

Can Gleaning be Transformative?

Ruth 2:1-13, 17-21; Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22;
Deuteronomy 24:19-22 (Shorter version)

To begin, let's watch this short video. Sorry that the sound isn't good, but it leads us into our topic for today. (Watch before worship)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SmXc5as5vM> "Biblical Principal of Gleaning"

Gleaning is one way we can show our Thankfulness on an ongoing basis. Let's look at what the **Bible teaches** us about it, some **history** about gleaning, some **principles** and try to be **creative** in carrying out this idea today.

When I was living in Tofield, I received an invitation to glean. The owner, who I did not know, invited some people to go to the edge of a certain field, & scratch the ground for usable potatoes. So I went, taking boxes, bags and a shovel. I found enough potatoes to feed my family for months. This was a new experience. The next year I received the same phone call.

In Ohio, my congregation was invited to go to the yard of a farmer who I did not know. When we arrive we were pointed to 4 big boxes, each the dimensions like that of our piano. We sorted out the mostly good potatoes from the few bad ones into smaller boxes, loaded up 4 vehicles, & took them to various food pantries.

In one of my congregations, they used some of their land to plant potatoes each spring. Then at harvest time, they were shared around to various groups involved in food distribution.

In another congregation, a member had the idea the church could have a big garden, & members would work on it – to give food away to low income people. So one group I contacted was a half-way house for ex-convicts. They were really really happy to have fresh garden produce which they picked up twice a week.

A relationship developed. They were so grateful for fresh vegetables, that they came some Saturdays, on their own initiative, to weed and harvest. The cook wondered how

this gleaning could be extended into the winter months. I told him about freezing and canning vegetables. This gleaning type project, became a multi year benefit for them. And the ex-prisoners, on their own initiative, became a big part of weeding and cleaning up the garden.

Gleaning traditionally is the act of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested or on fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest. It is a practice described in the Bible that became a legally enforced entitlement of the poor in a number of Christian kingdoms. This was an agricultural law of the Hebrews.

According to the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, farmers were to leave corners of their fields unharvested, should not pick up crops which were dropped, and should not harvest any over-looked produce that had been forgotten when they harvested the majority of a field. This included grapes in vineyards. Also, it is commanded that olive trees should not be beaten on multiple occasions and the remains from the first set of beatings should be left.

According to Leviticus, these crops should be left for the poor & for strangers. Deuteronomy commands the gleanings should be left for widows, strangers, and orphans. The Book of Ruth tells us the immigrant widow Ruth, gleaned to provide for herself and her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi.

Classical rabbinic literature has argued about these biblical laws. But all agreed, the farmer is not permitted to benefit from the gleanings; is not allowed to discriminate among the poor; nor try to frighten people away with dogs or lions. And farmers were not allowed to help the poor gather the left-overs crops.

In many parts of Europe, including England and France, the Biblically derived right to glean the fields was reserved for the poor; a right, enforceable by law, that continued in parts of Europe for many years. For example, in 18th century England, gleaning was a legal right for landless residents. In a small village the sexton

would often ring a church bell at eight o'clock in the morning and again at seven in the evening to tell the gleaners when to begin and end work. This lawful right effectively ended with a legal decision in 1788.

Today one Jewish code of laws says farmers are no longer obliged to obey the biblical rule. But, in modern Israel, rabbis of Orthodox Judaism insist that Jews allow gleanings to be consumed by the poor and by strangers during Sabbatical years.

In today's world, humanitarian groups practice gleaning by collecting and distributing foods. Often they pick up food that is destined to be thrown away. Blemishes on tomatoes for example, cause them to be seconds, and not economically valuable enough to harvest. But they are perfectly good, healthy and safe to eat or to process or put up for later. Much of the potential to help feed the people at the margins of society is in the farms. It's a matter of connecting the dots to get the food to them.

One of my congregations had a meal for low income people three times a week. Several stores contributed day old bread that the people could take home.

