



BRINGING FIRSTFRUITS

WEEK 5
10.04.15

FOCUS VERSE

Exodus 22:29

Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me.

LESSON TEXT

Leviticus 23:10–20

10 Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest:

11 And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it.

12 And ye shall offer that day when ye wave the sheaf an he lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the LORD.

13 And the meat offering thereof shall be two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the LORD for a sweet savour: and the drink offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of an hin.

14 And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

15 And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete:

16 Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the LORD.

17 Ye shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits unto the LORD.

18 And ye shall offer with the bread seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one young bullock, and two rams: they shall be for a burnt offering unto the LORD, with their meat offering, and their drink offerings, even an offering made by fire, of sweet savour unto the LORD.

19 Then ye shall sacrifice one kid of the goats for a sin offering, and two lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of peace offerings.

20 And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits for a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs: they shall be holy to the LORD for the priest.



FOCUS THOUGHT

To put God first and honor Him with our firstfruits will open us up to His blessings in our lives.



To Whom Does It All Belong?

Brendan Coffey writes, “There may be 147 companies in the world that own everything. . . . But it’s not you and I who really control those companies, even though much of our money is in them. . . . That means the real power to control the world lies with four companies: McGraw-Hill, which owns Standard & Poor’s, Northwestern Mutual, which owns Russell Investments, the index arm of which runs the benchmark Russell 1000 and Russell 3000, CME Group, which owns 90% of Dow Jones Indexes, and Barclay’s, which took over Lehman Brothers and its Lehman Aggregate Bond Index. . . . These four firms dominate the world of indexing. And in turn, that means they hold real sway over the world’s money” (“The Four Companies That Control the 147 Companies That Own Everything,” October 26, 2011, www.forbes.com).

Is it possible that only four companies control 147 companies that control almost all of the world’s wealth? If not, then who actually owns the wealth of the world? Some believe the myth of Hegel, Marx, and Lenin that everything belongs to the State; the individual doesn’t own anything but receives everything from government and is indebted to the State. Others contend individual property rights are superior to all other claims.

The biblical worldview clearly teaches that God—not the government, business, or individual—owns it all. In His benevolence, God made human beings His stewards and entrusted them with the care of the material possessions of the world He created. “Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

OUTLINE

I. PRINCIPLES OF WEALTH

- A. God Owns It All
- B. Everything We Have Came from God
- C. We Should Put God First

II. PRINCIPLES OF FIRSTFRUITS

- A. Firstfruits and Firstlings
- B. The Feasts
- C. Manner of Bringing Firstfruits

III. PRINCIPLES OF THE TITHE

- A. The Tithe Is the Lord’s
- B. Tithing Brings Blessings
- C. Honoring God Is Essential

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Life is filled with choices. North Americans have more choices than many others in the world due to our prosperity and our freedom. Perhaps more than any previous society, we have more choices about where we will live,

what occupation we will pursue, the level of education we will achieve, what social connections we will make, whom we will marry, what kind of transportation we will use, and so forth. These choices reveal what our priorities are.

People’s priorities lead their lives down different paths. A person may chose to live in a small efficiency apartment and drive a luxury sports car. Some people spend a large portion of their income for hobbies and recreational equipment. Others may spend enormous amounts of money on pets or clothing. Some allow themselves to get deep in debt, while others seek to be debt free. Our priorities affect our lifestyles. Our theology has an even greater effect.

Christian believers should have priorities that conform to God’s Word. The Bible provides a clear hierarchy of values. We are to love our families and provide for their needs. We are to work hard and be faithful to our

employers. But our number one priority should be God.

The Israelites were surrounded by idol worshipping people, but the Lord bluntly told them: “For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Exodus 34:14). Jesus said, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). Most sincere Christians would agree that God is first, family is second, and a career or ministry is third. Other things follow after that.

The Hebrew people were required to dedicate the firstborn of their families and their flocks to the Lord. “And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine” (Exodus 13:1–2). The final plague God sent upon the Egyptians was the death of the firstborn (Exodus 12). This horrendous plague brought Pharaoh to his knees, and he released Israel from her captivity.

