**Giving in thankful worship to the Lord**

Text: Deuteronomy 26

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 26; 2 Cor 9:6-15

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 34, ‘Give Thanks’, 192, 501, 180

**Series:** Deuteronomy (sermon #14)

**Theme:** As Israel prepare to enter the promised land, God commands a central worship offering of the fruits of the first harvest and after the third harvest, a local giving of the tithe to those in need in each town. The giving of Israel was to be accompanied by a profession of faith, a declaration of covenant faithfulness and prayer.

**Proposition:** Giving is an essential part of our thankful worship

**Introduction**

Thankfulness is a central theme of the Bible; that is ­gratitude in response to the glorious work of God. The practical benefits of thankfulness are widely recognised, even by those who do not know the Lord. Studies have shown that a thankful attitude generally leads to better physical and emotional health, reduced stress, deeper friendships, greater productivity, and happiness.

In Christ, being thankful for what you have, rather than grumbling about what you don’t have, reveals a heartfelt trust in the Lord’s goodness in providing what you need. His kind wisdom is seen both in what He has given you and also in what you don’t have. Scripture reveals that “*there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world*”. (1 Tim 6:6-7).

Remember how unthankful Israel was after they had been delivered into freedom? "*Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger*." (Ex 16:3). Ingratitude, mistrust, unbelief, and disobedience led almost a whole generation, including Moses himself, to spend 40 years in a barren land. Israel were the people upon whom God had set His love and had chosen them to be His own (Deut 7:7). The Lord wanted them to be content, healthy, happy and productive in the good land He was giving them.

Children, when someone gives you a gift what should you say? “Well, that isn’t what I really wanted”? “Why isn’t it bigger and better”? “The others have been given more than me”? When we are young (and sometimes not so young!) we need to be taught how to say, ‘thank you’. It could be said that the whole book of Deuteronomy is a lesson in how to express gratitude to the Lord. Consider this: Chapters 1-3 review the Lord’s faithfulness to His promise to deliver His people. Chapter 4 reminds the people that the Almighty Lord had chosen Israel to be His own. Chapter 5 reveals 10 ways for the people to live their best lives in thankful response to God’s great grace towards them (i.e. the ten commandments). Chapter 6 shows that thankfulness begins deep inside a person with a heartfelt love for the Lord. Chapters 7 and 8 call for remembrance of the Lord’s past works, not only of salvation, but also of loving discipline for Israel, His ‘son’ (Hos 11:1) Israel. Chapter 10 exhorts the people to be ‘no longer stubborn’. Obstinate people are not known for their thankfulness.

In the section of Deuteronomy up to and including chapter 26, the detailed laws of God for His people are set forth so that Israel would know how to live thankful lives in the Promised Land. Today we are going to see three aspects of thankfulness from our text:

1. Yielding up firstfruits
2. Yielding up tithes
3. Yielding up obedience
4. **Yielding up firstfruits**

Quite a few of us here today have grown our own vegetable crops in the garden, some have worked in agricultural cropping enterprises. None of the Israelites, gathered on the Eastern border of the Promised Land listening to the last sermon which Moses preached, had any experience growing their own food. The previous generations had been shepherds with flocks and herds living in the land of Goshen in Egypt. Later they were forced to become brick-makers as slaves under the hard yoke of Pharaoh (Ex 5). Then for 40 years they had travelled as nomads through the desert with their livestock, directly dependent for their daily food on the Lord’s gracious gift of the heavenly bread of manna.

This second generation about the enter the Promised land would not have had any experience of ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing or storing agricultural produce. They would not even have seen others growing crops during their lifetimes. The ability to grow their own food on their own land was a great gift of the Lord to His people Israel for which they were to be thankful. When they had entered the land, and grown their first crops, the ‘*first of all the fruit of the ground*’ was to be brought to the central place of worship and given to the Lord (v2). {It’s not clear whether this was a special first fruits offering or whether this was the first occasion of the ongoing ceremony of firstfruits as described in Lev 23:9-14}.

The offering of firstfruits was a token of the whole harvest. It was a visible recognition that all the crop (and everything else) ultimately belongs to God. Israel were called to be good stewards of the good land which the Lord had entrusted into their care. The firstfruits ceremony was a reminder that God had kept his covenant promise (Gen 17:8). The harvest from their own land was tangible (edible) evidence for Israel of the fulfilment of God’s Word to their ancestor Abraham.