James Patch shares: Breaking this law was a punishable offense in ancient Israel. This old custom is still practiced by generous landlords in Syria. I could not find a date for this source, but James Patch has seen the reapers, in Syria, even when they exercised considerable care, drop from their hands frequent spears of wheat. When the reapers are employees, they may carelessly leave bunches of wheat standing behind rocks or near the boundary walls, sometimes for their own children. The owner usually sends someone to glean these.

But if he is of a generous disposition, he allows some needy women to follow after the reapers and benefit by their carelessness. It is also the current custom in some districts, after the main crop of grapes has been gathered, to remove the watch man and allow free access to the vineyards for gleaning the last grapes.

So gleaning is both a biblical command and has or was a religious cultural custom that went on for years and still occurs in some places. It invites generosity for those who are wealthier. And as with human nature, some people try to game the system or are not generous.

Proof that gleaning was enough of a familiar practice is the Bible uses the term in **figurative negative ways**. It describes punishment from God. Jeremiah said that Israel because of her wickedness, would be utterly destroyed, even to a thorough gleaning, and destruction of those who first escape. (6:9; 49:9-10).

Practically, there were many legitimate reasons, beyond Biblical commandments, why a farm had food left in its peripheries, vulnerable to being tilled under. These are not necessarily reflections of bad or wasteful farming practices. Frequently it's situational, such as a lack or loss of labor or severe & dramatic changing weather patterns. Mechanized harvesting techniques can skip over produce.

But gleaning is not just a question of efficiency, it was way deeper than that. It provided a "social buffer" that allowed flexibility, or, if you prefer, "resilience," to the agricultural society. The whimsies of weather, insects, pestilences and other calamities always make the yield of the harvest uncertain. So, a peasant family that faced hard times could always fall back on gleaning to survive. Then, when the good times came back, the same family could provide the human resources for the regular harvesting. So, gleaning played the role that today we call "welfare" or unemployment insurance, or food banks, or CPP, reducing hardship, conflicts and frictions within society.

But today most people are not farming – so how do we extend the concept of gleaning today? It takes some creativity. This means we need to consider what the principles of gleaning are. The Bible suggests these points.

First, Gleaning is first and foremost about relationships. About community. Physical and mental health. As well as a culture that

goes beyond economic practices and political mechanisms to promote a good society. It's about how we get along together.

Second, God is concerned with the poor.

God wants that the people most likely to be in poverty will be taken care of. The Creator commanded Israel to do this because they were once poor foreigners who needed his help.

Third, God supplies enough for everyone. A highly efficient farmer would harvest every last bit of produce in the fields in order to maximize the profit on the growing season. But God specifically commands the people not to do that. The lesson is God provides enough food for both farmers and the poor. With farm practices today and the way farms are separated from most of the population, can we be creative enough so everyone can have enough food?

Fourth, God expects us to be generous. After all, our Creator is generous with us in so many more ways than simply food. It's an attitude, habit and way of life we are to copy. Boaz is an example of that generosity. Thankfulness is expected to lead to a generous spirit. It helps everyone in the community to have what they need to be sustain life and be healthy.

The generosity of the master of the crop determined the value of the gleanings, as the story of Ruth well illustrates (Ruth 2:15-16). Boaz commanded his young men, saying, "Let Ruth, the foreigner, glean even among the sheaves. Reproach her not: Let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not." This illustrates how God treats you and I.

Fifth, gleaning is the responsibility of both individuals & the community. The command to leave something in the field went to all of Israel. Individual farmers could choose how generous they would be toward the neighbors. The law did not say, leave a specific percent of the crop or a certain, number of rows. We do not know how much this law was enforced, but a farmer's reputation quickly became known,

as well as a community's. Gleaning is about how we live together in community.

The farmer had an ethical obligation to contribute to the well being of the poor and to the community. Today because of how our society is structured, we need to strengthen this idea and involve everyone – not just farmers. The Bible is clear, nations are judged by how we treat the poor, widow, stranger and orphan. The weakest and most vulnerable among us.

