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Generous Disciples: Intentional Deuteronomy

I had the privilege of going with the youth to Mexico this year and I really enjoyed my time there. One of the things I can always look forward to on a build trip (this is my fourth) is a minor injury of some sort—cuts, scrapes, or worse... but still minor. My second year, going with the men, I woke up on the last day of the trip with intense vertigo that lasted a week, probably from dehydration. This year, my minor injury ended up being all about my thumbs. On the first day I must have injured a muscle in my palm from using a pickaxe, which meant that I couldn't quite use my thumb and forefinger to close or open things. A couple of days later I hit my other thumb square on with a hammer. I thought my fingernail might fall off, but maybe not. Anyway, there were a couple of days there where I couldn't quite use my thumbs! Suffering for Jesus!

One of the things that amazes me about the Mexico trips, whether you go with the youth or the men, is that on the surface we're inviting people to do hard labor—"If you come to Mexico, you too will have your thumbs bashed in!"—but somehow we get people coming back year after year. And I recognize that they don't come back for the hard labor—at least the kids don't, maybe some of the men do. But really there's something about giving of yourself in this really intense way that changes you. We remove people from their normal circumstances and put them in a place where they're putting all this energy and sweat and blood into creating new hope for a family through this home alongside other people, and when that happens, your priorities really change, even if only for that time in Mexico. People aren't quite the same when they're in Mexico. They'll talk when they wouldn't normally. They'll cry when they wouldn't normally. All because when they give of themselves in this way, it resets their priorities.

And that's one of the lessons we hope people take back from going to Mexico—that following Jesus means giving intentionally. It means giving your best for others and back to God. The trick is making that lesson stick. Because giving intentionally, as a lifestyle, is relatively easy to do for a week or a few days in Mexico. But once we go back to our "normal" life, it becomes harder.

When we look back over *The Story*, this is one of the things God's interaction with Israel teaches us. As the people of Israel, the many sons of Abraham, are about to receive the gift of land that God had promised their father Abraham, God gives them instructions on how he wants them to live. And to nobody's surprise, he wants

them to be a giving people. Will it stick? Let's take a look at what he tells them in Deuteronomy 26: 1-11.

As you listen or read this, I want you to look out for a key verb that describes how God is active with the Israelites. By my count, this verb is there six times. Let's read.

¹ 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, ² 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 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." ⁴ The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. ⁷ 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. ⁸ So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰ 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. 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.

Did you see the verb I was talking about? What is it? Give! The story of the Israelites is a story of a God who gave them everything. They are about to enter into the Promised Land, and God institutes this ritual of giving with them. Not only do they act out giving by their offering, but they tell the story of how God gave to them. By reciting their history, it gave them perspective and reminded them how they got to where they were in the first place. How? By the power of a God who gives.

But I want you to notice something in particular. Is giving to God actually giving? Read verse 10 and see the verb that Scripture uses to describe this. The words the people are to recite when they bring their offering are, "and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me." Notice that he doesn't "give" a tithe, he "brings" a tithe. In Scripture, this language is fairly consistent when it talks about tithing, because you cannot give to God what isn't yours. Instead, you only bring back to God what is his already. God gives, you bring.

And yet, as you read on in the passage, you see that God tells them to do an additional ritual every third year. Read vs. 12. *“When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.”* We give to each other, because we give what others do not have.

This may seem like semantics, but it’s really about keeping perspective. God wants to remind his people that they are to bring back to him what is already his, but we are to give to each other what is lacking. Those two things help to remind us that none of the stuff that we own is really ours. It’s either given to us by God, or we are called to bless others by it. In the meantime we hold it with an open hand. We steward it.

Megan and I learned this give vs bring idea at a church we used to go to. The senior pastor there would pray for the offering in a very particular way. He would pray to God, “Receive your tithes and our offerings.” You might have heard Megan or I pray that ourselves in an offering. So in other words, the tithe was God’s already, we were just bringing it to him, but above and beyond that it was our offerings. It’s the same idea said differently.

But I don’t want to just stop short at saying this passage in Deuteronomy was just about returning to God what was his. It’s also about how they gave. God didn’t just call them to give whatever produce they thought they could, but what part of their produce... their first fruits! Now think about this. You’re a farmer and harvest time approaches. You know you need a good harvest, because whatever you harvest allows you to survive the winter. There’s only so much harvest to go around, but God asks you to give the very first of your harvest. It could be a small harvest. Locust might come through and destroy everything else. But God says, “give me the first fruits of the harvest.” If you weren’t a farmer, and you herded animals instead, God asked you to bring the best of your animals... without spot or blemish. Same thing there; what if the rest of my flock is sick? What if I give God the best and the rest can’t feed me? It’s risky!

So risky, the Israelites never really went through with it. They never really gave tithes, and they never really gave their first fruits. When you flip all the way to the end of the Old Testament to Malachi, God points out their lack of faith and obedience. In Malachi 1 says, “You give me the sickest, lamest animals you find, or you just steal from other people so it doesn’t cost you.” Later in Malachi 3 he says, “You rob me of the tithe.” Remember, the tithe is already God’s, so when the people of Israel didn’t bring it back to God, he calls it thievery. And this isn’t because God needs a tithe. Remember Pastor Mark saying this last week. God doesn’t need money. He doesn’t need sheep and produce. He tells us to do this because we need to give.

