

GOD'S FAITHFUL FIRSTFRUITS

James 1:16-18

"Don't be deceived, my dearly loved brothers. ¹⁷ Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning. ¹⁸ By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures."

INTRODUCTION

In families or large groups where common objects (chairs, food, etc.) could become a matter of dispute, it's been a custom in the United States since the 1920s to say something like, "I have [blank] on that toy (or game) when you're through," or "[blank] on the last piece of cherry pie." What is the term? "Dibs." We say "dibs" to claim the right to use or do something. Often, we have no true or legal right to the item or privilege in question; it's just a courtesy or custom for others to cooperate with our claim. But sometimes "dibs" is backed up by much more than courtesy. In Boston, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, when people shovel out a parking space from heavy snow, they mark this space as "dibs" by putting chairs, laundry baskets, or other items on it. This is their way of saying, "Don't think this cleared parking space is up for grabs. Hands off; it's taken! It's reserved for the one who removed the snow to make this spot usable again."

Americans love to assert our independence. People often say, "This is my life (or my body); I can do whatever I want with it." This is a half-truth. Some commitments we make automatically place us under obligation to claims of others. In our marriage vows, don't we obligate ourselves to certain claims our spouse may make upon us? If we pledge to serve our country in the Armed Forces, are we not duty-bound to honor claims our country may make upon us? The more we insist, "This is my life; I can do whatever I want with it," the more we evade responsibilities that give our life its most worth and purpose. If we call upon **Jesus** to be our Savior from the penalty and guilt of our sins, we become members of the "bride" of **Christ**, "the church" (**Ephesians 5:23-32; Revelation 19:7-9**). We could say this gives **Jesus** the greatest "dibs" upon us of anyone. To the extent we honor the responsibilities of Christ's claims upon us, our lives will find their true worth and purpose. Our three Outline points are God's Claims upon Us as His Firstfruits, God's Care for Us as His Firstfruits, and Our Faithfulness to God's Claims upon Us.

I. GOD'S CLAIMS UPON US AS HIS FIRSTFRUITS

What ownership rights do I have to your house? None. You may welcome me as your guest, but I have no right to make use of your home beyond what you *choose* to allow. Even for home buyers, our house remains our home only so long as we honor the monthly ownership claims of the mortgage company. Not until our mortgage debt is fully paid can we truthfully say our house is ours to do with whatever we want.

Our Heavenly Father paid a staggering price to redeem us from the guilt, control, and penalty of our slavery to sin and sin's death grip. A woman went to a mall for her Christmas shopping. She grew tired of walking through every aisle of every store to find just the right present. She stressed over her mounting credit card debt. She wearied of fighting the crowds and standing in lines for the registers. Her hands were full when an elevator door opened; it was packed. "Great!" she muttered with frustration. The people in the elevator, feeling her pain, graciously tightened their ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed she blurted out, "I think whoever came up with this Christmas junk ought to be found, strung up and shot!" A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a voice saying, "Don't worry. They already crucified Him." Knowingly or unknowingly, this voice echoed **I Peter 1:18-19** (NASB): "[Y]ou were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ." Is our debt to Christ every fully repaid?

The Greek word "redeem" refers to the price paid to set free someone held in slavery. **Jesus** may have had our redemption cost in mind in **Luke 17:1a, 7-10** (NIV): "Jesus said to His disciples, ⁷ Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat"? ⁸ Won't he rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink"? ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.""" The NKJV's wording is, "unprofitable servants." The Greek word translated "unprofitable" or "unworthy" underscores that regardless of what we do in service to Christ, we can never balance the books; we can never repay what our redemption cost Him!

Suppose I borrow \$18,000 from one of you in a lump sum, to be repaid at \$18/week (\$936/year). How many years do you think it would take to repay the full \$18,000? Over 19 years; but this would not make up for the interest you could have earned. In financial terms, *debt service* requires repayment of an original loan (the principal) plus the amount of interest the principal would have earned until the principal is repaid. Even 3% interest on \$18,000 for 19 years would earn another \$10,260. To repay you for this lost interest would take another 11 years. Of course, by then, you'd have lost even more interest. Even if I repaid you \$18 faithfully every week, I'd never be able to fully repay all your original loan of \$18,000 cost you; instead, I'd keep adding to my true debt to you. This is how we should view our debt to God. What we owe Him, because of what it cost **Jesus** to redeem us, when added to God's interest-free grace we daily receive from Him, keeps us "unprofitable" to the Lord, no matter how many years of debt service we render Him.

