

The Book of Deuteronomy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 10: Holy Living, Tithes, and the Sabbatical Year

Deuteronomy 14:1–15:23

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson must hold two truths together. First, the dietary laws, the tithes, and the sabbatical year were genuinely given by God to Israel under the covenant made through Moses, good and wise for their time and pointing forward as shadows to the substance found in Christ (Colossians 2:16–17). Second, those particular ordinances, the feast days, the food rules, the Sabbath, and the tithe, are not bound on Christians as law. The danger on one side is to dismiss the Old Testament as irrelevant; the danger on the other is to drag its ceremonial commands back onto the church. We aim to walk the careful, biblical middle: honoring these laws as God's word for their time and learning from them, while resting in the fulfillment Christ brings.

From these shadows the lesson lifts up timeless truth. God owns His people and calls them holy. He cares fiercely for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor. And He invites His people to give, not by compulsion or quota, but freely, cheerfully, and as they have prospered (2 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). The open hand of Deuteronomy 15 is not abolished in the New Testament; it is deepened and freed.

This study also aims at the heart of the student. It is easy to study tithing and miss generosity, to debate dietary law and never ask what our own appetites reveal. The aim is to let the God who would have “no poor among you” search our budgets, our griefs, and our sense of identity, until we live as people who truly know we are His treasured possession.

Question 1

Student Question:

What does God reveal about the identity and worth of His people when He calls Israel “a people holy to the Lord” and His “treasured possession”, and how is that identity meant to shape even their mourning (14:1–2)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens not with a command about behavior but with a declaration about identity: “You are the sons of the Lord your God” and “a people holy to the Lord your God”, whom He has chosen “to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (14:1–2). God grounds everything He is about to require in who His people already are. He does not say, “Behave like this so you may become Mine”; He says, “You are Mine, so live like it”.

The word “treasured possession” pictures a king’s personal treasure, valued above all his other holdings. Israel was not chosen because she was large or impressive (7:7) but because God set His love on her and kept His promise to the fathers. This was a call to a covenant purpose, a people through whom all nations would one day be blessed, not a guarantee that every individual was unconditionally saved regardless of faith. The choosing was real grace; the living it out still required a trusting, obedient heart.

Because they belonged to God, even their grief was to look different. The pagan rites of cutting the body and shaving the forehead “for the dead” (14:1) expressed a despair that treated death as the final word. God’s children were not to mutilate themselves in hopeless mourning. Their sorrow was permitted and real, but it was held inside the larger truth that they belonged to the living God.

For us this sets the right order of the Christian life. We do not earn our way into being God’s people; in Christ we are made His, and holy living flows out of that belonging. Identity comes first, then conduct. When we forget that order, obedience curdles into anxious performance. When we remember it, holiness becomes the glad response of people who already know whose they are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identity in God precedes and grounds holy conduct
- God’s choosing of Israel was a covenant purpose, not unconditional individual election
- Election did not remove the need for trusting, obedient faith
- Christian grief differs from the world’s hopeless mourning
- Holiness as response to grace, not a means of earning it

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God state who His people are before telling them how to live?
- How does knowing you are God’s “treasured possession” change your motivation to obey?
- Where does your conduct flow from anxious performance rather than secure identity?

Question 2

Student Question:

Israel was forbidden to grieve like the hopeless nations around them. In what areas of life are you tempted to mourn, worry, or react exactly like the world, and how would remembering that you belong to God change that?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God told Israel not to grieve like the nations who had no hope. The temptation was to absorb the surrounding culture’s reflexes, to let pagan despair shape even their tears. The same

temptation presses on us. We can carry the name of Christ and still react to loss, fear, money, and disappointment in ways indistinguishable from people who have no God at all.

Notice that God did not forbid mourning; He forbade hopeless mourning. The issue is not whether we feel grief but whether our grief is swallowed by despair. Paul echoes this exactly when he says we do not grieve “as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Our sorrow is real, but it is bounded by resurrection.

This question invites honest self-examination. Where do the world’s instincts still govern you? Perhaps it is anxiety about the future, envy over what others have, bitterness when wronged, or panic when money is tight. Each is a place where remembering that you belong to God could change your response from the inside.

The cure is not gritted-teeth pretending but renewed memory. You are His. He counts your tears, holds your future, and has not abandoned you to the despair that drives the world. Living set apart often begins not with doing something new but with remembering Whose you already are in the very moment you are tempted to react like everyone else.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worldly reflexes can persist in God’s people
- Hope-shaped grief versus hopeless despair
- Anxiety, envy, and bitterness as cultural defaults
- Remembering identity as the path to transformed reactions
- Distinctiveness lived out in ordinary emotional life

Discussion Prompts

- In what situations do you most react like the world rather than like God’s child?
- What is the difference between grieving with hope and grieving without it?
- How could remembering you belong to God reshape one reaction this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Why did God give Israel the distinctions between clean and unclean foods, and what do these dietary laws teach about His holiness and His desire for a set-apart people (14:3–21)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Deuteronomy 14:3–21 lists the animals Israel could and could not eat, distinguishing clean from unclean creatures of land, sea, and sky. These distinctions were not arbitrary food preferences but part of God forming a people visibly separate from the nations. Every meal became a small reminder: we belong to a holy God, and even our plates declare it.

