



STEWARDSHIP OF TITHES AND TALENTS

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Deuteronomy 26:12-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 12) When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, (v. 13) then you shall say before the LORD your God: "I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments: (v. 14) I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God, doing just as you commanded me. (v. 15) Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors-- a land flowing with milk and honey."

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

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The occasion for this passage is Stewardship Sunday, the requisite moments in our church lives when we (have to—many of us kicking and screaming) reflect on giving tithes and offerings for the support of the church and its work. Though difficult for some of us, such Sundays can be occasions to remind our congregations that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” and that God wants to do more with what we give than just sustain the church; God wants us to transform the world.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Deuteronomy 26:12-15

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I am one of those preachers who have a difficult time “begging,” as it can sometimes feel, when it is necessary to make the “appeal” to others to give to God’s work. Perhaps this is because I fear congregants are frequently uncertain about what happens to their gifts once they are given, and if the point is just to be a blessing to the preacher. Perhaps it is also because I do not always explain as fully as I ought in the limited time I have, the sovereignty of God over all of creation, and how our giving should be a blessing to those for whom a blessing seems long overdue. For these reasons, I resonate with the sentiments of this passage that describes one type of tithe that demonstrates God’s sovereignty, and God’s love for those in need..

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Our passage concerns the notion of a “tithe,” a word heard frequently on “Stewardship Sundays” throughout the African American religious community. But we should be initially aware that the tithe discussed in this instance is perhaps less familiar than we might initially expect. For us, the tithe is the tenth of our income (whether gross or net) that is given on Sunday mornings after a pay period. But for the people of Israel/Judah, tithes were much more complicated. In this instance the tithe referenced was a triennial tithe, one that was offered every third year.

Traditionally we understand the tithe as the income that supports the church and pays for the salary and benefits of the church workers, including pastors. But in Israel/Judah, the tithe, again, was a much more complex concept. In this instance, instead of going directly to the Temple to support the activities of the central sacrificial cult and pay the priests, this particular tithe was commanded by God to be given to support the *levi, ger, yathom, and almanah* or the “Levite, the alien-stranger, the orphan, and the widow,” as they are traditionally designated in English. Because of this shift in the recipient of the tithe, we should recognize that tithes are not only meant to be focused on those within the sanctuary; certain tithes were intentionally directed beyond the worship sites and cult functionaries to the people who were suffering and in need. The Levites were the priestly functionaries who had no land to sustain them and were thus dependent on the offerings of others for their survival. The other three members of this quartet (widows, orphans, and aliens) are familiar to us not just from prophetic literature, but they can also be found in the Torah (Pentateuch), in the Psalter, and in the wisdom books. Though we tend to think that caring for these three groups is a “prophetic” concern it is more than that; it is a core theological concern for the Yahwistic community that is expressed in every layer of the Old Testament and the New!

These three are clearly at a disadvantage because of their diminished social status. *Gers* were strangers who migrated to dwell among God's people. Because they are not indigenous people, they do not have their own land to cultivate, and in an agrarian society, people were dependent for sustenance on those who had land to let them glean (cf. Ruth 2:1-10) or who could employ or enslave them. *Yathom* and *almanah* were fatherless children and widowed women respectively, who were at a great social disadvantage because, in the male-dominated society in which they lived, without an adult male they would have had no one who is able to negotiate deals in public space, secure contracts, or retain land ownership on their behalf. Each of these three socially disadvantaged groups is in a precarious position, literally depending on the fidelity of others to God's commandments for their survival.

There are many potent points for reflection that leap forth from this passage. Because of space considerations, I will only list four.

1) The commandment to care for the fatherless and the widows, literally those with no men in their lives contributing to their survival, should resonate with us. In our contexts, this would include children growing up in predominantly female headed single family homes as well as single mothers struggling to make ends meet as the sole breadwinners. Just this past week, I came across an article in a local entertainment magazine that explored how difficult it is to support a family on a single woman's income, particularly given the persistent disparities in wages between women and men.

