

LEFTOVERS
Exodus 23:19

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I could feel the excitement in the hallway this morning – not quite at Easter anticipation levels, but surely the annual stewardship sermon is a very close second. If necessary, our ushers are prepared to bring in some chairs to accommodate this crowd. Stewardship – your favorite, my favorite. Can't wait to talk about it.

Exodus 23:19 is our stewardship theme for this year: “Bring the best of the first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord.” Simply said, “Bring your best” or “Give God your very best.”

Bringing one's best to the house of worship reminds me of a story very appropriate for mid-November, as we head into turkey time. Paul Harvey once shared a true story about a lady who called the Butterball Turkey Hotline with a very unusual dilemma. She had a turkey that had been in the freezer for 23 years. She wanted to know if the turkey was safe to eat. The Butterball specialist said the old bird would be edible only if it had remained at zero degrees all of those years. He quickly added that the turkey would have probably lost its tastiness and would not recommend eating it. The caller responded to this information by saying, “That's what we thought. We'll just give it to the church.”

Apparently, the donor of the tainted, tasteless turkey was unaware of the guidelines for giving found in Exodus 23.

I'm not a very good gardener. A bumper crop is seldom when I sow the seeds. Growing great veggies is just so complicated. Too much water? Too little water? Too cold for seeds to germinate? Too hot for tomatoes to make fruit? And bugs beat me to the bounty of my labor every single season.

I, however, try to beat the odds by planting a large variety of veggies for the single fact that the law of averages means that the moisture, PH, and nutrient levels will eventually favor one or two crops. What kills the carrots might just promote the potatoes, so by sowing several kinds of seeds I am almost certain to make something work.

And this year, the okra arrived in an overabundance. And if you don't pick okra today, tomorrow it will be big enough to have its own zip code.

And potatoes were plentiful, too. Lisa reminded me that potatoes can be purchased for just pennies a pound. But it's not the same, is it? We've labored, watered, hoed mounds, and got to go on an exciting, dirt -digging treasure hunt for golden and red potatoes with our very first attempt with spuds.

Though I've seen very few bumper crops through the years, I've taken note that God uses gardening to generate generous spirits. The crop all comes in at once, doesn't it? And, thus, we must share. In some seasons in Amarillo, if you just leave your car unlocked in the parking lot at church, some zucchini enthusiast will fill your car with his extra zucchini. I mean, there is only so much you can do with it. We eat zucchini bread. We make zucchini spaghetti, zucchini sandwiches. Eventually the zeal for zucchini is zero, and you're ready to share it with your neighbor. "Please, please take some of this zucchini!" Gardening is God's way of teaching generosity.

But there is a distinct difference, isn't there? Do we give our friends and family our season's first sweet, perfectly picked watermelon, our first fruit, our best effort? Or do we hand over a sack of two sizes too big, tough as toe nails zucchini?

God does not want our Zeppelin-size zucchini. God wants His worshipers to bring Him the first and the best of all their produce. Bring your best as your gift to the house of worship. This gold-level giving went beyond just the first fruit of the field; it also included the livestock and lambs. The rancher was to bring his best just as surely as the farmer.

In Malachi 1:8-10, we read,

"But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the Lord of hosts. "But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?" Says the Lord of hosts. "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar? I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you."

God expects our sacrifices and offerings to be our best, a returned portion of His good and generous gifts to us, brought as a heartfelt act of worship. By giving God our best, by bringing our first fruits to the house of worship, we have responded to the giver of all good gifts with both gratitude and devotion.

But when our giving becomes mundane, and we replace heartfelt devotion with reluctant duty, we fail to measure up as givers. When we begin to calculate how little we can give and get by with God, we haven't given our best in worship. God had told them how to give: "Bring animals to the sacrifice that are without defect" (Exodus 12:5; 29:1; Leviticus 1:3), "those without a blemish" (Leviticus 22:21; Numbers 19:2). But God's people were showing up with sick, blind, and lame beasts as substitutes for their authentic gifts to God. They were giving God the very beasts no one would buy at the market. Malachi asked if such second-rate gifts would be good enough for a secular governor. Of course not! If such gifts were not good enough for the governor, why would you even think about bringing them to God? If you're going to show up with less than your best, God says just close the temple doors, because second best is no real sacrifice. No real act of worship.