The repeated refrain is holiness. The chapter closes this section by returning to the theme it opened with: “you are a people holy to the Lord your God” (14:21). The dietary code drew a line around daily life so that Israel could not blend invisibly into Canaanite culture. The separations at the table reinforced the separation of the heart.

We should be careful not to read modern health science as the main point, though some laws may have had protective effects. The deeper purpose was symbolic and covenantal, teaching the difference between holy and common, clean and unclean, so that Israel would learn to think God’s thoughts about what is set apart for Him.

These laws also expose God’s lordship over all of life. He claimed not just Israel’s worship on holy days but their ordinary appetites on ordinary days. Holiness was never meant to be confined to the sanctuary; it reached into the kitchen. That principle outlives the specific menu: the God who is holy claims every corner of His people’s lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Clean and unclean as covenant separation, not mere diet
- Holiness reaching into ordinary daily life
- The symbolic distinction between holy and common
- God’s lordship over appetites, not only worship
- Caution against reducing the laws to health rules

Discussion Prompts

- How did the food laws keep Israel from blending into the nations?
- What does it mean that God claimed even Israel’s ordinary meals?
- Where does God want His holiness to reach into your ordinary days?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where in your daily habits, choices, and appetites is God calling you to be visibly set apart, not for the sake of rules, but because you belong to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The dietary laws made Israel’s distinctiveness tangible three times a day. While those specific rules are not ours, the call to be visibly set apart remains. The New Testament still summons God’s people to live differently in their appetites, habits, and choices, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9), language drawn straight from passages like this one.

This question turns the searchlight on daily habits. Our appetites are not only for food but for entertainment, attention, comfort, status, and pleasure. A life that simply consumes whatever

the culture offers, with no discernment and no boundary, looks no different from the world it claims to have left.

Being set apart is not about a list of forbidden foods but about a heart that asks, before its appetites, “Does this honor the God I belong to?” Paul could say “all things are lawful” yet add “not all things are helpful” and “I will not be dominated by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Freedom in Christ is not freedom to be ruled by every craving.

So the personal question is practical and probing. Where have your appetites quietly taken charge? What habit would change if you genuinely lived as someone set apart, not to earn God’s favor but because you are already His? Holiness here is not joyless restriction; it is the glad refusal to let lesser things rule a life that belongs to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Visible distinctiveness still called for under the New Covenant
- Appetites beyond food: media, comfort, status, pleasure
- Discernment versus uncritical consumption
- Freedom in Christ is not bondage to cravings
- Holiness as glad belonging, not joyless rule-keeping

Discussion Prompts

- Which of your appetites most needs the discipline of belonging to God?
- What habit would change if you lived as visibly set apart?
- How do you tell the difference between freedom and being dominated?

Question 5

Student Question:

What purposes did the various tithes serve, including the festival tithe meant to teach Israel to “fear the Lord” and the third-year tithe gathered for the Levite, sojourner, fatherless, and widow (14:22–29)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Deuteronomy 14:22–29 describes more than one use of the tithe. There was the yearly tithe brought to the place God chose, eaten before the Lord with rejoicing, “that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always” (14:23). When the journey was long, Israel could exchange the produce for money, travel, and then buy whatever they desired to feast before God. The tithe here was an act of worship that trained reverence.

Then there was the third-year tithe, stored within the towns so that “the Levite”, who had no inheritance, and “the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow” could “come and eat and be filled” (14:29). Built right into Israel’s economy was a safety net for those most easily forgotten.

God tied His own blessing to this open-handed care: “that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands”.

The tithe, then, served at least three purposes: it supported those devoted to God’s service, it provided for the vulnerable, and it formed Israel’s heart in reverence and trust. Giving was never merely transactional. It was discipleship of the heart, teaching the giver to fear God and to see the poor as God sees them.

We should note that this was Israel’s law under the Old Covenant, not a tax code lifted directly onto the church. Yet the purposes endure. God still cares that those who serve Him are supported, that the vulnerable are fed, and that giving shapes the giver. The heaviest doctrinal work on tithing and Christian giving waits for question nine, but already we see giving as worship that forms reverence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Multiple tithes with distinct purposes
- Giving as worship that trains reverence
- Provision for the Levite who had no inheritance
- Built-in care for the widow, orphan, and sojourner
- God’s blessing linked to open-handed obedience
- Old Covenant law, not a direct tax on the church

Discussion Prompts

- How did the tithe teach Israel to fear the Lord?
- What does it say about God that He built poverty relief into the law?
- How can giving shape a person’s heart and not just their budget?

