

## **Biblical Giving: More and Less**

*Sunday Morning Message delivered at Faith Bible Fellowship, Oak Ridge, Tennessee*

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*Third in a Series of Three Messages*

These past few weeks haven't been so good for my confidence. This is the fourth week in a row that I've taught about money.

A few weeks ago, one of our members was telling me about an out-of-town trip coming up. He asked, "How much longer are you going to be talking about money?" "Two more weeks," I answered. "That's perfect," he said, "we'll be back in three weeks."

That's not all. I was telling someone else about our new church website, and mentioned that I was including links to texts of some of my sermons. "O, good," she said. "Put up some of the good ones – not these ones you're doing now on money."

After today we all get some relief. They say whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger, right?

I'm not teaching about money and giving because it's my cup of tea (and not because it's my bread and butter, either), but because it is a part of the whole counsel of God that I am charged to teach. It is a significant part of the biblical instruction for the Christian life, and so it should be. Money is certainly an important part of every Christian's life. And it is certainly an integral part of our *spiritual* life. It is not (or should not be) a compartment set apart from our relationship with God.

I have framed the biblical teaching in terms of MORE AND LESS. There's a lot to learn about biblical giving (that's the MORE part), and sometimes a lot of UNLEARNING to do because we've all had some very unbiblical training on the subject of money, mostly from the world (that's the LESS part).

We began by saying that

*Biblical Giving is More about STEWARDSHIP and less about OWNERSHIP.*

That's really the foundation for the rest of it. The world sells a concept of "ownership" that is a gross exaggeration; a mirage; and in the end a deception. The truth is that we are not OWNERS in any kind of permanent or absolute sense. Rather we are STEWARDS who have been given temporary control of God's property, to whom we will one day give an account of our use and management.

Biblical Giving is also

*More about FAITH and less about FINANCES.*

Giving is an expression of faith – faith that it really is more blessed to give than to receive; faith that God really can supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. It is not so much about finances. We deceive ourselves when we say, "I'll give when I'm in better shape financially." Or, "That part of what the Bible teaches is really more for rich people."

Every Sunday we count the money in the offering basket, but the Lord looks at something that men can't count. He sees the faith *in* the gift. The Lord has a different scale. It's the scale that showed Him that a widow who put in two small coins amounting to a cent gave more than all of those who were putting in large sums. It's more about faith, and less about finances.

We also saw last week that

*Biblical Giving is more about the LIVING LORD and less about the LOCAL CHURCH.*

When you give, you should give to the Lord. If you support the church financially, you are giving to the Lord by way of the church. And the church has a stewardship before God to manage *His* money well.

But the local church is not the single divinely ordained vessel and clearinghouse for all money given to the cause of Christ in the world.

When you give outside the church you do not cheat the church - you honor the living Lord of the church. And God bless you for it!

Today we finish with two more points of biblical teaching about giving. (And I'll spend a lot more time on the first point than the second, so don't get nervous.) First, . . .

*Biblical Giving is more about your HEART FOR GOD  
and less about a PERCENTAGE OF YOUR INCOME.*

Under the terms of the OT law, at first blush, it looks like giving was fairly cut and dried. Listen to Leviticus 27:30-33:

*'Thus all the tithe of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S; it is holy to the LORD. 'If, therefore, a man wishes to redeem part of his tithe, he shall add to it one-fifth of it. 'For every tenth part of herd or flock, whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the LORD. 'He is not to be concerned whether it is good or bad, nor shall he exchange it; or if he does exchange it, then both it and its substitute shall become holy. It shall not be redeemed.'*

The word tithe, of course, means "tenth" or ten percent. The fact that we use the word "tithe" instead of "tenth" is a testimony to the influence of the KJV on our culture & language.

So there you have it. The Old Testament law says that God's share is ten percent, right? I kind of like the argument that is sometimes put forward, "If 10 percent is good enough for God, it ought to be good enough for the federal government."

