

Why we give

ASK ANY CASUAL CHURCHGOER about the churches they attend and you'll normally find that they greatly prefer the grander edifices. You don't find them checking in with the fledgling congregation meeting in the elementary school with folding chairs and bad acoustics. They want the established, comfortable venues.

But here's an irony: Ask those same casual attenders why they don't go more often, and one complaint is high on their list: "The church is always asking for money."

The great question, of course, is whether this observation is true. If you selected 52 random churches to visit each weekend for the next year, in how many of them would you find the leaders asking for money, other than to pass the offering plate? Or maybe it is that silly plate that makes us squirm.

CERTAINLY WHEN YOU ARE involved in missionary work—that is, ongoing interaction among non-believers for the sake of introducing them to the wonder of Jesus Christ—you

don't want to give the impression that behind all this is a desire to get into people's pocketbooks. The apostle Paul was adamant: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God" (2 Corinthians 2:17). The Good News of Jesus is not for sale!

At the same time, Jesus dedicated plenty of teaching time to matters of money, most famously indicating that "a man cannot serve both God and

Q The "Q points" with this article are questions designed to spark the reader's thinking about the issues being addressed and may also be good for group discussion.

Article written by JEFF HOPPER, the editor of Links Players Magazine and the Links Daily Devotional.





Are you uncomfortable with the way the church talks about money? What makes you most uncomfortable? How would you address this differently?

money” and that the widow’s two coins were a greater gift than the rich offerings of wealthy men because “she gave all that she had.”

At Links Players our ministry often operates among those with discretionary income, those who meet their fundamental needs then have money left over. We counsel people in all biblical matters, but many of them have money on their mind and want to know what the Bible really teaches about giving. Our intent here is to set forth some of that teaching in a way that allows you to read and understand the scriptural instruction about giving. Be forewarned: this instruction should have a definite practical effect on your life. You may find yourself doing very different things with your money than you’ve done before.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE NEW

One of the entanglements in church teaching about money comes from the fact that there are two orders of what we might call God’s society. There are the

of a household income that was to be given at the tabernacle or temple. Offerings were brought above and beyond the tithes as expressions of atonement or thanksgiving. In both cases, the money (or livestock or food) was given to God as opposed to “the church” (or temple), and the Old Testament directed the priests as to what portions of these tithes and offerings they could retain as their provision for serving the Israelites.

Because the Hebrew for *tithe* literally meant “tenth,” it has often been taught that each believer should give 10 percent of their gross household income to God through the church. A popular biblical passage for compelling such giving comes from the last book of the Old Testament: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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 there will not be room enough to store it” (Malachi 3:10).

We encounter several prob-

lems when we continue to compel the tithe in this way today:

1. The Old Testament tithes were *not* limited to one tenth, but rather we find indications of two different annual tenths, as well as a tri-annual tenth. This means that the tithes some Israelites gave amounted to 23.3 percent annually, not 10 percent.

2. The Malachi passage in its context points to a specific people in a specific time—the Jewish people about 400 years before Christ. Its promise for obedience? “The nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” (v. 11). While God may ignite Malachi 4:10 for individual believers, verse 11 provides a promise that does not allow us to apply the passage universally to all believers in all parts of the world today.

3. The case is similar for all Old Testament teachings. Many pastors who would not dare apply some portions of the Old Testament laws to New Testament congregations preach insistently about the tithe. As we will soon show, the New Testament confirms many aspects of the *spirit* of the Old Testament law, but the coming of grace in Christ has rendered the *letter* of the Old Testament law dead.

4. Among the wealthy, absolute preaching of the tithe can actually have a limiting effect. What if God calls an individual to give 20, 30 or even 90 percent of their income in a given year or over their lifetime? We do not want to set people up to reason in their flesh against what God is calling



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rules and regulations of the Old Testament and the “freedom in Christ” patterns of the New Testament.

From the Old Testament, we gather two significant practices: tithes and offerings. Tithes represented the regular portion

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them to do in their spirit.