The Sixth principle is, Gleaning is not a handout. The poor had to do the gleaning. God didn't tell the land owners to harvest all of their crops, then give a certain percentage of their harvest for the poor. Instead, rather than sitting expectantly in their house, the hungry person was required to go to the farmer's field and pick the produce, then prepare it. They were required to work for it. In doing this, they maintained the dignity of work and gathering their own food. Handouts create a class of victims, but work opportunities give people the tools to rise above their poverty. There is a connection between work and provision, a point that needs to be in conversations today.

And notice, because the farmer was leaving produce in the field, the poor could either gather it for food or could gather some of it for seed. This way, both the immediate and long term needs of the poor were being met. The poor can be fed, and they gain an opportunity for self-support in the future. Good gleaning has a transformation quality beyond handouts.

So, what kinds of systems can we create today to address the need for personal responsibility, dignity, and to encourage people to help themselves? Plus, we need to recognize there are people who simply need handouts – so how can we help them maintain their dignity?

A Seventh principle is, Gleaning leads to blessing. This was not a formal tax on the wealthy that would only benefit the poor. Instead, God gave land owners a chance to help themselves by helping the poor. Verse 19 in Deuteronomy commands people to leave something behind in the fields "so that the Lord

your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” God promises to bless the people who follow His laws, and promises abundance to those who obey the principle of gleaning. In God’s economy, helping the poor doesn’t come at the expense of a few. Rather, doing the right thing God’s way helps everyone involved. Those who receive and those who provide.

Lastly, I think another principle that we need to tease out is, God’s type of economy. We value our independence, but God values how we relate to our neighbor. Gleaning reflects our Creator’s character; how He relates to the world; and what is expected of you and I. This system offers a way of living for every one. It challenges our economic ideas as well as our politics and international relationships. It touches on what should we expect from our governments today.

Our Creator had a transformative vision of how we are to live together, modeling his love, care and generosity. These principles show that gleaning isn’t just charity. It points to a way of life and relationships beyond gleaning.

So let’s think and dream of how we can glean – more than we already do. How can businesses help creatively transform society and people, beyond simply being socially responsible? How can we move ourselves towards God’s gleaning community vision?

Did you ever think that the Thrift Store is a way of gleaning? It’s one way to help people; recycle our stuff; it’s ecologically friendly; and it cares for our neighbors, near and far.

Supporting the Canadian Food Grains bank is another way.

Being involved in the local food bank is another way of gleaning.

Some companies are intentionally less strict about who they hire and intentionally train people as well as build relationships.

I’ve heard of a man who uses some of his profits to help a few of his renters, buy their own home.

Some businesses offer reduced rates or free space to community groups and local non profits. Often the employees like this and even get involved with these groups. Did you ever consider that providing space for Prairie Light Christian Fellowship could be considered a kind of gleaning? It’s developing relationships and sharing our blessings which is the core of gleaning.

A great new creative trend among American congregations is helping people in debt because of health issues. Some churches partner with debt forgiveness organizations to cancel millions of dollars of medical debt for people in their communities. They buy up people’s personal debt for pennies on the dollar. They want to disrupt the cruel practice of going after debtors, especially when they can’t pay. They think not all debts are morally equal. Loans for survival are not the same as loans for sports cars. A 2018 study shows that 25% of Americans did without medical care, because they could not afford it. This includes those with insurance. This is evil & damages family’s individuals and society. What’s the suffering and pain as well as the lost opportunity cost?

These churches see the act of paying another’s debts as a good reflection of Jesus’ sacrifice. They see this as a means of justice. Followers of Jesus are not to just to care for souls, but also give real relief and help to people. For example, Pathway Church in Wichita, Kansas spent \$22,000 to eliminate \$2.2 million in medical debt for local residents. I think this kind of gleaning is so transformative, creative and what God expects his followers to do. It ties into the Bible’s Jubilee Year instructions.

In summary – gleaning helps us understand God’s heart. At its core – it’s about relationships. How can we be more transformative and more creative on this Thanksgiving Day?