



FORGET-ME-NOT: STEWARDSHIP AND TITHE

Scripture Passage: Deuteronomy 8:17-18, NIV

(17) You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." (18) But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

Introduction

Though often portrayed as a New Testament idea, stewardship and tithe find their beginnings as far back as God's directions to Adam in the Garden to care for creation (Genesis 1:28) and to Able who offered the "firstborn of his flock" (Genesis 4:4). The scriptures are flooded with reminders to give back to the Lord what he has given first to us, and yet you'd be hard pressed to find a pastor today who doesn't quake a little when they discuss stewardship and tithing with their congregations.

Why do we shrink away from this command of God? How can we as men and women of God become more faithful in our giving to the storehouse of God?

Background and Context

Deuteronomy has often been called the repetition of the law, and this is certainly true, but it is also a series of farewell messages and sermonettes from Moses just before he dies and the Israelites enter the Promised Land.

The opening chapters are written down as a historical summary, which serves as a prompt for the people to remember who they are: God's chosen people. He issues a reminder of all that God has done for them and, perhaps most importantly, who God is.

"Chapter 7 warns of alien dangers lingering in the land, while Chapter 8 turns to the dangers inherent in the land's very goodness."¹ As the people are preparing to enter the Promise Land, Moses sternly instructs the people *not to forget the Lord*.

As we come to verses 17 and 18 in chapter 8, Moses emphasizes that the people will face the temptation to take credit for their new life. Moses entreats the people to give God credit and to remember that it is only through his covenant that they are able to take hold of the land before them.

1) Forget-Me-Not

Moses presses the Israelites not to forget the Lord. After all the miracles they had seen, how could they possibly forget the Lord who brought them up and out of Egypt, the land of slavery, guided them through the desert by a pillar of cloud and fire, who brought forth water from the rock, and who fed them from his very hand?

As we continue, let me share with you a story told about the myosotis – a small, delicate, and beautiful blue flower.

The story goes that, during Creation, God gave plants not only a form, a scent, and a color, but also a name. One of these plants had small blue flowers with beautiful tiny yellow hearts in the center.

Impressed by everything going on around him during the Creation process, the plant looked about in amazement at how all the plants were being given names. As a result, the little flower forgot to pay attention. Finally, when all the plants had been named, he realized he'd forgotten his own.

¹ Green, Stephen G. *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2016. Pg. 110

"Do you know my name?" he asked all the plants, big and little, "I've forgotten mine." But none of them could tell him. In the end, after some considerable hesitation, the little plant approached God and admitted: "I've done something rather foolish. I've forgotten my name. What's my name?" God shook his head as he replied: "Forget-me-not!"

And so, I think it is with us. We as individuals and as a community get caught up in all that is going on in the world around us that we forget our name – we forget who we are.

We have forgotten that our name is the Body of Christ. We have forgotten that our name is Child of God. The loss of our names results in the loss of identity.

Moses is saying to his people, *do not forget who you are*: "You may say to yourself, my power and the strength of my hands has produced this wealth for me" (Verse 17). He is warning the people not to forget their identity, because, when they forget who they are, they may create their own identity – one that no longer reflects the image of God in the world, but rather reflects the selfish, self-seeking, proud, image of humanity.

When we forget who we are, we forget the Lord. We forget to be faithful in our praise, worship and giving. Knowing who we are rightly puts who God is into perspective.

2) Our Identity

Perhaps we need to take a moment and, like the small Forget-Me-Not flower, approach God and confess that we have forgotten our name, and ask him to remind us who we are.

We Are Stewards, Not Owners

Tom Felder is credited with saying, "When we give to God, we are just taking our hands off what already belongs to Him"².

Small children are interesting to observe, because around the time they are eighteen months to two years old, they begin to proclaim "mine" emphatically! They quickly learn to lay claim to the world around them. They develop the attitude of ownership early and so the battle to remember "who we are" begins. Before we learn to walk, we learn that if we want it, then it must be ours.

Our consumer driven society promotes a self-indulgent lifestyle that says the real winners in life are those who have the most financial security. "Material comfort is one of the greatest temptations for the people of God. Privileged circumstances often cause Israel [and us!] to overlook the reliance upon Yahweh"³.

This idea of ownership is central to the concept of Christian stewardship. Psalms 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." There is a real sense that as we rediscover our identity, we must rediscover who holds the deed to it all.

