

“First Fruits” (First Things First Pt. 5)
(Genesis 4:2b-7)

- **This is not a Tithing Sermon**

- *First Fruits*, here we go! Disclaimer: *this is not a sermon about tithing*. We'll get to what it is about soon, but first, some *Bible trivia!* True or False: Jesus said, **“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”** Raise your hand if you think Jesus said that. Raise your hand if you think Jesus *didn't* say it. OK, drumroll, here's the answer...*it's kind of a trick question!*
 - If you said *false*, technically, you'd be right, because *nowhere in the Gospels* does Jesus say it—*Paul* actually says these words in Acts 20. However, if you said *true*, you'd *also* be correct, because, when Paul says this, he quotes Jesus—it's just not a teaching that got recorded in the 4 Gospels. So, as long as you voted, you get a 100%. *Everybody gets a trophy today!*
 - Here's the context of this quote: in Acts 20, Paul is bidding farewell to the leaders of the church in Ephesus. At the end, he says: **“You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”** (Acts 20:34-35) There you have it!
- That was a fun way of getting us to our theme: today's the last day of “First Things First”—*First Steps, First Call, First Priority, First Love*, and finally, *First Fruit*. The big question is: *Are we giving God our first and our best, or just leftovers?* Once again, this is not a sermon about tithing. But we will *talk about tithing*. This is not a sermon about money. But we will *talk about money*—and *stewardship* overall. Really, this about *our response to what God has given*.
- Today, we're looking at Genesis 4. By this point in the Bible, there have already been lots of firsts: God's *first acts of Creation*, the *first Humans*, the *first sin*. In Gen. 4, the next generation comes along with Cain and Abel and we get 2 more firsts: the *first formal act of worship*... and... *the first murder*. All in one story. *This is definitely life after the fall*. Gen. 4 says:
 - **“Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.’”** (Gen. 4:2b-7)
 - Spoiler alert: Cain doesn't listen. He *murders* his brother Abel in cold blood out in the fields. Brother against brother. The *first murder*. Such an interesting, strange, tragic story. So many questions we could ask. One of the biggest questions is: *what exactly caused God to look favorably on Abel's offering, but not Cain's?* While there are hints, there's no direct answer in Gen. 4. But if we look at all that the rest of the Bible teaches about God's character, about stewardship, and the priority of giving, we can pretty clearly *infer* what's going on in this story.

- **A Brief History of Giving...**

- So, what does the Bible teach us about God's heart for giving? Why do we give, how do we give, what do we give? Let's take a journey. Consider this: when we think about worship, we probably think of music, prayer, preaching. All very important. But in biblical times, when *they* thought of worship, they probably thought first of *bringing an offering to God*. When someone worshipped the Lord, often they built an altar, and offered a sacrifice. The Old Testament is full of practices, celebrations, rules and regulations for this. Here's a powerful example from Deuteronomy:
“Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before the Lord emptyhanded: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.” (Deut. 16:16-17)

- As far as we can tell, before sin entered the story and humans got kicked out of the Garden of Eden, there was no prescription for offerings or sacrifices. Why? Because it wasn't needed: humans lived in perfect communion with God, there was nothing between us. They could freely receive all God's gifts with complete awareness that *everything was from God* and they were *totally dependent on Him*. In other words, *everything was worship*. Once that relationship was broken and we left the Garden, we forgot who all of this is for and where all of it comes from. We started to live for ourselves, by ourselves.
 - Think about this: in the garden, we opened our hands and freely received everything from God. No lack, no need, just gift and blessing. Then, people *reached out and took the one thing God told them not to take*. We grasped for life on our own terms, to go our own way, to be our own masters. And we lost that Garden, we lost paradise with God. And ever since then, our first move back toward God always involved *giving something back*—an offering, a sacrifice.
 - God commands His people to bring Him offerings not because *He needs it*; He's the Creator, it's already His! *We're the ones that need reminded: I am not my own; all I have, all I am, all I depend on—God is the Source*. All the different ways people gave offerings were ways of putting that faith into tangible, personal action.
- The different forms of *giving offerings* commanded in the Old Testament served many purposes: these gifts gave worshippers the opportunity to remember their relationship with God and where everything comes from. They allowed people to experience God's forgiveness and foreshadowed the *ultimate sacrifice* Christ would bring for our redemption. They provided for the priests and all the ministry that took place. And they provided for the needy in their communities.
 - There were offerings for sin and atonement, offerings for thanks and praise, offerings from herds and flocks, from crops, oil, and other resources. Tithes (or 10%), free-will offerings, first-fruits offerings. But they all shared a common theme: God wouldn't allow them to give the *leftovers*, or the *throw-away's*—the things they didn't want or need. He always asked them to give their *first* and their *best* as an offering to Him. *Why? Is God mean? Is He greedy? Certainly not.*
- Put yourself in their shoes and think about what this was like: You're a farmer, a herder. You live off the land. Your survival, and your *entire household*, depends on that crop, that flock, that land. You work night and day to tend it. By the sweat of your brow, you cultivate the soil, plant the seed, or tend the herd, fend off predators, wait out storms and droughts, watch anxiously as it all grows until it's *finally harvest time*. Out of Eden, it's *easy to think all this is up to you*. And it's literally *life and death*. There is no plan B—you can't quit your job and work as a banker. You can't stock up at Costco if your produce doesn't deliver. *This is all you live on*.
 - But God says to you: *I want you to take the first-born of all your flocks, I want you to take the first fruits of all your crops, I want you to take a 10th of all that you live on—whatever you live on—and I want you to give it back to me as an offering. It can't be what you have left-over, it can't be the duds that you were going to scrap. I want the best and the first of your yield*. It's the same with your time, God says: *I want you to give me one full day out of every 7*—that's 52 days a year, 15% of your productivity! And God says, *Trust that with me, less is more*. This all sounds *crazy!* It's like, *agricultural suicide*. Who in their right mind would think that's a way to live? But this is how God wants His people to live, with a *First Fruits* kind of life.
- Because here's what happens when you obey this: you are literally *trusting God with your life*. I give the first and the best of my yield, whatever I live on, and in so doing, *I now rely on God to take care of all the rest*. I give a *portion* of what He gave me, and in surrendering a *part*, I'm realizing that the *whole* depends on Him. I'm locating my source of life in its proper Place: *God*, the Creator, the Giver of all. I'm reversing the move that took us out of the garden: instead of taking what's not mine to have, I'm giving back what God first gave. And I'm taking the harvest of what I've sown, and *sowing back it into God's Kingdom*.
- This is the model God gives us to live by. And it's the secret to a life of peace, freedom and abundance in a world that lives in a mindset of *fear and scarcity*. Listen to some of the incredible things God says about giving in the Scriptures:

