

Tea Tree Gully Community Church

First Things First – Putting God First

The Principle of First Fruits

Joh 10:10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Mal 3:10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

Mat 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Introduction

Read: Above texts.

What do these scriptures have in common?
They all point towards God's heart that wishes to bring us blessing.
His heart is for us. But it also has context and conditions.

Paul sums this up well in writing to Timothy:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. **1Ti 6:17**

Blessing is in the context of relationship to God whose primary interest in us is reconciliation and redemption of us as a whole person from the state of sin and the influence of sin. The mechanism for this is faith and obedience.

Quote: Physical obedience brings spiritual breakthrough – Bill Johnson.

The old saying "First things first" actually has a lot of relevance when it comes to realizing God's blessing in our lives. And that's the title of today's message: First Things First – Putting God First. Subtitled the principle of first fruits.

Eternal principles

Explain: Using the following scriptures unpack the idea and principle of putting God first. Explain the principle of firstfruits (first born, first fruits, tithes).

The First Born.

"Consecrate (set apart, dedicate) to me every firstborn male. The first offspring (fruits) of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal." **Exo 13:2**

According to Old Testament law, the first born was to be either sacrificed or redeemed. There was no third option. Every time one of your live stock animals delivered it's first born, you were to sacrifice it, or if it was designated unclean, you had to redeem it with a clean, spotless lamb. To summarize the clean firstborn had to be sacrificed and the unclean firstborn had to be redeemed.

Explain: According the Old Testament law given to Israel, God had designated certain animals clean and others unclean.

First Fruits.

"Bring the first (best, first in quality and chronology) of the firstfruits of your land into the house of the LORD your God." **Exo 23:19**

Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops (increase); then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. **Pro 3:9-10**

In a society that relied very heavily on agriculture and a local economy this was a more significant act of faith and obedience than for those in the urban world of global trade we now live in. (However that does not make the principle obsolete by any means.) If the crops failed they had nothing.

The first of the crop meant first in quality and the first part harvested. For us who live in a different kind of economy our first fruit of increase of wealth that we give is in the form of financial one as a tithe.

The Tithe.

Tithe means a tenth. The tithe is based on gross new income – first fruits of new wealth. The tithe also was acknowledged in the Old Testament.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse - the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. **Mal 3:8-10**

There's a trend here in giving God the first part of any increase in wealth we receive.

The concept of tithe is rejected by some today, saying that it is Old Testament law and we now live under the New Testament provision of grace. However the concept of the tithe or first fruits is not an Old Testament law. It predates the nation of Israel and the law given through Moses.

Abraham understood the importance of tithe as he brought it to the high priest Melchizedek (see **Heb 7:10** and **Gen 14:17-20**).

As early as Genesis chapter 4 the account of Cain and Abel bringing their offerings to God; fruits of the field and first born of the flock is mentioned. Though it is not explained in detail there is the implication of the principle of first fruits being acknowledged.

“The principles of the firstborn, the firstfruits and tithing are biblical and eternal and very powerful”

Jesus is God's first fruit offering

God has also worked by and demonstrated this principle through Jesus.

Jesus, God's One and Only Son who came to earth and dwelt amongst us in human flesh was the God/man. He was without sin. He was clean.

We who are fallen human beings born with a sinful nature are unclean before a holy God. God sacrificed Jesus as a clean sacrifice was used to redeem us, to buy us back, who were unclean.

Jesus was God's first fruit offering, in a sense God's tithe.

God gave first, before we believed.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Rom 5:8**

When Jesus approached John the Baptist at the river Jordan, the words John spoke were of great significance, especially to those who understood:

"Look (behold), the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
Joh 1:29

Jesus Christ was God's pure spotless lamb (without sin) sacrificed to redeem us (who were unclean, born sinful by nature), to buy us back, to redeem us.

Faith and Obedience

Quote: The first belongs to God. We find this principle all through God's Word. We can give God the first of our time (includes priorities). We can give God the first of our finances. That's what tithing really is – giving our first to God. It's saying, "God, I'm going to give to You first and trust You to redeem the rest."

Put another way, when a firstborn lamb is born in a flock, it is not possible to know how many more lambs that ewe might produce. Nevertheless, God didn't say, "Let your ewe produce nine lambs first and then give Me the next one." No, God says, "Give Me the first one." ¹

It always requires faith to give first.