The unblemished lambs, of course, were a symbol of the future Lamb, the Lamb of God, the Christ, who was the lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:19). The cheap, marred sacrifices of Malachi's time left much to be desired. They gave God their leftovers.

"No, thank you," says the one who expects our best.

Imagine if I called up Lisa and Chan (our daughter at home) and said, "Hey, I've got some great news. Don't cook. I'm bringing an abundance of food home tonight." They sit in anticipation about the delicacies soon to be delivered for dinner. "Will he bring home piping hot pizza or big burritos?" But I soon arrive with a greasy, cold sack. "Here it is, honey." With a smile, I hand over a bag of less-than-desirable leftovers. "You girls go ahead, I am stuffed. I had two big burritos for breakfast, and all that pizza at lunch was just too much. You guys can take your pick. One of you can have my half-eaten burrito, and the other can have a partial slice of pepperoni pizza."

What? Your big surprise was a bitten off burrito and a pushed aside piece of cold pizza?

How does God feel when we arrive at worship with leftovers? Less than our best. Blemished gifts to God.

Maybe those less-than-best, those blemished gifts are a failure to give God the first check of the month, to give Him our first fruits. Or, a failure to give God and His people the priority of our calendar. "Hey, we don't have any big plans this weekend, and the Cowboys don't kick off until 3:00. We might as well just go to church." You "might as well go to church" as if it were the least acceptable alternative for a sunny Sunday.

God sees our second-rate efforts as a sack of greasy leftovers and says, "Just shut the doors and give it a rest."

One last passage – 2 Samuel 24. In 24:1, God is angry, unfettered, and dangerous. David has ordered a census, primarily, perhaps, to establish a military draft and broaden his tax base. The census is a clear departure from old, informal, modestly powered administration. In the old, innocent, tribal world of ancient Israel, a census is not needed, a draft is not forced, because the local militia always rise up at times of trouble. And, taxes are limited because the government is less expansive. You see, this census represents a breakdown of the primary, face-to-face relationships of the people of God, leading to a formal organization of brokered power.

Joab, the general, objects (v. 3). "David, is all this head counting really helpful? Is it necessary? We've always lived by faith and not by force." Joab sees the census for all that it is: a serious shift in modes of power and manipulation, and, therefore, out of step with God's old ways with His chosen people.

But David overcomes his commander and insists on counting heads. You can see the little villages now, invaded by highly organized government forces – swift runners, powerful horses, and royal agents of expansion. Much like the census of Caesar Augustus in Luke 2, this is no innocent head

count but, rather, a tactic of bureaucratic terrorism and turmoil. David comes to discover the dreadedness of using force over faith with God's people.

Suddenly, the king sees his sin of forcing the people and lacking faith in his God. Look at 2 Samuel 24:10.

Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly."

God sends a pick-your-poison response. God offers David three possible punishments for his sin (v. 13). (1) Three years of famine. (2) Flee from your foes for three months while they pursue you. Or (3) Three days of pestilence in the land. Fearing man more than God, David chooses for the people plague and pestilence as punishment for their king's overreaching. As part of Yahweh's anger, an angel begins to punish the people. David cries out (v. 14), "O God, be merciful." As the angel of death moves through the land, he stretches out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, and the Lord relented from the calamity (v. 16). And God said to the angel of destruction, "It is enough! Relax your hand!" And the angel of the Lord stopped the calamity by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

So Gad the prophet was a seer who came saying to David (v. 18), "Go up, erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah" David, now ready to be obedient, goes to Araunah, who sees his king coming and bows before him. "However can I help you?" is the essence of Araunah's attitude. David explains, "I need to buy this threshing floor. I need to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be held back from the people."

"I'll just give it to you," Araunah says in verse 22. "And, hey, I've got some oxen for the burnt offering. And wood – you need some wood for the fire?" Whatever the king needs.

