

Ps 24; Dt 26:1-11; Phil 4:4-9; Jn 6:25-35
Offer God Your Best-First Fruits – 01-15-17
Human Relations Sunday

King David wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains.” (Ps 24:1) This is the worldview of the faithful one who worships our Creator God – and follows the Lord Jesus Christ. He created all the grains, fruits, vegetables and water – all the flesh we consume for life on planet earth. Our fathers and mothers in the faith built altars – Abraham and Sarah – Isaac and Rebekkah – Jacob and Rachel and Leah. When the journey had been successful – when they were safe and secure, when the harvest was in, they first made a sacrifice to God. A measure of grain, a lamb, olive oil, grapes, dates – even bread they had made. Though we have not entered the Holy Land – or Israel/Palestine – still we keep the respect and tradition of our spiritual parents in bringing an offering to God in good times and in bad. Moses instructed God’s people to go to the house of worship and there present the very first fruits of the ground. We do not gobble up these first fruits ourselves. Instead we offer them to God – who caused them to grow in the first place. Our trust is in the Creator – not in the

creation. Our hope is in the Creator – not in the creation. We worship the One who breathed all things into being – not the things He created. It is most pleasing to the Lord to receive this trust and faith. We lay the first fruits before God to honor all that He is – and all that He has done. The Scripture teaches that after we place this offering at the altar, we bow down before Him in adoration and worship. Then, we celebrate all the good things God has done for us and for our family – and for the whole community. We eat together, right?

The gifts – the prayers – the worship – the celebration of the congregation of God’s people – gathered in the name of Jesus Christ – these bring blessing upon the entire surrounding area. It splashes over and God’s grace is super-abundant – not just for you and me, but for all who draw near. God blesses the land, the air, the waters, the plants, the animals and the people where the praises of God’s people are going up. Like our spiritual father, Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing to all whose lives we touch. It is our inheritance in Jesus Christ.

The most important First Fruit we offer is the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul says, “*But*

now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.” (1 Cor 15:20-24 NASB)

So, even as we celebrate a good harvest, a safe journey, the good things of the earth – so, we offer **first and foremost** Jesus Christ for the world. For, Jesus is the only hope of a lost humanity. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by the Lord Jesus.

The best a Jesus-follower can offer to our fellow human beings is not the food and drink – nor the clothing – blankets – socks and gloves. These are a **sign** of our love and devotion to the Lord Jesus – and our care for our neighbors who need these things. The **best** you and I offer is not a material

thing – not bread to eat nor a jacket to keep warm. No, our finest offering is Jesus Christ – and Him crucified – the hope of being reconciled to God. We are here to bear witness to Jesus!

For Jesus bore in His body the penalty for all the sins of those who believe in Him. That penalty is death. And by the powerful will of God, He was raised to New Life. He is the first fruits of those who are asleep. So, He makes a way for you and me to return to our Creator. He is the Bridge over the big, ugly ditch between lost people and the presence of God. We do not know what we will be when He returns, but we will be like Him (1 Jn 3:2) – born again to New Life. And we shall see Him as He is. All things belong to Him. The earth is His and all it contains.

We, being mere humans, must be involved with actual material fruits of the harvest – the things mentioned before: vegetables, grains, oil and so on. And the material money we earn represents all these goods. But we are not really working for money – we are not really working for material gain. You look surprised. Let me tell you a story. Jesus was healing and teaching the people. The

crowd was so huge, He went up on a mountain and the people gathered down the mountain-side, so they could see and hear Him. The day was wearing on, and the people had not had anything to eat. So, Jesus put it to His disciples, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus already had a plan, but he set the problem out for his disciples. Man, half a year’s income wouldn’t buy enough food for this great crowd, one of them said.

But, Andrew found a young boy who had five barley loaves and two fish. Everybody seemed to doubt that that boy’s lunch was going to do any good feeding so many. But, Jesus had all the people sit down. There were about 5,000 of them. Then, Jesus simply thanked God for the fish and the bread. Then, He had His helpers begin to hand out the food to the people. It was a sign – a miracle. As the disciples handed out the food, it kept multiplying – until all were fed and there was fish and bread left over. The people wanted to make Jesus king – to be their provider of food for the belly.

Jesus saw that many were confused between the food provided as a sign that He is God – and the

material food He had provided this one time. The earth is the Lord's and all it contains.

Are you possibly confused about what the Lord Jesus gives? Are you confused about who Jesus is? We have various reasons for coming to church: *In 19th c. China, when the Christian missionaries went there, there were poor people who came to the mission for rice. They entered in. They converted, were baptized, and joined the church. They remained active as long as their physical needs were met through the generosity of the congregation. When their prospects improved and they no longer needed rice, they drifted away. They were "rice Christians."*

No Jesus.

*Likewise, in the 90s in Eastern Germany and Romania, right before the liberation of their countries from Soviet rule, people joined the church to speak out against tyranny and dictators. But, after freedom came, the crowds abandoned the church and went on to enjoy their new political and economic freedoms. They just walked out. (O B Sparks, *Feasting on the Word*, WJK Press, vol B-3, p 308)*

No Jesus

Too often we invite – and our neighbors accept the invitation to come to church – without keeping the main thing the main thing: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Folks come to church for political engagement for a good cause, for the sake of a Christian nation, for a strong youth and family ministry, for the chance to be part of a famous downtown ministry, or the chance to go on great mission trips to Africa or Central America. Too often we all forget to pursue what really matters.

John 6:25-35

What is real. What is really offered – “in Christ and by Christ and because of Christ” – is the true “soul food.” This food lasts forever. It does not change with the changing circumstances of the church or the world. We offer our very best – the first fruits. We offer faith in the only begotten Son of God who gave His life for the sins of the world. For your and my sins. We lift Him up to all – so that whoever believes may have eternal life. Amen.