family walk out of there and head back to your home. Just like with the land, there is no extra time added for if you were a good worker or if you were a bad worker, it doesn't matter.

There is no coercive attempt to keep the extra labor, to keep the ability to produce more. You just go free. Given the regular timing of the jubilee of every 50 years, this would have meant that servitude would never go beyond one generation.

So it is baked into society, this cycle of restoration, so there would always be freedom coming for people. There would always be restoration coming.

The driving reason for this was that God brought the people out of Israel, out of Egypt, freeing them from their slavery. So because God was their redeemer, they were meant to redeem each other as well.

[14 : 14] So you see, like, the jubilee is God's idea of restoration. It was intended to prevent poverty from continuing unchecked, from taking root permanently in societies. It was a systematic way to address and to respond to the factors that lead to poverty, to provide an economic, cultural, environmental, and communal fresh start.

Beyond those practical elements, though, the jubilee would have evoked a deep sense of humility, a reminder of God's grace and gift of Israel's dependence on their redeemer.

This is a beautiful vision. Now that we have, you know, here in the U.S. over the last couple of months, there's been a lot of talk about student debt, about medical debt.

About how interest and debt accumulates at massive amounts, where people can never really repay them. I think that would happen if every 50 years there was just this reset.

It didn't matter how much you owe. It didn't matter how in debt you are. It's just, ride clean. Start over. Unfortunately, there's really not much to suggest that the jubilee ever happened.

[15 : 29] And there are a few reasons why, but one is very, very clear. The jubilee would have been very hard for the wealthy and the powerful to observe and to support. The jubilee created cyclical limits to both poverty and wealth.

You could be wealthy. You could have people working for you. You could purchase land. And at the 50 years, that goes away.

You could have four, five, six families working for you. That additional labor is gone. You could buy as much land as you want to. At the 50th year, that land is gone.

It's not yours anymore. The good news to the poor that restoration would always be coming was also a message to the rich and the powerful.

That their wealth had a limit. Their power had a limit. And so for whatever reason, the jubilee just kind of fades from the story of Israel. We don't really see it in Israel's history.

[16 : 30] The jubilee gets picked back up again in Isaiah, when the people of Israel are experiencing exodus. They're experiencing exile and conquest again. Just like their ancestors did in Egypt generations ago.

Isaiah uses jubilee language to talk about the restoration for people who have lost their lands, who have lost their families, who have lost their homes. The most obvious reference to jubilee in the New Testament comes in Luke 4, 16 through 30, the passage we're going to look at today.

Jesus comes back to Nazareth. It's his hometown. He comes back after his baptism in the Holy Spirit. He comes back after his temptation in the wilderness. And his time in Nazareth is considered his first public proclamation of his ministry.

But before we look at Luke 4, 16, I want to say a few words about Nazareth. We don't really know anything about Nazareth. It was a small, obscure village.

We know that much. We know it was being occupied by the Roman Empire, like the rest of Israel. We know that it's not mentioned at all in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's not important enough in the grand history of Israel to merit any mention at all.

[17 : 47] The Gospel of John shares a sentiment that likely would have been common during those days, saying, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nazareth was, by all accounts, insignificant.

There's not much there. But it was Jesus' hometown. That's where Jesus returns to proclaim his ministry and his message.

So if you have your Bibles, either a Bible or on your phone, let's turn to Luke 4, 16, 22.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

[18 : 49] On rolling it, he found the place where it is written, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.

He began by saying to them, Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.

Isn't this Joseph's son? They asked. Liberty to the captives. Return of freedom. This is Jubilee language.

[19 : 48] The ending line, the year of the Lord's favor, is a clear parallel to Leviticus 25, the year of Jubilee. It would have been understood as such by the people of Nazareth, hearing that the year of God's favor is here.

James Cone, a black liberation theologian, in his book, God of the Oppressed, describes Jesus' mission in this way. God and Jesus has brought liberation to the poor and the wretched of the land.

