WEEKLY SERMON STUDY

Grace Precedes Gratitude

Based on Numbers 7 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (7)
“Grace precedes gratitude. In response to God's solemn promise to bless, they bring their blessings to him.”

SERMON SUMMARY

This Reformation Sunday sermon plunged back into the “ocean of obscurity” that surrounds the one island of familiarity in this series. Last week's priestly blessing sat at the exact center — five sermons before it, five after. This week comes Numbers 7, the longest chapter in the entire Bible save one (Psalm 119 edges it out), and one of the most repetitive and most ignored passages in the Old Testament. Yet every chapter in this series answers the same question: Israel lived between slavery in Egypt and freedom in the promised land, between salvation accomplished and salvation completed, in the wilderness in between. We live there too — between the cross and the new creation — and the question is the same: how do we live faithfully with God?

The Twelve Days of Christmas

The sermon opened with an unusual Christmas song — about 250 years old — that covers a twelve-day period of gift-giving with a strange assortment of gifts, repeated and piling up day after day. Add it all up and you receive 364 gifts (economists peg last year's value around $51,476). But to tally the gifts is to miss the point. On every one of the twelve days the refrain is the same: “my true love gave to me.” The point behind the gifts is the giver. That is the window into Numbers 7 — another twelve-day stretch of strange, repeated gifts, all meant to draw us to the One who gives out of love.

Back One Month: The Tabernacle Dedicated

Chapter 7 opens a new section and a new chronology. “When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed it” points back a full month earlier (Exodus 40) — before Numbers even begins. Numbers is arranged not strictly chronologically but theologically. And it gathers up everything before it: the twelve leaders are the ones named in chapter 1, bringing gifts in the marching order of chapter 2, assigning carts to the Levites exactly as chapters 3–4 described.

Two Sets of Gifts: Carts and Offerings

During these twelve days the tribes bring two sets of gifts. First, gifts for the movement of the tabernacle: six covered carts and twelve oxen, which God has Moses divide by need. The Merarites — the least prominent clan, hauling the heavy frames and tent pegs (remember the Mushites) — get four carts, the horsepower; the Gershonites, carrying curtains and coverings, get two; the Kohathites, who carry the holy things on their shoulders, and the priests get none. Second, gifts for the function of the tabernacle: offerings for the dedication of the altar — the Hebrew word is Hanukkah — brought over twelve days.

The Strange List — and the Stranger Repetition

Each tribe brings the same “kitchen” set (a silver plate, a silver sprinkling bowl, a gold spoon of incense) and the same small “petting zoo” of animals for the burnt, sin, and fellowship offerings. The genuinely strange thing is the repetition: God could have listed it once and said “and each tribe brought the same,” but instead the text spells out every item, ounce for ounce, animal for animal, day after day, tribe after tribe, twelve times over. Why?

You Don't Come Empty-Handed

Repetition is for emphasis — and what is hammered home is this: every single tribe, every person represented, can only come to God by bringing something. You do not appear before God empty-handed. Day after day, word after word, the text drives home the central truth that to draw near to God, you must bring a sacrifice.

Why We Resist — Theological, Pastoral, Personal

We don't know what to do with this chapter, on three levels. Theologically, as Reformation heirs we confess we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone — we draw near without plates and bulls and goats. Pastorally, all that identical repetition looks like going through the motions, and “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6) warns how empty rote worship can become. But the deepest problem is personal: we simply don't like to sacrifice. Some 37% of churchgoers give nothing at all; we guard our time (nobody wanted the service to run thirteen minutes longer); we live in a consumeristic age, coming to worship asking what we can get — the music, the sermon, the parking — rather than what we can give. The preacher confessed his own version: wrecking the good car on the way to a nursing-home visit and thinking, “God, didn't you owe me? I was doing your work.”

> **Hosea 6:6** *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

The Order of Grace

So what do we do with it? First, God wants us to see the order of grace. Why place this dedication a month out of order, after chapter 6? Because Israel has already been delivered from Egypt — they don't bring these gifts to earn deliverance. And in chapter 6 they were just blessed. It is only after God's blessing on them that they bring their blessings back to him. “Grace precedes gratitude.” Even Reformed Christians are called to sacrifice — not to earn grace, but to respond to it in thanksgiving: the nickel in the plate, the time for a neighbor, asking not what the church can do for us but what we can do for the body.

The Means and the End

Second, God clarifies the means and the end. The chapter could have ended at verse 88 with the tally of offerings — but it doesn't. Verse 89 adds that when Moses entered the tent of meeting, he heard the voice speaking from above the atonement cover. The focus shifts from the altar to the ark, from our sacrifice to God speaking. The sacrifice was never the end in itself; it was the means to a restored relationship in which God could speak with us. What God wanted was never our silver and animals — it was us. This is the architecture of the Reformation: the altar moves to the side, and the Word, where God meets and speaks with us, takes the center.