But giving under the Old Testament law was not so cut and dried as it may appear. Here in Leviticus 27, for example, part of the tithe was paid on produce (income, verse 30), and some on assets (stuff we bought with previous income, verses 32-33). We don't think much about tithing on assets, but that was part of the Old Testament tithe.

What is this "passing under the rod"? They would run flocks & herds through chute, counting as they "passed under the rod," and every tenth one they would mark to be dedicated to the Lord, in other words, given over to the Levites for their service as priests.

Here's the point, there is no distinction between "pre-tithe" & "post tithe" livestock! You couldn't argue, "All of these sheep over here, they 'passed under the rod' last year. God already had a shot at them last year and apparently He didn't want any of these. All of my *new* sheep are over here. They are only ones I still owe tithe on." No, the whole flock (and/or herd) was included, so the Old Testament tithe was *partly* on assets, as well as on income!

And there couldn't be any manipulations of the system. If the ninth one through the chute was a scrawny sheep and the tenth was your blue ribbon state fair sheep, that's just the way it went. If you did try to substitute a skinny sheep for a fat one, both of them were to be given to the Lord (verse 33).

Here's another wrinkle. If you wanted to redeem part of your produce tithe (in other words, give money instead of the grain, seed, or fruit), that's fine – just add twenty percent to the value of it (verse 31).

Now, it gets more complicated than that: Deuteronomy 14:22-29 tells us about a second tithe for a second use and purpose:

*"You shall surely tithe all the produce from what you sow, which comes out of the field every year. You shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God, at the place where He chooses to establish His name, the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and your flock,*

*so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. If the distance is so great for you that you are not able to bring the tithe, since the place where the LORD your God chooses to set His name is too far away from you when the LORD your God blesses you, then you shall exchange it for money, and bind the money in your hand and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household. Also you shall not neglect the Levite who is in your town, for he has no portion or inheritance among you. At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town. The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.”*

The first tithe was for the maintenance of the Levites. The second was to be brought to the central place of Israel’s worship (which would become temple in Jerusalem). You could either bring the actual tithe of produce plus the firstborn of the flocks, or if you lived too far away, you could bring the value of those things in money. (You can see by the different conditions and regulations that this is a different tithe altogether from the one described in Leviticus 27.)

Now part of this tithe could be used in your own celebration of the feasts in Jerusalem, but every third year, the tithe was to stay in your home town to help the Levites and other poor to celebrate the festivals.

So what was the Old Testament tithe? It seems to me, here’s the way to figure it. Just to make it easy to figure, let’s say we start with a hundred dollars annual income. The first tithe would leave \$90. A second tithe on that amount would be \$9, leaving \$81. So all together we’re talking 19 percent, not counting that partial tithe on assets (the flocks and herds), plus whatever “redemption fees” (twenty percent) you paid for whatever part of the tithe of produce you decided to keep for yourself.

Furthermore, the Old Testament tells us about “offerings” that were not part of either tithe. For example, 1 Chronicles 29 speaks of the financing of the building of Solomon’s temple:

*“Then the rulers of the fathers' households, and the princes of the tribes of Israel, and the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, with the overseers over the king's work, **offered willingly**; and for the service for the house of God they gave 5,000 talents and 10,000 darics of gold, and 10,000 talents of silver, and 18,000 talents of brass, and 100,000 talents of iron. **Whoever possessed precious stones gave them to the treasury of the house of the LORD**, in care of Jehiel the Gershonite. **Then the people rejoiced because they had offered so willingly, for they made their offering to the LORD with a whole heart**, and King David also rejoiced greatly. So David blessed the LORD in the sight of all the assembly; and David said, "Blessed are You, O LORD God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O LORD, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name. **But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You.**”*

All of this is to say, that if we simply take our paycheck, multiply it by ten percent (whether it’s on the gross or on the net), and give that amount to the Lord’s work that is *NOT* really duplicating the Old Testament practice of tithing.