And that liberation is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of their humanity. The scandal is that the gospel means liberation.

That this liberation comes to the poor. Jesus doesn't just proclaim Jubilee in Nazareth. Jesus becomes Jubilee in Nazareth.

What better place than Nazareth to declare this mission? To declare freedom to the captives, liberty to the oppressed, restoration. So it's not really surprised that when Jesus says this to the crowd, they react with sort of puzzled positivity.

[21 : 06] They don't quite know what to make of this. They knew Jesus. They knew Jesus' family. It's an unexpected moment for them. They don't really know what's going on here.

They're the undercurrent of anticipation, astonishment. The year of God's favor, the Jubilee is here. And it's coming for one of their own. There's a part of you that really wants the story to end right there.

I love that. Jesus goes to a town experiencing poverty and oppression and says, you are free. I have come to free you. And Nazareth says, great, we are free.

And everyone lives happily ever after. But we see that the story takes a dramatic turn after Jesus proclaims Jubilee. So when I keep reading in the rest of Luke 4, so after the crowd responds with their puzzled positivity, Jesus says to them, surely you will quote this proverb to me.

Physician, heal yourself. And you're going to tell me, do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum. Truly I tell to you, Jesus continued, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

[22 : 27] I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time. And the sky was shut for three and a half years. And there is a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them.

But to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet. Yet none of them, not one of them was cleansed.

Only Naaman the Syrian. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of town, took him to the brow of the hill which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

He walked right through the crowd and went on his way. That second part of the story really frustrates me.

To be honest, I really don't like that part of the story. It starts off so well. Jesus gives this beautiful message of liberation to people who really need it.

[23 : 33] And then Jesus, for seemingly no apparent reason, decides to piss them off, insult them. So much so that they go from adoration to anger within minutes.

And then try to kill him. I think, would it have been that hard, Jesus, for you to just do what you did in Capernaum? Like, you just healed some people.

Would it have been that hard to do that here too? You've already done some miracles. Would it have been that difficult for you to do that here? This part has been confusing to me for a long time as I've tried to think about, why is Jesus being, in my view, antagonistic here, upsetting them?

There's no need for that. There's no need for that. So I think that we can understand this response from Jesus to the crowd a little bit better when we look back at Isaiah 61, 1 through 2, and look at the full passage there.

Because when Jesus reads that passage, and Luke, he's quoting from Isaiah 61, and he leaves a piece of that passage out. So if you look at Isaiah 61, 1 through 2, it reads, When Jesus quotes that in the synagogue in Nazareth, he stops mid-sentence at the end, and leaves off that last line, the day of vengeance of our God.

[25 : 13] If you've ever been to a Bible class, you know that that is really bad hermeneutics.

Generally, you don't just stop halfway through a passage in the Bible and leave out the other half of it. Jesus says that anyways. And although he doesn't read that last line, the day of the vengeance of our God, it would have lingered in the ears of his audience.

They know this passage. They've heard it before. They know what's said. They would have noticed the absence, that Jesus stops the year of the Lord's favor. So what does Jesus say and do that causes the people of Nazareth to become so angry that they want to kill him?

He replaces that last passage, that last line, with his parable, with his story about prophets being sent to widows and to lepers.

And it's an extension of jubilee to people that Nazareth wanted nothing to do with. Jesus is saying, I'm here to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to you, and to the people who you don't want me to proclaim liberation to as well, to the people who you think aren't good enough, the people who aren't part of your group.

[26 : 44] Liberation is here for them too. Jesus depicts the widow in Sidon as a captive in need of jubilee's restoration.

The Syrian leper who was a general in a foreign army at that time, as being in need of jubilee liberation. So yes, the people of Nazareth were suffering under empire.

They were oppressed. And Jesus wants them to see that there are so many other people suffering under empire too, who are not in Nazareth. And that jubilee is for Nazareth and extends beyond and through Nazareth as well.

