



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Sacred Giving Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Dr. Jeff Roberts  
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Last month, over a period of three days, over a million Americans gave \$10 each to Haiti relief by sending a text. The George Clooney Telethon for Haiti raised \$61 million. The countless giving that is going to this horrific natural disaster is beyond measure when you consider all of the religious, charitable and government organizations. Estimates believe that it will soon pass the \$1.9 billion that was given to the victims of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. In Rwanda, a woman that makes less than \$200 a year has already raised \$7,000 for Haiti. People who are out of work and struggling in the United States have found ways to give to Haiti even in their most difficult time.

What is evident from this experience is that as human beings we can be moved at moments to acts of giving. However, this type of giving to disaster depends on a lot of factors. Take for example the fact that in Afghanistan last year there was an earthquake that killed over 80,000 people; yet, very little was said about this disaster, and I don't remember any telethon for these poor people. In addition, the death around our world due to ongoing poverty continues to be a large challenge which is ignored by many. UNICEF reported that last year 1 million less children died from poverty than the year before; yet, there was very little fan fare or celebration. Had we watched on television the saving of 1 million children's lives in a natural disaster, would we have been celebrating and rejoicing?

What is the disconnect? Why is giving so easy at some times and yet not the way of life in other times? No doubt, some of it is due to the power of the picture. We are very visual people and pictures move us to tears. A powerful picture can change a person's view on things like civil rights and American poverty in the 1960s, the Vietnam War in the 1970s, and our nation's response to disaster like in the wake of Katrina in New Orleans. The pictures we have seen of the devastation in Haiti have brought us all to a place where we are moved to give and act. Whether rich or poor we know we must act.

Yet, today I want to present to you a better way of thinking about giving. I want us to consider how giving moves beyond a response every now and then to disaster to a way of living. I think the key is to consider how giving can become sacred giving. In Deuteronomy 26, we find the instructions to God's covenant people as they prepare to enter into the land of promise. This instruction was about giving when the people have been blessed with land and plenty. I find it interesting that this instruction is about what they should do when they inherit the land which God would provide. The people were being prepared to include giving as a way of expressing their covenant relationship with God.

Let me suggest five characteristics that are in this passage to sacred giving. If we will incorporate them into our thinking about giving, it might transform the way we view giving not only to the church but to those in need.

Sacred giving is first an act of worship. The first indication of this idea of worship and giving is found in the term *first fruits*. The first fruit was the best that your crop yielded. It was the choice wine, grain and oil. It was not what was left over but the first and the best of the crop that was presented as an act of worship. In verse 13, the people are instructed to say to the Lord God "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow according to all you commanded."

There was an understanding that there was something that they might claim as their own that truly did not belong to them but belonged to God. The first or the best of one's possession belonged not to them but to God. There was a sacred portion of their possessions. The term *sacred portion* is an interesting word which means literally "that holy thing." When the people say, "I have removed the sacred portion", they were literally saying "I have exterminated the holy thing from

my house.” The claim was “There is nothing I am keeping and claiming as mine that belongs to God.”

Only worship can bring you to this point of giving. Worship requires the knowledge of something or someone beyond self. You have heard the phrase “he worships the ground she walks on.” That term indicates that there is someone whose life is being lived with the recognition of another. That person thinks about the other one and acts in a way that is always best for the other one. The other or another is the most important person in their life. In the same way, the worship of God requires us to recognize there is another, or in God’s case, an “other” who is holy and different from us. To worship is to realize that we are not the center of all things, but there is another in our presence.

Giving becomes sacred when it becomes an act of worship. When we realize that there is a portion of our possession which is sacred and holy that does not belong to us and cannot be claimed as ours, then we become keenly aware of another. Giving as worship enriches our giving because it helps us recognize the very presence of God in our lives in a tangible way. When we recognize that God deserves our best and not our left overs, and we understand that there is some part of our resources that we cannot claim as our own but belonging to God – the sacred portion, then we become aware of God’s presence and activity in our lives and there is in that moment worship. It is the recognition of another beyond our self.

Giving can become sacred giving when it serves as a moment of remembrance. In our text, the people are instructed to give the first fruits as a reminder of what God has done, not only for them as individuals but for the people of God. There are several declarations which were to be made when one presented their first fruits, but they all had to do with remembering God’s faithfulness. First, they were to declare that they had come into the land promised to their forefathers. They were not to forget what God had done. Their father had been a wandering Armenian – this is a reference to father Jacob. Jacob had gone down to Egypt in the time of famine and there became a great nation, but Egypt had turned on God’s people, mistreated them, and put them in harsh labor. But the Lord brought the people out of Egypt by his mighty hand through miraculous signs and wonders and had now brought them into this land of plenty. As a result, I bring the first fruits of this land.

