

Remembering through Joyful Generosity

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Date: 31 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, that is a wonderful text from Deuteronomy 26. Let's crack into it a little bit. And we should start with a story to remember where we are in this book. So, Israel stands on the bank of the Jordan, and they're about to cross over to receive this land, this inheritance that God has promised them. And while they're waiting, they're waiting to cross over, God speaks to them through Moses in three sermons. And He's reminding them that He has rescued them, and He's teaching them how to live in the land as His people. And Deuteronomy 26 is the end of the second sermon.

I know it feels like a very long sermon. I'll try not to go quite that long tonight. But it closes this section that has had a lot of specific instructions. And many of those instructions have been about worship. Worship opens the rules in chapter 12, and it closes them now in chapter 26. And it's because God has gathered a people to know Him, a people to reveal Him to the world. And they do that through worship. Worship helps us know God and show God. It helps us relate with Him, and it helps us reveal Him. And the worship that's commanded here in chapter 26 is two actions of giving. And so, the first one, you probably noticed it there, is called first fruits. And that's an offering from us to God. So, there's a vertical offering happening there. And the second offering, the second act of giving, is called the tithe. And this is an offering from us to others.

It's happening on a horizontal plane. So, we'll see that as we get into it a little bit. That's how we're going to go through it. We're going to look at these two things, first fruits, the vertical gift, and tithe, the horizontal gift. And then we'll finish with the closing verses, which get after a little bit of the why behind this. Why is God calling us to these actions? So, let's look at first fruits, verses 1 to 11, the vertical offering. And you might have noticed as they were reading through this that there's quite a liturgical format here. And so, there's very specific in the instructions. It says, I'll bring this, and then the priest is going to do this, and then you're going to do this, and then you'll say this, and then this will happen. So, let's just break that down just so you have a handle on what's actually happening here. The basic picture is that you're going to be harvesting some produce in the spring, and you're going to put it in a basket, and you're going to carry it to the temple and place it before the altar with the priest there. And then there's these ritual words you say, recounting the history of God's faithfulness to His people, and then worshiping and rejoicing. That's my favorite part of this. You see that in verses 10 and 11. It says, you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given you and to your house.

Joyful worship is the tone of this offering. That's really important. I know there have been times when I've given through the years, and it did not feel very joyful. It was maybe driven by guilt or a sense of duty. It felt a lot more like a tax than a delight. So, where does this idea of joy come from in this passage? Why would we be joyful about giving away this produce that maybe we've worked very hard for? Well, if you look at the beginning of verse 10, it says this. This is part of what you would say when you come to offer. Say, I bring the first fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.

That's a really big theme. God as the one giving is repeated six times in this passage. Our gift to God is giving back what we've already gotten from God. So, we only give what He has given. And the joy in this offering stems from grateful recognition that just looking up and saying, God, this has come from you, and it's amazing, and putting our trust in His care as we do that. So, I want you to imagine Israel. Put yourself in their shoes. They've been wandering the desert for 40 years, and now we're in, they're in this beautiful fertile land, this place that they never could have gotten on their own.

[4 : 26] And think of the first time that they go out into the fields to harvest food from their own fields, and they're literally picking the physical evidence of God's care for them off of the vine, and then they're carrying it to this place of worship. I imagine their arms aching from the weight of what they're bringing to offer. And they get there, and they get into the temple, and then they recite this amazing history of God's care for them. How He called this wandering Aramean, this is talking about Jacob, their ancestor. How He called this guy that was just kind of on the edge, had no future, rescued him. How He delivered them out of slavery when they were captives in Egypt. How He fed them for 40 years. Now He's given them land and food and every blessing. And every time they recite this liturgy and give this offering, it invites them to reframe their story. So, you know, we have different stories about the world. Maybe we see ourselves as being, you know, a consumer, or, you know, that's how the news sees us, or a person that's just trying to get the best out of life. This is inviting us to reframe our story in terms of what God has done, to reframe it in terms of joyful gratitude for who He is and what He has done. When my daughter was three, she heard it was my birthday coming up. She wanted to get me a present. And so, she marched my wife to the grocery store, and she bought me a box of Smarties.

And she said, Dad is going to love this. Now, I don't have any particular feelings about Smarties. I mean, they're fine. But what had happened is that I had given her Smarties, and it was the best thing that she had ever tasted. I think her brain exploded. And so, her utter delight in this candy coat of chocolate drove her to give some back to me. And that's what joyful worship looks like. It's utter delight in looking at what God has done and how He has provided, and holding it back up to Him and saying, look at this. Look at what you've given me. You've been so faithful, and I have to give some of it back. God commands that they do this year after year. And again, it's this reorientation.

It's remembrance. It's reframing because it's really easy to forget. Early in the sermon, in Moses' sermon, that is, the second sermon, he warned about this exact thing.

So, he said, Beware, lest you say in your heart, My power and the might of My hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may confirm His covenant that He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. And so, I imagine this warning here, this danger that Moses is telling us about, like being caught up in a pyramid scheme. And so, we're in the pyramid scheme, and we're getting all excited, and we're grabbing after all of these good things, and we're taking credit for the success that we're having, the riches that we're acquiring. But what happens in a pyramid scheme is that it always becomes clear at the end. At the end of it, it becomes clear. You're not actually a brilliant investor.

[8 : 01] You're basically a scammer. You're basically just spending other people's money. And this is the reason that when we give, we give from the first fruit, the first produce of the land.

We don't wait for it all to come in and then give what we can spare, as if we're kind of accountants, taking care of God's stuff and keeping most of it for ourselves. We don't act as if it's ours to divvy up.