Question 6

Student Question:

Tithing was meant to train Israel’s heart, not just empty their barns. How is God using the way you handle money to train your own heart to trust and revere Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The yearly tithe was given so Israel might “learn to fear the Lord your God always” (14:23). Giving was a classroom for the heart. Every time an Israelite set aside the tenth, he was reminded that the harvest came from God, that he was not the ultimate owner, and that trust meant releasing his grip. Money handled rightly trains the soul.

The same is true for us, though the form differs. How we handle money reveals and shapes what we trust. The person who clings to every dollar is schooling his heart in fear and self-reliance.

The person who gives freely is training his heart to rest in God's provision. Jesus said it plainly: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

This question asks you to notice what your money is teaching you. Does your spending and giving cultivate reverence and trust, or anxiety and grasping? Often our budgets disciple us in directions we never consciously chose. The bank statement can be a more honest record of the heart than the prayer journal.

The invitation is to let generosity become a means of grace, a way God grows your trust. You do not give to twist God's arm or to earn standing; you give because you are learning to fear and trust Him, and few practices teach that lesson as surely as opening a tight hand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Money as a classroom that forms the heart
- Generosity trains trust; grasping trains fear
- Treasure and heart bound together
- Budgets quietly disciple us
- Giving as a means of grace, not a transaction with God

Discussion Prompts

- What is your current handling of money teaching your heart to trust?
- Where do you see grasping or anxiety in how you give?
- What one change would let generosity grow your reverence for God?

Question 7

Student Question:

What did the sabbatical year of release reveal about God's concern for the poor and His promise that "there will be no poor among you" if His people obeyed with open hands (15:1-11)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Every seventh year was a "year of release" when creditors among the people forgave debts owed by fellow Israelites (15:1-2). The aim was striking: "there will be no poor among you" (15:4), because God would so bless an obedient people that none would be left in crushing need. The release year kept poverty from becoming permanent and debt from becoming a lifelong chain.

Yet God is also realistic about the human heart. Almost in the same breath He says, "there will never cease to be poor in the land" (15:11), because His people would not perfectly obey. So He commands an open hand: "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor". The ideal of no poor and the reality of ongoing poverty both call for the same response, generosity.

God even probes the motive of the heart. As the release year drew near, a lender might be tempted to refuse a loan he would soon have to forgive, harboring a “base thought” and a “hostile” eye toward the needy (15:9). God forbids this calculating stinginess and promises blessing to those who give freely “and your heart shall not be grudging when you give” (15:10). He cares not only that we give but how.

Here is the heart of God on full display. He notices the poor man’s empty cupboard. He guards the dignity of the vulnerable. He ties His blessing to His people’s generosity, and He inspects the heart behind the hand. This portrait of God’s concern for the poor is timeless, even though the specific seven-year statute belonged to Israel’s covenant.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sabbatical release prevented permanent poverty
- The ideal of “no poor” set beside the reality of ongoing need
- God forbids calculating, stingy giving
- God inspects the heart behind the gift
- God’s blessing linked to open-handed generosity
- Concern for the poor as a timeless reflection of God’s heart

Discussion Prompts

- How does the release year reveal God’s concern for the poor?
- Why does God care about the motive behind our giving, not just the amount?
- How do the ideal of “no poor” and the reality of ongoing poverty both call for generosity?

Question 8

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 15 commands an open hand and warns against a heart that grows hard and stingy as a debt comes due. When have you felt that tug toward a closed hand, and what would open-handed generosity look like for you this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God warned against the moment a debt comes due and the heart hardens: “Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart” (15:9). He knew that generosity is easy in theory and hard in the pinch, when giving will actually cost us something we had counted on keeping. The closed hand usually closes slowly, with a reasonable-sounding excuse.

We feel this tug constantly. We intend to be generous, then a need arises at an inconvenient moment, and suddenly we find reasons to look away. The budget is tight. The person should manage better. We will give later. God names this drift toward the closed hand and calls His people to resist it before it hardens into habit.

This question invites honesty about your own grudging moments. When has giving felt like loss rather than joy? When have you calculated your way out of a need you could have met? Recognizing the pattern is the first step to breaking it.

