**Gratitude Garnished with First Fruits**

**Text: Deuteronomy 26:10**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Ramona Kudla’s wonderful testimony last week brought to mind the story about a little boy who was also given two quarters each Sunday morning. Like Ramona, he was told that one quarter was for God, and the other was for him. He was to put God’s quarter on the offering plate, and he could do whatever he wanted with his quarter. Well, one Sunday, as the family was about to drive to church, the little boy tripped and one quarter fell out of his hand. It rolled down the driveway and went right through the sewer grate. The little boy cried, “Mommy, Mommy; God’s quarter just went down the sewer!”

God deserves our first and our best; not our leftovers. The little boy hadn’t quite grasped that concept. He figured that the first and the best quarter was his! But the scholars who crafted the law as found in the Book of Deuteronomy: they understood the concept perfectly. They made it clear that when the Israelites gathered in the harvest, the first fruit of the land should be given to God as a thanksgiving offering. It was their way of saying, “Thank you” to God; their way of expressing their gratitude for the rich land west of the Jordon River that God had given to them.

Well, God had not quite *given* it to them, in the sense of signing over the deed. They *occupied* the land; they were living on and working the land. God still *owned* the land; God *held title* to the land. Our English Bible says that the Israelites *possessed* the land, it doesn’t say that they *owned* it. You see, Hebrew does not have a word for having, or not having, something. The original Hebrew text for today’s scripture says literally that the Israelites were “*in* the land.” And even our English word “possess” can mean “to enter into and control” something, without necessarily *owning* it.

It’s like when my great, great-grandparents came to this country from Germany, and they squatted on land in the Ohio Valley. Many immigrants and poor farmers in the 19th century did the same thing: they squatted on land that was owned by the federal government. They worked the land and lived off the land but everyone knew that they didn’t own it. *Everyone* knew, even the Congress, who graciously allowed them to stay there. Those squatters possessed the land in the sense of entering into it and controlling it, but they didn’t own it. The same is true of the Israelites. The land belonged to God.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the question of who held title to the land is clear: “The land is mine, saith the Lord” (Lev. 25:23). And the Israelites knew this. They knew the land was a gift from God; or more accurately, a loan. And they were so incredibly grateful to God for letting them use this land, and prosper on this land. So it was a joy for them to give back to God the first fruit of the land – the first fruit of *God’s* land – as a way of expressing their gratitude.

And we can understand that joy and gratitude, because they had come out of Egypt with *nothing*. They had been slaves there. They owned no land, no houses, no tools, *nothing*! And now God was offering them this rich land, this land flowing with milk and honey, and God was saying, “You can stay here forever,”

Think of it this way: your house has just burned down. It’s going to take a long time to rebuild. And a friend offers you her own home. She says, “You can stay here for as long as you need to.” Well *of course* you’d have a great sense of gratitude. And as soon as you were able, you’d give your host a gift by way of saying, “Thank you.”

That’s kind of the way it was with the Israelites. Indeed, that’s kind of the way it is with us. *Everything* is a gift from God. We hold title to nothing. God holds title to *everything*. The air that we breath, the food that we eat, the skills that we have, the resources of the earth, the land that we live on, the money in our pockets: it’s all a gift. It’s all God’s: loaned to us, entrusted to us, offered to us so that we can take care of it *for* God. But it’s still God’s.

“So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” That’s what the Israelites said as they placed their thank offering on the alter of the Lord.

It’s called first fruits living. And God’s people have been invited to join in this joyous life right down to the present day. God invites us to give to God our first and our best; not our leftovers, but our first fruits. And it really is an invitation, because when you live this way it can be so much fun. You give God your first and your best – right of the top – and more often than not the rest of our needs seem to take care of themselves! Once we get our priorities straight and give God our first and our best, the rest fits into place. Just like with the exercise that we did with the children: first the rocks, then the marbles, and then the rice just slides right in. That’s because, like those rocks, first fruits living provides a solid foundation for everything that follows. Consider Proverbs 3:9-10: “Honor the Lord with your substance, and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”

Now, in this current stewardship campaign I’ve been encouraging two biblical concepts: first fruits living, and tithing. What, you may ask, is the relationship between the two? Well, I’m glad you asked that question. Because they’re not quite the same thing, but they do fit nicely together. Let me explain by way of a story.

