

THE FOUNDATION FOR FIRSTFRUITS GIVING

Are these stewardship sermons getting to you? That question could be taken in two ways. One way is that you are increasingly under conviction and are now planning to give more. The other way is that you are tired of being squeezed like a sponge.

One little girl felt like the latter. She wriggled and squirmed and was increasingly restless as the preacher's sermon dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?"

There was another minister who announced to his congregation one Sunday, "Folks, I have here in my hands three sermons – a \$ 100 sermon that lasts five minutes, a \$ 50 sermon that lasts fifteen minutes, and a \$ 10 sermon that lasts a full hour. Now we are going to take the offering and see which one I will deliver this morning."

Well, today it doesn't matter how much you gave, you are going to get the \$ 25 sermon.

Tithing, or giving 10 % of your earnings to the Lord, has been a Christian tradition for many centuries. My parents did it, and still do it, without much thought to its origins. They were examples to me of faithful giving as I was growing up. My wife has taught me to be a generous giver, a tipper in restaurants and to be faithful in tithing in church. It is a part of my worship and is so engrained it is automatic. But why? Why do we need to give our ten percent to the church?

Many have said in recent times that tithing is not an NT teaching. It is an OT practice that has to do with empty religion and the sacrificial system. Therefore it is no longer necessary to be obedient to this practice. We are under the new covenant, not the old. We are under grace, not under legalism. We are NT believers, not OT achievers. There is nothing in the OT that we need to observe...they say.

I believe in the OT. We could spend a whole series of sermons on how much of what Jesus said was based on the OT. But today we want to focus on the foundation for firstfruits giving and why it is still a genuine part of worship for Christians today.

1. How firstfruits giving becomes our worship

When the people of Israel were on the verge of entering the land that God had promised them, Moses gave them the Law. This law was from God and was to serve them in helping them to know how best to live in this new land, this gift from God. Among these many principles for life was the practice of tithing, giving 10 % to the Lord in worship.

In Deuteronomy 26 we find the basis for this practice and three confessions that the giver was to make as he presented his tithe.

a) Confessing God's faithfulness – Worship is confession. Now confession is in one sense admitting our sinfulness before God. But in this sense it is acknowledging the goodness of God, the character of God, or, as we will see in this verse, God's faithfulness.

Moses tells the worshipper to take a basket and place in it the firstfruits of his produce, the crops of his land, and bring it to the Tabernacle. This is the place where the people were to worship God and bring their tithes. Imagine if you will, a large basket filled with sheaves of grain, bundles of large, juicy grapes, and other good things from the land.

Then the worshipper is to say to the priest on duty, **"I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us"** (26:3). This was an incredible promise, one that we don't fully understand. As wandering Mennonites we have gone from country to country, from Holland to Germany to Prussia to Russia to Canada and beyond. We have no land as such. But the Jews had a land promised to them, and God was faithful to that promise. So the first reason to give a tenth of their crops to the LORD was to confess that God is faithful. God keeps his word.

b) Confessing God's act of Deliverance – The second confession the worshipper of the LORD was to make went deeper. This confession acknowledged that the worshipper needed God in a far more spiritual sense.

The worshipper was to say to the priest, “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me” (26:5-10).

The principle of firstfruits giving in this confession points the people to their salvation. God purchased them out of Egyptian slavery and made them a people with a hope and a future. Tithing this small portion of the farmer's harvest was a way of saying, “Lord, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you.”

We can easily make the leap to the Christian story of salvation. Think of it: Jesus was obedient to his heavenly Father's plan to come to Jerusalem to die on a cross for our sins. When did he come? He came at Passover, a time when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egypt. On Friday Jesus died. On Saturday the Jews had their Sabbath. And on Sunday, as they had done for centuries, the Jews brought a firstfruits gift to the temple – their thank offering for the gift of salvation. But on this day God gave his own firstfruits to the world. The Lord raised Jesus from the dead and made him the firstfruit of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:23).