Open-handed generosity this week might mean a specific gift, a forgiven debt, time given to someone draining, or hospitality that costs you comfort. The command is not to give until you are destitute but to refuse the stingy, calculating heart and to give freely, “not reluctantly or under compulsion” but as a glad reflection of the God who gives to us (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The closed hand closes slowly with reasonable excuses
- Generosity tested when giving actually costs
- Calculating our way out of real needs
- Naming grudging patterns before they harden
- Concrete, cheerful generosity as response to God

Discussion Prompts

- When have you felt the tug toward a closed hand?
- What excuses most easily talk you out of generosity?
- What specific open-handed act could you take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

The tithes, the sabbatical year, the dietary laws, and these ordinances were given to Israel under the Old Covenant. How were they shadows pointing to Christ, what does the New Testament teach about whether they are bound on Christians, and how does the New Testament call believers to give instead (Colossians 2:16–17; 1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These two chapters gather some of the very ordinances the New Testament names as shadows: the dietary laws (14:3–21), the tithes (14:22–29), and the sabbatical year (15:1–18), alongside the firstborn devoted to the Lord (15:19–23). Paul writes that food laws, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths “are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16–17). A shadow is real and God-given, yet it is not the body that casts it. These laws were genuinely from God, good for their time, and pointing forward to Christ.

This means two errors must be avoided. The first is treating the Old Testament as irrelevant, as if these chapters had nothing to teach. They are Scripture, written for our instruction (Romans 15:4), revealing God’s holiness, His care for the poor, and His claim on all of life. The second error is binding these specific ordinances on Christians as law. The food rules, the feast days, the

Sabbath, and the tithe were part of the Law given through Moses, which Christ “set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). To require them now is to reach back behind the cross. The Old Law was good for its season, but it is fulfilled and not bound on Christ’s people.

Tithing especially deserves clarity, because it is so often imposed on Christians as a flat ten-percent rule. The tithe was an Old Covenant ordinance tied to Israel’s land, priesthood, and feasts. The New Testament never commands Christians to tithe. Instead it teaches a fuller, freer giving. “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (1 Corinthians 16:2). Giving is regular (weekly, on the Lord’s Day), purposeful, and proportional to how God has blessed us. And it is to flow from a willing heart: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). For some, ten percent may be a starting point; for others, generosity will go well beyond it. The point is a glad, purposeful, cheerful heart, not a mandated percentage.

Yet while the ceremonial forms pass away, the heart behind Deuteronomy 15 does not. The God who would have “no poor among you” still calls His people to open-handed care for the needy. James says pure religion “is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27), the very people the third-year tithe protected. The shadow has given way to the substance, but the love of God for the poor that animated the shadow shines all the brighter in Christ, who though rich became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9).

So we read these chapters as Christians: honoring them as God’s word, refusing to bind their ceremonial commands on the church, receiving the Christ to whom they pointed, and embracing the New Testament call to give freely, cheerfully, purposefully, and as we have prospered, with open hands toward the poor that reflect the very heart of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Dietary laws, tithes, feasts, and Sabbath named as shadows fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:16–17)
- Two errors: dismissing the Old Testament versus binding its ceremonial law
- The Law nailed to the cross, not reaching back behind it
- Tithing is not commanded on Christians as a flat percentage
- New Testament giving: weekly, purposeful, proportional, cheerful (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7)
- Care for the poor as a timeless, deepened reflection of God’s heart
- Christ became poor that we might be rich (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that these laws were real shadows pointing to Christ?
- Why is tithing not bound on Christians, and how does the New Testament call us to give instead?

- How does the heart of Deuteronomy 15 toward the poor still shape the church?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across these chapters, name one specific way Jesus is forming you through them, whether in your identity, your appetites, your money, or your care for the poor.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These chapters moved from identity (you are God's treasured possession) to appetites (clean and unclean), to money (the tithes), to mercy (the release year and open hand), to worship (the firstborn devoted to the Lord). Taken together they paint a whole life surrendered to God, table and barn, calendar and wallet, grief and generosity.

Jesus fulfills every line of this picture. He is the holiness the food laws foreshadowed, the true bread, the One in whom we are made a holy people. He is the substance of every shadow. And He is the perfect open hand, who became poor that we might be rich, and who calls us to give as we have freely received.

This capstone question asks you to name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this study. Perhaps it is a settled sense that you are His treasured possession. Perhaps it is an appetite He is asking you to surrender, a tight hand He is prying open, or a poor neighbor He is putting on your heart.

Resist a vague answer. Name one concrete thing. Spiritual formation happens not in general resolutions but in specific obedience, the single gift given, the habit surrendered, the identity finally believed. Let one truth from these chapters take root and bear fruit this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A whole life surrendered: appetites, money, mercy, worship
- Christ as the substance of every shadow
- Identity, appetite, generosity as places of formation
- Specific obedience over vague resolution
- Naming one concrete fruit of the study

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from these chapters pressed most deeply on you?
- What one specific thing is Jesus forming in you here?
- What concrete step will you take this week in response?