

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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2 Corinthians 9:6-15 *Grace and Generosity*

It's that time of year again – taxes, state budgets, school budgets, church budgets! We don't often talk about money in this church, so let me say at the start that the state of the economy has made it hard for everyone who wanted to give to charity this past year. However on this Sunday at the start of our new fiscal year, I want to respond to people who have asked me about the concept and practice of *tithing*. What is it? Who does it, and why?

1) *Tithes in the Old Testament*

What is a tithe? Literally it is "one tenth," and typically means giving one-tenth of something you own "to God." Why give to God? In the life and law of Israel, there were three reasons. One was *to acknowledge that God is the owner of everything*. A tithe was a response to God's greatness and goodness: a way of saying the giver recognized he was only a temporary "steward" of his so-called possessions, and that all he had was a gift from God, and he was grateful.

The second reason the law of Moses gave for tithing was *to support the people and the work of God's sanctuary* - the Tabernacle, or later the Temple. The sons of Aaron, the Levites, were chosen by God to devote their lives to serving him in the Tabernacle, and so they were to be supported by the tithes of the people. The third reason for the tithe was *to*

provide for the needs of the poor, for the alien in the land, for the orphan and the widow.

The tithe applied to the yield of the land, to the flocks and herds, and even to people. The first harvest of the grains and fruit, one of every ten cattle and sheep, and the first-born sons of each family "belonged to the LORD" - the sons for the additional reason that Israel was delivered from slavery when the Angel of the LORD destroyed the first-born of every family in Egypt. The tithe was "brought to the LORD" - usually to the Tabernacle or Temple, where the grains and fruits and animals were offered to God as burnt offerings, and/or provided food for the Levites. You could "redeem" the tithe by substituting money instead, so there was a "redemption price" for a first-born son, and the first harvest of crops and the choicest animals could be paid for at a rate of 1/5 more than their monetary worth. The special tithe for the poor was collected every third year, and it was kept in the local villages for the relief of needy people.

Of course tithing was not always practiced, and by the time of the prophets, this was a complaint brought against the people. Most pointed is the word of the LORD through Malachi - "you are robbing God" by not bringing in your tithes! But whatever the abuses, everyone understood the three principles of tithing: *gratitude* to God and acknowledgment of his ownership of

everything; *support* of the “work of God” in the Tabernacle or Temple; and *relief* of the poor and needy.

2) *Giving in the New Testament*

The New Testament carries these principles over to the new situation where God’s people are widely dispersed and multi-ethnic. The command “tithe” is replaced by the word “*grace*,” which at root means “*generosity*.” But the New Testament emphasis is still about thanking God for his goodness, supporting the people who spread the gospel, and providing for needy people.

Jesus was of course very clear that his followers should free themselves from the love of money, and be generous in giving. “*Freely you have received, freely give.*” “*Give as you have received.*” When you get to the letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, it’s the same. We find exhortations to “*give generously*,” “*give from the heart*,” “*give as you are able*,” “*give cheerfully*.” When you do that, says Paul, needy people are helped and God is praised when others see your generosity.

Jesus says “*Give and it will be given to you; a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*” Paul says “*God is able to make all grace abound to you... you will be made rich in every way, so that you can be generous on every occasion.*” There are echoes here of the words from Malachi: “*Bring in all the tithes... test me in this, says the LORD Almighty; see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room for it.*”

3) *How Much, and Why?*

So in practice, should Christians give a tenth of their income to God’s work – to show *gratitude* to God for his grace, to *support* the

ministry and mission of the church, to *relieve* the needy? For generations, churches taught that one-tenth was the minimum a Christian should give. During the long period of European history we sometimes call “Christendom,” that level of giving was at times enforced by the Church or the state. Even today in countries like Germany, Austria, parts of Switzerland, and all the Scandinavian countries, the state levies a “church tax” to support (mostly) the established state churches.

But we have no state-supported churches. How and what should Christians give in our place and time? Some churches and other religious groups still *require* a tithe, or something like it: Mormons are required to tithe, Jewish temples and synagogues typically charge annual membership fees. Tithing is still strongly advocated among Baptists and Pentecostals; sometimes required of members, very often of deacons and pastors. Even mega-churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback demand tithing from their members. There is often an explicit promise that God will bless you if you tithe.

I would rather echo Paul in 2 Corinthians – we should give what we feel led to give without compulsion and without guilt; with no fear of criticism or hope for praise; simply moved in our hearts by gratitude for God’s grace to us. Paul says “*God loves a cheerful giver*” – the adjective in Greek is *hilaros*, from which we get words like “hilarity.” When the plate is passed there should be laughter and joy – watch the younger children jostling to put their money in the bucket to support Ramiro in Bolivia! What you give is between you and God, and no-one here but the Treasurer knows who gives what. So you won’t get criticism or praise – unless of course you leave the church \$60,000 in your will as dear Bill Brehm did!

By giving we show our gratitude to God, we support the budget to run our church and its staff and ministries, and we help people in need. Churches may be "volunteer organizations" but they are expensive to run - you should see our insurance and utility bills! So yes, we all need to give as generously as we can. No, the Thrift Store and the Parsonage rental don't fund our budget; they contribute only 15% of our income, with 85% coming from people like you and me putting our money in the plate week by week and month by month - whether we can "afford it" or not - because we want to thank God for all his blessings, and because we are sure that he will always provide for our needs (if not for our wants).

Many churches have seen a serious decline in income the past two years. We have been spared that, but our budget is tight and we shall have to do some belt-tightening next year. But as a church we will still give away about one-tenth of our income to ministries, missions and people outside our church who are in greater need than we are. Americans give on average about 2.5% of their incomes to charity. I wish it was more, much closer to the biblical 10%. I wish we could double or quadruple our church budget! I wish we could give much more money to needy people. I wish we could fully fund all the staff and ministry areas that deserve it, where devoted people give their time and effort to extend God's love to others.

But I also wish there were fewer people unemployed or under-employed, fewer people paying high medical costs, fewer people with declining pensions, low investment returns, and lost income. So for these people we will continue to pray, and help where we can.

Should we tithe? In the end, giving is a personal response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. Grace produces

generosity, and generosity in turn produces thanks to God. In Greek they are all the same word: *charis*. So the *charis* of God (grace) produces *charis* in us (generosity), which leads to *charis* (thanks) from others - and the circle of grace is completed.

When we can say from the heart, with Paul, "*thanks be to God for his indescribable gift,*" we will know in our hearts what we should give him in return for the gift of his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...