

## Tithes and Offerings

I stand before you with the privilege of talking to you today about stewardship. And a part of stewardship is money management. Isn't that cool. The guy who use to balance his checkbook by opening a new account every 6 months and closing the old account after I was sure all the checks cleared gets to talk to you about money management. But that was a *long* time ago and I have seen the errors of my ways.

Much of this talk concerns tithing. Most people dread this talk and dread giving it. That's why I volunteered to speak on this subject and really, I'm looking forward to it because I think it's a very important topic and one that I've come to appreciate. And I would bet that none of you have heard this version of the stewardship talk. For those of you who are guest, please know that as guests we are not directing this talk to you but to our regular attendees. So, just sit back and enjoy and hopefully you'll find something of interest or something you haven't heard before.

Stewardship: stewardship involves the managing of your time, talents and money given to us by God. Part of this involves the giving of your tithes or "first fruits" in the form of worship, spiritual growth, serving others and the church, and the giving of your money. I'm going to speak mostly on the last part because, well, Jesus spoke the most about that part.

In the Bible, Jesus talks about money more than any other topic except salvation. And I don't think that was a coincidence, as you'll hopefully see. Today, as in Jesus' time, money is an issue that dominates our lives; it either controls you or you control it. The passages that I think best exemplifies Jesus' teaching to the subject is Mathew 6:19-24:

6:19 "Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. 6:20 But accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

6:22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. If then your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 6:23 But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

6:24 "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

As you can see, this passage is broken up into 3 paragraphs. The first and the last paragraphs are fairly self-explanatory and essentially say the same thing, that money shouldn't be your treasure, that hoarding it does you no good in attaining your heavenly reward and can actually keep you from it. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph is kind of odd and doesn't appear to fit with the others. In the first and last He's talking about money and

then right in the middle He starts talking about optometry. When you look at the commentary concerning this paragraph in the NIV Study Bible you get the following:

‘Spiritual vision is our capacity to see clearly what God wants us to do and to see the world from his point of view. But this spiritual insight can be easily clouded. Self-serving desires, interests, and goals block that vision. Serving God is the best way to restore it. A “good” eye is one that is fixed on God.’

Now, I don’t doubt what this commentary is trying to say but it’s not very satisfying as to why Jesus all the sudden changes his thought in mid-stream. When I first read the Bible, I thought this paragraph was very strange and out of place. But later on, when Kathy and I started studying the Jewish roots of the Christian faith so we could put Jesus’ teachings in their proper historic and cultural context, we discovered the answer to this apparent disconformity in Jesus’ teaching. You see a “good eye” was, and may still be, a Jewish idiom for being generous. Conversely, someone who has a “bad eye” is someone who is stingy. So, contrary to how it appears, Jesus is not changing His train of thought during this discourse on money but is being consistent. He is saying do not hoard your money because it will do you no good in heaven, but instead be generous with your money, and you will do good, set a good example for others and you will be rewarded in Heaven. In biblical times saying something 3 times (as in “Holy, holy, holy”) was the same thing as using 3 exclamation points at the end of a sentence. This topic was so important to Jesus that he said the same thing in three different ways so as to emphasize its importance.

Now let’s go to tithing. In the Old Testament, the tithe was one/tenth of your “first fruits” which was given to the priests for the support of the priesthood, temple and the community. If you’ll remember, the Levites (the priests) had no inheritance in the land, therefore, they had to be supported by their communities and this was, in effect, a tax for the Hebrew theocracy. An offering, often times called a freewill offering, was something given for a specific or general purpose over and above the tithe, out of your abundance.

Oddly enough, tithing is only referenced directly once in the New Testament when in Mathew and Luke, Jesus is chastising the Pharisees for giving their tithe but neglecting justice and the love of God. As with many things in the New Testament, tithing was assumed as it was a cultural norm for Jews to tithe. As for Jesus chastising the Pharisees, this is also a common theme throughout His teachings. The appearance of being pious is irrelevant; it’s what is in your heart. So here Jesus makes it clear that tithing in and of itself is not what is important, it’s your motivation for tithing. However, under the Old Testament laws that were in affect at the time of Jesus’ teachings, tithing was required of Jews. While it was required of the Jews, tithing was not required of the “God Fearers”.

