

Holy Habits - Set Apart to Give
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Brothers and sisters, do you remember what it was like to when you began to get an allowance when you were a kid? It was like you had all of a sudden become that much older, you were more mature, and you had your own money now!

Maybe you had to do some chores around the house, do the dishes, take out the garbage, clean your bedroom – whatever it was, and when you finished you received your money.

In order to get my allowance, every Saturday I had to clean out the garage and clean the bathrooms – and when they were done and done properly! I would get my allowance. My mom or dad would take some cash out of their wallet and I would get paid!

What a feeling - I had my own money to spend.

And later on when I was in high school, I used to work at McDonald's. And every other Thursday all of the employees

would show up late in the afternoon and wait around the staff room for one of the managers to come out of the office and hand us our paychecks.

And we'd all quickly open up the envelopes to see what we'd earned, and how much tax had to come off and make sure that we weren't shortchanged any hours – again it was a great feeling, you got paid!

You had some money that you earned from putting in all those hours cooking fries and burgers in the past week. It was yours you could decide what you wanted to do with it – and often the first thing we would do with it was go shopping! Spend it.

And when we were younger we could pretty much spend it on whatever we wanted right? I remember my parents just shaking their heads in dismay when I showed them my new Nike Sneakers that cost me \$110.00 or my \$120.00 Aluminum Graphite composite Badminton racquet, or my \$50.00 for Chip'n'Pepper Buckshot Sweatshirt – which was a sweatshirt

that had been shot full of holes by a shotgun – but it was my money and I could spend it on whatever I wanted to.

Now my teenage spending habits left my parents wondering if any of the financial wisdom they had tried to instill in me was getting through and had them somewhat worried I sure.

Because I was certainly worried as had to relive this stage all over again – but from the parental side this time – when my daughter started earning her allowance and some spending money and started going shopping with it.

And I also had to break the news to my daughter – as my parents had to did for me – that a part of that money she earns belongs to God. I had to tell her that it is a good habit to get into giving God 10% of what you make – right away!! So that you don't spend it on other things!

And as much as my daughter loves God – hearing this news produced the same reaction I had when I first heard it. What??? I owe God money!?! I thought this was all mine! You

mean I don't have 20 dollars to spend – I only have 18! Why do I have to give to God, I earned this?!?

And brothers and sisters this is our sinful human nature manifesting itself, isn't it. We balk at the idea that we would and should give the first portion of what we earn back to God,

If we even think about giving to God, we give to him out of what is left-over - if there is anything left over after we have looked after all our needs – and wants.

And if we are really honest about our giving to God, the only time it seriously crosses our mind is when we want, or rather desperately need, something that only He can pull off.

So we bargain.

God help me out of this mess and I swear I'll be in church every Sunday for the rest of this year!

God if you can get me this job I will start helping out at the homeless shelter!

God if you heal my cancer and give me a second chance on life I'll dedicate my life to you! So we're willing to give to God - if God will come through for us.

Now people have always related to the gods in this way. In the ancient world people would perform all sorts of rituals and offer sacrifices to the gods in order to secure their favor and bargain for the blessings they needed to survive.

A prayer in the morning with a pinch of incense thrown on the fire, hanging talismans and charms for good luck in the animal pens, bringing baked goods to sacred sites in the hills and woods as offerings, participating in annual planting and harvesting rituals with animal sacrifice – these were the daily and seasonal habitual activities of appeal and bargaining with the gods for blessing.

So when the one true God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, Yahweh - decided He was going to fulfill His promises to Abraham and set apart (make Holy) the people of Israel as His special chosen nation and give them the land which He had

promised them... the way in which Israel was used to relating to gods, bargaining with the gods... giving to the gods, had to change.

So in Deuteronomy 26:2 God says to Israel *"take some of the first-fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket."*

And then in vs 10 we find out what they are supposed to do with this basket. God says *"Place the basket before Yahweh your God and bow down before Him."*

Now when we read this we might think, well that doesn't sound so different from the ways in which they may or may not have given to the gods before...

So let's take a closer look at what is going on in this scripture passage to see how God's instructions on giving sets Israel apart - makes them Holy.

Now the first thing I want to draw our attention to is a series of ten prescribed actions that are to take place in this annual

act of giving, and we need to understand that this giving ritual must happen in this prescribed way – not just because God commands it - but because God has designed it to teach and instruct and... to shape the participant so they actually become different than others, set apart for God – holy. Does that make sense?

Ok – so in vs. 2-3 the participant is instructed “you shall take”; “you shall put”; “you shall go”; and “you shall say.” We can add in the “you shall” to these verbs because they are imperatives.