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Hab 2:4) **Rom 1:17**

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. **Heb 11:6**

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. **Jas 2:26**
(faith requires action)

Quote: That's why so few Christians experience the blessing of tithing. It means giving to God before you see if you're going to have enough. ..it is as if we are saying to God, "I recognize You first. I am putting You first in my life, and trust You to take care of the rest of the things in my life." ^{1 pg 33}

Quote: I have heard it said that any first thing given is never lost, and any first thing not given is always lost. In other words, what we give to God, we don't lose because God redeems it for us. But what we withhold from God, we will lose.
Robert Morris, The Blessed Life pg 33

Jesus echoed this principle when He said:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. Mat 16:25

It's a constant testimony of a principle and God's faithfulness to his word - those who consistently tithe tell of how much they have been blessed, while those who don't, say how they can't afford to tithe.

Stewardship not ownership

We acknowledge God's Lordship when we give our first fruits, our tithe to him. We adopt the mindset of a faithful steward or manager rather than an owner.

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; Psa 24:1

for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. Psa 50:10

"The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. Hag 2:8

While all that we have is his anyway, he grants us the scope to use it wisely and well. However the tithe, the firstfruits is non-negotiable, it's his. It's never ours to start with.

If you're not tithing on your new wealth (gross income, pension, interest on retirement funds and savings, dividends on investments) you are robbing God. Plain and simple. You open yourself to the curse of the Devourer financially and non-financially.

Redeeming our time as well as money

Quote: The first portion is the redemptive portion. In other words, when the first portion is given to God, the rest is redeemed. In the same way, coming to church at the first day of the week is a way of giving the Lord the first of your time.

Sadly, some people view Monday as the beginning of their week. They think, *I have to get this week started right. I have to put some deals together and get some money in the bank.* Thus, they give the first part of their week to money.

Other people think their week begins on Friday. They say, “Man, this weekend I’m really going to party and have a good time.” These people give the firstfruits of their time to recreation.

As God’s people, we need to give the first part of our week to Jesus. ^{1 pg 34}
(worship, prayer and hearing the Word – of instruction and direction and encouragement).

This is more than just dutifully turning up to Church. This involves a whole topic that we can’t cover here about resting from our labours and resting in God.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Mat 6:33

Illustration: The Best, the Good, the Rest.

Not the good, the bad and the ugly. Although things can get ugly if we don’t follow the right approach and embrace the principle at hand.

It’s an illustration about redeeming our time, similar to honouring God with our first fruits financially.

The Best (big rocks)

This represents the first things of our time (or at least what should).

- Personal and corporate prayer, worship, fellowship,
- Bible reading/study,
- Waiting on God; giving Him time in His presence;
- Committing our ways to Him, looking to Him for help, guidance, and blessing our remaining time.

- Areas of Christian service/ministry given priority in our use of time.

The Good (gravel and pebbles)

This represents other important areas of life that we need to give attention.

- Our occupation
- Family chores/responsibilities
- Marriage and family
- Community involvement
- Our rest and recreation.

The Rest (sand)

This represents the incidentals; unplanned, unproductive aspects of time usage that can and do occur in our lives.

They may have some value or be of no value. It also includes activities that amount to time wasting.

This was a visual presentation.

A container full of sand only, has no room for the good or the best. It represents those who are lazy, undisciplined, lacking motivation beyond pleasure seeking and entertainment.

Most of us more likely would identify with the second container filled with the good (gravel and pebbles). We are self motivated to provide for our selves and families and better our lives through work and other activities. However, there is no room to fit in any big rocks of the things that represent putting God first, but we can pour in sand to fill the gaps between the gravel and rocks.

If we honour God and put Him first our lives are represented by the container that has the rocks in it. We can add the good things (gravel and pebbles) that fit in around them and then still add sand as well.

In this way we honour God by putting him first and he redeems the rest of our time.

Personal Illustrations Examples of giving God priority in my time and blessing.

1. Attending youth group

Committed at the end of a busy week of high school and uni study.

It was a priority for fellowship. Didn't consider other activities as a replacement.

On few occasions I didn't feel like going / tired, I still went and came home more refreshed than when I went.