Giving had become a moment of remembrance of God’s faithfulness. There are many ways to remember the past. There are holidays and customs and traditions that help us remember a significant moment in the past.

However, what is interesting about remembrance is that unless it becomes personal then the moment of remembrance finally fades away. Think about our holidays of remembrance. There are many days that we might still have as federal holidays, but because the generation that first established these holidays has passed and the next generation did not personalize these moments their significance has passed, as well. One writer says that the only way a moment of remembrance lasts is if it is both significant to the community but also to the individual.

Giving is personal. In fact I don’t know of anything more personal and more guarded than our financial records or financial habits. We consider this part of our lives maybe more personal than any other part of our lives. This is why giving is an important part of making the remembrance of God’s faithfulness viable in our lives. When we give in worship to God, it is a very individual and personal expression of God’s faithfulness not only to God’s people but faithfulness to me.

On February 5, 1994, the Markale Market was jammed with Sarajevans. Hundreds of women, children and men came for their weekly outing in search of food and goods. Without warning, a 120 mm mortar shell hit the crowd, exploding in the midst of the open-air market – tearing heads and limbs from 68 people and spewing blood for yards around. The attack occurred only one block from the infamous May 1992 breadline massacre, when 20 women and children were killed in another marketplace assault. It occurred just one day after 10 people from the suburb of Dobrinja died from a Serbian-fired mortar shell while waiting for food.

Unable to accept the murder and mayhem of his anonymous brothers and sisters any longer, a cellist from the Sarajevo Symphony resolved to mark their memory in some way. He decided that each life lost in the latest shelling must be marked in some way. The day after the deadly bombing, he took his cello and a chair and quietly set them up in the heart of the bombed-out area of the shattered marketplace – the site of so much cruelty and carnage.

Then, without saying a word, he played a short memorial concert, uninterrupted and unannounced, transforming that scene of horror into a place of harmony and beauty. Instead of being only the place where 68 people had died, this cellist’s music transformed the marketplace into a place where 68 lives were lived. At the end of his concert, he picked up his chair and cello and faded into the crowd.

The next day, same time, same place, the cellist returned with his chair and cello. Again he played a short concert,

uninterrupted and unannounced. And again, he left as silently and without fanfare as he had come. He continued erecting this tone testament in music until he had played a memorial concert for each of the victims who had died in that last shelling. He commemorated their living, not just their dying, bringing dignity and honor to their families, putting their souls to rest in love instead of hate. He had done something else as well. He had found a personal expression of giving of his gifts as a way of remembrance.

Giving becomes sacred when it is accompanied by remembrance of God's faithfulness.

A third quality of sacred giving is thanksgiving. In the instructions of the giving of the first fruits, the person was to give by placing their gift in a basket and bowing before the Lord. The result would be everyone would rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.

Rejoice in all the good things. That is thanksgiving. There is something about giving that creates thanksgiving. When we witness the devastation that we have seen in Haiti, we not only are moved to give but we also become keenly aware of what we have and what we take for granted. When we watch children lost in the streets, we are thankful for homes, families and people who claim us as belonging to them. When we see the lines for drinking water we become very aware of the blessing of water that comes from a water fountain in almost every hall of this church. When we watch the makeshift hospitals and crude medicine that has to be practiced, we become grateful for the resources of healing that are so plentiful in the area in which we live.

When we give, it causes us to also "thanksgiving." There is something about giving that creates knowledge of our own blessings. When the people gave they were to rejoice in all the good things God has given to their household. Notice the particular part of that verse. I am to rejoice in what God has given my household. There is a sense of contentment in that verse. I rejoice in what God has given me and I am not jealous or envious of what you possess. Yet, my thanksgiving also extends to what you are blessed with. Notice the communal rejoicing. They were to rejoice with the Levite that is the clergy, the alien that is the person who was not a Hebrew but was also blessed by God. There is no room for envy, jealousy, or coveting when there is sacred giving. Sacred giving produces true thanksgiving for your possessions and for the possessions of others.

The fourth quality of sacred giving is obedience. This

is the quality that seems to lack emotion, but the truth is obedience is accompanied by the greatest virtue and emotion which is love. If we look at the section of this text that deals with the third year tithe we find the act of obedience. They were not only to bring first fruits; that is, the best on a regular basis, but every three years they were to bring a tenth of all of their produce and give it as an offering. This is the part of the passage that has the sound of duty or responsibility. It is the part that demands obedience.