So this begs the question; “are we as Christians required to tithe?” Before I answer that, I’m going to give you a short disclaimer; what I’m about to say is controversial, not all pastors agree with it. But what the heck...here goes.

Ok, let's go back to the God Fearers. These people were Gentiles that worshiped with Jews but were not of Jewish decent and had not converted through circumcision. God Fearers lived under the Noahic Laws. These laws were not part of the Torah (Old Testament) but inferred from Genesis Chapter 9 in the exhortations God gave to Noah and are part of the oral Mishnah (oral commentary of the Law) that was later codified in the Talmudic writings. According to Jewish tradition, the following rules or commandments are binding on all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. The original 4 Rules (which were later expanded to 7) are; No Idolatry! No Perversions! No strangled meats! No eating of blood! Now, some of you may recognize these rules as they are the same ones given to the gentile believers in Acts 15:28-29:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

So you can see that non-Jews, before, during and *after* the time of Jesus' were never required to tithe. So clearly this indicates that we are not required to tithe. Additionally, we are saved by Grace alone. To require tithing would be putting the same yokes on us that Jesus chastised the Pharisees for.

Now that I've told you that tithing is not mandatory, I'm going to tell you why you should tithe!

While we are not required to tithe, we *are* asked to give. I think the verses that best sum this up are 2 Corinthians 9:6-7: (Screen)

<sup>6</sup> “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup> Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Now for a point of clarification; from here on out when I say “tithing” I’m referring to what we give or pledge to the church on a regular basis (which is really a free will offering). When I say “offering” I’m referring to everything given over and above your tithe, quite often one-time or temporary giving for a specific purpose or cause. So if you gave to the brick fund or worked on the patio, this is an offering of your money or your time, and is not part of your tithe. And your tithe should not be reduced by offerings. Offers out of “your abundance”. Another way to look at it, tithes go to the church and the church directs where the money goes but with offerings you are directing where the money goes.

I remember before I was a Christian, Kathy used to drag me to church and I remember the gyrations we'd go through to decide on how much we'd give. The way I figured it, the Church ladies were essentially baby-sitting my kids for an hour so ten bucks seemed fairly generous. I remember the dread when it came time to make a pledge and how the rationalizations always kicked in. Kathy would always lobby for giving the \$10 per week

(\$20 bucks when we got a little older) even when we didn't go, and me, being the crypto-atheist, always had reasons why we couldn't afford it. I liked the "pay as you go" plan much better. It never occurred to me that we should give a percentage of what we earned primarily because I didn't see the relevance. I didn't see the need if we weren't their using the facilities and since I didn't believe, I couldn't really believe that anybody would actually gave 10% to the church. I had always heard about "those" churches that browbeat their members to give 10% but we went to a church that never even requested it of us. I remember, I once heard a rumor that one family in the church actually tithed and since the man of the family was an attorney, I had a good idea how much he was giving and I thought, if it were true, he must be a little touched and I wasn't real sure I'd call him if I needed an attorney.

But after coming to the realization that Creation, Jesus and the Bible were true, and after I'd read the Bible, it was a no-brainer that we'd give 10% of our income to the church, not out of obligation but out of gratitude!

And you know what, we never even missed the money. We didn't consciously change our spending habits, it just worked out. Even today when our income has declined because of starting a new business, it's just a given that we're going to give our 10% and it just works out. Besides it's not our money anyway; it's just ours to use. Really, I can hardly wait to make more money so that I cannot only give a larger tithe, but so I can give to organizations and causes that need assistance. I would love to be able to give more money to Grand Avenue Temple for example and "Stand to Reason" Ministry. One is doing God's work for the poor and the other is showing Christians and non-believers that the Christian faith is both rational and intellectually grounded.