2. Attending Sunday worship during exam periods.

3. Recent events:

New verandah installed ahead of time

Projector installation installed ahead of time

Paving (no sand left or needed – to the spadeful!)

List of other significant jobs (not expected to be done)

God is faithful and good.

Question: Why are some people always stretched for time, or 'time poor'?

Answer: Because their time is cursed. The Devourer has stolen from them. Life descends into turmoil and tyranny of the urgent. The efficiency of their day is greatly reduced, and wasted or lost time is multiplied through all manner of ways.

Quote: 'Christians have been taught way beyond their obedience'
– Kevin Dedmon quoting someone else.

An Israeli farmer's testimony

Read: See Appendix 1
Keeping the Shemith Produces Supernatural Results
By Zo Artzeinu, 12 September 2014.

This type of supernatural provision and protection is supposed to be normal not the exception. God has given an undertaking to bless when we respond with obedience to do things with His priority and principles.

Conclusion

Whether it's our finances or time, we need to put God first.

Each of us is now presented with a choice.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. **Deu 30:11**

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. **Deu 30:15-16**

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **1Jn 4:9**

Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained. **1Sa 2:30**

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life... **Deu 30:19-20**

References

1. The Blessed Life, Robert Morris, by Regal books

Appendix 1

Keeping the Shemita Produces Supernatural Results

7:00AM EDT 9/12/2014 [ZO ARTZEINU](#) Standing With Israel

Rabbi Shmuel Bloom, Vice Chairman of the Agudath Israel World Organization, is a very busy man involved in important matters concerning the public. Why do you think he would spend many hours traveling to look at bananas in Israel, especially all the way up north near T'veriya (Tiberias)? A secular farmer, Gibor Koach, whose produce focus is strictly bananas, decided that he would observe the Shemita (the Sabbatical Year) this time around. He approached the organization that helps facilitate this—Keren HaShviis—for assistance, and they stipulated that he would be registered in their program if he would also undertake to be personally Sabbath observant (Shomer Shabbos) throughout Shemita. He agreed.

The Rabbinic court (Otzar Bet Din) of Bnei Brak made the decision to cover his farming expenses and, in return, all the produce would become the property of Otzar Beis Din (court) and would be distributed in full accordance with Jewish Law (Halacha).

Israel suffered a significant cold spell for two to three weeks during the winter. Bananas don't like cold, and cold doesn't like bananas. When bananas are still growing and get hit with frost, they turn brown and become rock hard.

The hero of our story, Koach knew he was in deep trouble when the relentless cold hadn't let up for over a week. He lived a distance from his orchard and hadn't yet seen the damage with his own eyes. He began to receive calls from his neighbor farmers that have orchards bordering his, complaining bitterly that their entire banana crop had been destroyed by the frost.

He decided it was time to inspect the damage up close, no matter how painful it may be. He drove up close to Tverya to inspect his orchard, as well as those of his neighboring farmers. As he passed from one orchard to another, he was overwhelmed by the damage. Not a single fruit had survived; no tree was spared. His neighbors took quite a beating. All the bananas were brown, hard as a rock. He could only imagine how bad his trees must have gotten it.

Yet when he finally got to his orchard, he was awestruck. ALL of his bananas were yellow and green. It's as if his orchard wasn't a part of this parcel of land. His orchard bordered those of his neighbors, but not a single tree of his was struck by the frost. It's as if a protective wall kept the damage away.

At first he thought he was imagining it. As he rushed from one section of his orchard to another, the realization that the more the farmer keeps the Shemita, the more the Shemita keeps the farmer, hit home.

He immediately called his contacts at Keren HaShviis and yelled into the phone, "Karah Nes, Karah Nes!" (A miracle happened, a miracle happened).

It was a miraculous modern-day manifestation of "V'Tzivisi Es HaBracha" (I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year). There is no way to explain this other than that God keeps His promises. He says keep Shemitah, and I'll take care of you. He sure does.

Keren HaShviis reported that farmers who have until now refused to keep Shemitah have been turning to the Keren following their recent losses. They are now ready to commit to Shemitah observance.

Rabbi Bloom took the time to travel all the way to Tverya (Tiberias) and back to witness this awe-inspiring phenomenon. During the previous Shemitah, Agudath Israel of America provided over \$1,000,000 to Keren HaShviis. It plans to do even more this time around.

For the original article, visit israeltrees.org.