Notice the detail of the obedient Hebrew: "I will bring a tithe and I will not dare keep the sacred portion for myself." Not only will the person not keep the tithe for themselves but they also would not misuse the tithe or rationalize that the tithe could be used for other things. First, the vow of obedience was not to forget. There was the remembrance of the tithe that created obedience. Second, they would not misuse it. The way the tithe could be misused all had to do with offering what belonged to God to another god; in particular, to participating in the worship of fertility gods and Canaanite worship. These were the gods that were to bring harvest which the worshipper of God understood to be the provision of God. The word *mourning* is not the word for "suffering" but for the word of "pagan rites." There was a mourning and lamenting drama that would accompany the worship of these pagan gods. So, what is the commitment of this worshipper?

"God, I have not rebelled against your command to tithe, nor have I just forgotten to do it, neither have I offered to other gods of my culture what belongs solely to you." There is a great temptation when it comes to giving to God. We can be tempted to simply say God does not need it and forsake giving. We can say to ourselves and to God "I just forgot." Even worse, we can be tempted to say to God "I think my tithe can be better used in this area of my life or on this god of my culture." Not the faithful worshipper in Deuteronomy.

Instead, there is a commitment to obedience. Now, many consider giving out of obedience to be cold and dutiful, but let me suggest that to give out of obedience to God comes from the virtue of love. Have you ever watched a veteran stand and give honor to his or her country? With tears in their eyes they speak of their love for the United States of America and they conclude that it was the least they could do to do their duty or be faithful in being obedient to the commands of their commanding officer. In that case we would never say that obedience or duty was cold and unemotional.

In the same way Jesus says "If you love me you will obey my commands." Being obedient to God is not

some cold sense of duty, but it emerges out of the warmth of a love relationship with Jesus our Lord. Giving is sacred when it becomes an act of obedience as the result of our love for God.

Lastly, giving becomes sacred as it becomes an act of compassion. Throughout our text the worshipper is reminded that the first fruits and the tithe were for the Levite, the alien, the widow and the orphan. All of these people mentioned were those who were relying on Israel to care for them. They were dependent upon the giving of others. The Levite was the priest. When the 12 tribes came into the land of the promise only one tribe did not receive land so they could be self sufficient. That was the priestly tribe or the tribe of Levi. This tribe would be dependent upon the sharing of the others. The widow, the fatherless and the alien were all without certain rights in the Hebrew community. The word for *widow* in Hebrew is close to the word for *mute* which indicates that she had no voice in the community. A widow did have some protection by the law, but most of the laws had to do with a way for her to remarry. The fatherless and the alien also lacked rights, could not own property and care for themselves. All of these were directly dependent upon the giving and the sharing of the community.

The worshipper of Deuteronomy understood that his giving was an act of provision for those who did not have the ability to care for themselves. As we began this sermon I said that sacred giving was both vertical – that is an act of worship, but it is also an act of compassion for others that God has commanded us to care for. It is true that giving to a fund for Haiti and other places

where there is great need is an opportunity to care for those who cannot care for themselves. There will be moments when we should give in response to these moments of need. Yet, I would suggest that if you want to make a difference in this world one day after another, then giving to your church is the way to do it. This church is on mission along with our mission partners. Everyday in this city, in this state, nation and world there are people's lives being changed because you gave to the Lord through this congregation and this congregation shared its portion with others. There are people with hope in rural Kentucky. There are people with lights on and heat on this winter because of your compassion through North Raleigh Ministries. There are missionaries caring all over the world because of your mission gifts. There are homeless families who have a safe place to sleep while they find permanent living arrangements because we open up this campus for them sleep. There are lonely people, hurting people, and searching people who have found God and found community through the ministries of this church. Giving becomes sacred giving when it is accompanied by compassion.

Rousseau once said "When a man dies he carries in his clenched hands only that which he has given away."

There is in the human heart something that is stirred when we witness the suffering of others that causes us to give. I want to encourage you to not wait for such a moment but to adopt sacred giving as a way of life. Sacred giving is about worship, remembrance, thanksgiving, obedience and compassion. Sacred giving is deciding that I will not withhold from God and others that which is holy, not mine, the sacred portion. ♦



Trinity Baptist Church ♦ 4815 Six Forks Road ♦ Raleigh, NC 27609 ♦ 919.787.3740

www.tbcraleigh.com ♦ jroberts@tbcraleigh.com