

## Does God Still Want Our Firstfruits?

Exodus 22:29–31; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Think for a moment. Let's test your knowledge of Scripture. Do you know the very *first* command ever given to man? (*Pause for a moment.*) Do you remember? . . . The command was "Be fruitful!"

"Be *fruitful* and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). This was given to Adam as the head of the human race, and intended for all his posterity—all people everywhere, during all of time. It is what we refer to as the "cultural mandate." Man was meant to live in peace with God and with his neighbor and develop a God-glorifying culture where the true God would be worshipped and adored, families would thrive, and people would serve one another in love.

It doesn't always work that way, because of sin, but God's plan will not be thwarted, and the kingdom of Christ will indeed be built.

Remember, it all started with "Be *fruitful*!"

What if God had never said that? What if he had never given Adam and Eve the power to procreate? What a different world this would be! Adam and Eve would have gone to their graves childless, the human race would have died out, and Jesus, the "seed of the woman," would have never come.

But God is the Lord and *giver of life*, who enables us to be fruitful and build families. He enables us to live for something greater than ourselves, and that is the population—the "peopling"—of the church of Jesus Christ, whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. "Children are an heritage of the LORD, and the fruit of the womb is his reward."<sup>1</sup> Most humans intuitively understand this. Children are universally desired and are a source of great blessing.

As the Psalmist put it, "He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a *joyful mother of children*. Praise ye the LORD" (Ps. 113:9).

In our text this morning we have not only "The firstborn of your *sons* you shall give to Me," but also "You shall not delay to offer the first of your *ripe produce* and your *juices*. . . . Likewise you shall do with your *oxen* and your *sheep*." Don't miss the point: worshipers are to give back to God everything that he has given us.

"*Every* good gift and every perfect gift is *from above*, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17). Don't miss the repetition of the word "every"! *Everything* we have is a gift of God's great bounty. Nothing is excepted.

I have four points this morning: (1) What is the firstfruits? (2) What does it signify? (3) With what attitude should it be offered? (4) How is it fulfilled in Christ? First,

### 1. What is the firstfruits?

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. 127:3

Here's a term we don't use often, but it is a biblical concept. *Firstfruits* is the earliest ripe fruits offered to God in acknowledgment of his gift of fruitfulness. The word itself is used 32 times, 25 times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New.

The first occurrence actually is not till the next chapter, Exodus 23, when God enumerates the three annual feasts—but the *concept* is here in our text this morning. Notice the word “firstborn.” Notice also “the *first* of your ripe produce and your juices”—that is, the harvest of the field and of the vineyard.

In Genesis we have mention of “the fruit of a *tree* yielding seed,” “the fruit of the *ground*,” and “the fruit of the *womb*.”<sup>2</sup> By the grace of our bountiful God, the creation that he gave mankind to exercise stewardship over is *fruitful*. The idea is that God has put within creation the ability to reproduce, to propagate and multiply. Under man's stewardship, growth can occur, producing wealth. This is a great blessing, and God wants us to recognize it.

Remember the story of Cain and Abel? We read in Genesis 4: “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the LORD.’ Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat.”

Notice that from the very beginning man was conscious that growth was a gift from God. Eve, the first mother, said, “I have acquired a man (שׂוֹרֵק, male child) from the LORD.” In this she set an example to all new mothers everywhere. Indeed, as we observed a moment ago, “Children are an heritage of the LORD, and the *fruit of the womb* is his reward.” Both mothers and fathers ought to recognize this. In the Old Testament, women who struggled with fertility—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah—cried out to God to bless them with children.

Cain and Abel worked hard to provide for themselves and their families. Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. Both watching over flocks and working the ground are honorable occupations. As these two sons of Adam experienced fruitfulness in their respective labors, they brought offerings to the LORD. God had blessed their labors, so it was appropriate for them to worship him and offer him gifts in recognition of his blessings. So it is appropriate for human beings in any occupation to give thanks to God for the increase he has given. Who has given us strong bodies and functioning minds? It is the LORD! Man should never say, “*My* power and the might of *my* hand have gained me this wealth.” Rather, God says, “you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is *He* who gives you power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:17–18). Here is a universal principle:

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. 1:29, 4:3, 30:2

the power to get wealth comes from the God of heaven, and every human person is duty-bound to recognize this fact and give God the glory. To fail to do this is *sin* which man will answer for on the day of judgment.

