

Impractical Presents: Giving First and Best Instead of Last and Worst (Prov. 3:9) – Chris Altrock – December 13, 2009

Last summer Kendra and I baptized Jordan at Highland’s summer camp. Leading up to Jordan’s baptism, we had many discussions with her about life with God. There were many other parents at Highland who had similar conversations with their kids this year.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs find a parent and a child engaged in a similar conversation. Most of the chapters in this section begin with the words, “My son...”—a father having a faith discussion with his son. For nine chapters the parent tries to summarize for the child what life with God is really about.

One particularly thought-provoking summary given by the Proverbs Dad is Prov. 3:5-10: *5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. 9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; 10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. (Prov. 3:5-10 TNIV).*

The parent uses the word “honor” - *Honor the LORD*, he says in vs. 9. That’s an important word. In this ancient culture, the word “honor” meant “to be heavy,” or “to have weight.”¹ To show honor to a person meant to demonstrate that the person was “heavy” or “weighty” or of great significance to us. In some ways, the word “honor” governs this passage. For the parent, life with God means living in a way that demonstrates that God is “heavy” or “weighty” or of great significance. The rest of the passage illustrates what it looks like to honor God.

I’ll use five symbols to summarize the rest of this passage: a heart, hands, the number 1, a blue ribbon, and a plus sign. Those symbols capture what the parent teaches regarding a life in which God has weight.

The parent begins with the heart: *5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.* A life which says “God is heavy to me” starts with what’s in the heart. Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Submit to him. Fear him. It has to do with what’s inside.

And that’s crucial, because the toughest words Jesus spoke were about religious people who acted religious but had nothing religious in their hearts. Jesus called them “hypocrites”—a word which referred to acting. Jesus couldn’t stand people who, on the outside, acted like God was important, but, on the inside, had nothing of God at all. It has to do with the heart.

And that's an important consideration when it comes to our Special Contribution for World and Urban Missions today. It's easy to just give money and not give our hearts. True, we must meet the challenge of actually giving \$148,000. But the greater need is to meet the challenge to love those whom God loves as God loves. This contribution is not simply about giving money. It's about cultivating a heart which loves the poor and loves the lost.

But the parent doesn't stop there. He moves from the heart to the hand: *9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; 10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.* A life in which God has weight, the parent says, starts with what's in your heart. But it doesn't stop there. It proceeds to what you are doing with your hands. It's going to have an outward expression. In vv. 5 and 7 there is an emphasis on inner piety. But that inner piety must now be given an outward manifestation.² Here, that outward manifestation is giving. Whether we like it or not, this parent tells us that to live a life in which God has weight means we've got to look at our giving. One of the primary ways in which we honor the LORD is by giving our wealth.

Specifically, the parent tells us to give our "firstfruits." We are to honor the LORD with our wealth by giving our "firstfruits." What are "firstfruits"? In general, first fruits referred to either the first ripe part of the harvest or the choicest part of a harvest. The first parts or choicest parts of a harvest were considered holy and therefore belonged to the Lord.³ The farmer would bring them to the tabernacle or temple as an offering. He might bring it in its natural state if it were grapes, or other fruit, or cereals. Or he might prepare it into oil or flour or dough. The priest would then take that offering and present it to the Lord.⁴ Firstfruits were either the first ripe part of the harvest or the choicest parts of a harvest. They were collected and given to the LORD.

One aspect of firstfruit giving is that it was literally "first." It was the first ripe part of the harvest. And as such it represented a kind of giving that had priority. When you give the first of something that indicates priority. It was literally "first." The parent tells us that if we want a life in which God has weight, we must practice a first kind of giving.

Think for a moment about things in your life that are "first." Maybe the first thing you husbands do when you walk in from work is kiss your wife. It's a way of showing priority to her, of showing how important she is. Maybe the first thing you do when you get home from school is complete your homework. It shows how important doing well in school is to you. When we want to prioritize something, give it significance, we put it first.

The farmer in the Old Testament would do the same with his wealth. The first part of that harvest that ripened would be collected and brought to the Lord. It was a way of prioritizing giving, of honoring God.

And here's the challenging question: is *your* giving first giving? Is the way you devote your wealth to God a "first" kind of giving? Kendra and I give Jacob and Jordan an allowance every other week. When I get paid, they get paid. And the first thing we require them to do when I

give them their allowance is put 10% in a box or envelope which is then placed in the collection tray on a Sunday morning. We're trying to teach them a "first" kind of giving. There are several at Highland whom I know, at the first of the month, write out their checks for the contributions for the month. The first thing they at the beginning of the month is write the checks for each Sunday's contribution. Having allocated that money, they can then spend what's left on savings, retirement, and daily necessities. That's a first kind of giving.