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Finally, the chapter points to the ultimate sacrifice. Those twelve days cost 252 animals — by the preacher's math, roughly 446 gallons of blood, eight 55-gallon drums — just to dedicate an altar that would then be used for sacrifice again and again. But “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10). Piles of silver and buckets of blood couldn't do what we needed — but they pointed to what would. In verse 89 God speaks from the “atonement cover” — in Greek, the hilasterion — and the same word returns in Romans 3: God presented Jesus as a hilasterion, a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. How do we draw near to God? We must bring a sacrifice — and the good news is that God himself has brought it, once for all, in Jesus Christ. Grace, then gratitude; the sacrifice a means, the restored relationship the end; all of it through Christ alone, to God alone be the glory.

> **Romans 3:23–25** *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.*

Key Takeaway

Numbers 7's exhausting repetition drives home one truth: no one comes to God empty-handed. But the chapter is placed after the blessing of chapter 6 on purpose — grace precedes gratitude. Our sacrifices never earn God's favor; they respond to it, and they were only ever the means to the real end: a restored relationship where God speaks with us. Buckets of blood could not take away sin, but they pointed to the One who could — Jesus, our atonement cover, the once-for-all sacrifice. We give ourselves in grateful response because, in Christ, God has already given himself for us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1	The preacher used “The Twelve Days of Christmas” to show that the point of the gifts is the giver — “my true love gave to me.” When it comes to your own relationship with God, how easy is it to get focused on the gifts and lose sight of the Giver?
2	Numbers 7 repeats the identical offering twelve times, word for word, to hammer home that “you don't come to God empty-handed.” Why do you think we instinctively resist that idea — and is there anything healthy about the discomfort it creates?
3	The sermon named three reasons we struggle with this chapter: theological (saved by grace), pastoral (going through the motions), and personal (we don't like to sacrifice). Which of the three rings most true for you, and why?
4	“Grace precedes gratitude.” How does it change the meaning of giving — of money, time, or yourself — when you see it as a response to blessing already received rather than a way to earn it?
5	The preacher confessed wrecking his car on the way to do ministry and thinking, “God, didn't you owe me?” Where do you catch yourself approaching faith as a transaction — asking what God will do for you — rather than as grateful response?
6	The chapter doesn't end at the altar (our sacrifice) but at the ark, where God speaks — the sacrifice was only the means; relationship was the end. How might you be treating a spiritual “means” (giving, serving, attending) as if it were the end itself?
7	446 gallons of blood only pointed forward; Jesus is the true atonement cover who draws us near once for all. How does resting in Christ's finished sacrifice free you to give yourself to God and others out of sheer gratitude?

LIVING IT OUT

Take the truth of this passage out of the study and into the week. Consider these prompts across four areas of ordinary life.

In Your Inner Life

- Begin each day this week by naming a specific grace God has already given you, and let that gratitude — not guilt or obligation — be what moves you to give.
- Ask God to show you where you've been treating faith as a transaction ("what will you do for me?") and to startle you afresh with the grace of the cross.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Practice giving without keeping score. Do something for your spouse, child, or friend with no expectation of return, as a small echo of grace that precedes gratitude.
- Talk together about the difference between the "means" and the "end" — how family devotions, church, and service are paths to knowing God, not boxes to check.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Resist the consumer reflex that asks only "what can I get?" Enter at least one setting this week — work, church, a gathering — asking instead, "what can I give?"
- Offer your gifts and abilities, not just your spare time or money — look for one place your particular skills could serve someone this week.

In Your Faith Community

- Examine your heart (not anyone else's) about giving — of treasure, time, and talent — and take one concrete step to give in grateful response to God's worth.
- Volunteer for something unglamorous — the "tent-peg" work no one notices — as a way of bringing your sacrifice of thanksgiving to the body of Christ.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Faith takes on flesh when we act. This week, turn grateful response into one concrete act of self-giving — of treasure, time, or talent.

Step	This Week's Challenge
1	Count the grace. Write down three specific ways God has already blessed you. Let the list, not a sense of duty, set the tone for the week.
2	Give treasure. Make one gift that actually costs you something — to the church or to someone in need — as a glad response to God's worth, not to earn anything.
3	Give time. Sacrifice a slice of your schedule for someone else this week — a visit, a ride, an unhurried conversation — even when you'd rather not.
4	Give talent. Offer a specific ability of yours in service, especially for a quiet, behind-the-scenes need that usually goes unnoticed.
5	Aim at the end, not the means. In each act, consciously turn from the gift to the Giver — doing it to draw near to God and point others to him.

Optional Extended Challenge

Read Hebrews 10:1–18 alongside Numbers 7 this week. Notice how the endless, repeated sacrifices “can never take away sins,” while Christ's single offering makes us holy once for all. Then ask: what would it look like to live as someone with nothing left to prove — whose giving is pure gratitude for a sacrifice already finished?

Closing Prayer Guide

Close your time together in prayer, using these movements as a guide:

- Gratitude — Thank God that his grace comes first, and that in Christ he has brought the once-for-all sacrifice we could never bring ourselves.
- Confession — Confess the consumer heart that asks only what God and the church can do for us, and the reluctance to sacrifice treasure, time, and talent.
- Response — Offer yourselves back to God in thanksgiving, asking not what you can get but what you can give.
- Nearness — Pray that your giving would lead you past the gift to the Giver — to the restored relationship where God meets and speaks with you.

“The sacrifice was never the end in itself — it was the means to the end. The end was a restored relationship where God could speak with us. What he wanted was never our silver or our lambs. What he wanted was us.”