

The Law of First Things

July 17, 2005

1 Kings 17:10-16 (Living)

So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the city he saw a widow gathering sticks; and he asked her for a cup of water.

[11] As she was going to get it, he called to her, "Bring me a bite of bread too."

[12] But she said, "I swear by the Lord your God that I haven't a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jar. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I must die of starvation."

[13] But Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid! Go ahead and cook that 'last meal,' **but bake me a little loaf of bread first**; and afterwards there will still be enough food for you and your son. [14] For the Lord God of Israel says that there will always be plenty of flour and oil left in your containers until the time when the Lord sends rain and the crops grow again!"

[15] So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her son continued to eat from her supply of flour and oil as long as it was needed. [16] For no matter how much they used, there was always plenty left in the containers, just as the Lord had promised through Elijah!

Last Monday Carl Henriques dropped by my office and said that he believed that the Lord had prompted him to come by and give me an idea for a sermon. He said he believes that the people of Elim need to be reminded that God must have first place in their lives. It was a confirmation to me because God had been prompting me to preach on the subject of the law of first things but I was hesitant to do it because I spoke on this subject about a year ago. But after Carl came by, I was sure that God wants me to speak about it again.

I read to you the story of Elijah going to a poor widow's house and asking her to cook a meal for him. I thought about how cruel and unreasonable Elijah's request appears to be. The poor woman only had enough flour left to bake a few pieces of bread. That's all she had for her and her son to eat and there was absolutely nothing more. She had already decided that when they ate that bread they would die of starvation. There simply was nothing else for her to use for food.

What does Elijah tell her to do? He says, “Go ahead and cook that last meal, but bake me a little loaf first.”

That sounds like a man who only cares for himself. You talk about selfishness! That is it!

But wait a minute. Elijah was not being selfish. He was telling her to practice **God’s law of first things**.

Elijah was God’s prophet. He knew something that the widow did not know. He knew that God had established a law that required His people to give Him **the first portion** and when they did, He would supply their needs.

He told her that if she would give God the first portion of bread....afterwards there would still be enough food for her and her son. And He said.... the Lord God of Israel would see to it that she always had plenty of flour and oil left in her containers until He sent rain and the crops grew again!"

The Bible is God’s book! It gives certain principles that are timeless. They always remain the same. They were true when the Bible was written and they are true today.

One of those principles is what I want to talk to you about today. It is called **The Law Of First Things**.

The first belongs to God.

The word **firstfruits** occurs **32 times** in the Bible and each and every time God says that the it belongs to Him.

Exodus 23:19 (NKJV)

The first of the **firstfruits** of your land you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.

Exodus 34:26 (NKJV)

The first of the **firstfruits** of your land you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God.

Numbers 18:12 (NKJV)

All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and the grain, their **firstfruits** which they offer to the Lord, I have given them to you.

Proverbs 3:9 (NKJV)

Honor the Lord with your possessions,
And with the **firstfruits** of all your increase;

The Law of First Things is God's law that requires that His followers give to Him the firstfruits as an offering in faith, proving that God is first in their lives.

In the Old Testament the law required that the **firstborn** of the animals and the **firstfruits** of the crops be given as an offering to God.

Exodus 34:19-20 (NKJV)

All that open the womb are Mine, and every male **firstborn** among your livestock, whether ox or sheep. [20] But the **firstborn** of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. **And none shall appear before Me empty-handed.**

God established a system of sacrifices in the Old Testament. There were five animals that He classified as clean animals and that He would accept as a sacrifice. They were oxen, goats, sheep, pigeons and turtledoves. Wealthy people would sacrifice oxen and poor people would sacrifice turtledoves or whatever they could afford.

Most of the Israelites raised sheep so the most common sacrifice was a lamb.

A **firstborn clean animal** had to be offered to the Lord. It was called "**The Devoted Thing**".

"**Devoted**" means "The irrevocable giving over to the Lord, not to be taken back again".

Leviticus 27:26-28 (NKJV)

'But the firstborn of the animals, which should be the Lord's firstborn, no man shall dedicate; whether it is an ox or sheep, it is the Lord's. [27] And if

it is an unclean animal, then he shall redeem it according to your valuation, and shall add one-fifth to it; or if it is not redeemed, then it shall be sold according to your valuation.

[28] Nevertheless no **devoted** offering..... shall be sold or redeemed; **every devoted offering is most holy to the Lord.**

Verse 26 is a little confusing. What it means is that the firstborn clean animal could not be dedicated for any other type of sacrifice. It had to be destroyed by fire as a **tithe offering**. It was not acceptable to dedicate a firstborn lamb as a **sin offering**.

Also, God did not allow the substitution of a firstborn clean animal. If it was the firstborn and one of the clean animals, it had to be given as a sacrifice to the Lord. It had to die. It was "**cherem**". "**Cherem**" is a Hebrew word that means "It is doomed for destruction".

What about the firstborn unclean animals such as a donkey?

God gives us the answer.

Leviticus 27:27a (NKJV)

And if it is an **unclean animal**, then he shall **redeem** it according to your valuation....

"**Redeem**" means to "buy back by replacing with an acceptable substitute".

So an Israelite could redeem a donkey by substituting a clean animal for it.

But what if he had an unclean first animal but didn't have an acceptable substitute with which to redeem it?

Exodus 13:13 (NKJV)

But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, **then you shall break its neck.**

You say, "What is that all about"?

"Why would God require the donkey to be killed simply because the person owning it refused to redeem it?"

