

Old Testament Principles Regarding the Stewardship of Material Goods

By James J. Westendorf

The subject of this article is a vast one indeed. Given its size, it is obvious that we cannot do justice to every law, to every exhortation or condemnation or to every example dealing with giving in the Old Testament. We have, therefore, decided to use one passage, Proverbs 3:9,10, which deals with the matter in broad and sweeping terms to provide our outline. We will treat these verses exegetically and bring in other Old Testament passages in an isagogical fashion to expand on the points we are making.

In brief our outline of principles is as follows:

The believer gives:

- I. To honor the Lord.
- II. To make a confession of his faith.
- III. Gifts for the Lord's use.
- IV. Trusting in the Lord's generosity.

The verses which will occupy most of our attention read and are translated as follows:

9 כְּבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה מֵהוֹנֵךְ וּמֵרֵאשִׁית כָּל־תְּבוּאֹתֶיךָ:

10 וַיִּמָּלְאוּ אֶסְמִיךָ שִׁבְעַת וְתִירֵשׁ יִקְבְּיךָ יִפְרֹצוּ:

*9 Honor the Lord with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your yield.*

*10 Then your storehouses will be filled with plenty,
and with new wine your vats will brim over.*

I. The believer gives to honor the Lord

כְּבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה—With these brief words the writer of Proverbs immediately states the most important principle involved in all our stewardship efforts as children of God. It is a principle which is finely intertwined with all the others we will mention and is the source from which they all flow. We give in order to honor the Lord.

What do we do when we honor an individual? We voice our respect and great admiration for who he is. We loudly and publicly proclaim what he has done which makes him worthy of our respect. We praise him in his presence and elsewhere. And we perform deeds on his behalf which show very clearly just how much we admire him. Our acts of giving are to fulfill all these purposes in our relationship to the Lord.

The Hebrew word here used for honor is an interesting one. כְּבֹד has as its root meaning the stative idea of “being heavy.” The literal idea occurs very rarely, however. In the Qal and Hiphil stems the word often has a figurative meaning with a negative connotation. A person's body parts can be “heavy” in the sense of “slow,” “dull,” “dim” or “insensitive.” Experiences or events may be heavy in the sense of “severe.”

In the Niphal and Piel stems (our verse contains the Piel) the figurative meaning of כְּבֹד heads in a different and more positive direction. Someone or something is said to be heavy in the sense of being noteworthy or impressive. Perhaps he occupies a high position in society. So Hamor of Shechem, the emissaries of the Moabite king Balak, the merchants of Tyre, the nobles of Assyria, Samuel, David, his mighty men, even the city of Zion are all said to be נִכְבָּר or worthy of honor.

A person may also gain honor for himself by what he does, such an action being described by the reflexive sense of the Niphal stem. In the Scriptures by an overwhelming margin the subject of such an action is the Lord. He gains glory for himself by the way in which he defeats the enemies of his people. At the time of the Exodus the Lord proclaims, “The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh” (Ex 14:18). “I am against you, O Sidon,” the Lord exclaims, “and I will gain glory within you” (Eze 28:22). Through the same prophet the Lord asserts, “I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal....On that day I will give Gog a burial place in Israel....All the people of the land will bury them, and the day I am glorified will be a memorable day for them, declares the Sovereign Lord” (Eze 38:3; 39:11, 13).

And who is this God who gains the glory and honor for himself by his glorious deeds on behalf of his people? “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle,” David declares in Psalm 24. He has revealed himself through the Tetragrammaton, יהוה, the Lord, as the great I AM WHO I AM (Ex 3:16). The absolute sovereignty and the total constancy of the Savior God will not allow anyone or anything to stand in his way as he faithfully carries out his promises which he made to his people. The Lord through Moses holds his name in front of Israel languishing in Egypt and proclaims:

I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians, and I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord (Ex 6:6–8).

Such a God, with such a glorious name, deserves his people’s honor and glory. So he warns, “I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Is 42:8). His being honored is the result which is to be expected when he works for his children. “I will deliver you and you will honor me,” the Lord declares in Psalm 50:15. For such an act of honoring the Hebrew usually uses the Piel stem of כָּבַד that we have in the verse before us.