To commemorate this event, the Hebrew people were to dedicate their firstborn to the Lord. “Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the LORD” (Number 3:13).

The Feast of Firstfruits revealed, in a ceremonial way, the principle of making God top priority. At this feast the Israelites were to offer to God the first and best of their increase as a wave offering of thanksgiving.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. PRINCIPLES OF WEALTH

Becoming wealthy is a dream of many. People work long hours and make great sacrifices to make as much money as possible. Money can increase comforts, make luxuries accessible, bring prestige and power, and bring financial security. But even though being rich has perks, wealth is not the panacea for happiness. Loving money can be destructive.

“For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced

themselves through with many sorrows”
(1 Timothy 6:10).

Having money is not evil, but having an insatiable love for money is a sin. Rich people and poor people alike can love money. A minister and a businessman can be tempted by the same lust for money.

A. God Owns It All

God warned Israel about taking credit for their successes once they reached the Promised Land: “And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day” (Deuteronomy 8:17–18). Ultimately, the money we make and the wealth we accumulate is a result of God’s blessings. He is the One who gave us life, energy, talents, intelligence, opportunity, and health to be who we are. We owe everything to Him.

Governments have experimented with various financial systems over the years. Those adhering to radical socialism believe the government should own everything and distribute wealth evenly to the people. Those who adhere to the free enterprise system believe wealth should belong to the people, not the government. In North America we have an eclectic system where the government owns some things and the people own other things. It goes without saying that there is a perpetual tension between these two political views.

The Bible presents a third perspective: God owns it all and we are stewards of His earth and wealth. God told Israel, “Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the LORD’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is” (Deuteronomy 10:14). The psalmist said, “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). God owns everything!

We are stewards of God’s world. Jesus made this vividly clear by telling the parable of the servants in Matthew 25:14–21. In this parable a businessman was going away on a long journey and gave one of his workers five talents, another worker two talents, and a third worker one talent. When the businessman

returned, the first two workers had doubled their talents, but the one-talent worker had dug a hole in the ground and buried his talent. He made excuses by saying the businessman was unfair and the worker did not want to play his game. The talent was taken away from the unprofitable worker and given to the ten-talent worker. The slothful servant was cast into darkness as punishment. This parable reveals God's expectations of each of us. We are to be profitable stewards of the things God has put in our charge.

B. Everything We Have Came from God

When God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, they were thrust into a desert that contained little food or water. They did not just pass through this barren place; they lived there forty years. However, God miraculously provided for their needs, and He reminded them of His provision in Deuteronomy 8:16–18. He parted the Red Sea and helped them cross the Jordan River. He fed them quail and manna in the wilderness and gave them water from a rock. God gave them a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. Their shoes and clothing did not wear out. With all these provisions, they had no reason to boast about their survival skills.

Most people have worked hard for what they have. In most cases, it takes discipline and hard work to gain wealth. We may be tempted to assume we have achieved what we have through our own efforts. But acknowledging God as our provider will help us keep a proper balance in our attitude toward money.

“Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

Not only do our material possessions come from God, but our children do as well. That is one reason parents dedicate their babies to the Lord. Parents publicly acknowledge that these little ones are on loan to them for a few years. Children are not our property. They are God's children given to us to protect and nurture in the fear of God.

C. We Should Put God First

The first of the Ten Commandments says, “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3). Exodus 20:5 says God is “a jealous God.” The Hebrew word for jealousy is *qanna*. It is used six times in the Bible and only in reference to God. A different word is used for human jealousy. The jealousy mentioned as being “cruel as the grave” in Song of Solomon 8:6 is another word. God's jealousy is pure and holy. God demands first place since He is the Almighty. It is dishonest and defies reality to put God in any place other than first.

A major part of living for God is being a faithful steward over what He has given us. We cannot serve God and mammon (money or riches). Whichever one a person chooses to serve determines that person's priorities and decisions in life.

