



## Sermon

27<sup>th</sup> July, 2014

### ***What about Tithing?***

**Malachi 3:6-12; Hebrews 6:19-7:8; Luke 6:36-38**

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I said last week that giving is part of our worship. Our giving expresses the worth something has to us. What worth does God have to you?

We saw last week that Paul taught our giving should be proportional to our income. That is most easily understood as a fixed percentage.

As soon as I mention giving a fixed percentage you probably think of the tithe – a tenth. Does this apply to us or not? That is my topic today: "What about tithing?"

There is a story of a parishioner who told his pastor he did not have a problem giving 10% of his income to the church when he made \$50 a week. Nor did it bother him to tithe when he made \$500 a week. But now that he's making \$5,000 a week, he is reluctant to give \$500 a week to the church.

The pastor began to pray: "Dear God, please make this man's weekly income \$500 a week so that he can tithe."

Looking back in the Bible the first mention of tithing is Abraham. He rescued his nephew, Lot, from some raiders. As he returned with the captives and the stolen property he met the King of Salem:

Genesis 14:18-20 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Later, his grandson, Jacob, had his dramatic dream we call Jacob's ladder. On waking he made an agreement with the Lord that if he would protect him, he would tithe his increases to him<sup>1</sup>. It appears this was a normal part of worship to him.

Much later, in the Law of Moses, the people were commanded to tithe and make other offerings.

**Leviticus 27:30-32** "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. ... The entire tithe of the herd and flock--every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod--will be holy to the LORD.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 28:20-22

In fact, two other tithes are mentioned as well. A tenth was to be used for celebrations before the Lord.<sup>3</sup> And another tenth was required once every three years to support the poor.<sup>4</sup>

So in all they were commanded to give 23% of their income away! One tenth to support the ministry, one tenth to be consumed in feasting before the Lord and 3% to support those in need.

This was not the equivalent of state taxation. When Israel wanted a king, Samuel (their judge) warned them that a king would impose heavy burdens upon them. He would take their sons as servants and for his army; their daughters for the royal household, a tenth of their grain, wine and flocks.<sup>5</sup> This would all be additional to the tithes of the Torah.

Whatever the percentage, note that it is a percentage. God set up the rules of giving for them so it was proportional to their income.

In a number of places they are told to give to God first – e.g.,

Proverbs 3:9-10: Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

The first part of their increase or income belongs to God. It is not biblical to give God the scraps after we have had what we want for ourselves. If we pay all the demands and decide what luxuries we can afford, there certainly will not be much left to give. We need to commit to our giving and do it first.

## Malachi

The reading from Malachi is from the time of restoration from exile. God warns the people that their failure to give the tithe is actually robbing him. Then he gives a unique offer to test him. Nowhere else in scripture are we invited to test God.

“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 you will not have room enough for it.”<sup>6</sup>

He promised them generous provision as a result of obeying him.

On 30<sup>th</sup> July 1945, *Time* magazine ran an article, *Dynamic Kernels*, about a tithing experiment.<sup>7</sup> Perry Hayden planted 360 kernels of wheat in a 4’ x 8’ plot. Each year he gave a tenth of the crop to the church and replanted the rest. Careful records were kept.

The first year’s tithe was 5 cubic inches which the pastor had as breakfast cereal. The rest was sown into a 24’ x 60’ plot given by Henry Ford. Each year, Ford provided more land to allow the experiment to grow.

The next year’s harvest was 70lb pounds of wheat. The final harvest after six years of planting nine-tenths of each year’s harvest was 72,150 bushels of wheat - about 2000 tonnes. The tithe was 7,215 bushels.

At the start of the experiment, the people had arranged with a local miller not only to keep track of their harvest but also to compare their yields with the yield of other wheat farmers in that area. The miller computed that if they had not tithed but had replanted the full crop and they had got the average return of farmers in the state, they would have received a yield of only 5,297 bushels. Their tithe was greater than the entire harvest they would have received if they had not tithed.

At that their rate of fruitfulness after twelve years there would not have been enough land on the planet to receive another planting!

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 27:30,32

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 14:22-23

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 26:12

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 8:11ff

<sup>6</sup> Malachi 3:10-10

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,801686,00.html>

## Is Tithing for Christians?

That is a hotly contested question. The New Testament does speak of giving in proportion to your means but does not explicitly command a tenth. Jesus tells the Pharisees who are scrupulous to tithe even their herbs that they should do so and not neglect the more weighty matters of the Law.<sup>8</sup> We usually think he is speaking to those under the Law and it does not apply to us.

It is not commanded. The first Christians were Jews and they were not told not to do it. But that is an argument from silence.

The Hebrews passage is interesting. The writer wants to demonstrate that Jesus' priesthood is better than Aaron's. One of his many arguments is that the Jewish priestly line was descended from Levi. Levi was in his forefather Abraham when he was blessed by Melchizedek. Therefore Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and so than Levi. And Jesus is of the priesthood of Melchizedek.

But the interesting point to me is that Melchizedek's order of priesthood is outside the Law of Moses. He gives bread and wine and a blessing to Abraham – does that sound familiar? With him, tithes were received but not demanded. Abraham believed the appropriate response was to give a tenth to that priest. Jesus is of the same order of priesthood. Might we not expect to give at least a tenth to Jesus our high priest even when it is not demanded?

I said this is hotly contested. Reading some of the arguments, I thought, "Me thinks, he doth protest too much." The strength of the dispute appears to be driven by the desire not to give!

A friend of mine was struggling with this question some years ago. He told me in exasperation he said to the Lord, "It is only a principle." The answering thought was, "Yes, and it's a very good principle!"

## Gospel Generosity

That brings us to the gospel reading and our attitude. Jesus warns us that the way we behave is how we will be treated. The merciful person will be treated mercifully. The condemning person can expect to be condemned. If you want to be forgiven you must forgive others. And putting it positively, he says if you are generous to others, even more will be given back to you.

It's a principle of the Kingdom. "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."<sup>9</sup>

Do you see how bountiful is the return generosity? He is talking about measures in the marketplace. If you buy loose goods in a market they should be measured out to ensure you get a fair deal. But here the other party is trying to increase the amount he gives to you. How can you maximise the amount of grain or flour in a measure? Think of times when you have emptied a bag of flour or sugar into a container and it is a bit too much. What do you do? You shake it down to make it settle and pack more closely. You might squash it down to pack more in. Jesus says when God measures back to you, he will do just that. Squeeze in all he can get into the measure you used. Shake it to try to get more in. And then let the measure overflow in abundance. Isn't that a lovely picture of his generosity to us?

So we have three principles here:

1. We are to give the first part of our income to God's work.
2. We are to give proportionately.
3. God promises to respond to us accordingly with generosity.

How are we going to decide what proportion – that is up to you. My advice is to ask the Lord. He knows your circumstances and his intentions for you. Ask him what he would like you to give and expect an answer. You may be surprised!

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 11:42

<sup>9</sup> Luke 6:38

## **Pledge Day**

In your KIT sheet, there is a leaflet about our Pledge Day next week. Please read it this week and pray about it. Next week, there we will have the opportunity to return the pledge form in confidence as a joyous response to our loving Father. You may want to pencil in a figure and wait for next week's sermon to decide finally how much you intend to give on a regular, planned basis. Who knows, God might even speak to you during the service next week!

May God bless and prosper you in your obedience to Him.

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