If we think we've fully met our debt to God, does this reveal what our god truly is? A young man of the Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, at a time when he had little money to his name, made a covenant with the Lord to tithe 10% of his income each year. He tithed \$1,000 the year he earned \$10,000; \$10,000 the year he earned \$100,000, and \$100,000 when he earned \$1,000,000. But the year he earned \$6,000,000, he could not bring himself to write a check to the church for \$600,000. He went to his pastor's office, begging to be let out of the covenant. He said, "This tithing business has to stop. It was fine when my tithe was one thousand dollars, but I just cannot afford six-hundred thousand dollars. You've got to do something, Pastor!" The pastor knelt on the floor and began to pray silently. After a while, the man asked him, "Are you praying God will let me out of the covenant to tithe?" "No," said the minister wisely, "I am praying for God to reduce your income back to the level where one thousand dollars will be your tithe."

God knows we are tempted to forget what we owe Him for saving and caring for us. This is why God told Israel, His redeemed community of Old Testament times, to devote the firstfruits of their farming increase to Him. **Deuteronomy 26:1-11a** (GNT) gives us the details: "After you have occupied the land that the LORD your God is giving you and have settled there, ² each of you must place in a basket the first part of each crop that you harvest and you must take it with you to the one place of worship. ⁴ The priest will take the basket from you and place it before the altar of the LORD your God. ⁵ Then, in the LORD's presence you will recite these words: 'My ancestor . . . took his family to Egypt to live. They were few in number when they went there, but they became a large and powerful nation. ⁶ The Egyptians treated us harshly and forced us to work as slaves. ⁷ Then we cried out for help to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. He heard us and saw our suffering, hardship, and misery. ⁸ By His great power and strength He rescued us from Egypt. He worked miracles and wonders, and caused terrifying things to happen. ⁹ He brought us here and gave us this rich and fertile land. ¹⁰ So now I bring to the LORD the first part of the harvest that He has given me.' Then set the basket down in the LORD's presence and worship there. ¹¹ Be grateful for the good things that the LORD your God has given you and your family." In **Leviticus 23:14-15** (GNT), God said until they offered their firstfruits to Him, they had no right to partake of their harvest. To impress His ownership claims upon each new generation, God commanded the practice of offering firstfruits applied to everyone in perpetuity: "'Do not eat any of the new grain, whether raw, roasted, or baked into bread, until you have brought this offering to God. This regulation is to be observed by all your descendants for all time to come.'"

Last week's sermon, "Salvation is Found in Our Heavenly Father's Embrace," demonstrated our salvation as Christians is much more a matter of being saved *for someone* than it is being saved *from something*. God did not allow His own Son to be brutally sacrificed just to save us *from* consequences of Hell's eternal destruction, as wonderful as this is. **Jesus** sacrificed Himself to restore us to an eternal fellowship with our Heavenly Father that saves us from sin's penalty, power, and presence! **James 1:18** proclaims to us as New Testament Christians the same essential message God proclaimed to His redeemed community of Old Testament times in **Deuteronomy 26:1-12**. "By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures." The crucial difference is that instead of honoring God's claims upon His redeemed family by offering Him the firstfruits of our material prosperity, as did the Israelites, God declares the cost of our "new birth" and redemption, the "precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (**I Peter 1:19**), deserves that we offer *all* of ourselves to Him.

II. GOD'S CARE FOR US AS HIS FIRSTFRUITS

Let's reread **James 1:16-17**: "Don't be deceived, my dearly loved brothers. ¹⁷ Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning." As our sermons in recent weeks have emphasized, James wrote his letter to give encouragement to believers in Christianity's early years who struggled to restore stability to their lives after being driven from their homeland in Israel by persecution. Our most fateful (fatal) temptation is to misestimate (misjudge) God's character or love for us when we struggle with difficult or prolonged trials. Satanic suggestions or self-centered priorities seek to convince us to distrust the wisdom or goodness of God's will for us. "Don't be deceived" by circumstances, James is urging us. God is attentive to providing everything we could possibly need by His "generous acts." His "gifts" and guidance are "perfect" for us; meaning they are designed to exactly match and meet our needs. The light and benefits provided by the sun, moon, and stars are variable. But as "the Father of lights," God's attention to us and provision for us have "no variation or shadow cast by turning." God's love for us can be obscured by circumstance, as clouds may temporarily block the rays of the sun. But the warmth and constancy of His devotion to us never waver.

