

The Blessings of Giving

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March 1999

Some years ago we were ministering in a church in the Philippines when Carolyn noticed that each family poured a small paper bag of rice into a large container as they entered the building. After the service Carolyn asked the pastor what the rice was for and he told her that the people of the church brought the rice for their neighborhood. Each week the church distributed the rice to the poor as a gift from the Lord Jesus. I am sure the ears of these poor neighborhood people were much more open to the gospel when they received the rice! This is creative, compassionate giving.

We recently received a letter from a Kenyan pastor asking if we had any teaching on the subject of giving since we had only touched on tithes and offerings in a recent article. His letter prompted us to write an entire article concerning an accurate biblical perspective on the subject of giving.

Let's first look at giving in the Old Testament.

Old Testament Tithing

The Lord told Moses that the people were to tithe. He defined tithing as follows: "The entire tithe of the herd and flock--every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod--will be holy to the LORD." (Lev 27:32 NIV) Every tenth animal, despite its health or value, was the Lord's. No substitutions were permitted. This principle was to be applied to *all of the increase* of one's goods for the year including animals and all farm produce. One tenth of a man's annual increase was designated as holy to the Lord. Thus the tithe represented and still does represent a tenth of the profit from one's labors.

In Joshua 13-21, God gave eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel land. The twelfth tribe, the tribe of Levi, was given no land. Instead they were designated as priests and keepers of the Lord's tabernacle. The tithe was God's plan for the maintenance of the priesthood as well as the tabernacle.

God also solved the problem of how to manage the hundreds or even thousands of animals and tons of produce to be given to the tabernacle this way:

But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. (Deu 14:24,25 NIV)

This provision made it convenient to bring the tithe to the Lord no matter what the product of a man's labors were. In the New Testament, Jesus taught that we are to continue this practice. Speaking to the crowds and His disciples, He said, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you . . ." (Mat 23:2,3 NIV) The Pharisees taught tithing, and so did Jesus.

The Cost of Not Tithing

I don't think many churches today properly teach about tithing. Sure, we all hear, "You ought to tithe," but that is not teaching tithing.

Sadly, because we have not properly taught people to tithe, they don't. (I have heard the statistic that 20% of the Christians give 80% of the money.) Here is the bad news: *when a Christian does not tithe, he or she is under a curse!* Look at what God told us through Malachi.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. *You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house . . .*" (Mal 3:8-10 NIV, emphasis added.)

In my travels in many nations among poor churches I have heard pastors say their people are too poor to tithe. Sad as this is, the failure to teach them tithing only makes them poorer! Imagine, being very poor and being cursed on top of that!

The Blessings of Tithing

But we are not left with that curse as God's only pronouncement. The good news is that all those who do tithe will be blessed! Here is a biblical fact: Nine-tenths of what one has remaining after tithing *plus God's blessing* far exceeds tenths without the tithe. When you reckon in your heart that the tithe belongs to the Lord and faithfully give it, God begins to bless you in countless ways. Sickness visits your household less often, your land is more fruitful, you will experience more joy, less of what you own will need repairs, people (sometimes even unbelievers) give you things . . . on and on the blessings of God come. We have God's word on this. In fact, God *invites* people to test Him in tithing.

"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. (Mal 3:10-12 NIV)

Where Do We Give Our Tithe?

Malachi 3:10 teaches, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house . . ." (NIV) What is the storehouse? It is obvious from the context of this verse that Scripture intends the tithe to go to the church. The most common interpretation of the storehouse as church is that our tithe should go to the local church where we are members. Certainly every Christian must support his or her local church. If you interpret the storehouse as only the local church, then all other Christian works must be supported by offerings over and above the 10% tithe.

There is also a second, reasonable interpretation of this passage. That second interpretation views the church in much broader terms. This broad view holds that we are to give our tithe to the church at large, that is, to all of God's works, including Christian missionaries, Christian charities, gospel tract societies, and so forth.

Those who hold with this interpretation of the storehouse cite the following passage in Deuteronomy.

When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them. (26:12-13 NIV)

Surprising as it may seem, here the Lord is telling the people to divide the tithe among the Levite (the church), the alien, the fatherless and the widow. I believe both these interpretations are reasonable and I defer to each pastor the right to decide for his or her own church. (Please note that the principles of Spirit-led giving examined at the end of this article provide for plenty of money for all of God's people as well as His works!)

Offerings Are Optional

Going back to the Old Testament, we see that offerings are different from tithes. While tithes are mandatory, Scripture makes offerings optional or voluntary.

"Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man *whose heart prompts him to give*. These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze. . ." (Exo 25:2,3 NIV, emphasis added.)

Obviously the *heart prompting* mentioned here is from the Lord Himself through the Holy Spirit. It is easy to see how obedience to that prompting brings pleasure to the Lord. He is always pleased with His children when they obey His word and He always blesses that obedience.

Motives for Giving

It is a fact that when one gives offerings to God He pours blessings back on the giver. However, in recent years a teaching has emerged in the church that boldly instructs people to *give to get!* This is giving with the wrong motive. Exodus 25 clearly tells us to *give because our heart prompts us* to do so. Any gift to God is blessed and receives its due reward, but God sees the motives of our hearts and rewards accordingly.

