**Firstfruits and Faith**

Based on [Luke 4:1-13](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk4.1-13)

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Lent 1, St. Valentine’s Day

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In the business world companies sometimes give Christmas or year end bonuses to employees. **To my understanding, bonuses are awarded when the company makes enough money to meet its profit quota.** If the company is doing well, if the company is prospering, only the does it reward employees by skimming some of the fat off of the top of the company's ledger.

Contrast this business view of profit, and incentive, and reward with the way God has his people regard Him. **At the time of our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy, the Israelites were wandering the wilderness and about to enter the Promised Land.** Then God gives them a command, something to observe when they arrive and settle therein. He commands them to take all the first fruits of the land, the first produce, and put it in a basket and give it to the priest, and the priest will lay it at the altar for an offering to the Lord.

This offering of the firstfruits to God makes no sense to the world. To the world, it makes sense to give only from your abundance. To the world, a person or business needs to make sure its affairs and assets are in order and secure for survival before they give to charity or to God. **And think about what this means to the Israelites, that they are commanded to give the first of their produce, before the rest is ripe and harvested.** A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. The firstfruits that you have in hand are worth more than the second and third fruits that have yet to be produced and harvested. There could be a flood, or drought, or famine. The best way to do business, it seems would be to collect the first fruits for yourself and your family, whatever surplus you have, give that to the Lord. After all, he doesn’t need it as much as you do.

By giving God the firstfruits, Israel was to acknowledge that all good things come from God and that everything belongs to God. **Giving the firstfruits was a way of expressing trust in God's provision**; just as He provided the first fruits, so He would provide the rest of the crops that were needed. It was an exercise in faith, and faith pleases the Lord.

In Genesis chapter 4 Cain and Abel, the first sons of Adam and Eve, offer their sacrifices to the Lord. Scripture says, “**In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord and offering of the fruit of the ground, 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, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard**.” Abel the shepherd brought the firstborn of his flock to the Lord, but Cain the farmer didn’t bring the firstfruits of his harvest. And the Lord had regard for Abel’s offering, but not for Cain’s. And Cain, in a jealous fit of anger, murders his brother Abel.

It is often remarked that the reason God had regard for Abel’s offering is that Abel offered his in faith, while Cain offered his without faith. And that is possible, since the scriptures say, “**Without faith it is impossible to please God**” (Hebrews 11:6). But how do we know Abel offered in faith and Cain did not? **Because Abel offered the firstborn of his flock, trusting that the almighty God would provide him with more lambs, as he was gracious enough to provide him with the first.** Cain did not trust the lord with the firstfruits, and anything done without trusting the Lord is sin.

The season of Lent has begun, a season of repentance and self-denial. Yes, faith in Christ involves self-denial. Jesus says in Luke 9:23, “**If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.**” How does this word of self-denial comport with the modern teaching of self-affirmation and self-esteem? Popular Christian preachers today turn the gospel on its ear, into a form of self-help. “**Love your neighbor as yourself means you first must love yourself**.” And “**God helps those who first help themselves**. And of course, “**Put yourself first, then you’ll be in a position to help others**.” It follows the same worldly logic, that what God would have us do is look after our earthly well-being first before we can make time for the Lord and our Neighbor. But Jesus says, "**Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all of these earthly things will be added to you**." All of these worldly sort of teachings, that say you must get your life, yourself, your job and your goals in order first, that your earthly welfare is to be your priority...are thinly-veiled exercises in unbelief. It withholds for the self the firstfruits of God’s provision. It exalts the self, rather than waiting for God to exalt.

Lent is intended to remind us that we bring nothing into this world and we take nothing away. It is not by our own power that we live, but it is by the grace of God that we live and breath and have our being. Traditionally there are three Lenten disciplines that the Christian is encouraged to undertake: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. **Christians should be about these things all the time in one fashion or another, not just Lent.** For Jesus encourages these things in his sermon on the mount. Prayer is not something we do in our spare time, but it is a kind of firstfruit. We pray before we go into surgery, before we face any trial or hardship. We pray before the day begins and before we sleep we pray, because life is not sustained by our time management or by how much we accomplish, but by the Lord who provides for those who ask.

Fasting and almsgiving, these are practices in giving something up that you already have and are exercises in faith, just as the giving up of the firstfruits to God was in the Old Testament.

Fasting is a hard concept today. We live in a culture that is blind to the glory of the cross, a world that sees no purpose in suffering. Euthanasia, "the right to die" as it’s called, is becoming more and more acceptable an idea. Why prolong suffering when a person is simply going to die anyway? What good will that do? So too with giving something up that makes us happy. What’s the point? The point is that our life belongs to the lord, and we are called to bear the cross of disease and suffering, knowing that God has in store for us a harvest of eternal life.

On the other hand, people today fast all the time. It’s called "dieting" and "physical training." They do it in service to their waistline. They do it as athletes to enhance their physical performance. **Why not fast in service to God?...not that God needs your fasting or is impressed by your willpower.**  But fasting and self-denial are useful in order to subdue the flesh, for training in righteousness, and as a reminder that we are to worship the Giver and not the Gift. Paul talks about the enemies of the cross and he says, "**Their end is destruction, their god is their belly...with minds set on earthly things" (Philippians 3:19).** Your belly is not your God and you don't need to please him all the time. Fasting trains the flesh to acknowledge that man does not live by bread alone, and that the abundance we have is by the grace of God, not our capitalizing on what we have been given.

St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:25, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. **They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.** So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

Our Lord Jesus, immediately after his baptism, was driven out by the spirit into the wilderness. And he ate nothing for forty days. He fasted and the devil used it as an opportune time to tempt him. And the devil tempted him to deny his cross and take up himself. He tempted Jesus to break the fast and make bread out of stone. He tempted him with all the glory of the kingdoms of the world. He tempted him to put God to the test. And whereas our first parents, Adam and Eve in their abundance were overcome by one temptation of the devil. Jesus overcame multiple temptations while he was fasting and waiting upon God to deliver him.

Satan will use our abundance against us, but an impoverished spirit calls upon the Lord. There are too many instances in the scripture to mention of people and nations who God brings low so that they may repent and call upon his name. Scripture says, "A broken and contrite spirit, Lord, you will not despise."

Now, one can easily fall off of the other side of the horse. **One can fast and give alms and devote extensive time to prayer thinking that by these things, they please God and earn salvation.** Certainly not! All of our self-chosen works are filthy rags before God. **There is only one righteous man, one holy man, one man who can stand before the throne of God blameless and that is Jesus Christ, who offered himself as a sacrifice to pay for our sin and cover us with his righteousness.** He offered his innocent life on the cross--the firstfruits of his glory--knowing that from it God would yield an abundant crop of eternal life. Christ says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Christ has done all for all. He has died and is risen again as the firstfruits of a new creation. **God gave his only son first, so that he may yield a crop of all those who believe.** 1 Corinthians 22-23, "**For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.**" You belong to Christ, and as he has already offered the firstfruits, your harvest of eternal life is sure to come, for the Lord is faithful and he will do it. Romans 8:29 says, "**For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers**."

So we can fast without disfiguring our faces. We can pray in secret. We can give alms without our left hand knowing what we are doing, because our Father in secret knows. He knows what we need to support this body and life and he will provide. And even when we face times of famine and pestilence we know God's promise, "**The present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us**."