What actions will give the Lord the honor he deserves? There are many answers to that question. Worship, praise, obedience—all these actions honor the Lord. But our verses suggest another: “Honor the Lord with your wealth.” The Lord taught his Old Testament people that the giving of their material wealth was one very important way of honoring him as he desired. “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me,” declares the Lord (Ps 50:23). Furthermore, “... whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Pr 14:31).

Actually, the command in these verses can and should be understood in two ways. First of all, it teaches, “Honor the Lord *with your wealth*.” It commands giving. This is not an optional action for God’s people. It is a work which he commands. In fact, not to give, or not to give all which the Lord commands is actually robbing God. The Lord says through the prophet Malachi, “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings” (3:8). When Israel withheld what the Lord deserved, it justly incurred his wrath.

But we must not forget the second lesson in the words, “Honor the Lord.” And that is, “Honor *the Lord* with your wealth.” God’s inspired Old Testament writers clearly teach that it is possible to go through the outward actions by which the Lord desires to be honored, but without a believing heart. “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me (כִּבְדוּנִי) with their lips, but their hearts are far from me,” the Lord complains through Isaiah (29:13). No wonder this same prophet laments:

“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats....Stop bringing meaningless offerings!” (Is 1:11, 13a).

The prophet Amos condemns ungodly giving in even sharper terms:

“Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn your leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings—boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do,” declares the Sovereign Lord (4:4,5).

Besides offering sacrifices at illegitimate places in the Northern Kingdom, the people of the ten northern tribes were bringing their gifts as a matter of pride. By their bragging and boasting they intended to honor themselves, not the Lord.

What then is the Lord looking for in those who desire to honor him with their offerings? The answer is simple: Repentance. David declares, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 51:17). The prophet Micah taught exactly the same thing:

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (6:6–8).

Through the prophets the Lord crushed his people with the law. He cut open their hearts and revealed that true love and devotion to him were lacking. But he did not leave them wounded and bleeding. The same prophet who condemned the giving of the Lord’s people proclaimed, “ ‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’ ”(Is 1:18). It is only with these comforting words of Isaiah in mind—that the Lord purifies his people through forgiveness and not through the fire of judgment—that the Israelites could read the following words of Malachi concerning the coming Messiah with hope and anticipation:

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years (3:3,4).

The words, כִּבֵּד אֶת־יְהוָה, together with the other passages gathered to support their teachings, make it very clear what direction we ought to take in guiding the people of our congregations to God-pleasing stewardship. First of all, we must proclaim that refusing to give to the Lord of our material goods is a transgression of the law. It is a refusal to honor the Lord in a way which he desires.

Secondly, any effort to sensitize our people as to their responsibilities toward the Lord in the management of earthly goods must point to the heart of the giver. As in any other area of sanctification, we are talking to people whose hearts are filled with faith in their Savior God and with a desire to serve him according to his will. But at the same time they have not reached perfection. The Old Adam is still present in them and taints everything they do. There is not one thing which the prophets complained about concerning the attitudes found in the hearts of ancient Israel which is not also lurking in each of us today. Therefore we all must bring our offerings with the prayer on our lips, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Finally, an attitude of repentance does not eliminate confidence. We will offer our gifts to the Lord with the confidence that our God is pleased with them, not because we have done our duty, but rather because the blood of Jesus has washed us and our works clean. To put it in the words of the Old Testament psalmist: “If

you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Ps 130:3, 4). In this confidence we join Old Testament Israel in bringing our gifts to honor the Lord.

II. The believer gives what is pleasing to the Lord

The Lord not only taught the Israelites that they were to honor him by giving and by how they gave. He also showed them what to give. “Honor the Lord with your wealth (הוֹן).” This word is used only in the poetic sections of the Old Testament, and even then not as often as the more common Hebrew word for wealth, עֶשֶׂר. The basic meaning of the word is “goods” or “substance” present in sufficient quantity to be considered wealth (cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). As such it presents us with a very broad term which could simply be translated “possessions.”