It is probable that the words to be recited when the firstfruits offerings were made continued to be used in Israel’s worship. These words (verses 5-9) recall in summary the saving work of the Lord, beginning with their forefather Jacob (a wandering Aramean), who had travelled from southern Canaan to Haran in Aram, later migrating to Egypt (Gen 46:3-7). Having married two Aramean women, Leah and Rachael (Gen 28:5; 29:16,28), Jacob had a family, much smaller in number than the nation of Israel who were about to enter the Promised Land. By the time he went to Egypt, Jacob was an old man (130 years – Gen 47:9) and ready to die (Gen 45:28; 46:30). Many generations later the Egyptians treated the descendants of Jacob harshly, humiliating them and laying on them hard labour. Then the people cried out to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v7). He heard them, saw their affliction, toil and oppression and powerfully brought them out of Egypt with signs and wonders (v8).

After retelling the story of God’s mighty deliverance of His people from their bondage, the worshipper with the first fruit offering was to say: “*And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me*” (v9-10).

Notice the contrast between the landless nomad Jacob (with a small family) whose many descendants would now have a good land of their own which was fruitful: ‘*flowing with milk and honey*’. Today, we can be thankful when we see numerical growth in the church and an evident increase in the godliness of her members. We can also be thankful when the church shrinks in size (as long as this is not a consequence of our unfaithfulness).

The Apostle wrote a joyful letter to the Philippians in which he confessed: “*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need*” (Phil 4:11-12).

On occasion, in season, brothers and sisters here bring surplus fruit and vegetables which they have grown at home to share with us. There’s often a sign on a container in the foyer ‘help yourself’. That’s kind and generous – but it is not really an application of the principle of the first fruit offering which was offered up in worship to the Lord! When we budget and manage our own personal finances, it is consistent with the truth revealed in our text that we assign a portion for the Lord as the first priority before we work out what we can afford to spend on other things with the remainder.

In times past many Christians would physically put aside cash when they first received their pay cheque or business income. What they had left they then used for their expenses. They would then bring the money which they had set aside to congregational worship on the Lord’s Day and place it in the offering bag. Today many people give to the Lord by using an electronic automatic payment from their bank account to the church. The ‘firstfruits’ principle can be applied to the payment method of electronic funds transfer by having the first automatic payment going out for the Lord’s work on the same day that regular income is received. A natural question to ask is “how much should I give?” which leads us to our second point.

1. **Yielding up tithes**

I remember growing up as a boy in England with pounds, shillings and pence. A pound was worth 20 shillings, a shilling was 12 pence. This ‘old English money’ has been dated back by some historians to the Norman conquest of 1066. It was a ‘fractional system’ of currency used here in New Zealand until July 1967 when our current ‘decimal system’ of dollars and cents began. One of the advantages of the decimal system of currency is that it is very easy to calculate 10% - 10 cents in every dollar. 10 cents is a tithe of a dollar. The word ‘tithe’ literally means ‘tenth part’.

The first tithe recorded in Scripture is that of Abram who gave Melchizedek, King of Salem, ‘*a tenth of everything*’ (Gen 14:20). The tithe was a requirement of the Mosaic Law in which all Israelites were to give 10 percent of everything they earned and grew to the tabernacle/temple (e.g. Leviticus 27:30; Numbers 18:26; Deuteronomy 14:24; 2 Chronicles 31:5). The total annual giving of the Israelites has been calculated as having been 23.33% as follows:

* The ‘general’ tithe paid to the Levites for their service in the tabernacle/temple (Num 18.21-26). That’s 10%.
* The ‘worship’ tithe given in the central place of worship (Deut 14:22-27). That’s another 10% - running total now 20%.
* The ‘welfare’ tithe at the end of every three years, given in the towns (Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13) to support the sojourner, the fatherless (orphans) and the widows (14:29). That’s 10% every third year, or 3.33% annually.

Add these three tithes together and you get 23.33%. There is a sense in which the Old Testament tithe was a method of civil taxation to provide both for the needs of the priests and Levites in the sacrificial system and for the needy. The giving of all tithes was an obligation for Old Testament Israel as part of the Law of God (e.g. Mal 3:10). Not to tithe was to rob God (Mal 3:8). The tithe was an expression of gratitude to God by His people. Tithing from a believing heart reflected a trusting acknowledgment of God's ownership of everything on the earth (Ps 50:10). All we have, including ourselves, is from God. We are called to be faithful stewards of all our ‘possessions’ on this earth (Rom 14:12; 1 Cor 9:3-14; 16:1-3; 2 Cor 8:1-9:15). They are ‘ours’ for a limited time only (1 Tim 6:7).