Nor are you required to bump that up to nineteen percent plus. Nor are you required to try to figure out what part of your assets are comparable to “flocks and herds” and tithe on them, too. Because I’ve got good news for you from Romans 6:14, “*you are not under law, but under grace.*” And I’ve got good news from Romans 7:6, “*But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.*”

What does the New Testament say about this matter of the tithe?

The word “tithe” appears eight times in the New Testament. In Matthew 23:23 and Luke 11:42, Christ uses word in His condemnation of religious hypocrites. He does not condemn them for tithing, but he chastises them for paying close attention to smaller details of devotion to God while ignoring the bigger ticket items like justice and mercy and faithfulness. In Luke 18:12, tithing appears as a sign of a Pharisee’s outward righteousness. It is used five times in Hebrews 7, where it is argued that the priesthood of Melchizedek is superior to priesthood of Aaron, because Aaron’s forefather Abraham paid a tithe of spoils of battle to Melchizedek. The passage, however, *does not address* the issue of tithing for believers in Christ in the New Testament era.

In fact, the word tithe is never used in the New Testament as a command or a regulation for the church. It is entirely absent from the central New Testament passages on giving.

Not that we are left without direction on the matter of giving. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 tells us how much we should give:

*“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, **as he may prosper**, that no collections be made when I come.”*

How much should you give? How has God prospered you? Has God been good to you in the matter of material possessions? Give accordingly. Or, you could ask it this way: Would it be a good thing or a bad thing if God adjusted your income to match your giving? If God adjusted your income to match your giving, would it go up or down?

When you start asking questions like that, you can see immediately that giving is a reflection of gratitude toward God, isn’t it? It’s quite possible ten percent doesn’t *begin* to reflect how God has blessed us materially. C.S. Lewis said, *“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”*

There’s another New Testament passage that tells us how much to give. 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 says,

*“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully. Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

How much should you give? How much does your heart tell you to give? How much seed should you plant? That depends on how much you want to reap? Do you believe that God rewards? Does He reward richly, or meagerly? Plant accordingly. Give accordingly.

The church’s job is not to come after your wallet with a crowbar until we can pry ten percent out of you, or nineteen percent, or any other percent. The job of the church is to speak from God’s Word to your heart. The task of the church is to make disciples, and a disciple is someone who follows Christ from the heart.

Before I move on I should say that while the New Testament does not say “Thou shalt tithe,” neither does it say, “Thou shalt not tithe.” We do it as a church – we tithe on every nondesignated gift that comes in. Ten percent is dedicated to serve the kingdom of God beyond and outside our own ministry. When we set that policy in place it sure felt like a stretch. But it was a fitting response to God’s provision, and together we had faith to do it, and God has certainly blessed.

Last year through specially designated gifts, that figure was something like twenty-seven percent. Praise the Lord for letting us be part of what He is doing in Croatia and the Philippines and Nigeria and Choices Resource Center and in New York City through Jews for Jesus & other places.

And I believe that God blesses and rewards individuals and households that tithe, too. Giving ten percent of income is a stretch for most people. I saw a study that put charitable giving of the average household at about two and a half percent. Households with incomes below \$10,000 were at 2.8 percent and it went down from there. Households between \$50-\$100K were at 1.5 percent.

Ten percent might be a stretch of faith for you, but it is good to be stretched. It's good to express gratitude and trust in the Lord in a way that says, "I really mean it." I know of no one who has set out to stretch themselves and their faith by tithing on their income and did not find that God honored it and blessed it, and grew their faith & blessed them materially as well. You've never met anyone who has said, "I went overboard on giving to God, and its really worked out poorly for me – it took me years to recover!"

But whatever you do, whatever you give, it is more about your heart for God and less about a percentage of your income.