So, to reiterate, *firstfruits* is the earliest ripe fruits offered to God in acknowledgment of his gift of fruitfulness. That brings us to point two,

## **2. What does it signify?**

Bringing to God the firstfruits of our labors is a recognition that the ability to derive benefit from our labor comes from the LORD himself. There is truly *no* self-made man. It is God who gives us the power to get wealth. The fact that we have a functioning mind and body and are able to do useful work is no accident. The fact that we were born, that we took our first breath, that we grew and developed, that we have a measure of health, that we have a functioning mind and body, that we had parents who nurtured us, and adults who modeled for us goal-setting and diligence in labor and hard work and thrift and self-restraint and pursuit of excellence—all these are blessings from God.

Read the book of Proverbs and you will see that God wants us to work hard and not whittle away all our time with play. “Six days thou shalt labor” is a requirement that is binding upon every human person. All of us should be taught to work. Moreover, we should be taught the value of work.

We read in Proverbs: “I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down” (Prov. 24:30ff.).

When God created man—even before sin entered into the world—we find that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *work* it and *keep* it” (Gen. 2:15 ESV). The garden of Eden was a perfect environment. There was no death, no decay, no loss, no disappointment—only the most exquisite beauty. Yet God expected man to develop Eden to the glory of God. That is his task.

All of us have been given gifts, and God expects us to use them. He wants us to be diligent in our calling, to work hard, to be purposeful and intentional to develop the gifts that he has given us. The other day Norma and I came across videos of a young Italian pianist. She is absolutely phenomenal. We were blown away by her talent, playing concertos with power and technique, and interpreting them masterfully, all from memory, with no mistakes. What a masterful accomplishment for a young woman barely in her thirties. It is obvious that God has given her a lot of natural talent. But it is also obvious that she has spent hours and hours, diligently practicing, mastering every note.

Most humans have not been given that particular gift. But all of us are duty-bound to develop the gifts that we have. There are tragic cases of individuals born with handicaps, physical or mental, but through effort and hard work and

determination have overcome them. Each of us ought to develop and master the gifts that we have been given, not complain that we have not been given greater gifts. God has a purpose and plan for each of us, and he wants us to be diligent. And when we have worked hard, and the Lord has blessed the work of our hands, he wants us to offer him the firstfruits of our labors.

“You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.”

What does it signify? That *all* of what he has blessed us with belongs to the Lord. Not just the firstborn, but *all* our children belong to him. Not just the first ripe produce of our fields and vineyards, but the *whole*, belongs to the Lord. Same with newborn animals. God mercifully allows them to be with their mother for seven days, so that necessary bonding can occur, but then on the eighth day they are to be given to the Lord. These are only examples of the firstfruits of agricultural labor.

But what if we are not farmers? Then the first of our business income, or the first of our net paycheck, belongs to the Lord. Note that it is the *first*. The first is given in recognition of our Father’s promise that he is going to take care of us, that he will never leave us or forsake us. He will supply *all* our need, according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. We are to trust him by faith, knowing that we have never “seen the righteous forsaken, or his seed begging bread” (Ps. 37:25). We might be tempted to think, *Why am I giving this away? Doesn’t the Lord know I need it now?*” Indeed, he does! But he wants us to walk by faith, not by sight. He wants us to give the tithe (the tenth) of our paycheck to him. He knows the state is going to take its portion. He knows that there are plenty of things the state spends money on that are unjust and not good. But the fact is, he is going to take care of us, no matter what! He will enable us to get along with less. He has empowered the church’s diaconal ministry to help us out in case of emergency. But he will absolutely not let us starve. He has made the tithe incredibly easy to figure out—just move the decimal point. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to figure it out. You just have to be obedient. What matters is the heart. Pray, in the words of the hymn, “Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.” If you profess that the God of heaven is your God, and you will not tithe, then there is a disconnect. Is he really your God?

Thirdly,

### **3. With what attitude should it be offered?**

The Bible tells us exactly how we should offer our gifts. Paul writes, “But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully

will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, *not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver*” (2 Cor. 9:6–7).