1. Self-Centered Giving

If one gives to God in order to get, he or she is very likely to spend what he gets on himself. That is the nature of self-centeredness. This does not necessarily incur God's wrath or disapproval. But at this point we must heed the admonition God gave the children of Israel when He gave them His blessings of worldly possessions.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not

plant--then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deu 6:10-12 NIV)

2. God-Centered Giving

God is always moving in the earth according to His master plan. He usually uses men and women to do His work. By its very nature that earthly work almost always takes money. Therefore, isn't it reasonable to believe that each time God wants something accomplished that He *moves the hearts* of certain individuals to give money to that work?

How Much Is Enough?

God watches carefully what we give. I don't mean how much, but rather what we give relative to what we have, or put another way, what we give relative to what we spend on ourselves. Remember the poor widow?

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." (Mk 12:41-43 NIV)

In this passage we see that Jesus was impressed that this widow gave everything she had to live on, for she gave *out of her necessity*. Note that Jesus had no criticism of the rich and their gifts, but rather He praised the widow because she gave out of her necessity. He said that she had put *more* into the treasury than all the others! Evidently God judges "more" relative to what one has rather than the absolute monetary value.

Is God Ever Displeased With Our Giving?

Let's look at this Scripture:

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." (Hag 1:9-11 NIV)

God didn't say here that the people weren't giving. Rather He said that His house had a need and that the people were placing their personal needs ahead of His. There are times when the church needs funds and the people ignore those needs to fulfill their own desires. "My children need new clothes," or "I need to buy a car," or "I need a better house," or "I need . . . I need . . . I need . . ." and so forth.

What then is our ultimate guide in giving?

Spirit-Led Giving

I believe the ultimate goal of every Christian is to give as directed by the Holy Spirit. This is essentially what the Lord is saying in Exodus 25, "each man *whose heart prompts him to*

give . . ." Spirit-led giving works exactly that way. The Holy Spirit prompts the heart to give, it is God directed.

Spirit-led giving is most often given above the tithe. It is as if the giving of our tithe is done out of simple obedience and Spirit-led giving is a step beyond. This kind of giving has nothing to do with "how much we can afford."

This kind of giving is a learned process. The Holy Spirit is gentle. He will not come to us demanding control of our money. We must voluntarily hand over the control of our finances to Him. One of our goals as maturing Christians should be to give total control of our money to Him.

Often such giving is directed to individuals rather than through church offerings. Once I was walking down the street and I passed a man standing on the sidewalk. The Holy Spirit said, "Give that man ten dollars." I immediately stopped, took ten dollars from my wallet, turned and went back to the man. Handing him the money I said, "The Lord told me to give this to you." Visibly startled, he took the money.

I have no idea who the man was. My part was to obey the Lord. I have heard many testimonies from people to whom strangers similarly ministered in times of desperate need. And the great thing is that the giver is blessed more than the receiver! For the Lord Jesus Himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35 NIV) As tears welled up in the eyes of the man to whom I gave the money he said, "God bless you!" And He has. It is indeed more blessed to give than to receive!

We have already mentioned the widow whom Jesus watched give the two small coins, all that she had, into the treasury. From the context of that Scripture we don't know what happened to that poor widow. But from a spiritual principle found elsewhere in Scripture I know that God supernaturally provided for her needs. Let's look at how the Lord provided for Elijah's widow:

"Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die." Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'" She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. (1 Ki 17:9-16 NIV)

This poor woman had no guarantee that what Elijah said would happen. She obeyed in faith. She trusted God as she gave.

When the Lord asked her to give all she had to live on to Elijah, He wasn't trying to kill her. He was trying to get her over into the ultimate realm of giving--*that of giving to God what one needs to live on*. Her obedience released the floodgate of God's supernatural provision!

Freely Giving: The Law of Sowing and Reaping

Let's examine the law of sowing and reaping found in Paul's second letter to Corinth.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor 9:6-11 NIV)

It is clear that Paul is talking to the church at Corinth about their giving money to the Lord's work. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul clearly teaches that if we give little we will get little from God. But if we give abundantly we will receive abundantly from God for He tells us,

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled with overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. (Prov 3:9-10 NIV)

Let me close by affirming the truth that we can't out give God. He will never short change us if we give freely to His work and His people. One of my favorite passages in Scripture about giving is the story of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 35-36. The Lord gave Moses specific instructions about how to build the Tabernacle and Moses relayed this directive to the Israelites.

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 of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece. "All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the LORD has commanded. (Exo 35:4-10 NIV)

This is how the people responded.

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, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering

to the LORD. . . All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings for all the work the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do. (Exo 35:20-22,29 NIV)

God then chose those men who were most skilled to do the job.

. . . and he has filled [them] with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts--to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers--all of them master craftsmen and designers. (Exo 35:31-35 NIV)

What happened?

They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled craftsmen who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done." Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work. (Exo 36:3-7 NIV)

What an awesome account of giving. Notice that 1) God was in control, 2) He chose the people to do the work, 3) He gifted them with every skill needed to complete the job, and 4) the people gave until there was so much they had to be restrained from giving more!

Every time we give freely, we are personally blessed, and the work of the Lord is funded. We must teach these principles in our churches and live them ourselves. Then truly the gates of heaven will open and God's blessings will be poured out on all of us!

Lord, thank You that You have made provision for Your children. Indeed, You have promised that each of us can have life and have it abundantly. Thank You that part of that provision comes through our faithfully following Your principles of giving. We know we can't out give You. Help us to be more Spirit-led in our giving, help us to do it with more joy and freedom than ever before. Thank you for making a way for all our needs to be met and Your work to be done here on earth. Your name be praised!

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