5. Teaching the tithe is often done to the exclusion of other key instructions about generosity in the Old Testament, including the law of gleaning (where the poor were allowed to enter the fields and harvest their own

sustenance) and the laws of Sabbath, where every seventh year some families would have no “income” at all, because their fields were to lie fallow.

We find it interesting, then, that many teachers who declare themselves to be New Testament adherents, compelled by grace and not by the law, encourage adamant adherence to the Old Testament specific of the tithe. You will often hear it presented in facts and figures that make sense to our contemporary financial ears—“if every member of this church gave 10 percent (rather than the average of two to three percent that they are giving now), we would be able to provide so many services for our members and the community around us.” No doubt this is true. But the same could be said for eight percent, and far more could be said for 12 percent or 15 percent!

Still, giving is a principle deeply embedded in both the Old and New Testaments. We cannot ignore it. We just need a way of looking at what ideas are woven through from the Bible’s early chapters to its later ones.

FOUR THREADS OF GIVING

What we have come to recognize in the progression of Scripture from the strictures of the law in the Old Testament (which Paul wrote to the Romans was meant to lay bare our rebellious hearts against God) to the rule of grace in the New Testament is that some themes never go away. For instance, the Old Testament law defined murder and required firm punishment

for it. Jesus affirmed the heinous nature of murder, adding that hatred itself (often the motive for murder) was equally bad. Then Paul wrote that murderers were counted among those who would not see the kingdom of God. We could not then say that murder is “of the Old Testament” and no longer an unrighteous act under New Testament grace.

In the same way, while we do not find New Testament parameters around giving that look like the tithe percentages of the Old Testament, four threads—or principles continuing from the Old Testament to the New Testament—get our attention. By examining each of these, we find not only biblical challenge and encouragement for giving but also some pictures of just how this should be done.

Thread 1: Faith

Let’s get right to the point here: All obedience to God’s commands requires faith. When I purport to act in my own strength and earn what I have on my own, then I do not profess to needing help. I stand independent of God.

The Bible, however, makes it clear that what we have comes from God. When Moses recapped the work of God in his life and the lives of God’s peoples, the Israelites, he spoke these words to them: “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18a). In the New Testament, James wrote:

Q What adjustments in your personal finances would be required if you were to begin giving a regular percentage to the work of God?

OLD TESTAMENT MONEY

Ancient Israel functioned as a theocracy, with God in charge and speaking through his prophets. Thus, among instructions for worship and social restrictions (sexual purity, truth-telling, property issues, etc.), God ordained patterns for generosity, which continued through the later prophets as the time of Jesus neared.

DEUTERONOMY 8

Perhaps no passage captures the essence of God’s concern over wealth’s grip on us like Deuteronomy 8:10-18, which begins: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.” God never wanted our faith to slip into the hands of easy provision.

FURTHER READING

Here are several other passages from the Old Testament to guide your study about money and giving:

- Leviticus 7:28-34
- Deuteronomy 14:22-29
- Deuteronomy 18:1-2
- 1 Chronicles 22:5-16
- Nehemiah 5:1-13
- Job 1:1-Job 2:10
- Proverbs 31:10-31
- Isaiah 58:1-12

What do these passages and other Old Testament passages presented in this article reveal to you about the character and heart of God?

NEW TESTAMENT MONEY

Because Jesus was not hesitant to talk about money, speaking of it more frequently than he did of heaven and hell, his apostles fearlessly addressed the issue as well.

1 TIMOTHY 6

Some of the most powerful instruction occurs in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Famously, he wrote, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," extending Jesus' warnings that money will draw us away from God if we attempt to serve them both. This is why Paul extended his instruction with these words: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

FURTHER READING

Here are several other passages from the New Testament that will inform your thinking about money and giving:

- Matthew 7:9-11
- Luke 8:1-3
- Acts 4:32-Acts 5:11
- Romans 15:25-28
- 1 Corinthians 13:3
- Galatians 2:9-10
- 1 Timothy 5:8
- 1 Timothy 6:17-18
- Hebrews 13:5-6
- James 4:13-14

How might these passages change the course of your next conversation with your spouse or financial advisor?

