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Session 3 Leader Guide

Read

The principle of first emerges throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. When we give the first to God, we put God first in our life. Exodus 13:2 very clearly illustrates this principle. In this passage, God says, "Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine." God plainly declares that the firstborn is "Mine." It belongs to Him. In fact, sixteen times in Scripture, God declares that the first-born is His! For example, Exodus 13:12, 13 says:

That you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD's. But every firstborn of every donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem (NKJV).

According to Old Testament Law, the firstborn was to be either sacrificed or redeemed. This principle is critical. No third option existed. Every time the Israelites' livestock animals delivered their firstborn, they were to sacrifice it. If it was designated an unclean animal (a donkey, for example), the Israelites had to redeem it with a clean, spotless lamb. To summarize, the Israelites had to sacrifice the clean firstborn, and the unclean firstborn had to be redeemed.

With that principle in mind, think about the account of John the Baptist meeting Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River. One day, John was baptizing people, and he looked up to see Jesus walking toward him. At that point, John cried out, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

With that inspired declaration, John perfectly defined the role Jesus had come to fulfill. Jesus was God's firstborn. Jesus was clean-perfect and unblemished in every way. On the other hand, every other human was born unclean. We were all born sinners with a fully active sin nature. If you're a parent, think about your children. You don't have to teach them to do wrong things-they naturally do wrong things. Instead, you have to teach them how to be good. All of us were born unclean, and with a sin nature.

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Now think back to the principle of the firstborn in Exodus. The Law stated that if the firstborn animal were clean, the Israelites should sacrifice it. But if the firstborn were unclean, they should redeem it with a clean animal. Do you see the symbolic parallel? Jesus Christ was God's spotless Lamb. But every one of us was born unclean; therefore, Jesus was sacrificed to redeem us.

When Jesus redeemed us by His sacrifice, He bought us back for God. Jesus was actually a first fruits offering. In reality, Jesus was God's tithe. Is it any wonder that the tithe is such a serious and holy thing to God? God gave His tithe - Jesus - in faith before we ever believed. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (NKJV).

We have to give our first fruits offering-our tithe-in much the same way. Before we see the blessing of God, we must give it in faith. Before we know if we're going to have any "month left over at the end of our money," we give in faith and trust. It is not the act of giving ten percent that God blesses-God blesses our faith. It takes faith to give the firstfruits. It doesn't take faith to give the leftovers. When a firstborn lamb is birthed into a flock, it is not possible to know how many more lambs that ewe will produce. God didn't instruct the Israelites to take one out of every ten lambs born, but rather, to give the first lamb. It is an act of faith.

It always requires faith to give the first to God. That's why so few Christians experience the blessings of tithing. It requires giving to God before you see if you're going to have enough. By tithing, it is as if we are saying to God, "I recognize You first. I am putting You first in my life, and I trust You to take care of the rest of the things in my life." As with most matters in the Christian life, it comes down to the attitude of our hearts. The question is, "Do I trust God enough to give the first part to Him?"

We give God our first fruits because God is first in creation. In fact, God cannot be second. When you study the attributes of God, you will realize that God is omniscient. He knows everything and cannot have thoughts like we have. We think to figure things out. God never figures anything out, because He already knows the answer. In the same way, God is immutable: He cannot change. If God could change, He could improve. God cannot improve because He is already perfect. When you study the attributes of God, you will discover that God cannot be second. God can only be first.

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In Genesis 4:3-4, God honored Abel's offering but not Cain's. The reason is because Abel's offering was from the firstborn of his flock; however, Cain's offering was not from his firstfruits. The Bible says, "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. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering" (NKJV, emphasis added). God could not respect Cain's offering because it was not his first. God can only be first, He cannot accept second.

Proverbs 3:9-10 says that we are to honor the Lord with our possessions and with the firstfruits of all our increase. When we honor Him in this way, we invite God's blessing into our lives, and "your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow." Many blessings go along with tithing, but it is the principle of faith and putting God first that initiates these blessings. The first portion, the tithe, is the portion that redeems the rest. God does not desire a legalistic, begrudging response. He desires for us to submit our hearts to Him in joy and in the faith that His principles are true.

When you put God first in your life and honor Him with your tithe, it is a witness to your family. There is a powerful verse in Exodus 13:8 which says, "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt'" (NKJV). When your children see you honor God, and they ask you why you tithe, you have the opportunity to tell them how you were a slave, lost and dead in sin; and then Jesus, God's tithe, came and redeemed you. With a grateful heart, you can explain: "This is why I put God first in my life."

Discussion

1. What are some of the attributes of God that make you feel the most reverent or in awe of who He is? Does it make it easier or harder for you to honor God with your firstfruits when you take time to think about His attributes?
2. What types of fears or concerns do you wrestle with most when thinking about the principle of first? Why is it sometimes easier to believe we are saved by faith than it is to believe, by faith, that God will bless us and take care of our needs?
3. God accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's because Abel gave his as a firstfruits offering, and Cain did not. If you have started tithing by faith, how does this principle affect when and how you tithe? In what way does the timing stretch your faith?

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4. "There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty" (Proverbs 11:24). God makes sure that any first thing given to Him is never lost. But as this verse in Proverbs reminds us, what we unjustly withhold from God, we will lose. In what ways have you seen this principle at work in your life or in the life of someone close to you?
5. Every time we are paid, an inescapable moment of "worship" immediately follows. The first place to which we direct a portion of that money reveals something about what is "first" in our lives. What kinds of financial things are most likely to compete for "first place" in your heart?