God is not so much interested in the amount of our gift, but in the attitude of our heart. Are we giving gladly, voluntarily, and cheerfully? If we are giving because we feel compelled by necessity, that we have no other choice, then our gift is not done with purpose of heart, but with reluctance. We dare not fool ourselves to think that God will not notice. He will! He is the searcher of hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us give gladly. “I was *glad* when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.” Let us give voluntarily, according as we have purposed in our heart. Ezekiel writes: “Now when the prince makes a *voluntary* burnt offering or *voluntary* peace offering to the Lord, the gate that faces toward the east shall then be opened for him . . .” (Ezek. 46:12). This is the essence of the freewill offering. We do not give because we *have* to, but because we *want* to.

Paul urges us to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service (Rom. 12:1). Have you offered your body a living sacrifice to God?

Not only do we give money, we also give our sons and daughters to the Lord. God says, “The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me.” As the hymnwriter put it: “Give of your sons to bear the message glorious; give of your wealth to speed them on their way; pour out your soul for them in prayer victorious; and all your spending Jesus will repay.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, whatever we give to Christ, he will repay. He promises to pour out “such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it (Mal. 3:10).

Church of Jesus Christ, follow in the footsteps of Hannah, who earnestly prayed that if God gave her a son, she would give him back to the Lord all the days of his life. God answered her prayer by giving her Samuel, and when he was weaned, she gave him to Eli the priest to serve in the tabernacle. Hannah lived to see her son called to be God’s prophet to Israel.

As parents we love our children and dedicate them to God. We pray for them, as we pray for ourselves, “Lord, they are yours. Use them as you will in your service. I make no demands on you. Be glorified in our sons and daughters. May they be part of a mighty army fighting the good fight of faith, to the glory of Christ our King. If we believe in the cause—the ultimate glory of Christ’s kingdom—then we will make no demands. We will say, “O Lord, you are infinitely wise. You know the end from the beginning. You know what is best. Use my child in the way that will bring the most renown to your cause.”

#### **4. How is it fulfilled in Christ?**

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<sup>3</sup> Mary A. Thomson, “O Zion Haste, Your Mission High Fulfilling” (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 419)

All of us are sinners. We have broken God's holy law. We have failed to keep his commandments. We have failed to attain to his holy standard of absolute perfection. Because we are sinners, we are bound for hell. But the good news is that Christ died for our sins. He took our place. He became our substitute. He went to the cross and died for his people. And death could not contain him! He rose from the dead the third day, as he prophesied numerous times throughout his earthly ministry. He arose by his own power. "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the *firstfruits*, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

What does it mean that Christ is the firstfruits? It means that he was the first man ever to rise from the dead by his own power. Death could not contain him. And because he rose again, all his people in every age will likewise rise. He died for us and rose again as the firstfruits, so that we who look to him in faith will rise with him at the final day. Because he lives, we will live also!

Does God still want our firstfruits? Indeed, he does!

Take the matter of childbearing. The U.S. birthrate is 1.6 children per woman, as of 2022. That's shockingly low—far below the replacement rate of 2.1.

It wasn't always that way. As recently as 2007, the U.S. birthrate was 2.12 children per woman. In 2008, the birthrate started declining, and has never recovered.

In an agrarian society, children are an obvious blessing; they can help with farm work. But in an urban/suburban society, children are more mouths to feed; young professionals see children as a drag on their own personal prosperity.

Biblically, parents care for children when they are young, and children care for their parents when they are old, but under the "Great Society" model, the welfare-state takes care of both children and retirees, so family becomes unnecessary. As long as a society can extract ever-higher taxes from wage-earners to care for the indigent, or borrow from future generations, it can spend like there's no tomorrow—but eventually the day of reckoning comes. Society needs to get back to the biblical model.

To the worldling it seems so crass. What kind of a God requires a man to turn over to him his most valuable possessions? The answer is: the God who saved us from death and hell by the life-blood of his own beloved Son. Everything that we have is a gift from a loving and generous God.

Earlier in Exodus 13 the LORD explicitly says, 'Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.'" "Consecrate" (or sanctify [שׁוֹמֵר]) means to intentionally present our children to God who gave them to us.

The timing of this command is especially significant. The people were to kill the Passover lamb and put the blood on their doorposts. When the death-angel passed through Egypt that night, he would spare the firstborn of every house where the blood was to be seen, but in every house that lacked the blood, God would smite the firstborn both of man and beast. “It came to pass at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock. So Pharaoh rose in the night, he, all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead.”

It is against this background that God commands, “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn.” It is indeed a blessing to be able to consecrate our firstborn!

The first fruit of our bodies, our labors, our fields, our vintage, our income, our paycheck. The *first* belongs to the Lord. Amen.