And David says something we all need to hear in verse 24. "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing." And David built an altar there (v. 25), and the Lord was moved and the plague was stopped.

I can't get those words out of my mind: "I will not give to the Lord that which costs me nothing." Will we be like those half-hearted worshipers in Malachi's day who bring God the lame lambs, the sack of greasy leftovers? Our willingness to sacrifice in our pursuit of God reflects just how precious He is or is not to us.

And it really doesn't matter how much we give, does it? It's really how much is left, isn't it? There is no better gold medal giver in the New Testament in the eyes of Jesus than the widow who gives her last two pennies.

"I will not give that which costs me nothing."

When most people think about Oxford, what comes to mind are images of bright minds debating quantum physics or the existence of God. But even the brainiest sometimes need a

lesson in common sense. That's exactly what the bursar at St. John's College – the most richly endowed college at Oxford – delivered when he responded to students occupying his 15th-century quadrangle and refusing to leave until the college divested its oil-company shares. The students wanted the college to sell the more than \$10 million of its endowment now invested in Shell and BP, and they wanted it now.

The Times of London reported that bursar Andrew Parker made them a counteroffer. "I am not able to arrange any divestment at short notice," he wrote. "But I can arrange for the gas central heating in college to be switched off with immediate effect. Please let me know if you support this proposal."

The idea that the students themselves make a fossil-fuel sacrifice did not go over well. One protest organizer complained that Mr. Parker was being flippant, noting that "it's January and it would be borderline dangerous to shut off the central heating." Another suggested Mr. Parker was being provocative.

Again the bursar responded with wisdom: "You are right that I am being provocative, but I am provoking some clear thinking, I hope. It is all too easy to request others to do things that carry no personal cost to yourself. The question is whether you and others are prepared to make personal sacrifices to achieve the goals [you set before others] of environmental improvement (which I support as a goal)."

Surely a worthy lesson applicable far beyond the colleges of Oxford. ("A Heated Oxford Education," *Wall Street Journal*, 2/2/20)

When we sacrifice to God and when we give to his people, the church, the church becomes more dear to us. We can easily give God lip service – our desire to go deeper with God. But it is our willingness to sacrifice that reveals whether our desire is genuine.

Perhaps the painful truth is that while we might accept that we may have to sacrifice, we think we should be able to select what the sacrifice will be and the degree it will cost us. We want to stay in control of the cost. We don't want to become a "living" sacrifice for our Lord.

And God doesn't require the sacrifice because He is needy or demanding, but because He knows we need to sacrifice. Sacrifice sharpens our character, refines our faith, deepens our commitment, and gets our mind off ourself and on to serving others.

And sure, it's not a pleasant process. It takes some of us years to learn the joy of giving God our best, bringing our first fruits to His place of worship to support missions and ministry, to undergird the worship of the Creator of the cosmos.

If you ever get there, it becomes a sweet surrender. The intimacy with God that giving gives us is more valuable than anything that it might actually cost.

And it's not just money, is it? It's our time. It's our talents. It's our priorities. Giving God the best of our everything.

God doesn't want your leftover anything. Teaching a Sunday School class. Supporting the church budget full of missions and ministries. Volunteering to reach out to someone from another culture, from a land foreign to you, and treat them as a friend.

Uncomfortable. Sacrificial. But so much like the God who is the God of all peoples.

So before we show up with the season's third wave of overgrown zucchini, just remember we worship a God who wants that very first sweet watermelon, the tender one we've cared for from the beginning.

So when you measure your offering, your calendar, your energy, your effort – what are you giving to God? Lame lambs? Or, bringing your best. He knew the difference in Malachi's day. And he knows the difference now. Let's join David in declaring, "I will not give the Lord that which costs me nothing."

Sources:

Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

“Question: ‘How do we bring blemished offerings to God (Malachi 1:8)?’”

www.GotQuestions.com.

“I will Not Give That Which Costs Me Nothing,” www.tecartabible.com (daily verses and devotionals).