- **“Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” (Prov. 3:9-10)**
- **“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard...if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry...then your light will rise in the darkness...” (Isa. 58:6-10)**
- In the New Testament, Jesus said, **“Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.” (Luke 6:38 MSG)**
- The early church in Acts lived this out in radical ways: **“God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.” (Acts 4:33b-35)**
- Romans 12 takes it to the highest level: **“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”** We shared the Message translation a few weeks ago: **“...Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.” (Rom. 12:1)**
- *This is not a sermon about tithing.* This is a way of life. It’s not just money, it’s how we rust God with everything. We’re not owners, we’re stewards. Our time, talents, treasures. But we don’t give in order to *earn God’s love and favor*—we give as a *joyful response* to all God has already given—because *He’s given everything!*
- **More Than Just Leftovers**
 - The big temptation is to treat this as an afterthought or an optional choice. To put it off until it’s easier. Imagine these 10 blocks are your resources. Let’s say this represents your finances. Here’s what we often do: *this goes to that bill, can’t miss that payment. Groceries, need food. I need this for some leisure time, entertainment. Don’t forget the car payment. Vacation fund. Got to save for retirement. Now, let’s see...what’s left? Can I give this to God? Oh no, electric went up! Well, here’s something, Lord. Maybe next month I’ll have more leftover.*
 - How do you think God regards that sacrifice? Often, there’s never any left to even give. What about how we steward our time, our schedule? Our family? Our bodies? Do you get it?
 - I think this must have had something to do with Cain’s approach, note the wording: **“In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.” (Gen 4:3)** It’s the difference between the *leftovers*, an *afterthought*, and the *firstborn*, the *best*.
 - What does it look like when we live the *first fruits* principle? *God, all I have is yours, you deserve my first and best. I’m not going to wait until I have all my ducks in a row—they probably never will be! Before I do anything else, I’m asking, Lord, what do you want me to give for this month, this season? I’ll give what you ask and trust you with the rest. Use my life for your glory, use this to strengthen your church, help the needy, build your Kingdom. I’m not my own, I’m yours.*
 - Do you see the difference? Do you think God sees the difference? Can you imagine if an entire church *actually* followed through with this? What would happen in our lives, our families, our church, our *whole community* if we all lived with the priority of *first fruits* in all things?
 - Peter Drucker, a management guru from the 20th century, once said: **“Tell me what you value and I might believe you, but show me your calendar and your bank statement, and I’ll show you what you really value.”** Ouch.
 - What is your next step from here? Do you need to go into your prayer closet with your calendar and? *God, I want you to have my first and my best, help me figure out everything that’s left.* Do you need to take your budget and pray? *God, you deserve the firstfruits of my life, how are you calling me to give?* Listen, the management of our lives—our *stewardship*—is not a peripheral

issue, it's a *core issue* of our discipleship—because it's the *actual stuff* that makes up our daily lives, so don't you think Jesus cares about it?

- I know when we start talking about how we manage our lives, it can be a source of pain and strife. I know some of us feel like we're drowning in our schedules, or our finances are out of control, or we've come on hard times and feel totally stuck. The Way of Jesus does not *add crushing burdens to peoples' lives who are already burdened*—the way of Jesus brings *freedom and peace* to the hopeless. You know where you are with the Lord: if you're in a season of strife, don't strive more, *surrender and trust Him*. He'll get you through! But let Him search you and lead you, down to the most practical stuff of your life.
- I'm not asking you today to follow a rule or law, to reach some amount, or add some activity. *I'm asking you to make a heart shift* and instead of *making your plans then* seeing what room you have left for God, *put everything back on the table and start with God*. Ask Him what He wants you to do with it *first*, and watch Him move! You will see miracles if you give your first fruits.
- All of this boils down to one simple fact: *God gave first. God gave best. And no matter what we give, we'll never out-give God!* When we were desperate and lost, when all we'd given Him was our sin and rebellion, *He gave us His first and best: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)* *God gave*. You know, the New Testament uses the metaphor of *first fruits* to refer to *Jesus and His resurrection*. He gave *first*, and *best*. All we get to do is *respond*.
- *This is not a sermon about tithing...*It's about your *heart*, and your *whole life*. So, how will you respond? What's God calling you to today? As we pray and reflect on that, this is the perfect setup to guide us to the Lord's Table, where we receive *His greatest gift*. *Let's pray...*