"You want something but you don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God" (James 4:2).

One of the ancient names for God, Yahweh-Yireh, is often rendered Jehovah-Jireh and means The LORD Who Provides. The name first came off the tongue of Abraham, when God provided a ram in the thicket in place of his son Isaac, after the LORD tested Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice Isaac to the LORD. In our time, some have criticized God for making such a primal request of Abraham, but these people miss Abraham's perspective and God's. Notice that Abraham's response to the incident was not to say of God, "You are The LORD Who Demands," but rather, "You are The LORD Who Provides." And throughout God's Word from that day forward, Abraham was held up for us all as the man of great faith, the predecessor to those whose faith is credited to them as righteousness.

Therefore, the first thread in the Bible's recognition of provision is faith. We receive in faith, humbly deferring to God's hand in all that we have. And we give in faith, for it is with faith that we trust God will replenish our provisions and meet our needs, according to his wisdom and love.

Thread 2: Thanksgiving

A number of the Old Testament laws describe sacrifices. Many of these are brought as an act of atonement, when a person had sinned and needed to present

a sacrifice to God as a way of saying, "I know what I have done and that it has not pleased you. Please receive my offering as an act of humble apology." But people also brought sacrifices to God as a way of thanking him for good things he had done in their lives. None of these sacrifices were offered as a way of "appeasing God" as might have been done in other religions, but rather they were made as a way of responding to what he had done in their lives as Lord and Provider.

In the New Testament, Jesus encountered ten men with leprosy and healed them all. He then directed them to go show themselves to the priests that they may be deemed clean according to the procedures of the Old Testament laws. After they had started on their way, however, one of the men—not a Jew but a Samaritan—returned to Jesus and threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. Jesus made specific note of this act of thanksgiving and wondered aloud, "Where are the other nine?" Then he commended the man for his faith.

The apostle Paul also recognized that thanksgiving is always the right response to the good gifts of God. "In everything give thanks," he wrote to the Philippians, and he told the Corinthians that their financial generosity "will result in thanksgiving to God."

Thanks is an attitude of the heart, but as the second thread of biblically directed giving, it is also an act of appreciation, a way of telling God, "We are so



If faith is the essential characteristic of those who are generous in giving, what kinds of hindrances keep us from this necessity? How might we overcome a lack of faith?

grateful for what you have done for us.”

Thread 3: Provision for ministers
Perhaps the thing that troubles some churchgoers about appeals for financial assistance is that it is the ministers who usually do

Paul furthered this teaching, even though he commonly worked on the side so that he would not be a “burden” and could teach the gospel free of charge. “Don’t we have a right to food and drink?” he wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians. And this:

When we give toward those who deliver the word of God to us, we are buying the time for them to study and prepare lessons that lead us closer to Christ, in the very same way we pay experts in any field.

the asking. It turns pastors and missionaries into sales people, a role almost none of them are comfortable with.

This was never the intention of Scripture, however. By God giving the direction for how his priests would be cared for, they were never placed in a position of asking. The ongoing provision came through the system of offerings and sacrifices. In fact, the portion set aside for the priests was originally called their “regular share for the generations to come” (Leviticus 7:36). From the beginning of ministerial offices, then, the giving of God’s people was partly intended to support those who were engaged in the work of leading worship.

This provision extended into the New Testament when it came to the ministerial work of teaching the Word of God and delivering the Gospel of Christ. When Jesus sent his disciples out on their first mission of ministry, he told them, “Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep” (Matthew 10:8-9). If God’s ministers were doing God’s work, people with God’s heart would provide for them.

“If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more?” (1 Corinthians 9:7,11-12). In this context and a similar one written to his protégé Timothy, Paul built his argument from the Old Testament passage of Deuteronomy 25:4: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”

The third thread of giving, then, motivates us to give toward those who deliver the word of God to us. We are, in essence, buying the time for them to study and prepare lessons that lead us closer to Christ, in the very same way we pay experts in any field for the time they have put in to preparing training materials and sessions that make us better in other endeavors.

