

# biblestudy: may 2018

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## May 6, 2018 Text: Exodus 35:20-29, 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 “Gving from a Generous Heart”

Why don't you count them too? I counted in the Exodus 35:20-29 text twenty-two different items that individuals brought as their offerings to God. And then Paul (in 2 Corinthians 9:7) reminds us that we should give “whatever (we) have decided in (our) heart.”

The obvious conclusion to these two texts is that your giving and my giving may not look alike. You had better hope that I do not bring any of my home cooking to the covered dish supper; but we are all going to be disappointed if Danny does not bake one of his cakes. The dollar amount of my cash offering might be larger than the crumpled five dollar bill slipped into the plate by a neighbor, but which of us has made a sacrificial gift? One of my friends goes weekly into the city's toughest neighborhood to distribute food, but she wouldn't give a five-minute talk to her circle. I, on the other hand, run off to make speeches at the drop of a hat, but seldom venture into the shadow streets of the city.

Our gifts are different, so our giving ought to be different. We are packaged differently in terms of resources, talents, experiences, and availability, so it is not surprising that how we give gifts to God will differ among us.

This is not to say that all giving is equal. Paul says that God measures gift-giving by the cheerfulness of the giver. (Don't give until it hurts; give until it feels good.) The passage from Exodus (in the New Revised

Standard Version) speaks of those who gave from the heart (Exodus 35:21, 29). In today's culture, we think of the heart as a place of emotion and feeling, but in biblical times “heart” was more likely to mean where we do our thinking, our disciplined reflection, our decision-making. The writer of Exodus is speaking highly of those who made their giving decisions based on careful planning, not just on emotion. (Maybe I am pushing the point a bit to suggest that this might mean there is great value in giving to apportionments as a sign of disciplined and planned ministry and not just in the “cause du jour.”)

In the Exodus text, both men and women are givers (Exodus 35:22, 29). The word “everyone” appears over and over again, at least half a dozen times. That does not give much of a hiding place for those of us who would like to think that God expects giving only from the wealthy or well-positioned. The last time I looked, “everyone” included me...and you.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

James A. Harnish (*Earn, Save, Give*, Abingdon) wrote “Effective charity is measured by the difference it makes for the ones who receive it; stewardship is measured by the difference it makes in the life of the giver.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, You gave, and now I give...”

## May 13, 2018 Text: Leviticus 23:9-14, 22 “Bringing First Fruits”

These rather complicated verses describe how the Israelites were to honor God by giving God the best they had to offer (Leviticus 23:10, 12). So far, so good. The truth is that all of our blessings have come from God (Leviticus 23:10). So far, so good. The first check I write each month—yes, I still write checks!—is to the church. So far, so good. First fruits!

Then, boom! God reveals that our support of the poor and the immigrant (v. 22) is to be done intentionally. It is not enough to share if we have some left over. The Israelites were to save for the poor from the very beginning of reaping, from the very way they harvested their crops. Some of the crop was to be left on purpose for the needy. It's one thing to be inspired to help the “sojourner,” but it is another thing to plan to help “the poor and the immigrant” whether we are inspired to do so or not! It is not a matter of waiting to see if the poor will need our help. Even as you start harvesting (looking at your paycheck?), know that the first fruits belong to God and from the very beginning set aside some more that will be for the poor. (After all, Jesus said, “...you will always have the poor with you”—Matthew 26:11).

I got curious about the word in Leviticus 23:22 that is sometimes sometimes translated “immigrant” (CEB), sometimes “alien” (NRSV, NIV), sometimes “stranger” (KJV), sometimes “sojourners” (ESV), sometimes “foreigners” (CEV). The Hebrew word is *gēyr* and it literally means “guest.” In other words, the instruction is to take care of those

who are not like you, not from your family. We are usually pretty good about taking care of our own, but here is God's command that we are also to care for those who are not “our kind.”

Because most of us do our “harvesting” at Harris Teeter and Food Lion, it is not easy to get these texts from Leviticus into our twenty-first century experience. If “first fruits” means “bring your best,” I am left to ask myself: “How do I give my best time to God?” If “first fruits” means “give to God first,” I am left to ask myself: “How are my finances being distributed?” If “first fruits” means “let God set your priorities,” I am left to ask myself: “How are God's priorities seen in my witness and my service?”

If caring for the poor is something to be done intentionally and not simply conveniently, I am left to ask myself “Who are the poor and the ‘guest?’” Then, there is a big “So what?”

