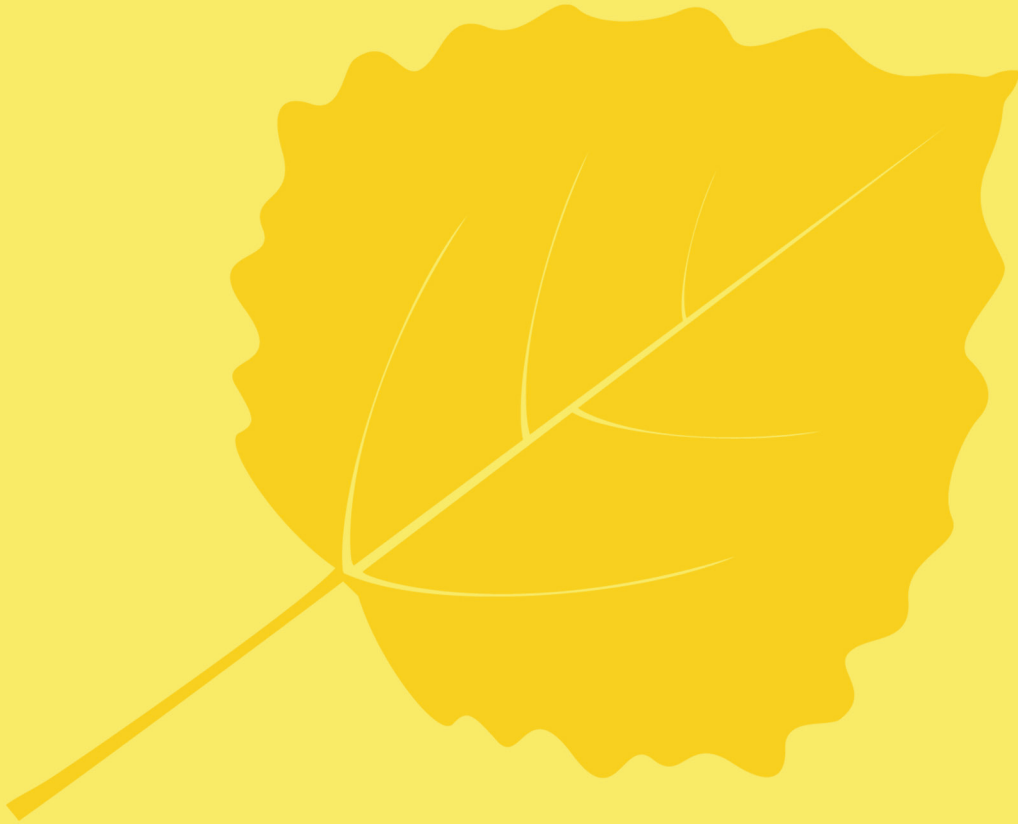


1stTHINGS1st



What's really in first place in our lives? We say God is first, but our schedules, commitments and finances tell another story. Setting God in the highest place is not just right, it's good! When God is first, everything else falls into place. It's time to let God be God. Let's study our priorities until God is at the head of our lives and order everything around Him through worship, obedience, service, prayer and generosity. God in first place—let's put **First Things First**.

First Things First - First to Give • Deuteronomy 26:1-11 • Tim McConnell • October 15, 2017

Today we are talking about a problem we all, all, all have—finding peace with our finances. We talk today about putting God first in our finances. First Things First, God first in my money. Dave Ramsey was so smart to name his class “Financial Peace University” because that’s what we all want, peace. You can be rich or poor and not have peace. You can have a lot of money and have no peace with God or in your own heart about it. Or you can have very little and be tremendously anxious and never find peace about what you have. What we all want, what we all need is peace with God about our money. When I was a little boy, I was a saver. I saved every dollar, every penny. I remember counting my change out in piles. One day I crawled under the sink and got out the brass polish, and I—no kidding—polished all my pennies shiny and new. I wanted to pile them up like Scrooge McDuck and watch them gleam! But then we got in a fight, my pennies and me. I wanted my pennies but I also wanted to buy stuff—I wanted to buy a pack of Bubblicious. But if I bought that, I lost my shiny pennies. From that day we have been in combat! I want peace with my pennies. God wants us at peace with our pennies. And peace can be found when we put God first.

Next week is our annual Sunday to make pledges to the work of First Pres in the coming year. But this is not a “fund the church” message. I’m not embarrassed to fund the church or to call you to fund the church, and if that message needs to come at some point it will. But this message is fundamentally about your peace with God about your pennies. If you’re not a believer, let me say to you—you’re off the hook today. You can just sit back and relax. One of the chief complaints about church these days is, they just want your money. Well, put that out of your head. You might find some helpful principles here, but this is primarily a message for those who belong to Jesus Christ so just listen and then you can rib your Christian friend later. Because if Jesus is your Savior, if Jesus is your Lord, then...is Jesus first in your finances? If not, you will not find peace with your pennies.

