

The Wisdom of First-Fruits Finances

Proverbs 3:9-10

*Honor the Lord from your wealth,
and with the first-fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

Here's the truth about the small library of books you may be holding in your hand right now.

No one can rightly understand the message of the Bible (God's library) apart from understanding its first book, the book of "beginnings," *Genesis*. What happens in the chapters of *Genesis* is the key to everything else.

And, even more narrowly, there's no way for us to fully figure out this proverb – Proverbs 3:9-10 -- without giving a long, hard look at what happened in *Genesis* chapter four.

A remarkable chapter. Painfully brief; profoundly telling. And curious. Curious because of all the things which the Holy Spirit *could have told us* about the first two sons of Adam and Eve, He chose to tell us how each of them handled what God had given to them. If you've turned to *Genesis* 4, let me read it for us.

^{4:1} Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." ² And again, she bore his brother Abel.

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.

³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." ⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

In many ways, this is an incredibly tragic story. The first two sons born to the first human couple on planet earth, and "in the course of time" the older brother -- full of seething, jealous anger -- premeditatively murders his younger brother.

All of that out of a time of worship, when two men came before the Lord to offer back a portion

of what God had given to them, receiving two very different responses from the Lord.

I think this story raises a personal question, right at the beginning of the Bible: *Have you ever wondered whether what you give back to the Lord is acceptable?* Another way to ask that is, *How does the Lord regard my giving--my stewardship, my worship of giving back to Him a portion of what He's given to me? Is my offering before Him—is what I bring-- like Cain's or like Abel's?*

You and I may have never asked that question before. But if I'm reading Genesis 4 correctly, along with Proverbs 3:9-10, then maybe, just maybe, I should take another look. Seems like a pretty serious matter.

And please – if I may – don't dismiss the question with merely a "Well, I give my 10%! What's the problem?" The truth is that the Bible doesn't teach 10% giving. In the Old Testament, the Law of Moses actually required 22% of a Jewish family's income. And in the New Testament, no percentage at all is given...only a two-part principle. ***Be faithful and be generous.***

So, if you and I have a heart open to the Holy Spirit, set aside for a few moments any "10% should be good enough" kind of thinking, and let's look at the wisdom of "first-fruits finances" found in Proverbs 3:9-10. Let me quote it again:

*Honor the Lord from your wealth,
and with the first-fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

What wisdom is this teaching? My take is this: **Endowed with all things, I first honor the Endower.** In other words, it's not so much about HOW MUCH as it is about recognizing where what I have comes from, and knowing what portion of that, given back, truly honors the Lord.

Endowed with all things, I first honor the Endower.

First, Do I recognize that **I am "endowed with all things."** Here are 4 key truths Scripture teaches us about this.

NUMBER ONE – *I've been GIVEN everything I HAVE.*

No one said it more succinctly than the one whose entire life pointed to Jesus. John the

Baptizer said it (John 3:27) – *No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven.*

Unless we are diligent, we quickly forget this. An almighty, sovereign God endows all things to all of us all the time. Scripture could hardly be clearer about the Triune God.

- The One who creates and gives to all His energizing life (Job 33:4)
- Gives each person each breath each moment (Isaiah 42:5)
- Provides every living animal its food (Psalm 147:9, Luke 12:24, Job 38:41)
- Since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things (Acts 17:25)
- By him it is determined what nations exist and where ethnicities of people will live (Acts 17:27)
- In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)
- God the Son is before all things, and in (or by) Him all things hold together (Col.1:17)
- Upholds the universe by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3)

The truth is that every second of my existence is utterly contingent on the giving hand of an almighty God. Do we recognize the moment by moment scope of God's endowments?

You know I've heard that an atheist was walking through the woods admiring all the "accidents" that evolution had created. "What majestic trees! Could there be a more scenic river? What delightful animals!" the thoughts that ran through his head.

But walking alongside the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes. Turning, he saw a 7' grizzly charging toward him. And he took off down the path. Over his shoulder, he saw the bear gaining ground. He ran faster, so scared tears welled up in his eyes. Again, the bear was closer. He ran faster, only to trip, tumble and roll trying to get up. But the bear was over him, reaching for him with his left paw, raising the right to strike down.

At that instant, the atheist cried, "Oh my God!"

Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest fell silent. Even the river stopped moving.

A bright light shone upon the man, and a voice echoed from above. "You deny my existence all these years, teach others I don't exist, even credit creation to a cosmic accident. Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I now to count you as a believer?"

The atheist looked directly into the light and said, "I would feel like a hypocrite to become a Christian after all these years, but...but perhaps you could make the bear a Christian?"

"Very well," the voice said.

The light went out. The river started flowing. The forest sounds resumed. And the bear dropped its right paw, brought both paws together, bowed its head and spoke: *Lord, for this food I am about to receive, I am **truly** thankful.*

Honestly...we put ourselves in peril if we do not assess the source of what we have. Which means

NUMBER TWO – *I am utterly DEPENDENT on God's grace* Jesus taught,

"Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For (*explaining*), He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

Paul preached the same truth to unbelievers in the Galatian city of Lystra:

“...we bring you good news, so that you turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet He did not leave himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:15-17).

God’s gracious provision is a WITNESS to Himself. Everyone, everything dependent on His grace.

