

Giving Less Than a Tithe?

By Randy Alcorn

To me, giving less than a tithe is simply not an option. Someday I'm going to stand before God and give an account of my life (Romans 14:12). On that day I do not want to have to explain why, being indwelt with the Holy Spirit and having lived in the most affluent nation in human history, I failed to give at the very minimal level of those who did not have the indwelling Spirit and owned far less than I.

Maybe you believe the tithe was an Old Testament standard, and we're no longer under the law but under grace, so tithing isn't a requirement for us. Okay. Let's say you're right. Now, do you really think God doesn't have a will for New Testament Christians when it comes to giving, or that he has lowered the bar of what he expects of us? Since studies show the average Christian gives just over 2% of his income to the Lord, does that mean that grace is only a fifth as effective as the law? Or is something fundamentally wrong with our approach to giving? Are we failing to learn what real grace giving means because we children of grace are failing to start at the minimum level God started his children under the Old Covenant?

The concepts behind the firstfruits—the ownership and worthiness of God and the servanthood and indebtedness of man—are as true today as they were in the Old Testament. And surely the gratitude of God's people should be far greater on this side of Calvary than the other!

I view the tithe of 10% as I view a child's first steps. His first steps are not his last, neither are they his best, but they are a fine beginning. So is the tithe. Tithing is for many the first toddler's step of stewardship. It is the training wheels on the bicycle of true giving. It may not be a home run, but it gets you on base—which is a lot further than the majority of church members ever get.

Two reasons commonly given for not tithing are:

"I can see it's right to tithe, but I must pay off my debts first." Why am I in debt in the first place? Is God responsible for my unwise or self-serving decisions that may have put me there? And even if I have come into debt legitimately, isn't my first debt to God? If we obey God and make good our obligations to Him, He will help us as we seek to pay off our debts to others.

"I can't afford to tithe." Of course I can. What if my salary was reduced by 10%? Wouldn't I continue to live? And if tithing is God's will and He promises to provide for those who trust and obey Him, won't He allow me to get by on 90% rather than 100%? In fact, am I not a lot safer living on less inside the will of God than living on more outside it?

Never put off obedience. The moment of conviction and enlightenment is the moment to act. To procrastinate is to disobey. Trust Him enough to begin this life-changing, eternity-impacting adventure of giving. Scripture makes clear that in many cases God blesses us financially when we generously give (Proverbs 11:24-25; Luke 6:38). "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

When God prospers us in this way it is not merely to give us new toys and more beautiful homes but to allow us to give still more: "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Corinthians 9:11). God's extra provision is usually not intended to raise our standard of living, but to raise our standard of giving.

R. G. LeTourneau was an example of a man who understood God's purpose for blessing him financially. An inventor of earthmoving machines, LeTourneau reached the point of giving 90 percent of his income to the Lord. As he put it, "I shovel out the money, and God shovels it back to me-but God has a bigger shovel."

My family has personally experienced God's "bigger shovel," His abundant material provision to the giver. In some cases it is obvious—such as an unexpected check in the mail or being given something just when we thought we were going to have to buy it. One time when we really needed it, it came in the form of catching an error in figuring our bank balance that had been greatly in the bank's favor.

In other cases God's provision is less obvious. A washing machine that should have given up the ghost a decade ago keeps on working. A car with 180,000 miles on it runs for two years without so much as a tune-up. A checking account that should have dried up long before the end of the month somehow makes it through. As God miraculously stretched the oil and bread of the widow in Elisha's day, and as He made the clothes and sandals of the children of Israel last forty years in the wilderness, I am convinced He sometimes graciously extends the life of things that otherwise would have to be replaced.

My family often thanks God for His behind-the-scenes provision, including preventing accidents and incidents that would have been very costly. We need to give careful thought to our ways, and ask ourselves if we would do better to give more to the Lord and ask Him to maximize what we keep, rather than trying to hang onto more, only to have it leak out our pockets.

As we learn to give, we draw closer to God. But no matter how far we progress in the grace of giving, Jesus Christ remains the unmatched giver. It was He who left the wealth of heaven to make the supreme sacrifice to deliver us from eternal poverty and grant us eternal riches.

No matter how much we give, we can never out-give God.

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