In vs. 4 the focus shifts to the priest who is instructed “he shall take” and “he shall set down”

Then the focus shifts back to the participant again who is commanded “you shall declare” and then following the declaration, “you shall place the basket”; “you shall bow down” and finally “you shall rejoice.”

So if we mapped this out in a diagram, it would look like this:

Vs 2-3	Participant actions	<i>you shall take</i> <i>you shall put</i> <i>you shall go</i>
Vs 4	Participant speaks Priest actions	<i>you shall say</i> <i><u>he</u> shall take</i> <i><u>he</u> shall set down</i>
Vs 5	Participant speaks Participant actions	<i>you shall declare</i> <i>you shall place</i> <i>you shall bow down</i>
Vs 11		<i>you shall rejoice</i>

So what we can see in doing this is that there is a pattern to this, actions – speaking – actions –speaking – actions. This is deliberately designed; it’s not random or haphazard – and that makes it easy to memorize for the average Israelite, which was important because they couldn’t just pull it up on their smartphones to remember the instructions.

And whenever there is a pattern like this, whatever is at the center is central, so in this case the actions of the priest are central and this ritual of giving depends on them in order to accomplish its purpose – so keep that in mind because we’ll come back to that in a bit.

So let's walk through these imperative verbs and get a better understanding of what is going on and how it sets Israel's giving to God apart from the bargaining and self-interested giving practiced by nations around them.

So this particular practice of giving to God starts at the beginning of the harvest – when the first of the crops would ripen. When you started to see the reward for all the hard work of plowing, weeding, protecting, worrying about the crops – that first red tomato on the vine, the first bunch of juicy grapes..

Instead of picking that tomato or those grapes and taking a big bite of that ripe fruit right then and there and savoring that mouthful of deliciousness - which would be indicative of the great harvest still to come – and quite literally the fruit of your labors...

Instead of doing that the Israelite farmer was to **take** those first ripe fruits, grains, vegetables that had been grown from the Land WHICH GOD HAD GIVEN THEM – and **put** them aside

in a container, so that when all the first fruits had been collected the farmer could **go** and take them to the tabernacle and later the temple.

These actions show that Israel was only a steward of the land, because the one whom the land belongs to gets the first portions of what the land grows.

So when the farmers arrived at the tabernacle or temple he was to go to the priest **say** as much: *"I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."*

Even when they had been living in the land for many many years – each year as they presented the first-fruits they would each individually declare this.

It would remind them of the kind of relationship they had with the land, how they had received it, and who truly owned it and this in turn would shape the way they thought and form their identity.

Now notice that the farmer is to say to the Priest “the Lord YOUR God” not my God.

That’s strange right – isn’t Yahweh the farmer’s covenant God? Well yes – and that’s why the farmer would say “your God” to the priest.

It was recognition that in their covenant relationship the presence of God had to be mediated to the people by the priest and that their access to God was facilitated by the priest. That’s why the role of the priest in this act of giving to God is central.

Without the Priest taking the basket and setting it before the altar of God the farmer has no way to actually give this to God and complete this act of required obedience. Once the basket has been placed before the altar BY THE PRIEST it has technically been received by God, and now the farmer may address God directly.

The next set of speaking instructions reveal this, God now gives the farmer permission to speak and declare to the Lord your God – so now... God is the God of the farmer, and the farmer then recites what we might call “the Exodus creed.”

This creed has the farmer admitting that God’s decision to choose their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was an act of undeserved mercy and grace. There is nothing noble or legendary about your ancestors being “a wandering Aramean”

They did not receive this promise because they came from good stock so to speak.

Then the creed recites how they were oppressed by the Egyptians when they lived in Egypt – the farmer personally includes himself among those who were oppressed, so that those who never knew the hardship of slavery might remember and never be tempted to oppress and enslave anyone who had come to live in their land.

The creed also reminds the farmer how he and his people came to be freed from slavery and found themselves in a fertile land where they can live and settle and be prosperous.

And finally the creed finishes with the farmer personalizing all that history into his offering by saying “now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me.”

Then the farmer was to take the basket and bow down before the Lord in an act of worship.

But this act of giving isn't quite finished just yet. There is still the command that he is to rejoice and invite the Levites and the foreigners living among them to celebrate God's good blessings upon himself and his family. In other words there would be a thanksgiving meal where the temple workers and the immigrants would be invited to join and celebrate.

So how did this whole process make Israel's giving different from the nations around them?

Well first it showed they were stewards of the land, second it showed that the produce they received from the land was a gift of God, the land was fertile because God blessed it.

