

First Fruits and Tithes

^{NIV} **Deuteronomy 26:10 & 13** and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.^a Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him.¹³ Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 16:2** On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.^b

^{NIV} **Matthew 10:7-8** As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

First Fruits and Tithes

For the past two weeks we've looked at a number of aspects of stewardship, all pointing toward the theme of "Believing in Tomorrow." It's common for both individuals and congregations to slip into a comfortable routine. That routine eventually becomes stagnation and then decline. But that path isn't inevitable. It can be reversed by having a clear vision of how to move forward. Part of that vision involves seeing ourselves, not as owners, but as stewards of all that God has given us. Our vision must clearly see all of creation, all of our abilities, and all of our creative talents as God's wonderful and generous gifts to us. Once we recognize these bountiful blessings as expressions of God's great love for us, our natural response is heartfelt gratitude and joy. This leads us to love one another, just as Christ loves us. We believe in tomorrow because we trust in God's completely reliable, ever present, unstoppable, steadfast love.

If we forget that we're deeply loved stewards who have been entrusted with what belongs to God, we can corrupt our faith. We begin to feel that we have to dig into what belongs to us in order to purchase righteousness and salvation. Even then, many of us give little thought to determining how much we give to support the Lord's work. When we do think about how much we give, it's sometimes in terms of how much recognition and praise we'll get from other people. At that point, our actions aren't a way of praising God for all that we've received, but have become a way to get people to praise us.

We can have clearer vision and more belief in tomorrow when we pause and realize just how much we and our money have done over the past few years. Look at the insert in the bulletin. We've added to the treasures in the Kingdom of God. We've made a difference and that gives us great joy. We have a firm foundation for future growth in discipleship and service.

A few minutes ago we sang, "Lord, I want to be a Christian, inna my heart!" But can we say, "Lord I want to be a Christian inna my wallet?" This morning, let's consider how we can go about being better stewards of all of our blessings. We tend to give from what's leftover after we spend on what we need and on things we want. There was a small boy who was given two dollars. He was told that one was for the offering plate and one was for an ice cream cone. He ran down the street toward Baskin Robbins. In his enthusiasm, one dollar bill slipped out of his hand and was carried away out of sight by the wind. He stopped and looked down at his hand and said, "Well, Lord, it looks like the wind took your dollar!"

The first thing we can do is adopt the attitude and practice of first fruits. The book of Nehemiah tells the story of how Nehemiah was sent back to Judea by the king of Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. After the walls were restored, all the people were assembled and the Law of Moses was read to them. The people renewed their vows to be faithful to the law and said, (Nehemiah 10:35 and 39b NRS) "³⁵ We obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of our soil and the first fruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD; ³⁹ We will not neglect the house of our God." Like those early Hebrews, we need to trust God to meet our needs. We can change from giving from excess, from what is

leftover. When we practice first fruits, our gift to the Lord becomes the first check written rather than giving from what is left. Our response to God becomes a high priority instead of an after thought.

When we practice the concept of first fruits, our attitude about money changes to an understanding of stewardship. Proverbs 3:9 reads, "Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce." The first of our income is God's sacred money. We don't want it in our house, in our checking account, or invested in our stuff. We want to do with it what God wants us to do with it – sow it, plant it to bear fruit for God. For those ancient Hebrews, first-fruits giving was a sacred covenant and a matter of living out their trust in God. As the crops ripened, the first part of the crop was given to God. Only after that did they begin to fill their own storehouses against the needs of the coming year. If we put our trust in God by practicing the concept of first fruits, we'll find that we grow spiritually and we grow in discipleship.

In today's world, we can practice first fruits by making the check to church the first one we write. When we leave on vacation, we can write our check for the offering in advance to cover the time we're gone. If we bank online, we can arrange for our pledge to be sent automatically. After all, that's what we do with other things that are important to us, things like mortgages, car notes, and insurance premiums.

In Paul's glowing praise of the Macedonian churches who gave joyfully even in their own poverty, Paul says, "they gave themselves first to the Lord." (2 Cor. 8:1-5) This priority of first fruits to God can lead to deferred pleasure on our part. Our gift can cost us something. In Salem Presbytery there's a Hispanic congregation named Ebenezer Presbyterian Church. Most of the members are immigrants from Guatemala and they work in the chicken processing plants. They've been scrimping and saving for some time now to build their own building. But when they learned that a church where they came from in Guatemala had been severely damaged by a tropical storm, they sent \$ 10,000 dollars from their own building fund to aid their brothers and sisters in Christ. They deferred their building program to help another congregation.

