

Firstfruits Stewardship (March 2020)

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One theme that persists throughout the whole Bible is that of the “firstfruits.” It is a central idea in stewardship, but also in Christian teaching and spirituality.

It goes back to Exodus, the second book of the Bible. The people of Israel have just escaped from Egypt. They are free at last. Camped out at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they listen as Moses teaches them the Law from God.

This Law included the Ten Commandments, but it also included special holidays that the Israelites were commanded to celebrate. One of these was a harvest festival:

“You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.” (Exodus 23:16)

Most cultures and religions have a harvest festival. What made Israel’s harvest festival special was that God insisted that the people should bring Him the very first things they harvested — their firstfruits.

You can easily see how this requirement of the firstfruits demands faith. The Israelites don’t get to wait until the whole harvest is in, calculate the amount they grew, and then give to God whatever they felt they could do without. No, instead, the Israelites brought to God they very first things they grew — without knowing how much would come after. They had to trust in God to take care of them. They had to give their first and possibly their best to God, no matter what the cost.

The theme of firstfruits continues throughout the Old Testament, sometimes as a criticism of the people of Israel when they failed to bring God the firstfruits.

What’s really interesting, though, is how the New Testament writers took this firstfruits idea and applied it to Christian spiritual life. Let’s look at a few examples from St. Paul.

He writes in II Thessalonians 2:13: “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”

*We* are God’s firstfruits! Believers are the first people “harvested” by God for salvation. There is a bigger harvest waiting — but those of us who are believers now are God’s firstfruits.

St. Paul also uses this image to describe Jesus. In I Corinthians 15:20 he writes: “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

What he means is that Jesus is the first person to rise from the dead. Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection. There are more resurrections to come—when, on the Last Day, God raises all of us up to everlasting life. The reason we can trust this promise is because Jesus has already been raised as the firstfruits.

St. Paul also talks about our experience of the Holy Spirit this way. In Romans 8:23 he says, “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Our spiritual life is not yet perfect or total. We are still part of this struggling, sinful world. And yet, we really do have the Holy Spirit at work in us—the firstfruits of the Spirit. Our faith right now is the first harvest of the Spirit’s work in us.

In light of this, it makes sense that St. Paul uses the same concept to talk about stewardship and giving. Paul was collecting money from his various churches around the Mediterranean Sea to donate to the very poor people living in Israel. So he writes to the church in Corinth (Greece): “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (I Corinthians 16:2).

“The first day of the week” reflects how people were paid then. For us today, every two weeks or every month would probably make more sense. “The first day of the week,” however, is also the day that Jesus was raised from the dead. (Technically, Sunday is the first day of the week in the Western calendar, although many people assume it is Monday because that is the first working day!) So our saving from our income and giving it to people in need should always be connected to our worship of Jesus, the firstfruits from the dead, our savior and Lord.

Notice also that Paul says “as he may prosper.” Paul is not asking for a “flat tax” in which everyone pays the exact same amount. Instead, he asks us to give according to how much God has given us. If our salary is small, then it’s fine for our giving to be small. If our salary is huge, then it’s fitting for our giving to be huge.

But big or small, the point is that we think of God *first*. We give God our firstfruits, instead of spending first on ourselves and then, when we’ve spent all we want, seeing what is left over for God. That is putting God last in our lives. But we are called to put God first.

It’s a wonderful thing to trust in God. But trust isn’t just something we say in our hearts or with our lips. It’s also how we live. If we trust in God, we can give generously, at the beginning instead of at the end. God blesses generous firstfruits giving. After all, God chose us to be His firstfruits! If He put us first, then we should also put Him first.