

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JULY 14, 2007



2 Corinthians 9:6-15 *"Tithing, Generosity and Blessing"*

Three more intriguing questions from the "Ask The Pastor" series, from two different people:

Why is tithing so important in some churches and not in others? Why don't pastors preach/teach tithing? Why do some people think they will "get more if they give more"?

1) Tithes in the Old Testament

What is a tithe? Literally it is "one tenth," and typically means a gift of one-tenth of something you own. Usually that gift is, in some sense, "to God." Clearly the tithe has similarities to concepts like "tribute" which was a gift or payment showing dependence on a powerful person. Tithing in some form was practiced by many ancient peoples, and you could argue that the principle is present in almost all religions – bringing a gift to the gods, to the spirits, to God your Creator.

Why "give to God"? In the life and the 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 that the giver was only a temporary "steward" of their so-called possessions. It was, so to speak, up to

God what he did with the tithe; it was "holy to the LORD." You could see that illustrated in such famous actions as King David taking the water that his men had risked their lives to bring him and pouring it out on the ground "before the LORD" as a thank-offering.

The second reason that 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 to devote their lives to serving God in the Tabernacle, and they were to be supported by the tithes of the people. When Israel conquered Canaan, the Promised Land, no land was given to the tribe of Levi; the other tribes would support them by their tithes. 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 produce of the land, to the flocks and herds, and even to people – in the sense that the firstfruits 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

God had destroyed the first-born of every family in Egypt when he delivered Israel from slavery. So the tithe was to be “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 firstfruits of crops and 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 (nobody is sure if this was the normal tithe or an additional one), and it was kept in the local villages for the relief of the needy.

Of course tithing was not always practiced in Israel, and in the time of the prophets, that was one of the complaints 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 details or the problems, everyone understood the three principles of tithing: thanks 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 era carries those principles over to the new situation where “God’s people” are no longer solely agricultural, no longer centered on the Jerusalem Temple, widely dispersed, and multi-ethnic. Interestingly, the word “tithe” does not appear in the New Testament. But there is still plenty said about giving money to thank God for his goodness, to support those who work to spread the gospel, and to provide for the needy.

Jesus was very clear that his followers should be free from the love of money, and generous in giving, especially to the poor. “Freely you have received, freely give.” “Give as you have received.” “Sell all you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me.” When you get to the letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, the principles are the same: give because God has given you so much; give to support people in need; give to support the work of the Gospel. But instead of the command “tithe,” we find the exhortations “give generously,” “give from the heart,” “give as you are able,” “give cheerfully.” If you do that, says Paul, needy people will be helped and God will be praised when others see your generosity.

One thing, according to the New Testament, that marks out the Christian attitude to giving and so much else is the phrase “how much more.” If under the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant people gave one-tenth, “how much more” should people redeemed by Jesus Christ be ready to give generously. As you are now so blessed in comparison with them, “how much more” should you show your gratitude in your giving!

3) *How Much, and Why?*

So let’s be practical. Should Christians give a tenth of their income to God’s work – to support the ministry and mission of the church, to provide for the needy, to show their thanks to God? In the Church through the ages, some have taught that one-tenth was now the *minimum* a Christian should give. During the long period of Christian domination in Europe that we sometimes call “Christendom,” that level of giving was at times enforced by the Church or the state.

In medieval Europe, buildings called “tithe barns” were found near the church in every parish – that was where the gifts of crops were stored to maintain the work of the priest and the parish. To support the poor, there were regular collections of money and distributions to those in need. Nobody doubted the principle – if you had much, you should give much. It became an embedded cultural principle that has still not quite disappeared – *noblesse oblige* – what the dictionary defines as “the responsibility of privileged people to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged.”

In time, as the power of the Church diminished, more of that responsibility was taken over by governments in the form of taxation – not only to provide for the needy, but even to support the churches. Even today, countries like Germany, Austria, parts of Switzerland, and all the Scandinavian countries, still levy a “church tax” to support (mostly) the established state churches.

But what about us? We have no state-supported churches. How and what should Christians give? Why do some churches still insist on “tithing,” and others never mention it? Our Puritan forebears certainly tithed. Some 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; in some cases it is required of members, or very often of deacons and pastors. I was surprised to learn that some large “seeker-sensitive” mega-churches demand tithing of members: Willow Creek, Saddleback, for example.

Related to these demands are the promises that are common among Pentecostals: if you give generously, God will reward you. Now you may be surprised to know that you can find more support for this in the New Testament than you can for “tithing or more.” Jesus was clear about it: “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 takes up the same theme: “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 famous 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.”

So how should we give, what should we give? Give of our time, talent, wealth, income. Give generously, give regularly (weekly, Paul suggests); give as we are able (that is, if we have more than most, we should give more than most); give cheerfully, give out of gratitude to God for all that we have received in Jesus Christ. That is how the ministry and mission of the church should be supported: by God’s people giving consistently and generously. Not, I would argue, by appeals to support some special project; not by fund-raisers or games or lotteries; not by charging people to come into our buildings; but by consistent, generous, cheerful giving by all of God’s people, as we are able, in gratitude to God for all he has done for us.

Will we be blessed for giving? Yes and No. Yes, because your own generosity will in itself be a blessing to you. Yes, because

you will be demonstrating to God that you trust him enough to know he will not let you starve, no matter how much you “give to Him”. Yes, because you will see God’s work flourish in your Christian community. No, you won’t necessarily become wealthy: for every promise in the Gospel that God will make you flourish, there is at least one warning that as a Christian you may suffer hardship, just as Jesus suffered.

Why don’t pastors talk more about tithing? Some prefer to speak about generous giving. Some have lived through an era when money and Christianity were a bad story in the public mind, and the media gleefully reported financial scandals among TV evangelists, major national ministries, denominational offices. For a while, it seemed wiser not to appeal for any money from any pulpit. Some pastors want to distance themselves from the “health and wealth” gospel that promises God will reward you for giving. Some want to demonstrate their trust in God’s provision by being quiet and letting him, by his Spirit, stir his people to generous giving. Some pastors feel it is self-serving to appeal to people who are perhaps on fixed incomes to give more, when the pastors themselves account for 40% (or in small churches 80 or 90%) of the expenditures on the church budget. Some pastors know that money is the last “sacred” topic in American life, and that people will more readily tell you about their sex lives than about their incomes, let alone their giving. Some would prefer not to talk about money because it stirs very strange passions, and causes more trouble than almost anything else in churches – it is, after all, a subject on which we are all experts!

Should we say more about giving? I think so. We need to be more transparent about how the church of Jesus Christ and the work of God in the world is financed – because financed it must be. Churches may be “volunteer organizations” but they are expensive to run – you should see our insurance and utility bills! So yes, we need you to give generously - and more each year, because our expenses go up and up. No, the Thrift Store and the Parsonage rental don’t fund our budget; together they amount to 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 think it is the right thing to do, because it is the biblical way to support God’s work, because we want to express tangibly to God our gratitude to him for all his blessings, because we trust that he will always provide for our needs (if not for our wants).

Nationally, people give about 2.5% of their incomes to charity. I wish it was more, much closer to the biblical 10%. I wish we could double our church budget. I wish we could give much more money to needy people. I wish we could fully fund all the 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 outrageous medical costs, fewer people without adequate pensions or other income. So for these I will continue to pray, as I hope you will for our people and our church budget; and that you will pray over what you should do to show God your love and gratitude for his blessings to you.

Let us pray...