

Vision 20/20

*“Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?”
(Matthew 21:42 ESV)*

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”
(Matthew 25:13 ESV)*

Give

November 17th, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-15

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Introduction:

Good morning church! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 26.

We’re nearing the end of our vision 2020 series and in these final weeks we are asking the question: What can YOU do to further this mission. Today, we’re going to tackle the answer that is the most obvious but also perhaps the most controversial. If you want to support the mission of this church, then you need to give.

Some of you brought guests this morning and you’re starting to sweat a little, but I brought more guests than any of you today so let’s just take a deep breath together. Perhaps it would disarm us a little bit if we addressed the elephant in the room right away.

Why is this so awkward? It’s awkward because there are churches and church leaders who take advantage of the poor. There are some crooks standing behind pulpits. I wish it weren’t true, but it is. The Bible warns us about wicked, deceitful men who will weasel their way into church leadership and it reminds us that God will hold them accountable. Peter said of them:

And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2 Peter 2:3 ESV)

Therefore, in one way, the suspicion that you might be feeling this morning isn’t entirely wrong. You SHOULD be asking: “What are the motives of this teacher? Is this the kind of leader that Peter was warning us about?” And if you determine that the leadership here IS that kind of leadership, then you should warn us of our sin and then you should find a church with leadership that you can trust.

But I hope that we have earned your trust. If you’re visiting with us this morning, I hope the fact that everyone is not standing up and walking out right now will enable you to put your guard down for the next 35 minutes to hear what God’s Word says.

This morning, we're going to root ourselves in Deuteronomy 26:1-15. But before we do that, I want to take a moment to think about how we as New Testament believers ought to relate to the Old Testament. In order to rightly appreciate and apply our text this morning, I think it would be helpful to quickly answer one question:

What Are The Main Differences As We Move From The Old To The New Testament?

We're not going to navigate through ALL of the differences this morning because we simply don't have the time. You'll notice, for example, that we didn't sacrifice any sheep in our worship service this morning. That's a pretty noticeable divergence from Old Testament worship and it is because Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sacrificial system is fulfilled in him.

So that's a significant difference, and there are many more, to be sure, but today I want to highlight two changes in particular that will influence the way in which we study our text this morning.

First, I think it would be helpful to recognize that:

1. In the New Testament we have a better helper

In his letter to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul wrote:

²⁴ So then, the law was our **guardian** until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Galatians 3:24-26 ESV)

Paul is saying here that the Law is GOOD, but that what we have now is BETTER. The law was like a nanny for the Israelites – it clearly communicated the harm that would result if the Israelites broke the rules. But as you read the Old Testament you discover that simply being AWARE of the danger was not enough. The Israelites still slipped past the nanny and into harm because they WANTED what was out of bounds. Their hearts gravitated toward sin like a magnet. The guardian was helpful, but it wasn't enough. They needed a new heart. And THANKS BE TO GOD that's EXACTLY what we have received in the New Covenant!

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33 ESV)

On this side of the cross, we have been given a better Helper. The Holy Spirit – God HIMSELF – dwells in us and He has written the law upon our hearts. If you are in Christ, you will increasingly WANT to obey. The Scottish puritan Ralph Erskine wrote:

To run, to work, the law commands,
The gospel gives me feet and hands.
The one requires that I obey,
The other does the power convey.¹

¹ Ralph Erskine, Gospel Sonnets or Spiritual Songs (Edinburgh: John Pryde, 1870), 288-89.

Isn't that beautiful? That's an important difference and it means that, as we see the response of the Israelites in our text this morning, we should expect an even GREATER response in our hearts, because our response is helped by the Spirit of God working in us.

The second difference we need to bear in mind is that:

2. In the New Testament we have more to be thankful for

We're going to flesh this out as we study the text, but this is perhaps the difference that should most impact our reading today. The Israelites were delivered from Egypt, but we have been delivered from death and hell! The Israelites saw the overthrow of Pharaoh, but we have witnessed the death blow to the devil! The Israelites inherited the Promised Land, but we have inherited everlasting life! Therefore, if God calls them to respond to their salvation with gratitude and generosity then HOW MUCH MORE should we respond to the mercy that we have received today with gratitude and generosity?!

We have dealt with this question off the top because I want you to in a sense put on your "Jesus glasses" as we read our passage. I want you to try and read it through the lens of the cross so that we can fairly consider how this text ought to inform our lives today. So, put those glasses on and look with me at Deuteronomy 26:1-15. Hear now God's holy, inspired, living and active word to us today:

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. ³ And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.' ⁴ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God.

