



The Law of Firsts

Sunday, November 23, 2025

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Old Testament Lesson, Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹“When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess and you possess it and settle in it,

² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.’

⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God,

⁵ you shall make this response before the Lord your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

⁶ ‘When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,

⁷ ‘we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

⁸ ‘The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and 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 ‘So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.’ You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God.

¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Sermon, “The Law of Firsts”

Life is filled with rules. Many of them have been codified in local, state, or federal laws. Others have been codified in the rules of the game, depending on which game you may be playing. But not all rules are written down.

Baseball gives many good examples of unwritten rules. Those unwritten rules of baseball are a code of conduct for players; they are focused on sportsmanship and respecting one’s opponents. Here are a few examples:

- If your team is up 10-1 in the ninth inning, don’t swing on a 3-0 count. That’s considered poor sportsmanship.
- Don’t showboat or stare down opponents when you hit a home run.
- Don’t bunt to break up a no-hitter; it’s a cheap tactic.
- Don’t step on the pitcher’s mound: The mound is considered sacred ground and players should not walk on it.
- If you catch a foul ball, give it to a kid for obvious reasons.
- A pitcher removed from a game should remain in the dugout. This shows a team-first attitude as well as support for the next pitcher.

You won’t find those rules codified in a book, but players learn them early in their career; they probably learn them in Little League.

Little Leaguers are not alone. We all have unwritten rules instilled in us at an early age. One of the unwritten rules that are instilled in us is the Law of Firsts. I can remember learning some “Laws of Firsts” as a child:

- Give others the first choice of a dessert before choosing your own.
- Before you sit down to eat, first say grace.
- When you approach a door, ladies first. And be sure that you open the door for the lady.

In Deuteronomy 26, Moses presents to the Hebrews God’s Law of Firsts: When you come into the land which Yahweh has promised to you, take some of the first produce of the ground, place it in a basket, take it to the place where the tabernacle has been set up, and present your basket to the priest. In other words, make God a priority in your life by giving to God first.

That practice has long been adopted in church stewardship campaigns. Pastors encourage their congregations to give to God first—before any other bills—and to give to God through the local church where you worship. And then, Malachi 3:10 is often quoted as part of those stewardship campaigns because Malachi is simply codifying Deuteronomy 26:2.

¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty,

I've followed the practice of tithing for many years. My check to Aledo UMC may not be literally the first check I write when I get paid, but consistent giving to the church is a priority of my budget and the check always gets written. If I'm running short, I find something else to cut; I don't cut down on what I give to the church.

How much are we to give? As a noun, "tithe" is a word that means a "tenth." As a verb, "tithe" means to give one-tenth of one's earnings or, in an agricultural context, it means to give one-tenth of one's crop.

But in Deuteronomy 26, Moses doesn't say to give a tithe or a tenth; he tells the Hebrews that they were simply to bring a basket of the first fruits of their harvest and present it to the priest. At this point in their faith journey, Moses doesn't require a tithe. Remember, these are former slaves and the children of former slaves. No doubt some gave less than a tithe; some gave more. Moses does not require a tithe; but he does require everyone's participation.

I recognize that giving a tithe can be difficult for some of you. That's okay. But if a tithe is too much, I would encourage you to prayerfully determine the portion of your income that the Spirit is nudging you to give.

The Hebrews were to give as an expression of appreciation for all that God had done for them. For forty years they woke up every morning to manna as thick as dew on the ground. For forty years, all they had to do was go outside where the manna was waiting for them. All they had to do was pick it up and make it into manna cakes and manna bread and manna tortillas.

Remember, this command was given to the Hebrews when they were still in their wilderness wanderings. That meant this was a command that was intended to capture their faith and imagination. Moses was giving them a vision of prosperity when they would have a home and a garden that produced enough crops that they would be able to gratefully present a basket of produce to the priest.

We do the same thing when we give to God: we give by faith. That same verse in Malachi goes on to say:

Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it" (Malachi 3:10).

We give because God has blessed us. And we give because God will bless us again.

I have to be careful here. In Romans 12:8, Paul tells us that one of the gifts of the Spirit is the gift of giving. However, there are any number of preachers and evangelists who have wrongly turned the beautiful gift of giving into something like a divine lottery: *"Give to God and God will give back to you tenfold or even a hundredfold. What? You gave a hundred dollars, and you didn't get a thousand dollars back? Well, you need to buy more lottery tickets—I mean, you need to give even more money to my evangelistic association and then God will give you even more than a thousand dollars in return."*

It's not like that. God is not running a sweepstakes. But God did send his Son Jesus, and Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life, and that you may have life more abundantly" (John 10:10).

If you think it's all about money, you've set your sights way too low. Money loses its value; grace never does.

We give, not to enter a sweepstakes; we give because we have already entered into the Kingdom of God. And that's even better than the Land that was Promised to the Hebrews. And because we have become citizens of the Kingdom of God, we have entered into its economic system. And in this economy, we make God our priority. We give to God first: even if it's only a dollar, we give it to God first. And as we make God our priority, we discover that the economy of the Kingdom of God is an economy of generosity, justice, and love. And what a joy it is for us to be a part of this kingdom!

Let us pray.