“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:10–13).

We only have one master and Lord—Jesus Christ! Being faithful to Him will affect how we spend our money. If we cannot handle money wisely, how can we be trusted with spiritual things? The Bible says, “Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine” (Proverbs 3:9–10). God must be first when it comes to how we spend our money. Paying tithes and giving in offerings should be top priority.

II. PRINCIPLES OF FIRSTFRUITS

Many people today are removed from an agrarian life. In Bible times almost everyone understood farming language and life. Many young people today grow up in the city and never help harvest crops or tend to farm animals. The Bible is full of references to farm life because it was so common in that era.

Firstfruits was a term readily understood in Bible times. It was the first harvest of the season. Many crops progressively ripen over time. There will be repeated harvesting until all the fruit is gone. The first picking is special. A long wait is finally over and much work has been invested to bring a crop to harvest. A farmer may think, "I've worked so hard over the past few months, this harvest is mine!" To give the firstfruits to God was a sacrifice. Since so many do not live the farm life today, our giving is more of a general priority than literal firstfruits. It is an overarching principle that we put God first in everything.

A. Firstfruits and Firstlings

Just as the firstfruits belonged to God, He also required the firstborn son to be regarded as special. The firstborn (firstlings) of humans and beasts were to be dedicated to the Lord. The firstborn males of the animals were typically offered to God as a sacrifice. "Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me. Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep: seven days it shall be with his dam; on the eighth day thou shalt give it me" (Exodus 22:29–30).

The Hebrews did not practice child sacrifice as their heathen neighbors did, but the firstborn sons were dedicated unto the Lord as a special consecration. They received a double inheritance from their fathers (Deuteronomy 21:17) and many times acceded to their father's roles.

Jesus was called the "firstborn." Jesus was the firstborn of Mary (Matthew 1:23–25). "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). Jesus was also called the "firstbegotten." "And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship

him" (Hebrews 1:6). Jesus is the "first begotten of the dead" (Revelation 1:5). Jesus has "risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (I Corinthians 15:20). These terms help to magnify the dignity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. The Feasts

The Feast of Firstfruits coincided with the barley harvest in the land of Israel (two days after the Passover began). It was the first crop harvested from the winter sowing. The priest would take a sheaf of grain from the field and wave it before the Lord as an offering. The grain could have been in a basket or waved as a stalk. In addition, they were also to bring a lamb of the first year, without blemish, a grain offering with oil, and a drink offering of wine. The Israelites did not eat of the harvest until this offering had been presented. Firstfruits were also brought at the time of the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Offering the firstfruits and dedicating the firstborn provide examples of God's desire to be first in a believer's life. Many cares of life will pull at our coattails to distract us. They may be important things. Nevertheless, we must get our priorities in order; God always comes first!

C. Manner of Bringing Firstfruits

Three times a year God commanded the people to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. (See Deuteronomy 16:16.) All three of these festivals were connected to a harvest season. Passover was at the time of the barley harvest, and Pentecost was at the time of the wheat harvest. Both of these festivals were firstfruits harvests before the final harvest that was to come at the end of the year during the Festival of Tabernacles at the time of the fruit harvest. These trips required sacrifice, but they allowed people to come together and worship.

Jerusalem is located at a high elevation, so the trip was uphill. Psalms 120–134 are called Songs of Degrees and are also referred to as Songs of Ascents or Hymns of Degrees. These songs were sung on the ascent up to Jerusalem for these pilgrim festivals. They are well suited for singing because they are short,

written in poetic form, and have repetition, and because of the sentiments expressed in the words. These feasts were still being celebrated in the New Testament era (Luke 2:41; John 2:13; 5:1; 7:2, 10; Acts 2:5–11; 20:16).

III. PRINCIPLES OF THE TITHE

Giving of a tithe is well documented as an Old Testament practice carried out as a commandment of the Lord (Leviticus 27:30–32; Number 18:24–28; Deuteronomy 12; Malachi 3:8–10). The New Testament does not mention tithing to the same degree as the Old Testament. Tithing is mentioned as a faithful practice of the Pharisees, although they missed the key principle behind it. Hebrews mentions tithing as it teaches Christ through the Law and the prophets.