Thread 4: Generosity and Care for the Poor

Few people argue with the beauty of generosity. It is love in action, because it is never done grudgingly (or we wouldn’t call it generosity!). The recurrent description of God himself in the Old Testament begins like this, “The Lord your God is gracious and compassionate, abounding in love...” Here is the

essence of generosity—gracious, compassionate, and abundant. No wonder God calls us to the same!

Throughout the Bible, generosity is closely connected to care for the poor. This begins in the Old Testament law with rules



regarding debt and gleaning. Among the Jewish people of old, debt canceling was to be done every seven years, with a return of property to its original owner every fiftieth year (the Year of Jubilee). While the inclination of one’s heart under such direction may have been not to loan anyone money if any debts were just to be cancelled, God called his people to a generous mindset: “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be heardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs” (Deuteronomy 15:8). In fact, God called the idea to hold back from generosity as the year for canceling debts neared a “wicked thought.” Moreover, slaves who were being set free at the end of their six-year service were to be “supplied liberally” from one’s flock, threshing floor, and winepress: “Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you” (Deuteronomy 15:14). Further, the law made room for the poor by requiring that farmers and orchard tenders leave unharvested food for the poor to pick. For example: “When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the

vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. This is why I command you to do this” (Deuteronomy 24:21-22). But there may be no Old Testament passage more indicative of the generous heart of God for the poor than this: “If [you make a loan to a] man who is poor, do not go to sleep with his pledge in your possession. Return his cloak to him by sunset so that he may sleep in it. Then he will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 24:12-13).

People are often more familiar with Jesus’ words concerning generosity toward the poor, chiefly in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Here, Jesus taught that those who feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe an unclothed person, or visit the sick or imprisoned are actually doing these compassionate acts unto Jesus. When confronting the Pharisees over their “dead religion,” Jesus noted that while they carefully tithed every tiny portion to the tenth percent to demonstrate their “righteousness,” they neglected “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter,” he told them, “without neglecting the former.” In other words, we cannot practice only the “more spiritual” threads of giving; our giving is completely satisfactory when we give to the financially poor among us.

This is why Paul was so complimentary of the Macedonians and their sacrificial giving: “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:2-4). The Macedonian believers set an example for us all. They saw generous giving as a privilege!

WHEN IT COMES TO GIVING, the Bible leaves us no option. From end to end, it lays out a four-fold pattern for our giving. We are to give in *faith*, with *thanksgiving*, with *regular provision for those who minister the Gospel of Christ* and with *open-handed generosity* to those who need financial assistance. Paul encouraged this kind of giving throughout his letters, but perhaps never more so than in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 when he wrote: “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.” The law of grace is not like the Old Testament law. Rather, it is driven by the Holy Spirit in us. At his lead, we may give what it makes us happy to give—but we should not be surprised to find that what makes us most happy is to, like the Macedonians, give as much as we possibly can. 1

Q At the end of this reading, what big ideas are swirling in your head? How do you need to approach God in prayer about what you have learned?

WHAT ABOUT SAVING?

In Psalm 24:1, we read that “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” The question has been posed, then, “If everything belongs to God, we should not be asking, ‘How much of my money should I give to God,’ but rather, ‘How much of God’s money should I keep for myself?’”

The Bible both encourages wise savings (Proverbs 6:6-8) and discourages meaningless hoarding (Luke 12:13-21). As in most financial matters, a balance is appropriate—unless God calls us to something far more radical.

R.G. LeTourneau (1888-1969) was an American industrialist whose generosity became broadly discussed because he gave away as much as 90 percent of his annual income, principally to Christian causes. Clearly, LeTourneau was one of those into whom the Holy Spirit infused the gift of generosity (Romans 12:8).

Here are several guidelines to strike the giving-saving balance:

- Don’t be afraid to stretch. Give in faith.
- Save for a retirement that will allow you to continue to give of your finances and also to give more of your time in ministry when you are no longer working.
- Save for your future more than for your children’s future. Instead, teach your children to work hard and manage their money well.