Now, part of what I just said use to really bug me. The part about it "not being our money". I used to think, the heck it's not my money...I worked hard for that money and nobody's going to tell me it's not mine! A lot of pastors throw that phrase around and just assume that people get it. But I certainly didn't get it and it use to anger me. It just seemed like a trite ploy to get people to cough up more money. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Maybe I was just being obtuse and this doesn't really bother anyone else, but here's how I came to reconcile that money is really God's. Okay follow me now; clearly the vast preponderance of evidence shows that the universe was created and that we are a part of that creation. And everything that we as humans create would not be possible without God and His initial creation. Therefore, it *is* all His. No different than when one of my minor children goes out and makes money; legally it's mine even though I allow them to use it for their benefit as long as it's done within the parameters that Kathy and I set. No difference. So if God's wants his creations to give, I'm going to give. As with all things that we are asked to do in the Bible, it is for our benefit and not just arbitrary rules designed to oppress us.

Ok, I know that some of you are thinking, "How does tithing benefit me?" Glad you asked. First, by tithing we are being taught to be generous. It's a practical lesson in being generous and not hoarding. Now the world teaches us the concept of scarcity. That we have to get and keep ours because if we don't someone else will take it. In other

words, life is a zero sum gain...if I make more it is at the expense of someone else who, therefore, makes less so you'd be a fool to give up what you have for the benefit of someone else. But God teaches abundance, that there is plenty for everyone and the logical outgrowth of that is that if I give to someone else, there is plenty more where that came from. So giving is a gift, a gift that not only benefits others but also benefits us by helping us to trust God more and to give up our dependence on money.

Secondly, and this one will probably seems a little self serving, but clearly we are rewarded for being generous. Again this is a common theme "do good and you will be rewarded in Heaven" ex post facto salvation. Jesus makes this clear from Mathew 16:19 when He says, "But accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven". Now I've always struggled with this because it does feel self-serving...I'm giving money and doing good works because I'm going to get a bigger slice of the pie in heaven? It just doesn't feel right. To me, I do these things out of gratitude for God's creation and salvation. But here again, the more I read and study this, the more I see the logic in it. Let's face it, we as humans are by nature self-serving in varying degrees. No matter how good a person we are, at times even the most unselfish of us, put ourselves ahead of others. Why not use that human trait for good by rewarding us for *doing* good. We reward are children for doing good, why wouldn't our heaven father reward us for doing good. If it takes a little heavenly motivation for us to experience the joy of giving, where's the harm in that?

Lastly, by giving to the church we are helping are neighbors as well as our selves. There may come a time in your life that you'll find yourself in financial straits. I don't know of a single established church that doesn't have a fund to help its members if they find themselves in financial difficulty. Some of you think that this would never happen to you but I have friends who were living the south Johnson County dream, only to find themselves struggling and then being financially supported by their church. That's what the tithe was meant for from the beginning.... the support of the temple (church), the priests (the pastor) and the community (us).

Now while all of these reasons are true, they are only tangential and pale in comparison to the most important reason of all for tithing your time, talents and money. Let's look at Mathew 6:22-23 again but this time, let's substitute the literal meaning:

*"How you handle money is the lamp of the body (it indicates to the world you're standing in God's Kingdom). If then you are generous, your whole body will be full of light (the world will know by your actions that you put God first). 6:23 But if you are stingy, your whole body will be full of darkness (you set a bad, obvious example). If then your heart is obscured by your greed, how great is the darkness (your greed will keep you from knowing God)!"*

So it's clear from this passage and the other two passages that the giving of your money to God's Kingdom is a clear indication of where your heart is. If we, as a church did not ask you to give, we'd be doing you a disservice. Because, it is our responsibility, not only as a church but also as fellow Christians to help you grow in your faith!

Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be”. The way Billy Graham put it was, “Give me five minutes with a person’s checkbook, and I’ll tell you where their heart is.” So this is how it works, first you believe and confess your belief in Jesus Christ. And then if you’ve truly rendered over your heart to God, you will begin to do good works by the giving of your time, talent and money to the Kingdom of God and managing the resources that God gave you!

Now some of you may be asking yourself, “isn’t that a works based salvation!” The answer is no. It’s a heart-based salvation! Paul makes it clear in Romans 10:9 that we are saved by grace alone when he says, “That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” So the question is, how do we know where someone’s heart is? The simple answer is by their “fruit” or in other words, by their good works. James makes this clear when in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter he asks the question, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” He goes on to answer the question with a resounding “NO”!!! Faith without works is dead.

Now let’s talk practicalities. While I don’t know, and neither does Bryan, what each of us give, it doesn’t take a math major to realize that we are not a tithing church. Some of us are new Christians that aren’t familiar with the concept of tithing. Some of us are new Christians who have brought a challenging financial situation with them or who have made financial decisions that didn’t take tithing into account. And some of us are life long Christians who have not been faithful to God and Jesus’ call to give and there are a myriad of reasons why that is. Now I’m not making a judgment call on this, it’s just a fact and a fact that is not uncommon within any Church. As I said previously, tithing in and of itself is not a requirement for salvation. But it is a worthy goal. Can you imagine the additional good that this little church could do if every regular attendee gave a full 10% or more? The additional people we could reach, the additional money we could give to the poor among us, and the additional mission work we could accomplish. What a goal!

Now some of you may be thinking to yourself, “is tithing a percentage of my check that I bring home after taxes or is it my gross pay? I will let you know that Bryan and I differ on this but since I’m the one giving this talk I’m going to tell you what I think. Here goes...God makes it clear in 1 Samuel 8:9 that government is inherently evil and warns his people to be careful for what they wish for. In addition, the First Commandment is “thou shall have no other gods before me”. Based on all of this, you have to ask yourself, do you want to give your first fruits to the government, an organization that God’s word tells us is inherently evil. And aren’t you in effect putting another god before God. Additionally, if you make say \$50,000 a year and you pay \$10,000 in taxes, then the church only gets \$4,000 (10% of \$40,000). But if you tithe off the full amount you are giving \$5,000 to the church and paying taxes on \$45,000. Remember, Jesus said, “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and give unto God what is God’s”. I don’t know about you, but when it comes to giving, I’ll be putting God first and everything else in its rightful position.

In three weeks you will all be asked to make a pledge. The reason we need you to pledge is so we can set a budget and be able to set responsible spending guidelines for the operations of the church, for evangelism and for mission work so that we can continue to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century expression of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church by being an authentic family of religious seekers and Christian believers who worship God together, grow in relationship with God and each other, serve in God's Kingdom together, give to God's Kingdom together and invite others to do the same. Some of you may recognize that last part as the Morse Church's Mission Statement. A mission statement that I think truly exemplifies this church and I hope all of you will embrace it by making a pledge.

One last point I'd like to make about tithing. Notice that several times I said, "tithing of your time, talents and money." So what does tithing your time and talents look like. Well, there are 168 hours in a week which would mean giving 17 hours a week to God in the form of worship, study, small groups, serving others and honoring the Sabbath. Now if we were just talking about waking hours it would be about 11 hours. I just wanted to throw that out there so you can think about that over the next few days. I first heard this concept a few days ago myself and am still processing it.

Now, getting back to the financial pledge, if you're not able to pledge a full 10% of your income for whatever reason, please consider making your pledge a percentage of your income, whether it be 1% or 9% with the goal of working towards a full 10% or more when you're able. By making it a percentage of your income whatever that percentage may be, you are at least giving your "first fruits" to further God's kingdom.

Let me finish with a passage from Malachi...it's known as the Malachi Challenge.. Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me on 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." Just think how much better the world would be and how much we would benefit the Kingdom of God if all believers tithed! And more importantly, think of the peace you will have knowing that you put God and His Kingdom first.

Amen.