Because it is the firstborn and therefore it belongs to God. And if the person who has it refuses to acknowledge that it belongs to God it becomes a curse to that person. By breaking the donkey's neck the Israelites were taking a stand against the curse and with their actions saying, "It is better to break its neck than to disobey God. If I do not give to God what is rightfully His, I will bring a curse upon my life, and I cannot afford to do that!"

Exodus 13:13 (NKJV)

But every firstborn of a 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.**

God required the first of everything. When a couple had their first son, he belonged to God. In order to redeem the life of that child, a lamb had to be offered as a substitute. If this wasn't done, the child had to be dedicated to the Lord and left at the synagogue.

God required the first of everything. And if it wasn't the first, it did not even count as being given!

To human reasoning that doesn't make any sense. Why should it matter if it's the first or not? I mean, if I have a whole flock of sheep, why not give Him a big fat woolly one or the one with the biggest horns or the one that won the contest at the county fair? No! God said, **"I want the first one. I don't care if it's frail or the runt of the litter. If it's the first, then it's mine."**

Why is giving the first thing so important to the Lord?

The Israelites could have thought, "If He's the Lord, He doesn't need my sheep! He doesn't need my kids! He doesn't need my money! He's God! He made it all! **Why does He require me to give the first back to Him?"**

The reason is simple. He wants to remind us that He must hold the first position in our lives. He cannot fill any other place you choose to give Him. It is impossible for God to become second or third. He is the Lord, God, Almighty and because of who He is, He demands first place.

If He's not Lord of all He's not Lord at all!

When the Israelites finally entered into the land that God had promised them, the first city they encountered was Jericho. Therefore it belonged to God.

Notice what God said to Joshua.....

Joshua 6:17-19 (NKJV)

Now the city shall be doomed by the Lord to destruction, it and all who are in it. Only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. **[18] And you, by all means abstain from the accursed things, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it.** [19] But all the silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are consecrated to the Lord; they shall come into the treasury of the Lord."

Jericho was the first city they conquered and therefore it belonged to God and was doomed for destruction. It was "**cherem**". It was accursed. God warned them to by all means abstain from the accursed things.

"Whatever you do", God said, "Don't keep any of it for yourself because if you do, you will become accursed. And not only that, but you will cause the whole camp of Israel to become accursed."

One guy heard what God said but he didn't believe it and so he keep some of the stuff for himself.

He took a beautiful Babylonian garment, two-hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels and he hid it in his tent.

God gave the Israelites a great victory at Jericho. But when they went to the next town that was called Ai, which was a very small place and the Israelites should have had no problem in capturing it, they were defeated.

Joshua fell on his face before the Lord and said, "What's going on Lord. Why has this happened?"

Joshua 7:10-11 (NKJV)

So the Lord said to Joshua: "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? [11] Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff.

[12] Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you. [13] Get up, sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, because thus says the Lord God of Israel: "There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you."

God would not tolerate a violation of His law.

Jericho was the first city they encountered. Therefore it was designated as a devoted thing to God. God had spent many, many years teaching them the Law Of First Things. Every one of them should have understood it. They should have known that Jericho was just the first. There would be many more to come and they would be blessed with all of the spoils. But they could not enjoy the blessings that God planned to give them until they dealt with what Achan had done.

Now, let's bring this right down to where we live today. The principle is still the same. The first fruits still belong to God. We don't raise sheep and oxen. We work at a job and we receive a paycheck for what we do. **Our responsibility is to give to God the first ten percent of our pay. It belongs to Him. It is the devoted thing.**

When we keep it for ourselves, we are taking what belongs to God.

The most powerful scripture in the Bible concerning this is found in the Book of Malachi.

Malachi 3:6-11 (NKJV)

"For I am the Lord, I do not change;

Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.
[7] Yet from the days of your fathers
You have gone away from My ordinances
And have not kept them.
Return to Me, and I will return to you,"
Says the Lord of hosts.
"But you said,
'In what way shall we return?'

[8] "Will a man rob God?
Yet you have robbed Me!
But you say,
'In what way have we robbed You?'
In tithes and offerings.

[9] You are cursed with a curse,
For you have robbed Me,
Even this whole nation.

[10] Bring all the tithes into the storehouse,

That there may be food in My house,
And try Me now in this,"
Says the Lord of hosts,
"If I will not open for you the windows of heaven
And pour out for you such blessing
That there will not be room enough to receive it.

[11] "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes,
So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground,
Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field,"
Says the Lord of hosts;

When we take the tithe and use it ourselves, we bring a curse upon ourselves. You say, Pastor Ron, that's Old Testament. That doesn't apply to us."

Let me read verse 6 to you again....."**For I am the Lord, I do not change;**

The principles in the Word of God do not change. If He required His people in the Old Testament to give Him the tithe, He requires us to give Him the tithe today. The tithe is to be brought into the storehouse. The storehouse is the local church where the Lord has put you to serve Him.

The good news is He promises to do some wonderful things for us when we are obedient. He says He will open the windows of heaven and pour out such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And on top of that He promises to rebuke the devourer.

That's an awesome promise.

I'm not through with this message. I am going to continue it next week. God demands first place in your life. This applies to every area of your life.

But for today, I want you to understand that the key is to give the first fruits to God.

That means that when you get your paycheck, the first check you write is your tithe. When you do that, you have demonstrated that God is first in your finances and you have released His financial blessings into your life.

Give invitation!