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Tears We Cannot Stop* (St. Martins Press), Michael Eric Dyson wrote, “The greatest mark of our humanity and character shows when we are concerned about others beyond our circle.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Forgive my poor start, O God...”

NON PROFIT ORG  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
RALEIGH, NC  
PERMIT #2483

North Carolina Conference  
The United Methodist Church  
700 Waterfield Ridge Place  
Garner, NC 27529

**May 20, 2018 Text: Leviticus 25:1-12 “Remembering with Joy”**

The Sunday School class of which I am a part raises money for mission projects by operating a concessions tent at Duke home football games, so we are there setting up long before time for the kick-off. One hour before game time, there is a sudden and loud burst of fireworks, intended to be visible and heard for a great distance. Then, at full strength, the public address announcer says, “Okay, tailgaters and late comers. It’s time to close down and head to your seats: one hour to go.”

We are accustomed to signals that tell us when it is time to do something: the alarm clock whispers—well, maybe it shouts—that it is time to get up. A shrill buzzer says it is time for class to start at school. A gentle peal from the church steeple reminds us that the worship service is about to begin. The wail of the town siren may call volunteer firefighters to rush to an unwanted blaze.

That is what is going on in this week’s study text. Look at Leviticus 25:10b: “...It will be a Jubilee year for you.” The word translated “Jubilee” means “ram’s horn” or “trumpet.” This instrument is to be used to alert God’s people that something important is about to happen. “The Year of Jubilee” is the time when everything is returned to its rightful owner “The Year of Jubilee” is when things that are awry are set right. In Christian terms, it is recognition of a time of before and after: how God in Jesus Christ restores us to a right relationship with God so we

can claim our inheritance of peace and everlasting life. (If you want to read a poetic rendition of that truth, take a look at the Charles Wesley hymn “Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow”—hymn 379 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.)

God’s love of creation is clear. Not only does the Lord tell Moses that the Israelites are to have freedom themselves (Leviticus 25:10), but there is also to be restoration of the land and the vineyards and the crops of the field (Leviticus 25:4-5). Abuse of the created order is clearly contrary to God’s will. How does this truth shape the economic, environmental, and food policies we must decide?

In Jesus Christ, the Year of Jubilee is now. “Blow ye the trumpet, blow!”

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Self and the Dramas of History*, Scribners) wrote: “The essence of the Christian faith is drawn from the Hebrew, particularly the prophetic, interpretation of life and history...”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the new life You offer us...”

**May 27, 2018 Text: Psalm 34:1-10, Hebrews 2:17-18 “Rejoicing in Restoration”**

The other day a friend sent me a fairly complicated document and asked me to proofread it. By the time I got through, I had noted more than a dozen things that ought to be changed. (I kept hearing the voice of Miss Holleman, one of my high school English teachers, saying “Now, you need to put a comma there.”) I typed up an e-mail with all the complex things I was recommending. I hit “Send.” That’s when I goofed.

Rather than waiting for the e-mail to complete “sending,” I switched my computer to tackle some other job. My e-mail? Gone. Nowhere to be found. Not in the sent file. Not in the draft file. Not in the deleted file. I had rushed away without getting done what I had set out to do.

This unhappy experience got me to thinking about how we sometimes proofread our lives and find those things that need to be corrected. Then, alas, we rush off to something else and never get around to making the needed changes.

Our study text in Hebrews 2:17-18 indicates that Christ is able to help us in such a situation because he knows what it is like to be tempted. He knows what we are dealing with because He has been there! “...he is able to help those who are being tested” (NRSV). “He’s able to help those who are being tempted” (CEB, ESV). “...he is able to help them

that are in trial” (Phillips). “...able to help as help was needed” (Message).

The rhythm in a service of worship is right: a prayer of confession followed by a statement of forgiveness. However! It is easy to move on after hitting the confession “send” button and then forgetting all the challenges and corrections to which we were exposed in the prayer of confession. This is no plea to linger in morose self-analysis, but it is a call to live life differently after we have proofread our lives.

Jesus Christ not only grants us forgiveness, but He also walks with us in the difficult days of living a changed life.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Faith for Personal Crises* (Scribners), Carl Michalson wrote; “Confession based on the need for self-punishment is an insatiable maw...The only therapeutic confession is the confession not to what you have done, but to who you are. As Max Scheler has said, you confess not ‘I have done this’ but ‘I could do this.’...But this kind of confession is in counterpoint with adoration, which is the acknowledgment of who God is.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Move me, O God, from who I am to who I can become in Christ Jesus...”

