
Stewardship Part XII

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Is Tithing for Today?

The early church prescribed a tithe for all of its members who were able to pay. They saw ten percent owed to God as the absolute minimum from a person's total income, the least anyone should be able to do. Even Monks had to pay.

Later on in Church history, it was believed and practiced that one was to live the most modest life possible, sell his possessions, and give to the poor based on the passage in Matthew (Matt. 19:21; Gal. 5:1). They saw tithing as law, but we were not under law. In addition, they believed that since everything belonged to God, we should just give Him everything. By the time of legal Christianity, the ideas of tithing had changed so much that the application of giving ten percent was accepted and practiced in all the provinces and nations that were Christian. By the Eighth Century, the Holy Roman Empire took over and the tithe became the tax to Rome, in addition to any governing tax. In the twelfth century, the Monks got a reprieve, so, not only did they not have to pay tithes, they also were able to receive them (before it became the obligation of families to care for them).

At this time, controversies over what a tithe is, how much the Christian was to give and the Church was to receive, was highly intense. The main opponents to tithing were those who did not want to give versus those who did; between those who wanted the tithe for themselves versus those who did not want their money wasted on corruption. By the Middle Ages, tithes had become as complicated as those in Jesus' day. With specific regulations, twisted out of the context of the Scripture and levied on the poor, such as tithes to the church, the priests, vicars, and personal tithes-- were extracted from their produce, for which each category had different regulations (just like our IRS tax code today), different from hay, to corn, to wood, to monies. Then in the pre-reformation, intense conflict arose with tithing; it then escalated during the Reformation. Just a generation after the Reformation, more controversy arose, especially in England where there was a state church. This escalated into the English Civil War. What was the issue and why there was a civil war? A whole county fought over tithing! This was one of the reasons that led the Puritans to flee. The Puritans desired the tithe to be voluntary and not mandatory, just as Scripture prescribes. The state tithe in England lasted up until a few decades ago-- to support the state church!

Consider this. Without faithful giving, we would have no way to finance the spread of the gospel, missions, evangelism, social programs, kids and youth programs, or even the building of the Church. Not just the buildings, but the people, programs, and opportunities to do as our Lord has called us to do would suffer! We could not impact our neighborhoods with His love, or minister to the needs of men. Yet, our neighborhoods are suffering from violence, the breakdown of the family, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse--the list goes on--while most of the neighborhood churches sit, doing little to nothing. There is no vision, no programs, all because of one thing that is missing--no money!

Here is something else to consider. The “smart” economists say that if we removed the nation’s income tax system and went to a “flat rate” of ten percent across the board for everything, our US National budget will be plentiful--and balanced! All we would have to do is divide ten percent from the gross national product, compare it to what the IRS gets annually, and what the national debt is. But, we probably will not see this happen due to political jockeying; it is too simple, and it would work. The rich would pay more because they buy more. The poor would pay less, and so forth. It would be a level playing field. The tithe is on the same level playing/paying field, too. It was, when first instituted, and it is still fair today. Everyone is at the same standard; there are no favorites.

Is Tithing for Today? The answer is no--*as a forced obligation*. The answer is also yes--*if it is a response from the heart*. We are not obligated to give any amount. But, when we have the right mindset, based on the Word of God and a heart that flows with gratitude for what He has done, yes, we will want to give all that we are able to. I believe that in the debates, occurring over the centuries since the early church, and now to the classrooms in seminary, and to the message boards I pursued, money and religion have always gone together. Money and religion have always fought each other in people’s pride and inclinations. Just as Jesus’ anger with the money changers in the temple and Luther’s outrage with the selling indulgences in the pre-Reformation period, to the TV preachers we have today saying, “if you give to me, God will give to you ten times as much,” it all comes down to motivation, greed, and the idol of money. We will bow to money or we will bow to God. The question is what do you truly worship? Where is your motivation? Where is your heart?

And, so the controversy continues, as the presumptions and feelings of men take over sound reasoning and dialog. I call you to search the Scriptures and see for yourself what God requires of you. As for my family and me, we will give all we can with our *time, talents, and treasures* for His glory. What about my opinion of ten percent? I agree with the Puritans and the early church. Give what you can, but not as an obligation; it all belongs to Him for His glory! Ten percent is a good place to start! Good stewardship is where we start! Sometimes you may not be able to give much. When I was in school I could not give most of the time, so I augmented more volunteer time. Today I am a missionary and struggle day to day. God has provided for my family, but not in any kind of abundance or what we call in the US, “discretionary income.” So, I volunteer in areas in my church outside of my pastoral responsibilities and give what I can of the treasures the Lord has given me. Even in my poverty, after doing my taxes, I realized I did give just over ten percent, and I do not know how I did! He provided!

(Reference and History from “History of the Christian Church” by Schaff; “A History of Christianity Vol. I & II” by Latourette, “The IVP Bible Background Commentary,” by Keener, and “The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church”)

Questions

1. Do you worry about money? What can meet your financial needs? How can the worship of our Lord replace your worry? What can you do to get in a state of worship when worry comes your way?
2. Is Tithing for Today? Why, why not what will you do?
3. What do you need to do to focus on how you can be more obedient with His call to the poor and oppressed?
4. How do money, sex, and power have an influence on you? What about in your church?
5. How can you be sure that money (stewardship), sex (good marital relationships) and power (positive influence and encouragement) are tools for His glory? What will be the real values in your life that will echo throughout eternity?
6. How can you put yourself in Jesus' hands, to be more of a person of faith and integrity?
7. How can you be one who is surrendered and poured out to Christ and used powerfully in the lives of others (John 3:30; Gal. 2:20-21; Phil. 3:10)?
8. How do you feel that without faithful giving, we would have no way to finance the spread of the gospel, missions, evangelism, social programs, kids and youth programs, or even the building of the Church?
9. How do you feel that people, programs, and opportunities will suffer and fail to do as our Lord has called us to do when we are disobedient in stewardship?
10. Are you chasing your desires or our Lord? How can the answer to this question help determine what direction you take in stewardship and honoring God?
11. How does our love and kindness unveil the possibilities and opportunities Jesus gives us? What happens when we do not do this?
12. How is your attitude about Stewardship now? Have you realized yet that how you deal with stewardship will show your true character, maturity, and spiritual growth? Have you realized that how you deal with financial problems can make your situation positive and meaningful? How so? If not, what is in the way?