Third they didn't have to earn God's blessing – He had given it to them freely by liberating them from slavery and giving them the land, they only had to respond in obedience out of gratitude, which would lead to more blessing.

And lastly – regularly giving back to God with these specific actions would become a habit that would contrast and be different from methods of bargaining and sacrificial rituals of the other nations used with their gods - and this habit would shape their identity.

So what do we take away from all of this?

Well firstly, and in line with the focus of our sermon series this month we need to take a look at our habits around giving to God.

So brothers and sisters – do we even give to God? And are we habitually giving to God from our first-fruits? Do we give from a recognition that all our blessings come from Him?

And do we give intentionally and in such a way that it reflects the truth – reminds us of the truth – and proclaims that truth to others – the truth about our relationship with God and His grace and mercy and liberation?

Brothers and sisters what are your giving habits? Do you happen to throw whatever you have left in your wallet into the offering plate? Do you only give when the church comes asking for support? Do you support what you are personally enthused about, a specific project or ministry?

Now – please understand, these are questions the Holy Spirit can use to bring Godly conviction about your giving habits.

We are not going to accept or allow the enemy to use them as guilt trips or shame tactics to manipulate us into legalism or coerce us. That is falling back into the same sort of bargaining

giving trap that God wanted Israel to be different from - guilt and shame do not lead to Holy giving.

But these questions can lead to conviction about wanting to take specific actions that can help us establish holy giving habits that will distinguish our giving from the non-Christian giving that goes on around us in society.

So the very first habit we need to develop is to give in Jesus name.

Remember the role of the priest is central in this – and Jesus is our great High priest. God only receives and uses what we offer through Jesus name.

Remember what Peter said to the begger who asked him for money at the temple gate? He said “ I don’t have any silver or gold, but I’ll give you what I have – in the name of JESUS CHRIST – stand up and walk!” (Acts 3:6)

So when you give something to God – give it in Jesus name.
Say it, out loud to whomever you are blessing with that gift.
Make it a habit – it will set you apart, make you and your gift
holy, and accomplish Jesus’ purposes with it.

Next, give just because God is God and all that means. Just let
that sink in for a moment.

Brothers and sisters our first motive for giving shouldn’t be a
cause, it shouldn’t be a need, it should be simply because God
is God – and then giving for all the causes and needs that we
are aware of fall into their proper places after that.

Get into the habit of giving because God is God.

Next make it a habit to give from **all** of your first fruits not
from your leftovers. So yes, just like my opening example,
this mean that you need to give God that \$2.00 from the
\$20.00 you earned when you get paid.

Or maybe it means that you intentionally include what you will
give into your budget at the beginning of the month – and you
don’t give into the temptation to reduce the amount when
you are facing extra bills or expenses etc... that’s a bad habit.

And it’s not just our money – what do we do with the first few
minutes of our day? What do we do with the first day of the
week, the month, the year?

And what about the rest of our blessings that we receive from
God – we need to make it a habit to give from the first-fruits
of those things as well. All our blessings are from God – and
God’s not after our money – He’s after our heart!

Which leads into the next giving habit – that giving to God
should happen IN corporate worship and we do this all
together. In part because being at worship is how we give
God the first fruits of our week isn’t it?

Now it’s not that giving can’t occur in other places – but if it’s
going to happen, make sure it’s happening with other

Christians in worship because that gives a context to our giving. It frames it with the gospel and contributes to forming our identity as those who give out of gratitude.

Now I understand that the whole idea of making giving a habit with these kinds of specifics can seem terribly “unspiritual” to us because we’ve been conditioned against routine, especially routine that turns into ritual, or worse meaningless ritual...

We’d rather just give as the Spirit moves us right – that seems more New Testament doesn’t it? Well brothers and sisters I’ll leave you with this final take away from our scripture passage this morning.

There is every reason to believe that Deuteronomy 26:1-11 is the basis for the celebration of.... Pentecost! You know that particular festival that was going on when Jesus decided to pour out the Holy Spirit upon his disciples in Jerusalem. And as we learned last week from Ezekiel 36:27 when the Holy Spirit is poured out He will move us to obey God’s laws and keep His commands.

And in 2 Tim 1:7 Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit give us power and self-discipline. So developing habits of giving with these kinds of specifics is perfectly in line with New Testament spiritual freedom – and how the Spirit will move us.

And brother and sisters – this is something that I hope to bring out more throughout the series. Spontaneous acts of Christian living only spring forth out of the regular, routine, discipleship habits that we observe and practice regularly.

So with that in mind brothers and sisters - *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* (Sow generously into your discipleship habits friends!)

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Amen.