The Lord doesn’t need our resources to accomplish His plans and purposes. He is all-sufficient. However, He does desire a responsive heart in His people. A heart that overflows with gratitude and thanksgiving to Him. Such a heart gives generously, willingly, and cheerfully in response to the love and grace that abound in Christ. The Apostle Paul explains this to the Corinthian church using these words: “*The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all contentment in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work*”. ([2 Corinthians 9:6–8](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Cor%209.6%E2%80%938)).

When Christ died on the cross, having been perfectly obedient to the will of God, He fulfilled the requirements of the Law and made obsolete the mandatory 10 percent civil law tithe. Nowhere does the New Testament expressly command Christians to give a tenth of their produce or income. The words ‘tithe’ and ‘tithing’ appear only eight times in the New Testament (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42; 18:12; Heb 7:5-6,8-9). All of these passages refer to Old Testament usage or to 1st century Jewish practice.

However, as believers we are to be generous in sharing our material possessions for the support of Christian ministry and for those in need. Giving is to be voluntary, willing, cheerful, and given in the light of our accountability to God for all that we have been entrusted with. The New Testament standard is giving according to your means – proportional, generous, sacrificial, regular (1 Cor 16:1-2) and not under compulsion, as Old Testament tithes were. A portion of income should be set aside as an offering, but this is not specified in Scripture as a 10% tithe. Neither should 10% (or 23.3%) be viewed as ‘ceilings’ above which one must not give. We have much liberty in Christ!

Notice in verses 13 and 14 that the tithe of the third year was a declaration that the worshipper had fulfilled his covenant obligations; firstly in bringing the tithe (‘the sacred portion’) and then in keeping God’s commandments (13). Which brings us to our third point:

1. **Yielding up obedience**

Paying taxes to the state authorities is a requirement, whether you feel like it or not (Rom 13:1; Matt 22:21). However, we are not commanded (either in Scripture or New Zealand law) to love our civil government, nor to agree with how they spend the taxes they collect from us. We are to yield up a proportion of our money to the government, but you don’t have to give them your heart! Taxation is about compliance, not necessarily willing obedience.

Giving to the Lord is so very different to paying a tax. As we have already seen, in light of the work of Christ, we are not commanded to give a fixed amount or percentage of our income to the Lord. First and foremost we are called to give of **all** ourselves in our spiritual worship (Romans 12:1). This is not a tithe at 10% or an accumulated giving of 23.33%. The percentage here is 100%!

The reason for this yielding up of ourselves entirely to the Lord is given by the Apostle Paul in these words: ‘*present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness*’ (Rom 6:13). How does a person give all of themselves to the Lord all the time? By attending long, frequent worship services every day of the week? By engaging in works of Christian ministry all of the time? By doing nothing but pray and read Scripture 24x7? By retreating into a monastery or isolated Christian community and sealing yourself off from the temptations of the world?

None of these. The way to give all of yourself to the Lord all the time is through willingly yielding up your full obedience to Him. “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*” (Col 3:17). The declaration of the worshipper when paying his tithe in Deuteronomy 26 expresses this submission in these words: *'I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover, I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me. I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them… I have obeyed the voice of the LORD my God... I have done according to all that you have commanded* *me’* (v13-14).

Thankful worship of God in all of life is expressed through a willing giving up – yielding - of yourself entirely. This is what Jesus has done perfectly for you and me, brothers and sisters in our Lord. Here are his words of yielding: "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42). "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*" (Luke 23:46) If we are to understand giving in thankful worship, we must look at Jesus ‘*who for the joy set before him endured the cross*’ (Heb 12:2).

Here are some questions to ask yourself: Have I received the gift of life eternal in Christ from God? Have I been given every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places with Christ (Eph 1:3)? Am I thankful to the One who laid down his life for me? Is my worship from a heart filled with love for my Saviour? Have I yielded up willing obedience to my Lord? Can I say, as the worshipping Israelite who had brought his ‘sacred portion’ out of his house, was to say before the Lord his God “*I have done according to all that you have commanded me*” (13)?

Here is an acceptance of the terms of the covenant between the Lord and His people. In thankful worship there was to be a dedication of the worshipper to the Lord in willing obedience. We see this in v17: *“You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice”.* Soon we’ll sing the song ‘Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord to thee’ which expresses freely giving yourself in thankful worship to Christ.

The response of the Lord to the willing obedience of His people is expressed in verses 18 and 19: “*And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honour high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised*."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are God’s treasured possession…that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet 2:9). We proclaim that we have received God’s bountiful grace in Christ when we willingly give of our money, time, and energy for the Lord’s Kingdom. Congregation: Give thanks with a grateful heart. Give thanks to the Holy One. Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.

"*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

AMEN.