

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters  
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number 6  
June 20, 2007

Leviticus 19:9,10 (NRSV)

**9. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.**

**10. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.**

This “gleaning” is about actual gleaning: the second harvesting of the land’s produce by the poor and those who had no land of their own. The crucial premise underlying this double command is Israel’s understanding that the land belonged to Yahweh. No one in Israel was a landowner in our sense. Each tribe (except the priestly tribe of Levi) and clan had its own “portion in Yahweh,” the piece of land that represented its share in the covenant with God.

Yahweh has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable among the covenant people, and so a portion of the harvest belongs to them as surely as the first harvest belongs to those we would identify as the landowners. It was Yahweh’s to distribute. So, the Israelite farmer was not to reap all the way to the edges of the field. The farmer was not to “gather the gleanings,” because they were given by God to the poor and the alien, that is the resident foreign worker.

Notice the difference from our own in their way of thinking. The Israelite farmer did not “allow” gleaning by the poor; Yahweh God commanded it. There is no charity involved, no handout. The poor are not to be regarded as beggars or freeloaders. They are valid members of the covenant community, and they have as much right to glean as the farmer has to harvest.

I think suggesting there was no stigma attached to gleaning would be naive. People have always honored the rich above the poor (although there were no rich by our standards), the landowner above the tenant, those who take first above those who wait in line. But God does not. God gives graciously to all, and the farmer who disobeys this command by harvesting to the very edges of the field and stripping his vineyards bare is stealing, not only from the poor and the foreigner, but from Yahweh God. If the older child takes all the cookies, the mother who baked them for her children will get angry.

The book of Ruth is revealing. The passage below is Ruth 2:15-19 (NRSV).

**When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her." So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of**

**barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."**

Here in Ruth, we see that in practice gleaning might be slim pickings, because Boaz gives special instructions for Ruth to be treated kindly and given plenty to glean. We see also that gleaning is considered working. After all, Ruth was in the fields all day, just as the field hands were.

I think these commands regarding gleaning give us plenty to consider if we think about our own society's attitudes toward ownership, consumption, acquisition, benevolence, and welfare. I have just begun reading a book, *Nickel and Dimed*, about the plight of low-wage workers in our society as experienced by the woman who posed as one in various American cities and towns. These people with no last names ("Maria, get back to work!" or "Hon, get me another cup of coffee, and I'm in a hurry") work like field hands just to survive, barely. Many count on tips, which can be more sparse than gleanings. It's grim reading but good for the spirit.

Any thoughts you're willing to share?