But the Lord’s commands concerning Israel’s offerings went beyond such vague terminology. Our verse continues, “with the firstfruits (רֵאשִׁית) of all your yield (תְּבוּאָה).” תְּבוּאָה again is a very general term. In the agricultural setting in which Israel brought its gifts it would refer to the crops which the fields had produced in a particular year. It could, however, also refer to some articles or goods which a craftsman had manufactured.

The other term in the sentence, however, reminds us that the Lord was quite specific about the offerings which he desired from his people. The רֵאשִׁית, “firstfruits,” were one of the specific kinds of gifts which the Lord demanded in the Mosaic law code. Treating his Old Testament people like little children, the Lord left very little to their imagination. We are no longer under those laws by which the Lord specified the gifts he desired from Israel. To impose them as legalistic demands of what our gifts to the Lord must be, or even as guidelines of what our gifts should be, would be to ignore the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians:

So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (4:3,4).

We are not under these laws, and yet we can learn from them. With his specific laws concerning offerings in the Sinaitic law the Lord was teaching certain principles and aspects of his will which are still valid for us today. The most complete list of offerings which the Israelites were required to present to the Lord is given us in Deuteronomy 12:

To that place you must go. There bring your burnt offerings (עֹלָה) and sacrifices (זֶבַח), your tithes (מַעֲשֵׂר) and special gifts (תְּרוּמָה), what you have vowed (נִדָּר) to give, and your freewill offerings (נְדָבָה), and the firstborn (בְּכוֹר) of your herds and flocks (Dt 12:5, 6).

The first category of gifts are the sacrifices, both the whole burnt offering (עֹלָה) and the peace or fellowship offering (זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים). These were blood sacrifices. They were not the only ones. There were two other sacrifices which were commanded, the sin offering (חַטָּאת) and the guilt offering (אָשָׁם). These last two are omitted from the list because they were offerings required when certain offenses against the Sinaitic law were committed. They were sacrifices by which the Lord removed the sinful obstacle which prevented the offerer’s covenant relationship with the Lord from continuing.

The burnt and fellowship offerings, however, in the case of the individual Israelite were voluntary acts of worship. If he was bringing a burnt offering to the sanctuary, he presented a perfect male animal from either the herd or the flock, or a male bird with no defect. The victim was prepared by the priest and then wholly consumed on the altar. The purpose of the sacrifice was to express the devotion and total commitment of the worshiper to the covenant relationship which he enjoyed with the Lord.

In the case of the fellowship offering, any animal from the herd or the flock could be presented, as long as it too was without defect. The purpose of this offering becomes clear from the way it was carried out. Only the fat portions connected to the kidneys, covering the liver and in the loin region, along with the kidneys themselves were actually burned on the altar. The breast of the animal, called a **תְּנוּפָה** (KJV and NIV, “wave offering”), and the right thigh, called **תְּרוּמָה** (KJV, “heave offering”; NIV, “contribution”), belonged to the priest. The rest of the offering was returned to the worshiper to be eaten by his family at the sanctuary before the day ended. Eating the Lord’s sacrifice symbolized the fellowship which the worshiper in spite of his sinfulness was graciously able to enjoy with his holy God.

The third type of offering, the tithe, was commanded by the Lord in Leviticus 27:30–33:

A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord....The entire tithe of the herd and flock—every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod—will be holy to the Lord. He must not pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution.

Deuteronomy 14:23 gives this reason for presenting such a yearly tithe: “so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God always.” With the tithe the worshiper proclaimed that the earth with all its bounty belonged to the Lord. What he had, he had from the Lord. So he confessed that he was no more than a caretaker of his goods. Abraham confessed the same thing when he gave a tithe to Melchizedek (Gn 14).