⁵ "And you shall make response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹ And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.' And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. ¹¹ And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

¹² "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled, ¹³ then you shall say before the Lord your God, '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. ¹⁴ I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God. I have done according to all that you have commanded me. ¹⁵ Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.' (Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This morning I want to look at this text and ask the question:

Why Do God's People Give?

First of all, we learn in today's text that God's people give:

1. To respond to the grace that we have received

Look again at verse 1:

When you come into the land **that the Lord your God is giving you** for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land **that the Lord your God is giving you**, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. (Deuteronomy 26:1-2 ESV)

Do you see what Moses is saying here? The Israelites didn't come to possess the land because of their might or their ingenuity. They were going to possess the land for one reason: God GAVE it to them.

As I read that text, all I could hear in my head was Ephesians 2 saying:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And **this is not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, ⁹ **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)

Do you see the parallel? Old Testament and New, God's people are supposed to look at their salvation and see that it was ALL A WORK OF GOD!

Therefore, when the land produced fruit for the Israelites, they were to respond with an offering of gratitude and worship. Because they didn't earn the land. It was given to them.

And to further inspire a spirit of gratitude, as they gave their gift, they were to recite their history. That's what we see in verses 5-8. All of that talk about a wandering Aramean and Pharaoh was a recap of Israel's history. The "wandering Aramean" was Israel. He and his sons moved to Egypt during the years of famine under Joseph's rule and they became a numerous people. Eventually, another Pharaoh came to power and he realized the Israelites were so numerous that they could overthrow the Egyptians if they wanted to, so he subjected them to slavery.

The slavery that the Israelites experienced in Egypt was brutal. They were routinely whipped and beaten. In their affliction, they cried out to God.

And He heard them.

And He saved them.

Because He is a faithful God, and His faithfulness even extends to powerless slaves in Egypt.

As the Israelites approached the altar, there was to be a tangible buzz in the air of thankful people saying: "I was a slave, but GOD SET ME FREE!"

We give to respond.

That was true in the Old Testament, and that remains true for us today. There are a number of places that we could turn for an example of New Testament giving, but today let's look at Acts 4:

³³ And with great power the apostles were **giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus**, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:33-35 ESV)

Acts 4 paints a picture of the early church's generosity, and look at the grace that fuelled it! Their gratitude was a response to the preaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ! On this side of the cross, we are called to respond to the life-altering reality that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that three days later he rose again and that THROUGH Christ we can be set free from the power of sin and death FOREVER!

Ephesians 2:1 says:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 ESV)

That's who we were without Jesus. The Israelites were slaves, but do you know what's worse than being a slave? Being DEAD!

But in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been made alive again! Therefore, we RESPOND! And one of the ways that we respond is through our generous giving. Our giving ought to say something to the world about how thankful we are for this salvation. I hope that there are some auditors in Canada who go home thinking: "Man, those Christians really love their God."

In the same way that the Israelites recounted the Exodus story when they brought their first fruits for the offering, I wish we had a habit of recounting the Gospel as we passed around the offering plate. I think that would be a helpful addition to our liturgy.

Can you imagine? The offering plate comes to the guy sitting next to you and he shouts out: "I was an addict who hated God and I was on the road to hell, but JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS FOR MY SINS AND NOW I'M FREE!" And then he slaps down his offering envelope to the next lady and she shouts: "I was a slanderer and a gossip and I was dead in my sins but JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS FOR MY SINS AND NOW I'M ALIVE!" and then she slaps down her envelope.

I just think that would be a good addition to our services.

We give to respond.

Second, God's people give:

2. To minister in word and deed

That's what we find in verse 12:

When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled (Deuteronomy 26:12 ESV)

Where does the tithe go? It goes to support the Levite who then supports the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow.

The tribe of Levi was set apart to tend to the tabernacle and to lead God's people in worship. Unlike the rest of the tribes of Israel who were allotted plots of land in Canaan, the Levites did not receive an inheritance. They were not to live off of the land but, instead, they were to serve as priests and to live off of the offerings that were brought to the tabernacle.

Therefore, when God's people brought their offerings to the priests, a portion would be set apart for the livelihood of the priests. This same principle carries forward into the New Testament. Even though we are now a kingdom of priests, we still set people apart to devote themselves to the teaching and to the leadership of the people of God. In 1 Timothy 5, we read:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18 ESV)

Same principle. Old Testament and New, when we give, part of that giving supports ministry. It supports the ministry of the Word locally, and it also supports the ministry of the Word globally. The Apostle Paul encouraged the church in Philippi for their giving when he said:

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. (Philippians 4:15-16 ESV)

Paul said, "Your giving is supporting the ministry of the Word in Macedonia and Thessalonica, and I want to commend you in that because that's exactly what you SHOULD be doing."