The Israelites needed to give because it was the regulator and the sign of their relationship with God. By bringing their offering, they showed trust, they showed love, and they showed obedience. By loving God, by trusting him, by obeying him, things went well for them. But by rejecting God over and over, they slid into injustice, death, and chaos as a nation. Giving, through all their history, was the evidence of their relationship with God. Giving is the evidence of our relationship with God.

It's no wonder that God doesn't just want the Israelites to bring their offerings as though it were a checkbox to be ticked off—he's looking at how they give, because that shows the tenor of their hearts. How they gave showed what their hearts were toward God. In other words, God wanted their giving to be intentional—thought out, meaningful giving. He didn't say, "I'm okay with the leftovers, just so long as you give." He said, "Bring me the best," because by bringing the best you reveal where your heart is.

If you read the bulletins you read a little about how I wrestled with this idea of intentional giving, first fruits, in terms of my morning routine. But I've also grappled with it a bit in terms of my finances. I don't mean to call out the ushers in this, but has anybody ever noticed that they never pass the plate in front of the pastors? I honestly have no idea why. And the truth is that Megan and I have brought a tithe our entire marriage, thick or thin, and even before that. Tithing isn't a radical or new concept for us, so when we first came here I would have our check ready, but the plate wouldn't come in front of us. And I'd have to dive backwards to get rid of our check! But now I'm okay with it because I realized that when we wrote out a check, it didn't happen very intentionally. We get paid once a month, and sometimes it might be a couple weeks before Megan or I remembered to tithe. Or sometimes it might be the next month and we'd have to double up the tithe. But the problem with that is that it didn't really reflect where we wanted our hearts to be with bringing our tithe. I didn't want our tithing to be an afterthought, or haphazard; I wanted our tithing to be intentional. How we gave mattered, because it said something about our hearts. So, to be really practical, I set us up on automatic giving and right after we are paid, our tithe comes straight out of our bank account. I see that withdrawal and I say, "Amen. What I have is yours God."

One of the things I have learned as I grow older is that the more intentional about my faith that I am, the more blessed that I am. The more intentional with my time, my energy, and even my money, the more spiritually fruitful I am, and according to God's mercy, even the more materially fruitful I am. The more intentional I am, the more I give room for God to show up. And this was certainly true for how we tithed. I won't say it was a profound change to do automatic giving, but it was a meaningful change. And at root, it was a change of heart.

I have to wonder if some of you listening might be thinking, why are we spending so much time talking about the laws and ordinances of the Old Testament? Aren't we living under grace? Are we not saved by faith and not by works? Isn't it about

relationship now? Yes and Amen. But what I hope you are beginning to see is that the laws and ordinances of God were always about relationship. God set up these laws and rituals in the Old Testament to shepherd the kind of relationship he wanted with the people of Israel, and to prepare them for the kind of relationship they would have with Jesus. We are meant to learn about our relationship to Jesus by reading these old books.

This might seem like a rabbit trail, but does anybody know about the book *The Five Love Languages*? Do you remember what they are? Touch, words of affirmation, serving, giving and receiving gifts, and quality time. By the way, a big one of mine is touch. But only from my wife, so please don't give me a big hug after this. Anyway, you could probably argue that God is about all of these ways of showing love, but what might you argue would be a predominant love language for God? I'd argue it would be giving! Just think about it, John 3:16. "God so loved the world that he... gave!"

When we read about the giving God in Deuteronomy, we are already learning about the giving God in John 3:16. It's the same guy. So as we read through the story we shouldn't be surprised that God loves by giving. And that he calls us to live the same way. That being a follower of Jesus means being an intentional giver. Pastor Mark mentioned that he has been hesitant to talk about giving because he got tired of taking pot-shots about it. But the truth is that we've been talking about giving all the time. When we talk about marriage, we talk about giving, because you can't have a successful marriage without being willing to give. When we talk about prayer, you have to be able to give to pray successfully. Discipleship involves giving of all sorts: time, life, even money. And that's no surprise when you realize that at the core of who God is, is a giver. And when we talk about being in relationship with him, in all aspects of our lives, in many ways it comes down to how we give.

And God doesn't give us his leftovers. He gives intentionally. He gives his best. He didn't give us an average man. He didn't even give us an angel. "For God so loved the world, he gave us... his only begotten Son." His first fruits. There is nothing more precious, more valuable, than the very life of his only begotten son. When you realize that, then can you see why the idea of first fruits is so important to God? Why would he tell the Israelites, and now us, that they should be givers of their best too?

Perhaps the most important thing about first fruit giving is that when we give in this way, we proclaim the Gospel. In effect, we say, "Father, I know you gave of the very best by giving your Son for us, that we may have life. I bring to you of the very best you have given me, so that others may have life also." When you give intentionally like this—of your time, your money, your life—you proclaim the Gospel to your family, to your spouse, to whoever is watching, because you are imitating the very essence of who God is and carrying that out in all areas of your life. That's what first fruits are about. That's what being a follower of Jesus is about. Intentional giving screams to the world about a God who gives.

Now I hope you can see what a loss it can be to not pursue first fruit giving. When we are not intentional about our giving, we miss out on a powerful way of reflecting the essence of who God is. We miss out on transforming our hearts, and we miss out on transforming the hearts of others. I pray that we would become intentional givers, like Jesus is, to our very cores.