Recognizing God's ownership of all that we have tears down the selfish barricades that we create to protect our "stuff." As long as we believe that we own it, we will be tempted to resort to our two-year-old selves and insist that it is, "mine," "I worked for this, not God," or "I deserve it."

Moses said to the Israelites, "You may say to yourself, my power and the strength of my hand have produced this wealth for me" (verse 17).

We Are Dependents

As the Forget-Me-Not was dependent on God for a form, smell, color and name, we are also dependent on God and his sustaining hand. The Israelites, throughout the Old Testament, and Christians today are eager to cry to God when things look bad, when our backs are against the wall, and it's all out of our hands. Yet, the very moment we are looking over the hill into the land of milk and honey, we book it down the mountain and leave God in the dust because suddenly "we got this".

² Felder, Tom. *The Tithing Principle*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011. Pg. 23

³ Green, Stephen G. *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2016. Pg. 110

Recognizing that we are dependent on God for our very existence forces us to realize that our identity is also found in knowing that we are God's children – God's dependents.

When we file our taxes in this country, the tax form calls our children dependents, meaning they cannot take care of or support themselves. Parents often require that their offspring participate in the care of the household as a way to give back and as a way to show their gratitude for the provision granted them, for the care and support that they cannot give themselves.

Likewise, God asks us as his dependents to participate in the household, that is, his creation. We do this by being good stewards of creation and by giving the tithes and offering that God our Father asks of us.

As we rediscover our identity as dependents, we are more easily able to sacrifice gratitude rather than succumb to pride: "...It is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (verse 16). Moses suggests just a few verses before that "when you have eaten and are satisfied, *praise* the Lord your God for the good land he has *given* you" (verse 10). If we are praising the Lord for what he has given us, then our identity becomes more focused on worshiping the Lord than on worshiping ourselves.

We Are Made To Worship

We are made to worship. In worshiping our Creator, we become more human. Worship is the creation glorifying the creator, and part of the way that is accomplished is through stewardship. When we offer our tithes and offerings to the Lord through our local churches, we are acknowledging that God is the owner and we are the dependents; we also recognize that we are required to participate in the keeping of the household. As an embodied extension of all the congregations' praises, confessions, and laments, the church is invited to bring forward tithes and offerings as an embodied sacrifice...placing oneself on the alter in *self-sacrifice*⁴.

All true Christian stewardship begins with the confession of what God has done in the Old Testament and with the Israelites, but also in the acceptance and appreciation of what God has done through Jesus Christ.

“Just as surely as the power of the gospel stands at the heart of all true worship, so worship itself stands at the true center of the Christian life”⁵.

In true worship, our vision may be broadened and enlarged to see the world as God has seen it and as Jesus Christ leads us to see all of humanity. Jesus saw the world in its full dimension when he commanded his followers to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19 NIV).

Some of us are called to physically “go,” but we are all called to “give.” As stewards of the gospel who know themselves to be agents of reconciliation, every time we praise and adore God, we ought to know him also as the God and Father of all humanity. In that knowledge, we discover the full scope of our stewardship – we will see all the peoples of the world to be in God’s picture.

As we give to our local churches, we know that the mission of God is being fulfilled, not only locally, but globally.

Oliver Powell says, “In the end, there is only one motivation for a Christian’s giving: he gives because God has given so lavishly constantly, beyond all his deserving...When all has been said and done, we give out of a profound sense of gratitude”⁶.

Conclusion:

Moses warned the Israelites long ago not to forget the Lord and not to forget their identity. Knowing who we are puts into perspective that we are not owners, but stewards. We are dependent upon God for our provision and sustenance, and God alone is worthy of our worship and gratitude.

⁴ Peterson, Brent D., *Created to Worship*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012. Pg. 139-140

⁵ McKay, Arthur R., *Servants and Stewards*. Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1963. Pg. 7

⁶ Powell, Oliver, *Stewardship Facts*. Department of Stewardship and Benevolence, 1962-1963. Pg. 39

Our identity as individuals cannot be separated from our identity as the Christian community. Our identity as the Christian community can likewise not be separated from our commitment to the Great Commission. As we begin to give in ways that glorify God, ways that show our faith in and dependence on him, we can respond to the Holy Spirit's wooing to remember Christ's sacrifice and to emulate his giving example.

Let us not be like the *myosotis* who forgot its name. Let us not forget that it is not *our* own power and strength that sustains us, but God who gives us the abilities through his covenant. We are granted the abilities not strictly for our own benefit, but so that we can see the world through the eyes of God and participate in the reconciliation of all creation to a right relationship with the Father.