Now, once our giving has first fruits priority, we can move on to the next step, the concept of proportional giving. Proportional giving is not a matter of picking a nice number and multiplying it by twelve. Proportional giving is a matter of giving prayerful thought to our income and our giving. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." Paul points to regular and consistent giving when he says "on the first day of every week." He also emphasizes proportional giving with the phrase "a sum of money in keeping with [one's] income. The point isn't how much a person gives, but rather, how much we give in relation to our income. Many of us have no idea what percentage of our income we're giving.

Challenge yourself to take the first step toward proportional giving. Look at how much you've been offering to the Lord and how much all of your income sources add up to. Compute what percentage you've been offering. Then, with prayer for guidance, commit to offering a known percentage next year. Have a clear vision for what you will offer the Lord.

A specific form of proportional giving is the tithe, which is giving ten percent of your income. Tithing is a struggle for most of us. There was a Wizard of Id cartoon some years ago. A woman with a baby in her arms and her husband were greeting the minister at the conclusion of the worship service. The woman apologized for all the noise and ruckus they were making during the service and said, "I'm sorry that the baby was crying so loudly; he's just started teething." The minister replied, "That explains why the baby was crying, but why was your husband crying." The woman answered, "He's just started tithing."

We tend to think about how much tithing will cost us instead of realizing how much it'll bless us. The prophet Malachi reports the following message from God. (Malachi 3:10 NRS) "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." This is not prosperity theology. Don't think of this in accounting terms. God is not saying, "Invest 10% of your income with me and I'll double your income by the end of the year!" Any preacher

that feeds you that line of baloney is looking to fill his or her own pockets. But, God **is** promising that you will be drenched in blessings.

The Tuohy theologians, Sean and Leigh Anne, explain the concept clearly. "Tithing is a way to get our hearts right. It affects our whole outlook on life; it means sacrifice, living a little more frugally ourselves, to consciously pass up on personal luxuries in order to give to something and to someone outside ourselves. It's an exercise in unselfishness." Tithing gets our heart right. It moves our focus from inward to outward. It changes our vision and it fuels a more godly vision. Giving is a serious means of grace that God gives to bless and build the faith and heart of the giver. We're blessed as our focus turns away from ourselves and toward others. There is great joy in knowing that we're making a difference in the world for our Lord. But the less you give, the more you're cheating yourself of the joy of serving our Lord and our neighbors.

If all Christians in the U.S. tithed, the annual offering would be 49 billion. Think of all of the people who could be fed, all of the unemployed who could be trained for better jobs, all of the addicts who could be treated, all of the sick children who could be healed, in short, think of how many of God's children who could be loved into wholeness.

Tithing has been wrongly promoted as an insurance policy. Two men were shipwrecked on an island. One man was frantically dashing around yelling, "No food! No water! We're going to die." The second man was calmly leaning against a palm tree, relaxed, with a faint smile on his face. "It'll be okay," he said. The first man said, "Don't you understand? We're going to die!" The second man replied, "No, you don't understand. I make \$ 10,000 a week!" "What difference does that make? We're stranded!" The second man calmly explained, "I tithe. My pastor will find me!"

One approach is to try tithing for six months. See if you had to give up anything that was really necessary. Or did you give up something that was really precious to you? Ask yourself if what you gave up was really that important – or just a whim that you weren't able to satisfy. On the other hand, how do you feel about yourself? What does tithing do to your self-image, your self-respect, and your level of contentment?

Another approach is to set a prayerfully determined goal. Increase your giving by one percent of your income each year until you reach that level. It'll give you a sense of self-control and self-respect to be working toward a worthy goal. I know this from my own experience. When we have increased our percentage of income offered to God, we've found that oddly enough, it wasn't as painful as we feared. The blessings have flowed over us. We've found more love for others and less stress about ourselves. Our vision of what is important and what is beautiful has grown clearer.

I urge you to pray about your pledge. Before you fill out your pledge card pray for guidance. Pray with gratitude for all of God's blessings that you've received. Pray with thanks for the steadfast love of God. Pray for deeper trust and firmer faith. Pray for a clearer vision of the path ahead. Pray for stronger belief in tomorrow – and then fill out your pledge card and bring it next Sunday when we will dedicate our pledges to God's tomorrow. Jesus told his disciples, "Freely have you received; freely give." Amen.

^{NRS} **2 Corinthians 8:1-5** We want you to know, brothers and sisters,¹ about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege¹ of sharing in this ministry to the saints -- ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 16:2** On the first day of every week, ^aeach one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.^b