I think that Jesus is extending to them an offer for them to become jubilee as well. Saying, just as I am jubilee, and you are experiencing liberation through me, I'm extending to you the chance for others to experience liberation through you.

Remember that the jubilee would have evoked humility, this deep humility of, I live on a land that was gifted to me by God. No matter how much land I gain for myself, it's not mine.

[27 : 57] I have to give it back. No matter how many extra hands I have working for me, they're not mine. I have to give them back. It's a restoration to the human condition of dependence on God, interdependence on each other.

The guidance to forgive debts, to let captives go free, to return land, all function as a reminder that the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, including all of humanity.

So Jesus says to Nazareth, Yes, jubilee is here. It's here for you. And it's here for more than you. And that's what provokes Nazareth.

That's what drives their violent rejection of Jesus. They want a liberation that stops with them. Jubilee is a liberation that never stops. It goes on and on and on.

When I read the story again through that lens, my frustration at Jesus is still there.

[29 : 04] If I'm being honest, it still frustrates me. But I'm replaced with this brokenhearted feeling towards the people of Nazareth. They had jubilee in front of them.

Not just for them, a chance for jubilee to transform them to become people of liberation for others who are experiencing oppression as well. And they didn't want that kind of liberation.

They wanted it to stop with them. I think that this underlying principle can be summed up really well by a well-known quote from Toni Morrison.

The function of freedom is to free someone else. That's a beautiful quote. It's a powerful quote. If you search that phrase on Instagram or Google, you'll get a list of images where this quote is juxtaposed over mountain ranges, forests, diverse groups of people laughing, celebrating their freedom.

It's a beautiful quote. But it's also been sanitized a bit. Similar to how Jesus' liberation message has been taken a bit out of some of the context.

[30 : 14] This quote comes from Toni Morrison giving a commencement speech at Barnard College in 1979. The speech is entitled Cinderella's Stepsisters. And just like Jesus' jubilee mission, this freedom message from Toni Morrison carries a challenge with it.

Morrison starts off by wondering about the story of Cinderella. And specifically, Cinderella's stepsisters. She wonders, what must it have been like to be those stepsisters, growing up with a mother who used them as an instrument of her hatred and anger towards Cinderella?

Morrison describes the stepsisters as being brutalized by their mother, as having their sensibilities, their ability to love and care, being destroyed by their mother who only wanted to spread hatred.

Morrison describes the stepsisters as being poisoned by their mother. And she wonders, at the end of the Cinderella story, when Cinderella goes off happy and free, what happened to the stepsisters?

Did their cruelty continue? Did they even turn that back on their mother when their mother became old and needed their care and support? Did they perpetuate the same anger that they had experienced?

[31 : 38] Wonders why Cinderella didn't come back and try and save them as well. In the full context of this quote from Toni Morrison, Toni Morrison says, You're moving in the direction of freedom, and the function of freedom is to free somebody else.

You are moving towards self-fulfillment. And the consequences of that fulfillment should be discovered that there is something just as important as you are. And that just as important thing may be your stepsister.

If you're free, go free somebody else. You might be surprised at who that somebody else is. I had a similar moment to my Makoto moment of shame a few months ago, where I love something so much that I became pretentious about it.

I was in Canada celebrating my graduation from seminary. I've been a seminary student for about five years now. I had the honor of being welcomed as a guest in a school that is predominantly indigenous.

I am white, my family is white, we have basically Norwegian, English, and Scottish heritage. I was welcomed at the school that is focused on indigenous peoples.

[33 : 05] So my parents came up for my graduation, and my dad was full of questions at every moment. He asked me, can everyone in the US be indigenous if they were born here?

He asked me, can I be indigenous? I was born in the US, my parents were born in the US, my grandparents were born here, my great grandparents were born here. We don't know anyone who wasn't born here.

He asked why he couldn't be part of certain ceremonies and practices that were closed to specific indigenous communities. Saying, those really resonate with me. The values they teach of respect for the land and people resonate with me.

