

## Sermon – 18/06/2006 pm

### First-fruits and Tithes

Study Text: Deuteronomy 26

In a mission meeting I commented that it is good when people give financially to support a missionary because then they are more likely to remember that person and pray for them. I was taken aback when someone commented ‘we must not have many people praying for us for we do not have much support at all!’ Of course many people unable to give can still pray, but still the principle is valid. In giving materially we are more likely to remember someone – even if it is just when we write out a cheque to give them.

Jesus commended the poor widow who even in her poverty gave ‘two mites’ to the Lord – *she put in all the livelihood that she had* (Luke 21:4). We are often encouraged to ‘give until it hurts’ – not that giving to the Lord is a burden in any way. But when it hurts, when we give out of our poverty rather than our riches, we will remember the Lord and he will be pleased.

#### First-fruits

Moses commanded the people of God that when they came into Canaan they were to *take some of the first-fruits of the ground...put it into a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God chooses to make his name abide* (26:2). There they were to give it to the priest who would set the basket down before the altar of the Lord.

What was the point of doing this? Did the Lord need this produce? Does the Almighty depend upon man to supply his needs? Surely not! *If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine and all its fullness* says the Lord (Psalms 10:12). God supplies all our needs – we do not supply his (Philippians 4:19).

Was it to appease the Lord and ensure that they had bountiful harvests in future? That was the idea the Canaanites had. The Lord could of course withhold the rains if they broke the covenant he made with them and he often did. But this offering was one of thanksgiving not appeasement. It was that the people might remember the Lord their God who graciously brought them into this rich land as he promised their fathers.

Moreover it was not just a matter of making an offering. The Lord looks on the heart not just the hands. The people were not told to send a servant up with the offering, or run up themselves and drop it off. They were told to confess before the priest, and before the Lord, all that the Lord had done for them since the time of their fathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Apparently there are ‘drive-through’ churches in some place these days. People drive in, drop off their prayer request and some money and drive out. Even more convenient of course is the church where you do not even have to leave home. The ‘tele-evangelist’ will pray for you if you just send him your prayer request along with your credit card details! Even in mainline churches there are those who want to give money to the church but never come to worship the Lord with the congregation – and some churches greatly value such members!

Moses commanded the people to take of the first-fruits of the ground and go themselves to the house of the Lord. And he told them how to offer this basket of produce to the Lord. He told them what to say before the Lord. This simple confession reminded them that all they harvested was because of God's mercy. The very fact that they had land in which to grow these crops was because of God's mercy. *I declare today to the Lord that I have come into the country which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us (26:3).*

The confession detailed how the Lord led them to this land which they now possessed. *My father was a Syrian/Aramean about to perish and he went down to Egypt and there he became a great nation (26:5 – 'perish' can be translated 'wandering')*. Jacob fits this description best, although Abraham came from Aram originally. Jacob fled his home with nothing but the clothes on his back. He had to sleep in the open with a stone for his pillow. But the Lord was watching over him and brought him to Aram where he married and had twelve sons (Genesis 28). But again his existence was threatened when he returned to meet his brother Esau. When famine threatened his family he went down to Egypt.

Wandering and in danger of perishing – that was how Jacob was to be remembered. They were also to remember how the Lord blessed him and he became a great nation. When Jesus walked this earth he saw many people like Jacob, helpless and hopeless people wandering like sheep without shepherd. Still today there are many such people. Maybe you are one of them. Can you remember how God graciously came to save you from this wandering life, from the brink of perishing? Do you know Jesus as your shepherd, the good shepherd who cares for his sheep?

Back in the seventies young people from the West flocked to Asia, and to India in particular. They were wandering about trying to find meaning in life, having rejected the Christianity of their parents. They searched for some guru who could enlighten them. I met a man who was enlightened, but not as he expected. His enlightenment came when he met a true Christian who told him about the greatest guru or teacher, Jesus Christ. He still lives in India caring for orphans and teaching them about Jesus.

Still today millions are wandering this earth in this helpless and hopeless condition. Still some are looking to man-made gods, to Buddha, to Shiva or Shinto. Others have rushed off to the gods of sex and sport, of money and material things. We have trouble building shopping complexes fast enough these days; such is the demand for things to fill our homes and our lives. But the Lord sees such people as lost. Speaking in the house of a very rich man who had just been saved, Jesus said *the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).*

Their confession went to recall how the Lord heard their cry when they were in bondage in Egypt. In his mercy the Lord heard them, and in his great power he brought them out of bondage. He brought them with *great terrors and many signs and wonders to this land flowing with milk and honey (26:8, 9).*

It was all of God's grace, from beginning to end, that they were now living in peace and prosperity in this land. This was what they were to remember as they brought their first-fruits before the Lord. They were to rejoice in the Lord and acknowledge him always.

## Tithing

It is not clear whether this bringing of the first-fruits to the house of the Lord was ongoing or just one off. Moses, speaking to Israel before they entered Canaan said, *and it shall be when you come into the land... that you shall take some of the first of the produce* (26:1, 2). But tithing, the setting aside of one tenth of their harvest, was to be ongoing.

Moses had already explained tithing in chapters 14 and 18. Such repetition, and especially this reminder at the close of his sermon, a sermon that commenced in chapter 5, signals the importance of this practice. Tithing was no small matter as far as Moses was concerned. It is surprising that Christians today are so ready to dismiss it.

The people were to tithe year by year (14:22), but in the third year they were to set their tithe aside for the Levite, the stranger, the widow and orphan in their own town. They had to solemnly declare before the Lord that they had done this *according to all your commandments and I have not forgotten* (26:13).

It was easy for them to make up some excuse for failing to keep this command. In a time of mourning they might need extra food, or they may be tempted to use it for some other purpose. It is difficult to tithe when all the money is spent! I have even heard of church members withholding their tithes and offerings when they were upset at some matter in the church! The tithe must be set aside first and foremost, and faithfully kept for the Lord.

In a particular church in North East India it is the practice in every home for the mother to set aside a tenth of the rice as she measures it out for the meal. For every nine handfuls that go into the pot one handful goes into the bag that is for the Lord. On the Lord's day, this bag of rice is taken to the church as part of their tithe.

Paul told the Corinthian Church to lay something aside on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:2). Maybe this was what Moses envisaged – a daily, weekly, or 'pay-day' setting aside of a tenth of your income for the Lord. This practice helped the people remember the Lord and his goodness to them.

Did the people always obey this command? See what the prophet Malachi had to say many years later (Malachi 3:8f). He accused them of robbing the Lord by failing to give their tithes and offering. When they stopped tithing they forgot the Lord. They began to worship Baal and thank this local deity for the rain and for their grain. They made offerings to Baal instead of the Lord. Where does the money go when we fail to tithe?

Those who honour me I will honour says the Lord (I Samuel 2:30). Malachi declared *Bring all the tithes into the storehouse* says the Lord and see *if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. Try me now in this* says the Lord (Malachi 3:10). Are you willing to do this?

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