We give from the best, knowing that it's a gift from God, trusting that it has come from Him, and He's going to continue to provide for us, just as He's provided to this point. And this is a discipline, isn't it? It's disciplining our hearts to rely on God. It's not easy, but it is important. The heart of giving is remembering that our generous God has given to us.

It's remembering that He has given us the power to work, the leisure to rest, that He's giving us beautiful creativity. He's given us a drive to innovate. He's given us muscles and minds, dexterity and cleverness. But far, far beyond that, He's given us Christ, His Spirit. Remember that on Pentecost. He's given us His very Spirit to dwell inside of us. He's given us full forgiveness. He's given us the promise of eternity. He's given us the gospel to share and enjoy. And this is how we can be tangibly connected to His work, by being able to give away the things that He has given to us. And that also is a gift, our ability to participate in the things that God is doing in the world. Our God is so good. Let's have a look at the second giving.

[9 : 49] And this is the tithe. This is the horizontal giving. This is verses 12 to 15. This second section is probably a little bit less straightforward, but it's just as beautiful.

So, every three years in this section, every household is to take that regular tithe, though there's a regular tithe that would have been happening every year. And a tithe just means a tenth. It's a tenth

of all the produce that they would get from their land. And instead of taking that 10%, that tithe to the temple, as they do on the other two years, on the third year, they are to give it all away to people that are living in the land around them. And specifically, they're to give it away to people without any land. And so, the list in verse 12, it talks about Levites. Levites were not given land by law. Their inheritance was to be God. They were to be serving Him in the temple. Sojourners are refugees or immigrants that don't own any property. They've fled to this land. And widows and orphans, well, those are people that are also landless in this society. And so, you gather a tenth of all this stuff, all of the things that your fields have produced, and then you just distribute it. You just give it away. You give it away to the poor and the marginalized, maybe strangers. You give it away so that they may eat within your towns and be filled.

This is not just giving them enough so they can, like, scrape by and barely survive. The image here is bounty, that everyone in the community has what they need, that they're full, that they're thriving. What's really interesting is that this doesn't happen in the temple. It actually happens in your own town. And so, there's no priest involved at all. And yet, I don't know if you notice this, but verse 13 calls it a sacred portion. It's a thing set apart to God. It's made holy in our obedience to Him. And so, this is really interesting. Giving this tithe to the poor in the town, it's just as precious in God's sight as when they go and they give the tithe in the temple. I find that incredibly challenging. [12:04] The temple or giving in church, it seems so much more spiritual and important to God than giving to those in need around me. And yet, here, God calls it a sacred portion. He's going to use this.

He's going to make it holy as we obey Him in our generosity. The liturgy goes on to talk about obedience to God's commands. And so, you know, there's that bit about declaring that we haven't done anything weird with the portion, like offering it to the dead, or we haven't collected it while we're unclean, offered it to false gods, any of that stuff, or held any back, given, you know, less than 10%. And what this portion is trying to tell us is that this is not about giving scraps. It's not about giving the leftover. It's not about collecting kind of whatever's broken or bad and giving it. So, it's not like a can drive where you're digging through the back of your cabinet, and you find some cans of expired okra, and, you know, whatever you won't miss having, you give those things away, and, you know, you've done your good deed. It's not patting ourselves on the back for whatever worn-out clothes we've donated to the Salvation Army.

This tithe is sacred. It is joyful worship. And therefore, this is 10% of our best. The milk and honey in our lives, off the top, we're giving that away to the poor and the marginalized, the vulnerable in our community. Now, I know that things are slightly different today, aren't they? We don't give 10% of our barley to the local charity or, you know, whatever other crop we're growing. We don't have many crops, do we? But we see that this pattern, you know, continues in the New Testament. This pattern continues in church history of the church caring for the poor. And so, we see as we look at the New Testament and church history that we give money to God. We offer money for the work of the gospel, for the teaching of His Word. That's giving money to the church, right? We also see that Christians have always given generously to the poor, to those in need around them. And this is an invitation to imitate our wonderful God and His generosity in the way that we give to others. Now, friends, I want you to know none of this is a guilt trip. This is a joyful invitation. [14:30] God commanded it to Israel because it's for their best. And regular giving to God and to other people is for our best as well. It reframes our perspective. It helps us to lean on God, to trust in Him.

And it's worship. Worship helps us know God, and it helps us show God. And that's what the closing verses are about at the end of this passage. And these closing verses actually close the entire second sermon. And I don't know if you remember, it ends with Israel promising their obedience and their faithfulness. They're going to do their part in the law. And God, for His part, promises to move His plan forward through them. So, He says, this is what God promises to His people.

The Lord has declared today that you are a people for His treasured possession, as He has promised you, that He will set you in praise and in fame and honor high above all nations that He has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as He promised. In other words, as Israel lives with God in the land, in His way, God is going to hold them up as His treasured possession, a people that He loves and cherishes, whom He finds beautiful and delightful, a people that resemble Him in His characteristics. That's what holiness is. As they are

raised up, they shine in holiness. They begin to radiate to, they give a visual representation of who God is to all the people around, the nations around. So, all the people on the outside catch a glimpse of the joyful, generous God that Israel has by looking at His joyful, generous people. Jesus is doing that exact same thing in us through His Spirit. This is the work of God now, is holding up His church as His treasured possession, a thing beautiful to Him, a thing that He cherishes and loves. He's holding it up. He's transforming us in holiness. He wants us to look at His people, look like Him, and act like Him. And as we are transformed by looking at our wonderful God, other people see that. They see our joyful generosity. They see that we're a people changed by knowing this God, by remembering all that He's done for us, and by responding to Him with joyful worship. So, let's do that now. Let's respond to God now with joyful worship, and Emma is going to lead us in singing our next song. Amen.