Such a passage should be a wake up call to all African American fathers who have left the home (or who were never in it!) leaving a struggling partner and children behind. It was not easy to survive under these circumstances 2,700 years ago, and as a man raised for several years by a single mother, I can attest that it is not easy today. The presence of a committed male in a home can mean the very survival of an entire family, and his absence its death.

Such a passage should also be a wake up call to us as well, reminding us that the care for the fatherless is also a matter for each of us in the Christian community. The tithe here functions symbolically for the support that is due from us to the fatherless in our churches and communities, as well as to those single mothers who are struggling each day to raise families alone.

2) A commandment to care for the ger is a poignant reminder, during this age where the immigration of our neighbors from the south is constantly a political and economic concern that God has, as we say in North Carolina, a "dog in this fight." The matter of Latino immigration has become particularly contentious in the past few years in the wake of a weakened economy and less resources for cities. The increasing number of those who are in this nation without legal permission, some estimate this number at 12-14 million, has also fueled a vigorous backlash against new immigrants.

In light of such arguments, we need to note that we would all be served by a system that treated all people, immigrants and indigenous, equally. Only when there is equal pay for equal work can there ever be a fair system where all people can compete on the same terms for the same jobs. The very policies that would serve "their" interests are the same policies that protect "ours" as

well. But more than prudence, the concern for the immigrant is God's concern and therefore must be respected as such. Here such arguments that suggest "they" are taking "our" goods and resources find a fitting end, for in our pericope it is clear that "our" resources in the form of a tithe, are God-ordained to be used to aid those in need.

3) As we noted above, the tithe is not just an internal concern focused on the sanctuary and those employed by the church. We may think of the tithe as that which supports the work of the church inside the four walls, but we should also note that this passage moves the concern beyond those walls into communities with those in need all around us.

Such an understanding of tithes can be transformative, reminding us of what is truly at stake in stewardship; God is concerned not just for provision for the church, but also for a world of people in need just outside its doors. When we view the tithe through this lens it is a reminder that our stewardship responsibility flows from the sanctuary to the world. In our communities riddled with needs we cannot afford to wait for the government or social service agencies to offer solutions to the problems that ail our people; God has laid part of that obligation on **us**.

4) In this vein, it is important to recognize that passages like this that emphasize justice for the poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized are not theoretical in orientation. They are found in Scripture because the people during that time were in need and required a remedy. In a world where there was no other option, the people turned to the Lord for help from on high in order to sustain them in their times of greatest need.

Similarly, we should note that one of the means of sustenance that God provides is us. The word of the Lord is a potent reminder that our God holds us responsible to meet the needs of the others who are around us in need. While we may not think of this means of provision as miraculous, we should recognize the miracle involved when we step beyond our self-interests to care for others. This is an expression of Christian Love as tangible action and a testimony that Christ is born anew in us; our giving, then, becomes an act of Love, fulfilling God's call on our lives toward our sisters and brothers and meeting the needs of those who would otherwise be forced to do without amid the abundance many others of us enjoy.

I encourage you to delve deeply into all that it means that God has entrusted us with goods from God's own storehouse of finances and talents to be used to meet not only our own needs, but also the needs of others. Such a point serves to disrupt the rampant materialism that threatens to destroy our people by offering an alternative view of property and possessions in light of God's ownership and concern for us and others.

Charge

The commandment to give a tithe, which targets the needy in our midst, speaks for itself. It is a reminder that we have a responsibility to our God that will have an impact on the lives of others. Most of all it is a sign of the depth of our faith and our willingness to do what the Word says do.

Descriptive Details

Being aware of the familiar concepts of tithes and their association with worship places, imagine how this context is altered by this passage. The feelings of hunger, alienation, and full dependence of the poor on the giving of others should stand out to us as well. Finally, we have no shortage of models from which we can paint a picture of those in need in our passage; by reflecting on what need looks like in our contexts among those similarly situated we can bring this passage to life.