Although the next category of offerings is expressed in rather general terms, **תְּרוּמַת יָד**, “offerings of the hand,” it no doubt is meant to include a category of offerings not mentioned here, the **רֵאשִׁית** of our passage from Proverbs. Firstfruits, either called **רֵאשִׁית** or, using a noun form of the root, **בֶּכֶר**, were first commanded by Moses in the Book of the Covenant, Exodus 20–23, when the Feast of Harvest (**חַג הַקִּצִּיר**) was instituted. There Moses said, “Celebrate the Feast of Harvest with the firstfruits (**בְּבֹרֵי**) of the crops” (Ex 23:16). Exodus 34:22 calls it the Feast of Weeks, one of the three times during the year when all Israelite men were to appear before the Lord at his sanctuary. The bringing of firstfruits does not seem to have been limited, however, to the Feast of Weeks. For we are told in a general way in Exodus 34:26, “Bring the best of the firstfruits (**רֵאשִׁית** **בְּבֹרֵי**) of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.” Here the point is made that firstfruits are not only to be the first crops produced, they are also to be the best.

Deuteronomy 26 also speaks about the firstfruits. It isn’t absolutely clear whether the firstfruit offering mentioned here is a onetime offering to be brought when the first crop in Canaan begins to come in, or whether it refers to the annual firstfruits offering. The passage, however, makes very clear what the Lord was teaching his people with firstfruit offerings. When the worshiper presented his offering, he was to make the following confession of faith:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer....So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched

arm...He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me (Dt 26:5–10).

With the giving of the firstfruits the Israelite worshiper confessed that the Lord had graciously given him his land. The crops which it produced and the animals which it fed were a special blessing of the Lord. For that he was to be honored with an appropriate offering.

The next category of offerings mentioned in the list of Deuteronomy 12 deals with purely voluntary offerings given to fulfill a vow or pledge, or simply because the worshiper's desire moved him to give a special offering to his merciful God. With these offerings the Lord indicated to Israel that gifts should be given to the Lord, not just because they are proper and commanded, but also because the heart, when filled with love for a God who has done so much for his child, is moved to perform voluntary deeds of thanksgiving and praise.

Finally Moses speaks of the firstborn (בְּכוֹר) of the herds and flocks. This offering was in addition to the tithing of the animals. It is first mentioned and gets its significance from the tenth plague, the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, in Exodus 12 and 13. Actually the law also covered non-sacrificial animals and firstborn sons, but these were redeemed: non-sacrificial animals by a substitute sacrifice and the sons by money or later by the substitution of the Levites who belonged to the Lord. The Lord told his people that these firstborn belonged to him. By dedicating them to the Lord they would be acknowledging his sovereignty, something the Egyptians refused to do (cf. Ex 13:15, 16).

The foregoing list of offerings and the confessions of faith connected with them surely must suggest to us that our offerings ought to make similar confessions of faith. As in the case of the burnt offerings and the fellowship offerings of Israel, our offerings ought to display our total devotion and commitment to the God of our salvation and the pleasure we take in being able to fellowship with him. We New Testament Christians are not commanded to tithe. The purpose of the tithe can certainly be present, however, as we set aside an amount, perhaps a very definite proportion, of our earthly goods to demonstrate that all we have belongs to God. We are only his caretakers. Maybe a great number of us are not farmers like the Israelites, and yet, our offerings, too, can truly be firstfruits as we give to the Lord first, thereby acknowledging that every paycheck, every bit of interest on our investments and every unexpected gift is a new evidence of the Lord's gracious preservation of us and those who depend on us. And without doubt our gifts can show the freedom and joy with which we give to the Lord, who has given so much to us. These are the kinds of gifts the Lord desires.

III. The believer gives gifts for the Lord's use

Our study of the passages which were gathered above to describe those offerings which are pleasing to the Lord also reveals that a need exists which the Lord wishes to meet with these offerings. In other words, the Lord has a purpose the gifts are to serve and a use to which he wants them to be put for the good of his church. In some cases like those of the עֹלָה and זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים that purpose may simply be to provide the worshiper with a chance to exercise the faith living within him. Through Isaiah the Lord complains that his people have not exercised their faith in the giving of the offerings:

Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.
You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices
(43:22,23).

With the bringing of offerings the Old Testament Israelite was given the opportunity to perform in loving obedience as the Lord had commanded him. He could wear himself out in doing good.