And finally,

*Biblical Giving is more about WORSHIP and less about RECOGNITION*

In 1997 the New York Times published a story about a six million dollar zoo for children in Central Park. I'm not sure if it was a zoo for children to visit, or if the children would be on display in cages – but it was some kind of zoo for children. But what happened is that a couple who had agreed to give half the money for the project had decided to rescind their gift of three million dollars. The problem was that the zoo administrators had decided to put a two-inch plaque acknowledging the gift over the zoo entrance.

But the *sides* of the gateway already had plaques (bigger ones, one on each side) recognizing a gift of five hundred thousand dollars given thirty-six years before for construction of the original zoo. The couple pledging the three million proposed that their names *replace* names of the original donors. The zoo refused, and so the three million was not given. The news story quoted the couple saying, "*We were not talking about neon lights. We were just talking about a very modest plaque that would give acknowledgement to a very sizable gift by anybody's standard.*"

That is the way giving works – *in the world*. If we're going to give, it's not too much to ask that we be recognized & honored for it. Someone has said, "We'd all like a reputation for generosity, and we'd like to buy it cheap."

I've read that the American auto pioneer Henry Ford was once asked to donate money for a new hospital. He pledged \$5,000, which I suppose to a billionaire like him would be like a nickel for you or me. The fund-raisers must have thought something like that, too, because on the basis of their information the New York Times ran a story on it under the headline, "Henry Ford To Contribute \$50,000 To Local Hospital."

An irate Ford called the fund-raiser to complain that he had been misunderstood. The fund-raiser, in turn, offered to tell the New York Times that Ford had reduced his gift by \$45,000.

Ford quickly calculated the cost of poor publicity, and agreed to give the \$50,000, on the condition that a certain biblical inscription would be carved above the doorway to the hospital: "*I came among you, and you took me in.*"

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said,

*"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them;  
otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*

*When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,  
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men.*

*Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms,  
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that you alms may be in secret;*

*and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” (Matthew 6:1-4)*

In other words, keep it very private – keep it a secret even from yourself! Don’t even let yourself be impressed with yourself! Let it be about God. Let it be a private expression of worship to your God.

A few weeks ago I explained reasons behind our putting out a basket instead of passing the plate like they do in most other churches. But I’ll give plate passers their due here - they emphasize one thing that might be missed here. Giving is a part of your worship. And worship is the overflow of your relationship with God & your heart for Him.

Giving as worship is perhaps seen nowhere more clearly than in Mark 14:3-9:

*While He [Jesus] was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."*

She certainly didn’t do it to be lauded by men. In fact, she was criticized for it. Is it not evident that it was all about her heart for the Master. She could see nothing else but Him. And the Master recognized her heart, and the Master rewarded.

There are times in the course of your life, driven by what is going on in your life with God at the time (perhaps a great answer to prayer, a great appreciation for what He has done, perhaps a contemplation of His blessings and a fresh realization of His goodness) when the right response of your heart is to break the alabaster vial, and pour it out in sacrifice as a fragrant aroma before the Lord.

Don’t do it for a two-inch plaque or even a neon sign. Do it out of a spirit of worship. Make it about the worthiness of the Lord, not about your worthiness for being so generous.

I suppose it’s the worship aspect of giving that makes it such a foul thing in the sight of God when men turn it into a magnification of themselves. The gift is supposed to be a sign of the worthiness of God. Leave it to fallen men to figure out a way to put worship to work in service of their own pride.

But let it not be so – it cannot be so – among those who serve the Lord from the heart!

*Father in Heaven , we can see that what you really seek is a heart attitude on our part that is expressed (partly) by holding our possessions with an open hand, by a willingness to give, by a worship that is validated and confirmed and strengthened when we give of the resources that you have given us. We know that our attitude toward money speaks to the reality of our attitude toward You! It speaks of our sense of gratitude for Your blessings. It speaks of our faith in You as our provider. We resolve to have faith in You and to follow You not just in word but also in deed. But we also ask you to deepen our heart for You. We believe, Lord, but help our unbelief. Let Your word dwell in our hearts richly – this week and in all the days to come. In Jesus’ name, amen.*