Practically speaking, this is why 20% of our budget goes toward local and global missions. 20% of our giving supports ministry in South Africa, India, Ireland, the Dominican Republic, Albania, Newfoundland and ministries right here in the city of Orillia. That also means that the more we give, the more we can send. Your giving MATTERS for ministry.

But that's only a portion of what our giving is used for. Moses also tells us that our giving should support the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. A big part of our ministry is mercy.

The more we give, the more mercy we can extend. In the Old Testament, God's people brought their giving to the Levites so that it would be administered to those who were in need. In the New Testament, God's people bring their giving to the church for the elders to distribute it. We saw a glimpse of that in Acts 4, didn't we? Let's look at that again:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ **and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.** (Acts 4:34-35 ESV)

God's people gave generously, and the leaders of the church then distributed those funds to those who were in need. This suggests of course that there needs to be a culture of trust in the church. We talked about that off the top.

This is why our budget is an open book. We have our annual general meeting and we give you our books well in advance. We expect you as members to look through that with a fine-tooth comb. We expect you to correct us if we're missing the mark in our stewardship. This is also why we bring in an outside auditor every year to inspect our budget and to correct us when necessary. Every dollar needs to be accounted for. This is also why the paid staff at the church have no vote on the finances. We don't handle the money. You vote lay elders in and one of their primary responsibilities is to oversee the budget. And they do an AWESOME JOB! The unbiased auditors agree.

In a culture of distrust, we have put a number of policies in place because we don't want the sins of some outside charlatans to hinder the ministry that we are responsible for here. The more we give, the more we can minister.

Finally, our text today teaches us that God's people give:

3. To invite God's blessing

Now, this is where I expect to see some suspicious looks and some furrowed brows. This teaching is often abused but the misuse of a thing doesn't negate a thing. Look again at our text. Listen to verses 13-15:

¹³ then you shall say before the Lord your God, '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. ¹⁴ I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God. I have done according to all that you have commanded me. ¹⁵ **Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.'** (Deuteronomy 26:13-15 ESV)

Let's remember that this text is God's instruction for his people – meaning, this text isn't describing what the Israelites said of their own volition – this text is PRESCRIBING what God COMMANDED them to say!

God told his people: "After you bring that offering to me, you check your heart. You look back on your motives and determine whether or not they were in the right place. You look back on your giving and determine whether it was a faithful reflection of what I deserve. And then, you invite me to bless you and to bless your land because THAT IS WHAT I LOVE TO DO."

We find this same principle in the book of Malachi:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. (Malachi 3:10 ESV)

Do you see that? SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS! The God of the Universe invites us to put Him to the test. He says: "Worship me with your wealth and see if you are the poorer for it."

There is blessing in obedience.

Now, where we often go wrong in this is, we assume that the "blessing" we will receive will inevitably be more money. That's what the charlatan says on the T.V. when he tries to lure those living in poverty into sending him some more money to pay for his private jet.

But the text doesn't say that the blessing will be wealth.

And that's really good news because the older I get, the more I realize that wealth is not what I need. Sometimes, I think the blessing of giving is that it forces you to right size your spending allowance. God knows what my soul needs, and I think that one of the blessings of giving generously to Him is it keeps me from living a life of self-indulgence. I would bet that there are probably some folks here today who – if they really wanted to give generously to the Lord's work – would need to scale back on the fishing trips, or the sport commitments, or the home renovations – and your faith, your family and your marriage would probably be better for it.

I'll stop right there because I mentioned off the top that we shouldn't assume that we know what the blessings are that God has for us. I shouldn't pretend that my guess is any more valid than yours. But what I can say with the authority of God's Word is this: When we give to the Lord, we invite REAL, TANGIBLE blessing into our lives. When we put Him first – even in our budget – we position ourselves to receive the blessings that He has for us. Jesus said something very similar:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
(Matthew 6:33 ESV)

In the Old Testament and the New, God's people give to respond to His tremendous grace. God's people give to contribute to the ministry of the Word and the ministry of mercy. And God's people give because they know that there is BLESSING in it. Therefore, if we are going to be as fruitful and as faithful and as BLESSED as we desire to be in this church, then we need to give.

Because He's worthy. And because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.