Why can't, why can't I be part of that? He asked about basically everything that we saw and experienced. And as he asked questions, I felt myself getting more and more annoyed with every single question he asked.

Towards the end of the trip, things reached a tipping point when he asked me a question that was borderline offensive about people who had ancestry that was both white and indigenous.

[34 : 10] And I felt the words, you have a phone, just Google it. Starting to come out of my mouth as I dismissed his question. Before I could say anything though, he continued his question with his own exasperated statement of, I really want to understand.

I know I'm probably saying the wrong things. I'm asking the wrong questions. I'm a six year old white guy. I've never thought about these topics before.

And it's really important for me to wrestle with. I need to learn about this. I need to get this right. And when he said that, my heart dropped and I felt devastated as I reflect on how for the past five years, I sat in a room with people who truly helped me experience Jubilee.

Through my experience in grad school, I found restoration with land and people in a rich way I'd never felt before. I said a lot of really stupid things. I asked a lot of really poorly phrased questions.

My ignorance was on full display. And at times, people let me talk and say things. At times, people stopped and corrected me. Yes, at times people said, you have a computer, you have a search engine, use Google.

[35 : 26] But they walked with me on that journey of Jubilee, of restoration. And here I was, three days into my dad's journey of Jubilee, of restoration towards land and people, and I was done.

I was ready to dismiss him, let him find his own path. I was not ready to extend Jubilee to him. I realized I hadn't fully embraced the humility behind Jubilee.

That every moment, first, when someone corrected me at school, where people let me kind of ramble, and then corrected me in private afterwards.

I had a moment of my dependence and need towards them, towards a creator. And I wasn't willing to give that to him.

I have to admit that I feel a little bit awkward and uncomfortable with this sermon. I know that a lot of people here at the table have experienced injustice in various ways, both on personal levels and in systemic ways.

[36 : 32] I know that many people here at the table have been on a journey of deconstruction, of leaving churches and families that had toxic theology, harmful theology, and are finding a more beautiful way to practice our faith.

I'd rather talk about what it means to call out injustice. I'd rather sit down with a group of white people and talk about how just Google it is a valid response, and that sometimes we need to just do our own work sometimes.

And all that is true. When I look at this story, what I see there, what I see in what Jesus is teaching there, is that the good news of Jubilee extends through and beyond all of us.

I really wish that in that Nazareth story that I could paint Nazareth as a picture of privilege and power. In my first drafts of the sermon I did, because I was a lot more comfortable to talk about how Jesus confronted privilege, and to talk about how Jesus goes to a town of poor and oppressed people and then gets driven out of it.

Jesus extends Jubilee beyond Nazareth to all who are oppressed by empire. And ultimately that vision is too wide for Nazareth to accept.

[37 : 57] So my question for you as we come towards the end of the sermon tonight is, who are the Sidonian widows in your life?

Who are the Syrian lepers in your life? Who are the Cinderella's stepsisters in your life? Who are you discounting from the Jubilee liberation that Jesus offers?

Jubilee is here in the person of Jesus. Jubilee is here for you. There's liberation, there's restoration, and it's here for more than you as well.

Jubilee vision is a spirituality that lets us be transformed as we become Jubilee ourselves to those around us.

And we might be surprised at who we are asked to offer Jubilee to. So as we transition from here into a moment of communion, as we typically do here at the table, I ask you just to pray with me on that.

[39 : 13] I know it's a, it's not a question that I want to ask. I don't want to think about the Syrian lepers in my life. I don't want to think about the people in my life who I have discounted from receiving Jubilee.

Jesus, you extend Jubilee to us and even beyond us. I ask that your message of restoration of land and people.

That the earth is yours and everything in it, including all of humanity. I ask that you let it humble us. To view ourselves as vehicles for your Jubilee in this world.

To extend liberation and restoration to all who need it. To all who are oppressed by empire. We pray this in your name.

Amen. Amen.