A. The Tithe Is the Lord's

The first time tithing is mentioned in the Bible is in the story of Abraham giving Melchizedek, king of Salem (ancient Jerusalem), a tenth of the spoil of war (Genesis 14). Abraham spontaneously gave a tithe to Melchizedek—who was both a king and priest. This was a practice before the giving of the Law at Sinai. The practice of tithing was later codified as a part of the Mosaic law (Leviticus 27:30–34). The Israelites gave a tithe of their increase to the Levites for the maintenance of the Tabernacle and the priesthood. The Levites gave a tithe to the priests (Numbers 18:24–28). This system provided a financial base of operation for the children of Israel.

Malachi gave Israel a scathing rebuke with these words: “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation” (Malachi 3:8–9). These words reveal how God feels about tithes and offerings. The tenth is His, and to keep it for ourselves is robbing God. These are strong words.

B. Tithing Brings Blessings

Malachi says God will bless those who give.

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith

the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:10–12).

Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). He also said, “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38). Paul said our giving is like sowing seeds: “But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (II Corinthians 9:6–7).

C. Honoring God Is Essential

Paul said, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10:31). The believer's entire life should be worship unto the Lord. Our natural tendency is to please people, but pleasing God must come first. “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Colossians 3:23).

Finances. Money is our primary means of exchange. Giving money to God's work is a great way to honor Him. We acknowledge He is the source of our health, talents, energy, and job opportunities. Giving tithes and offerings is one way to express our love and devotion to God. Our giving should not be considered as an exchange for blessing, however. We are to give with grateful hearts without expectation of a return.

Our will. Our will is a gift from God. The human will has control over our decision-making even though other elements may have a strong influence. The will can override logic, knowledge, the influence of others, or

our emotions. God allows us to choose what we will do with His commandments. Moses chose “to suffer affliction with the people of God” rather than “to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter” (Hebrews 11:24–25). Joshua challenged Israel to “choose you this day whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15). This challenge is the same for us today. We must choose whether to serve God.

Our time. We are given twenty-four hours a day to use as we see fit. The psalmist said, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). Giving God a portion of our time is a way of honoring Him. We are granted a limited amount of time on earth, and we should choose to use it wisely.

“LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee” (Psalm 39:4–5).

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:15–17).

Not only do we give God a portion of our time, but we try to use the time we give Him effectively. We need to give God quality time.

Our lives. When we think about giving to God, we probably think about money. Finance is certainly a part of giving to God; nevertheless, money is not all God wants. He wants us!

He wants our thoughts, ambitions, hearts, and devotion. Jesus spoke to the lawyer this way: “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38). We also give our troubles to God. Peter said, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5:6–7). Humbling ourselves before God is part of our giving to Him.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Everything we have is because of God. We certainly have the power to build our lives in the way we choose. God permits us to have many choices in life. But ultimately God creates and sustains it all. And our recognition of this truth changes the way we live.

Acknowledging God and being thankful for His blessings by giving back to Him was established early in the Bible. Humanity was not just to consume God’s blessings and fail to give thanks. Being thankful to our benevolent God has been a principle from the beginning.

Even though the Old Testament law was superseded by the coming of the Messiah, the principle of giving did not end. We continue to give of our increase. Giving God a tithe of our increase and giving in offerings is one of the main ways we worship God. If we obey, blessings are promised to the giver.

God does not want us to give only financially. He wants our lives. Our total existence should be dedicated to serving God. Nothing is more important than that! ■

REFLECTIONS

- In what way do we owe everything to God?
- What is meant by the term *firstfruits* in Scripture?
- Why do we continue to give a tithe of our increase today?
- What did Malachi mean when he said refusing to give a tithe was robbing God?
- What did the Israelites do as they traveled up to Jerusalem to celebrate feast days?