A retired Disciples minister remembers growing-up in the Depression. His family lived in southeast Ohio and his father was a coal miner. Of course, work was hard to come by during those years, and if you had a job at all, you were aware that you could be laid-off any day. Nevertheless, when his dad was working, he got paid every Friday. And every Friday night the dad poured out his pay envelope on the kitchen table, and dad and mother counted out 10% right off the top, and that was their gift to God every Sunday. It was their first fruit offering, and it happened to be a 10% tithe. And somehow, they got through those tough years. There was always a roof over their heads and food on the table and clothes on their backs. It was a very modest house, and the food wasn’t steak, and the clothes may’ve been hand-me-downs, but still their basic needs were provided. Maybe not their wants, but their needs. Because God is good, and they placed their trust in God, and they worked hard with what God had entrusted to them.

That’s what first fruits living is: not only an act of thanksgiving, but also an act of *trust*. You give to God your first and your best, and you trust God to provide the rest. And the more that you do it, and the more that it works out, the deeper your trust becomes. Your trust in God becomes deeper, which really means that your *faith* in God becomes deeper. First fruits living is one of the best ways that I know to nurture a stronger and deeper faith. When you give God your first and your best, right off the top, and there’s enough left over to cover your basic needs – when that happens over and over again – you have that much more reason to believe, that much more empirical evidence to think, that things will *continue* to work out. And there is a deepening of faith and trust in the God who is the Giver of every good gift.

Now, that first fruit offering that you set aside, it doesn’t have to be 10%. Or if it is 10%, there are a variety of ways of calculating it. Some people figure 10% of their gross income. Others figure 10% of their net income. Some folks believe that 10% goes to the church, and if you have other charitable giving, that’s a gift over and above your tithe. Other folks figure that God’s 10% covers *all* of their charitable giving, with maybe 5% of their income to the church and 5% to all of the other charities that they support. Bottom line is, I don’t care how you calculate your 10%. I don’t even care if it’s 10%. I’d like it to be 10%. That’s the biblical norm, after all. But what I hear the Bible saying is that you need to give God your first fruits; meaning *some* percentage, right off the top. Even if it’s 2%; so long as you give God your first and your best, and you trust God to provide the rest. You can build toward a 10% tithe over the coming years if that’s what you hear the Holy Spirit calling you to do. Because, you see, it’s not about God’s need for money; it’s not about the Church’s need for money; it’s about *your* need to give. It’s about *my* need to give. It’s about *our* need to give. When we give God not our leftovers but our first and our best, we are engaging in an act which nurtures a deep and profound faith; a faith which puts God first in our lives; a faith which gives God the glory and makes God the priority.

We give God our first fruits, as a thanksgiving offering to the Lord. Because, you see, generosity comes from a place of gratitude, deep in our hearts.

What are you grateful for, this day? How has God blessed you in the past week, or the past year, or at some point in your life? Maybe it happened in this place, or maybe it happened halfway around the world.

What are we thankful for today? What do we want to give thanks to God for this day? We’ve got a couple of microphones floating through the congregation. Raise your hand, wait for a mic, and then let us know about some way in which the Lord has blessed you; something for which you’re grateful…

 SHARING OF BLESSINGS

We have been blessed! We have been *richly* blessed!! And God’s people have been blessed ever since they made their first offering to the Lord, after they had entered into the land which God had loaned to them forever. That’s when a grateful people brought their thanksgiving offering to God. They brought with them baskets overflowing with the fruit of the land. And the priest took the basket from their hands, and laid it down before the alter of the Lord. And the people said, “So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” And then, together with the priests and the aliens who resided among them, they celebrated with all of the bounty that the Lord had given to them. Thanks be to God.