Jeremy Camp, now 40 years old, is a Christian music singer and songwriter from Lafayette, Indiana. He's released 15 albums and won numerous awards. Seventeen years ago, he wrote *Walk by Faith* while on his honeymoon with wife, Melissa, age 21, who was battling cancer. His lyrics affirm faithful trust in God in the face of the crisis threatening Melissa's life. Jeremy wrote, "Would I believe You when You would say Your hand will guide my every way? Will I receive the words You say every moment of every day? [chorus] Well, I will walk by faith Even when I cannot see Well [,] because this broken road prepares Your will for me." In his second verse, Jeremy prays, "Help me to end my endless fears. You've been so faithful for all my years. With one breath You make me new. Your grace covers all I do." Yet, despite their confidence in the goodness of God's will and in His power to heal, Melissa died three months later.

Jeremy says, "My faith was shaken to the core. I didn't understand what God was doing, and yet I knew I could trust Him. I told the Lord how I felt and gave Him my struggles. He reached deep down to the most intricate places of my heart and said, 'I see that hurt, I see that pain, I see that grief.' I told God, 'OK, here's my heart.' He took it and so delicately healed it." Two weeks after Melissa went to Heaven to be with **Jesus**, God enabled Jeremy to write the song, *I Still Believe*. Hear his words of the chorus and final verse: "I still believe in Your faithfulness. I still believe in Your truth. I still believe in Your holy word; even when I don't see, I still believe. The only place I can go is into Your arms, where I throw to You my feeble prayers. In brokenness I can see that this was Your will for me. Help me to know You are near." Melissa had told him, "Jeremy, if I die from this cancer and one person gets to know Jesus as their Savior because of it, it will all be worth it." Jeremy Camp testifies today, "Well, 17 years later, there hasn't been just one but tens of thousands of people who have heard about Christ and committed their lives to Him as I have shared my testimony in concerts around the world. Thank You, Jesus!" God has rewarded his faithful trust in the face of tragedy, including blessing him with his second wife, Adrienne, and their three children.

III. OUR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD'S CLAIMS UPON US

Some Christians live as though *they* expect to be at the top of their Heavenly Father's list of concerns. Our Heavenly Father expects us as His redeemed "firstfruits" to live as though *He* is at the top of our concerns. Listen to His appeal in **Titus 2:11-14** (NCV): "God's grace that can save everyone has come. It teaches us not to live against God nor to do the evil things the world wants to do. Instead, that grace teaches us to live now in a wise and right way and in a way that shows we serve God. We should live like that while we wait for our great hope and the coming of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. He gave Himself for us so He might pay the price to free us from all evil and to make us pure people who belong only to Him—people who are always wanting to do good deeds."

Ron Hart, Pastor of Tucson's First Southern Baptist Church for 31 years, became my spiritual mentor when we met the week after **Jesus** captured my heart at age 18. Five years ago, I shared with Ron that the more we live in the reality of **James 1:17-18** by yielding to the Lord all claims to ourselves, the more we as individuals and as a Church will experience a revival of God's saving and transforming power in our midst. Ron commented, "God's fleet sails on many ships, including stewardship, discipleship, and fellowship. But the hardest ship for Christians to get on board is ownership." We want to live as though we have a right to do what we want with some or most of our lives, as long we give God part of our lives. The Lord has great plans, marvelous plans, awe-inspiring plans for each of us, but He won't compete with our plans. Sadly, we may not discover until we leave this earth how remarkable His plans were for us, because we will not abandon all claims to ourselves "so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures."

CONCLUSION

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) spent 51 years in China as a missionary. He seemed to accomplish greater work for the Lord with fewer resources than anyone since the Apostle Paul. The China Inland Mission he founded established 300 mission stations and 125 schools across China. Time and again, what others told him "could not be done," or "was impossible," Hudson Taylor transformed into reality. He's been often quoted for his motto, "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply."

Once, while sailing to return to China's mission field, a fierce squall threatened to crash the ship upon huge rocks. The captain woke him from a sound sleep; pleading for his prayers so their ship could be saved. Hudson Taylor prayed with the assurance of God's special protection over those who live as though God and His work are at the top of their concerns. Remarkably, just as **Jesus** calmed the storm when the disciples were in a frenzied terror of drowning in the Sea of Galilee (**Matthew 8:23-27**), the Lord immediately calmed the storm in response to the prayers of His "firstfruits" follower, Hudson Taylor!

Taylor hung a plaque in his home with two Hebrew Words on it: EBENEZER and JEHOVAH JIREH. The first word means "The Lord has helped us to this point" (**I Samuel 7:12**); the second plaque means, "The Lord will see to it" or "provide" (**Genesis 22:8, 14**). One plaque looked back while the other looked forward. One reminded him of God's faithfulness in the past; the other reminded him of God's assurances for his future. Such experience of the faithfulness and assurances of our Heavenly, Almighty Father is the privilege and the ringing testimony of all "firstfruits" Christians!