In connection with giving to meet a need we ought to look at one passage which could be misunderstood. While describing the זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים, Moses says, "The priest shall burn them on the altar as food

(לֶחֶם), an offering made by fire, a pleasing aroma (רִיחַ נִיחַח) (Lv 3:16). By calling the Lord's part of the זֶבַח יִם שְׁלָמִים "food," Moses was simply maintaining the imagery present in the ritual surrounding this sacrifice. The meal connected with this sacrifice displayed fellowship between the worshiper and the Lord. Therefore the Lord had his food, the worshiper had his.

This passage is not classifying the Lord with all the heathen idols of the nations around Israel. Those so-called gods were believed to need the offerings of their people. In fact, it was thought they would starve to death if the offerings were not brought. These sacrifices were not burned on altars. Instead they were placed as a meal in front of the god's image in his sanctuary. Pagan literature consistently teaches this as the reason why man was created, to meet the physical needs of the gods and make their life comfortable.

The Lord was much different. The very fact that he called for his offerings to be burned indicates that he did not need them to satisfy any wants of his own. Furthermore, the Lord clearly told his people:

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills...If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? (Ps 50:9–13).

Evidently the influence of the nations around them had convinced the Israelites that God needed them and their offerings. The Lord did not need them or the offerings which they brought. He could easily have seen to it that the needs of his kingdom were met in other ways.

But God was gracious to his people. He allowed them to work with him. He used the offerings they brought to meet the needs and carry out the work of his kingdom. And he was not afraid to lay these needs in front of the people when he called for their offerings. That surely does not mean that they brought their offerings only to meet needs. They brought them, or were supposed to bring them, to honor the Lord, but they certainly brought them to be used in a specific way.

The matching of offerings to needs could simply be summarized in this way. Regular offerings met the ongoing expenses and needs of maintaining the Lord's worship. Special offerings went to meet onetime needs. To the priests the Lord said, "Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord I give to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share" (Nu 18:19). Concerning the Levites he said, "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting" (Nu 18:21). God could have provided for these workers of his differently. He could have given them an inheritance of land in Israel so that they could have provided for their own needs. But he chose to use Israel's offerings for this purpose. The people were to give to honor the Lord, but part of their honoring him was meeting the needs which he said were before them and which would not have been met if their offerings were lacking.

Deuteronomy 14 presents some new aspects about the tithe which are not mentioned earlier in the Mosaic law. There it speaks about eating a tithe of grain and animals, evidently sharing it with the Levites from the worshiper's locale. Furthermore, Moses speaks of bringing all tithes of every third year to the local storehouse to be used to feed widows, orphans and aliens. Students of the Bible debate whether three separate tithes are referred to here, or whether we have one tithe mentioned, but used in three different ways. Trying to find a solution to that problem is beyond the scope of this paper. But the point is well made. Tithes were put to a specific use. They met the need of feeding the priests and Levites and of caring for the needy.

Sometimes special needs were laid before the people. After Moses had received the plans for the tabernacle from God on Mt. Sinai and after he had been instructed to build it, we are told:

Moses said to the whole Israelite community, "This is what the Lord has commanded: From what you have, take an offering for the Lord. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering....All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded: ..."Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses' presence, and

everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the Tent of Meeting (Ex 35:4,5,10,20–21).

The tabernacle needed to be manufactured. It was a need which existed. The Lord himself said so. So the call went out for offerings of time, talent and treasure. And the people responded. Here was an extra opportunity to honor the Lord by meeting this special need in his kingdom. Yes, they gave to a need in the sense that the offerings would not have come in if the special need had not been there. But the motive for giving the offering was to serve the Lord. Their hearts were moved, and so they acted.

A similar special need existed at the time of the building of the first temple. It was a major undertaking. Great resources were needed. So David said to Solomon:

“The task is great, because this palatial structure is not for man but for the Lord God. With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God....Besides, in my devotion to the temple of my God I now give my personal treasures of gold and silver for the temple of my God....Now, who is willing to consecrate himself today to the Lord?”

Then the leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders...and the officials in charge of the king's work gave willingly. They gave toward the work on the temple of God....The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly (1 Chr 29:1–3, 5–7, 9).