Sadly, this kind of giving has declined. A book entitled Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money explores this. The book reveals that if just the "committed Christians" (those who attend church at least a few times a month) would tithe, there would be an extra 46 billion dollars a year for kingdom work. That \$46 billion would fund 150,000 new missionaries; 50,000 additional theological students in the developing world; 5 million micro loans to poor entrepreneurs; the food, clothing and shelter for all 6,500,000 refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; all the money for a global campaign to prevent and treat malaria; and resources to sponsor 20 million needy children worldwide. The authors write, "*Reasonably generous financial giving of ordinary American Christians would generate staggering amounts of money that could literally change the world.*" That's what first kind of giving could do. Do you remember the reports we heard three weeks ago about the good work going on in the Philippines, Ukraine, and Papua New Guinea? Do you remember the reports we heard last week about the good work going on through HopeWorks, Agape, and MUM? Do you remember David Jordan mentioning how the city has asked FIT to double in size? Can you imagine how all of that good work could multiply and how all of those requests could be met if every person at Highland just tithed, gave our first 10% each month to God?

But sadly, 20% of American Christians give nothing to the church. The vast majority of American Christians give less than 3%. The authors of Passing the Plate find that personal disposable income has quadrupled yet the percentage of money donated by American Christians has fallen.⁵ Proverbs calls us back to a "first" kind giving. It's how we honor God.

But there's more. "Firstfruits" not only carries with it the idea of "first" giving. It carries with it the idea of "best" giving.⁶ "Firstfruits" could refer not only to the first ripe part of a harvest. It could also refer to the best part of the harvest.⁷ It was a kind of giving that represented the very best of what you had. It wasn't just "first" giving. It was also "best" giving.

And if "first" giving is a challenge, "best" giving is even more a challenge. How many of us can look at what we put in the plate each Sunday and say, "That's the very best I can do"? Many of us regularly give our best at our jobs. Many of us give our best to our kids. Many of us give our best on a team or in the classroom. But how many of us give our best in the collection tray?

I'd like to invite Michelle Betts up right now. Michelle is one of our Children's Ministers. Michelle, you recently did a live experiment of "best giving" that involved some of our children and some cupcakes. Share with us what you did...

Best giving is not easy. But the Proverbs Dad tells us that if we want a life that says “God’s weighty to me” then we’ll show it not just by what’s in our hearts but by what’s done with our hands—first and best giving.

But there is one more aspect to this firstfruits kind of giving. In the Old Testament, firstfruits not only represented first giving and best giving. It also represented what I’ll call “rest” giving—giving the rest of what we have. We’ll symbolize this with a plus sign. The firstfruit of the harvest was presented to the Lord in recognition that the entire harvest belonged to him.⁸ The entire harvest was devoted to God even though only the first part was brought to the temple. The farmer recognized that the whole crop was God’s.

The parent calls us to a kind of giving that goes far beyond just what we put in the plate. If our giving only consists of the check we place in the plate, we’ve missed the point. That gift is just one part of the whole. God’s desire is that we live a life in which all we have and all we are is devoted to his use.

Those we support today through our Special Contribution are great examples of “rest” giving. They’ve given their whole selves to God. Ron Wade works tirelessly as the director of Hope Works. Jim Harbin is pulling overtime while helping MUM transition to become a non-profit organization and continue its life-changing ministry. Nathan and Karen Luther packed up all they owned and moved to the Philippines to minister there. They are all generous givers—not only of their money but of their lives. They’ve given the rest.

God’s calling us to the same. We desperately need to reach our goal of \$148,000 today. And we need to reach our weekly contribution goal of \$30,900. But we could reach those goals and still miss the kind of giving to which we’ve been called. A life in which God is weighty doesn’t end with what we put in the plate—it begins.

In his book *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller offers the following story:⁹ *Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, "My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as [the gardener] turned to go the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing. But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot—what if you gave the king something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. So the king said, "Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse." Giving is a matter of both the heart and the hands. When both heart and hands are engaged, our giving becomes a token of our love and*

respect for God. And the kind of giving that most honors God is first giving, best giving, and rest giving.

Let's do that right now. The trays are going to be passed one time and we'll give toward our weekly contribution and our Special Contribution for World and Urban Missions. As you place your contribution in the tray, ask yourself, "Does this reflect a desire to prioritize giving? Does this reflect the very best I can give? Am I willing to not only put this in the tray, but myself as well?" And as the trays are passed, we'll watch an interview of Nathan and Karen Luther, their children, and Nathan's parents—all missionaries in the Philippines. Let's pray first...

¹ Bruce K. Walke The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15 The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 2004), 247.

² Ibid.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, Tyndale Bible Dictionary (Tyndale, 2001), 486.

⁴ P. Levertoff, "First Fruits," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Fully Revised Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1982), 307-308.

⁵ Ron Sider, "A Lot of Lattés," Books & Culture (November/December 2008).

⁶ James E. Smith, The Wisdom Literature and Psalms (College Press, 1996), Pr 3:1-12.

⁷ Longman, 134.

⁸ Smith.

⁹ Timothy Keller, The Prodigal God (Dutton, 2008), 60-61.