We can tell all the standard jokes. Martin Luther, once wrote “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the wallet.” He said the last one’s the hardest. Or the joke about the man who got baptized but held his wallet up out of the water. Or the pastor who said, “The good news is the church has all the money it needs. The bad news is, it’s in your bank accounts.” But I think this is an area where we need peace. I think it’s a part of our lives that gets

upside down and off balance as fast as any other area. I meet fewer and fewer people as I go on in ministry who feel at peace with their finances before the Lord; and I’ll call this out, because it shows in statistics as well as stories, but it seems that with each passing generation we are getting worse at this, not better. How long do you want to live upside down about your money? So here’s the thing, you might want to write this down. We think giving is losing. It isn’t. Giving is a great gain. Giving isn’t losing; generosity is joy. It’s God’s plan for your life.

Let’s look at Deuteronomy 26. This actually gives us a plan, a plan to find peace with our pennies. This passage is a “how to” for putting God first in your finances. Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of Moses, so this is Moses speaking to the people of God after they have wandered for forty years in the Exodus from Egypt and they are just about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses is telling them all that God has explained to him, what God expects of them as they start a new life in the new land. God expects, among other things, that they will bring the first fruits to the Lord with joy. God expects them to tithe. The tithe is the word for offering God the first ten percent of your income. Some will jump up and say “That’s Old Testament stuff. We Christians don’t worry about that.” Well, not so fast my friend. Jesus assumed his followers tithed in Matthew 23:23. If anything, the New Testament ethic about giving is that the tithe is just the beginning of what we should give, a minimum. Do I have to tithe to be saved? Absolutely not. Like everything Jesus calls us to do, our salvation is not dependent on our performance but on his victory at the cross and our faith in him. That’s it. But if you are looking for the healthy, godly standard. It’s ten percent as a minimum.

But we’re not worried about that, because we know giving isn’t losing. Generosity is joy. It’s God’s plan for us and we want God first in our finances, right? Here’s the how to, here’s the method. **Step one: Have a plan.** Verses 1-2, “When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name.” (Deuteronomy 26:1-2) You’ve got to have a plan. You are not going to get peace with your pennies without a plan! Nobody fell backwards into holiness and no one gives regularly without a plan. Moses said, plan

now for when the good times comes. Plan now for the giving you want to do. When the money comes, when the profits roll in, that's not the time to decide how much the Lord deserves. Here's a challenge I've heard, "Are you tipping Jesus for good service, or are you intentionally investing in the mission of God?" Are you dropping a tip in the basket for Jesus or are you strategically funding eternal things? Have a plan. Make the decision before the question comes. I plan to give ten percent to the Lord. That's the value of the pledge next week, by the way. It's not a contract with the church. Nobody will hold you to it like that. It's a plan. It's a way to make the decision to do the godly thing before the question arises of what to do.

See, people say they want the secret. There's no real secret. We know what to do. We just don't want to do it. I want the secret to weight loss. Okay, exercise and burn more calories than you eat. Oh. I want the secret to a happy marriage. Okay, read Scripture and pray together daily, and listen more than you talk. Oh. I want the secret to limitless wealth. Okay, I'm going to give you the Bible's secret key to limitless wealth and prosperity. Ready? Spend less than you earn. Give ten percent. Save ten percent. Spend less than you earn. Oh. We know what to do, we just don't want to do it. A plan is the best way to make the decision to do the right thing before the question comes along. Have a plan.

Step Two: Declare the moment. Publish your plan. Share it somehow. Say it out loud. Then declare when the moment has come to enact the plan. Pick up verse 3, "and say to the priest in office at the time, 'I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.'" I like that bit about the priest in office at the time. Maybe I don't like that priest. Doesn't matter! It's not about the priest. This is about your relationship with God and God being in first place with your resources. Declare when it is time to activate the plan. Celebrate it. It's a victory. I remember being in a worship service in Kenya where a woman brought a small bag of five eggs as an offering. Others brought sugar cane, or beets, and some had money, but one woman carefully laid down her small bag of eggs on the floor in the front of the church. And do you know what the pastor prayed? He prayed, "Thank you Lord that you have blessed us so much that we even have a gift to give to honor your name." I learned a lot about Christian giving that day. You might remember when the plan was only a dream. One day I'll have a degree. One day I'll have a paycheck. One day I'll have a business. One day my hens will lay eggs. One day becomes today

at some point. Declare it. It's time to honor God with what he has done to prosper you.