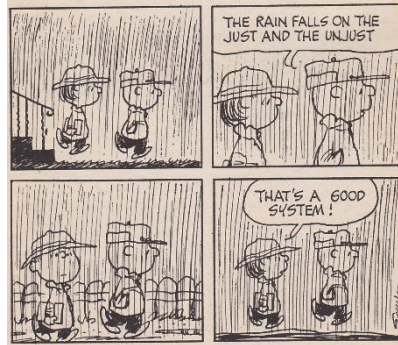
Charlie Brown and his brother Linus

head out on a rainy day. Suddenly,

Charlie Brown feels a theological urge.

“The rain falls on the just and the unjust.”

Linus thinks, then replies. “That’s a good system.”ⁱ Comes from a GOOD, gracious God.



In an interview, Brennan Manning captured it.

I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, or Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We’re not joyful and then become grateful — we’re grateful, and that makes us joyful.ⁱⁱ

NUMBER ONE – Everything I have is given. NUMBER TWO – I am utterly dependent upon God’s grace.

NUMBER THREE – *My culture is LARGELY IGNORANT* of Number One and Number Two

Many, perhaps most, have what I’d call the BELSHAZZAR PROBLEM (i.e., the King who followed Nebuchadnezzar). Daniel, refusing the king’s rewards for interpreting the handwriting on the wall, did not mince words with the king. problem.

Daniel 5:22-23 But you his successor, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart even though you knew all this (i.e., how God humbled Neb.) but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But you have not glorified the God who holds your life-breath in His hand and controls the whole course of your life...”

NUMBER FOUR – *A responsive DISCIPLE honors Number One and Number Two*

How? Making Proverbs 3:9-10 a lifetime habit

*Honor the Lord from your wealth,
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Derek Kidner's comments are helpful.

*The cost and reward of KNOWING God in our "financial ways" is to see that these honour Him, in giving Him the first and not a later share – like the widow who did not give out of her abundance like the rich but put in first everything she had (Mark 12:44). – of gratitude (cf. Dt. 26:9-11) and of trust (Prov.3:5), for such giving in the face of material pressures is a simple test of faith.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, from that recognition—that I am endowed with all things – wisdom cries out to my heart for me to **"first honor the Endower."**

If you and I were Israelites in Old Testament days eager to "Honor the Endower" we would

> **Exodus 23:19** "The best of the first-fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

> **Leviticus 23:9-14** Bring a sheaf of the first and the best grain from your fields (priest would wave it before the Lord)...bring a without-blemish one year old male lamb as a burnt offering to the Lord...yet another offering of your finest flour and your best oil and your best wine...and all of that given BEFORE you eat your own meal on that day

> You knew that **Numbers 18:11-12** directed "All the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine and of the grain [were] the first-fruits of what they give to the Lord."

Living back then, we would have known that OBEYING THE LAW in HONORING FIRST THE ENDOWER with first-fruits giving came with a promise (**Deuteronomy 28:3-6**)

Blessed shall you be in the city, blessed shall you be in the field
Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground
And the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds
And the young of your flock
Bless shall be your basket and your kneading bowl
Blessed shall you be when you come in and
Blessed shall you be when you go out.

Proverbs 3:10 puts it like this: "Then your barns will be filled
filled with plenty, and your vats bursting with wine.

You say, "Hey Pastor Staff...I'm not an Israelite. We're not living under God's O.T. Law. What about today? Does God still honor someone like me, following Jesus, who give Him the first and the best?" Well, let's

LISTEN TO JESUS - **Luke 6:38** *Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."*

LOOK WHAT HAPPENED IN ACTS – **Acts 4:32-35** ³²*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There 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 ³⁵and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

LISTEN TO WHAT PAUL TOLD THE CORINTHIAN CHRISTIANS – **2 Corinthians 9:6** ⁶*The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.*

OR THE BELIEVERS IN PHILIPPI – **Philippians 4:10-20** ¹⁰*I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. ⁶Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit...the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

CONCLUSION

This wonderful word of God speaks with one voice about “first fruits finances,” and this incredible proverb sums up its truth --

**Endowed with all things,
I first honor the Endower.**

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There are things that stick to your ribs when they happen to you as a boy. And so I remember the night my father came down and sat on the edge of my bed.

My dad was an incredibly hard worker. [Frankly, he still is. Back then...] Driving school bus at sunrise, at the print shop during the day, selling at night. But we were in debt. He had bought things

for mom he knew she love having, but...well the problem was that the Lord was getting the left-overs. And he came to realize it...somehow the Holy Spirit impressed Scriptures like these on my father's heart. So there he was, sitting on the edge of my bed. Surprising me with, "David, I want you to know that I've sinned by buying things and giving the Lord the left-overs. No more. The Lord's portion comes first, and I'll get us out of debt by honoring Him and working hard."

As a boy, was I surprised my dad was admitting this to me? I've never forgotten it. And I've never forgotten how the Lord – honored with first-fruits giving – lifted the Staff family out of the hole.

Frankly, there was something supernatural about it.

So maybe there are some Scriptures to re-read with your Connect Group, and some conversations to have with your spouse and your kids. Read the passages, and pray. Talk with the Holy Spirit about it. Confess, if necessary, and make your family a team that loves to follow Jesus in wisdom *because you are*.

First, and with the best, honor the Endower. Then, my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

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ⁱ Charles M. Schulz, *And the Beagles and the Bunnies Shall Lie Down Together – The Theology of Peanuts* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984).

ⁱⁱ Brennan Manning, in "The Dick Staub Interview: Brennan Manning on Ruthless Trust," *ChristianityToday.com* (December 1, 2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ Kidner, *Proverbs* (IV Press), p. 64.