David gave great amounts of his wealth for the building of the temple. The offerings of the leaders of the people were given in direct response to David's call for consecration of the type which he had demonstrated himself. And the common people rejoiced (we are not told whether they also gave) at the free and wholehearted response of their leaders. The offering brought joy to other believers because they saw evidence of the power of the love of the Lord which dwelt invisibly in the hearts of these contributors. The need was there. The offering was given to meet the need. And yet it is very clear in the account that the intent of the offerings was to honor the Lord. And it was the evidence of this intent which brought joy to the hearts of the people.

Both law and example in the Old Testament show that the Lord taught his people to give when a need existed, whether that need was ongoing or special. And so God's people ought to give today. The intent of giving is to honor the Lord, but the Lord is not honored if the needs of his kingdom work are not met. Therefore, those needs, ongoing or special, ought to be put before God's people as opportunities for service. And when our people respond, it ought to fill our hearts with the same joy that filled the hearts of ancient Israel at the building of the temple. The Lord has once again moved his people to honor him with their offerings.

IV. The believer gives, trusting in the Lord's generosity

To those who honor the Lord with their firstfruits our verse in Proverbs says, “Then your storehouses will be filled with plenty, and with new wine your vats will brim over.” What is the purpose of this promise? Is it some kind of reward for the generosity of the giver? The Lord says that all these things were his anyway. Nothing has really been given to him. Is it then an appeal to the selfishness present in all human beings, “Give, and just see how much you get back for yourself” ? Such a motive for giving would hardly seem to be consistent with honoring the Lord.

Isn't the Lord here rather giving a promise to his people, a promise which was to serve the same purpose which all of his promises serve, namely, to cause his people's faith in him to grow? Essentially the Lord was assuring the potential giver, “I will not let you down or forsake you after you have given to me. You will not suffer materially because you have been generous in honoring me.” Evidently the Lord did not go back on that promise to Israel because David exclaims:

I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed (Ps 37:25).

The promise of our verses does not hold amazing riches before the eyes of God's people. In fact, in the eyes of the world the righteous may seem to have very little. And it may seem the believer's generosity in honoring the Lord has contributed to his dearth of material things. The extent to which the Lord fulfills this promise, however, ought not to be measured in terms of the amount of material wealth which the child of God accumulates in the world, but rather by the way the Lord has moved him to look on his possessions. This Spiritworked attitude toward the things of this world was in the heart of St. Paul when he wrote, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content" (1 Tm 6:6–8). King David felt the same way. Although very rich in earthly goods, he could confess, "Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous" (Ps 37:16–17).

The Lord knew that one of the most damaging attitudes to proper and willing giving of goods is the fear of not having enough for oneself. So Jeremiah warns, "... (let not) the rich man boast of his riches" (9:23). God tries to convince the person who has so misplaced this trust that it will not do any good anyway. "He who trusts in his riches will fall" (Pr 11:27). Since such a person is depending on his own efforts and ingenuity rather than on the Lord's promised blessing, and since he operates without that blessing, Proverbs can lay the following seeming contradiction before us. "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty" (Pr 11:24; see also Hg 1). And finally such a misplaced trust is shortsighted. "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death" (Pr 11:4).

Nobody has more effectively laid before God's people the promise of the Lord to bless those who honor him with generous offerings than did the prophet Malachi:

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty" (3:10–12).

This principle of stewardship which the Lord taught his Old Testament people so clearly shows the importance of faith in the Lord and his goodness as an essential ingredient in the God-pleasing offering of earthly goods. And no amount of law preaching, enticements or gimmicks, or the laying out of the needs is going to create such confidence in the hearts of God's people. It will come only from a patient and loving proclamation of the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. Only the person who knows and trusts in the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord will cheerfully give of his material goods. That is because he finds security in the Lord's faithfulness to his promises, not in the goods which he is holding in his hands.

The times and circumstances differ greatly between our age and that of ancient Israel. But the principles which God taught his Old Testament people are still valid for teaching stewardship and training stewards in the church of Jesus Christ today.