Step Three: Tell your story of gratitude. Verses 5-10, "Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me.' Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him." (Deuteronomy 26:5-10) How about—for those of you who are going to go through this exercise this week and make a pledge to the work of the Lord here at First Pres in 2018—how about you take time before you figure that number out to tell your story. Remember your story. Remember where you were when God reached out his mighty hand to save you. Remember what life was like when you were wandering here and there in life. Generosity is based on gratitude. Tell the story of what God has done for you, then look at your resources and decide what to give to the work of the Lord.

Step Four: Celebrate. Give praise to God. Verse 11: "Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household." (Deuteronomy 26:11) Party. An awesome thing has just happened. You have struck a blow against the power of greed, against the anxiety of never enough, you have resourced awesome things God is doing to save souls and love people. It's time to stop and celebrate. We think giving is losing. Giving to God isn't losing. Giving is a great gain. Giving isn't losing; generosity is joy. It's God's plan for your life.

"Yeah, but ten percent! That's a lot!" Yeah, it is. "I can't do ten percent." Maybe not, but I hope you set it as a goal and walk toward it. Right through Scripture it comes in again and again as a minimum return to the Lord. Ten percent is a lot. What are you afraid of? You say, "I'm afraid of what I'll lose. I'm afraid of what I'll lose if I give that much to God. Giving is losing." No it's not. So let's take that and think about it. You'll lose. What will you lose? What will you lose? Think for a minute about your last year's spending. Think of

what you spent money on. What were your dumbest purchases? What will you lose? Rank all the stuff you bought or spent money on in terms of how smart a buy that was at the top, and how much you regret it at the bottom. What will you lose? You'll lose that ten percent of your income you spent on really dumb stuff. I bought a five-hundred dollar bottle of wine. I bought the brand new iPhone. I got a new pair of skis because every year they change the angle of the edges just that tiny hair. Okay. I bet at the bottom of your spending list there are some things you wish you could do over. You wish you could have that money back.

Giving isn't losing. When God is in first place in your finances, the rest of your finances fall into a new rank of priorities. Instead of ten percent regret at the bottom, you gain ten percent joy at the top. I'm not worried about what you'll lose when you put God first. I'm worried about what you'll lose if you don't. Joy in generosity. Peace with your pennies. Freedom from anxiety and greed. Fulfillment at seeing what God did with what you gave. You don't have to tithe to gain God's love and favor. Like all Christian obedience this is a free act of love and devotion or is the worst kind of religious drivel. If you are going to tithe, do it out of love for God not guilt. But I encourage you to try it. I'm not worried about what you'll lose when you put God first. I'm worried about what you'll lose if you don't.

You want peace with your pennies? Put God first. Don't tip Jesus here and there, tossing God the leftovers. Giving isn't losing; generosity is joy. It's God's plan for your life. Make a plan. Declare the day. Tell the story. Celebrate the victory. We are not going to put other things or other desires above the Lord our God. We are going to declare that God comes first in our finances. We are going to invest strategically in the work of God. And after a while, after years of faithfulness to building up the work of God and investing in the Kingdom of God, we are going to look back and say "I am so rich. I am so blessed. I am so glad I gave and got to be a part of that." We are going to be at peace with our pennies because we are going to be first to give. But when you are challenged or failing or faltering, remember, it's Jesus who saves. And he has already done what holiness requires. He gave. He gave his whole self on your behalf. Lean on him and know peace.

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST THINGS FIRST • First to Give

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Start It

- "The tithe was not put into place for God's benefit—He already has everything He needs. He doesn't need our money! And "our" money is already His anyway. Tithing was created for our benefit. It teaches us how to keep God first in our lives and how to live unselfishly. Unselfish people make better spouses, friends, relatives, employees and employers. And they usually have better finances. God is trying to teach us how to prosper over time. Not only does giving of your money or other resources generate good in the lives of others, but it also generates contentment in your heart. If you tithe, do it out of love for God, not out of guilt." — Dave Ramsey

Study It

- Read Deuteronomy 26:1-11. What does the phrase "some of the firstfruits" mean in verse 2? Do you think that is tied to the "tithe"?
- Read Matthew 23:23 and Matthew 19:16-22. How does Jesus want us to think about giving?
- Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-11. How should a Christian approach the discipline of giving from his or her resources? Is the tithe (10%) an important measure? Why or why not?
- Go back to Deuteronomy 26:1-11. What is the motivation for giving to the Lord? How much of that motivation comes from looking back on what God has done in the past? How much is forward looking?
- Reading verse 11, who gets to celebrate when generosity happens? Why is celebration important?

Pray It

Heavenly Father, every good and perfect gift comes down from heaven by Your hand. All that I am and all that I have are from You. Release my heart from anxiety about money. Allow my hands to open with generosity and let me live a life open to give, reflecting the generosity and sacrifice of the God I love, who sent His Son Jesus to die for me. In His name I pray, Amen.

Live It

Evaluate your household budget and make a plan to invest in God's work in the coming year.