By carrying on the practice of tithing, we as Christians confess God's act of deliverance in our lives. At one time at the City Temple in London, there was in the congregation a restaurateur named Emil Mettler, who was a close friend and missions agent of Albert Schweitzer in Britain. Mettler would never allow a Christian worker to pay for a meal in his restaurant but once he did happen to open his cash register in the presence of a Secretary of the London Missionary Society. The Secretary was astonished to see among the bills and coins a six-inch nail. What was it doing there? Mettler explained, "I keep this nail with my money to remind me of the price that Christ paid for my salvation and of what I owe Him in return."

c) Confessing God's good purposes – There was a practical side to tithing which we see in the third confession. Moses tells the worshipper to give a portion to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow. You can read the full confession in Deut 26:12-15.

This tithe covers a number of social programs of Israel in that day. First the Levite, a minister of God encouraging the people, would receive support in this way since he did not have land of his own. The Levites were the only tribe set apart to serve God as priests and therefore did not have land. Then, secondly, the people who could not support themselves, widows, orphans and foreigners, all people who did not own land, could be fed through this practice.

By obeying this command to tithe the Jew was confessing that God is good and just and shows mercy through his faithful people. All three confessions through firstfruits giving declares that God is our God. Moses said, “You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, and that you will obey him” (26:17).

These principles of tithing as worship span the OT and the NT. God is as faithful to us in his promises as he was to Israel. Through Jesus Christ we have come to know the salvation of God. And we know that God loves when his people care for the helpless in society. So how is this not relevant to our worship today?

2. How firstfruits giving effects our lives

From the time that this teaching came down to the Israelites to just a few centuries before Jesus came the Jews forgot why they were supposed to tithe. The prophet Malachi came on the scene 400 years before Jesus and told the people why they were suffering and failing physically and spiritually. All the people called out for a revival in the land and Malachi responded by saying that revival began with a return to tithing.

In Malachi 3 the prophet speaks in the negative. Let's look at the negative in a positive sense:

a) Tithing honors God – Revival and money have a unique connection. Jesus talked about choosing between God and money as the Lord of our lives. It makes sense then to read Malachi's words here: **"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,"** says the LORD Almighty. **'But how are we to return?' 'Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.'** But you ask, **'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me'"** (Mal 3:6-9).

Someone once said that a tithe was the 10 % we rightly owe to God, and offerings were the gifts we give to God beyond the tithe. So we give ten out of duty and we give another ten willingly as a gift. I will let you decide how you want to understand the differences.

What is important is to understand how God sees the tithe. He is being robbed when we fail to honor him and worship him for giving us so much. He is letting you have 90 %; all he wants is ten.

That token of "ten" has a spiritual significance for our relationship with God. Richard Foster said, "When we let go of money, we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security. But this is precisely why it is important to do it. It is one way to obey Jesus' command to deny ourselves.... When we give money, we are releasing a little more of our egocentric selves and a little more of our false security.... Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure in the world, and that is worth living for and giving for. *Richard J. Foster, quoted in "Reflections," Christianity Today (6-12-00)*. We honor God when we show we are willing to trust him with the tithe and the rest as well.

b) Tithing builds the community of faith – To lift the curse of their present dilemma, Israel needed to repent. Their repentance was to start with bringing God his tithe. **"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house..."** (3:10).

Was God starving? Did he need the people's money, crops and possessions? Literally, no. But we saw in Deuteronomy that the tithe helped the community of faith by providing for God's servants and by feeding the helpless.

When we look at tithing today we may wonder how our money honors God. A close look would show that our offerings go to pay the hydro bills, the elevator repair bills and the salaries of our staff. A good portion goes towards our missionaries. How does this honor God? From a humanistic standpoint it probably doesn't. But I believe there is a spiritual component we must look at and understand that just as communion bread and juice are symbols, so is the tithe. Both are worship when practiced with a heart inclined towards God. And it helps to build up the community of faith by providing this place and the staff and the missionaries to God's work.

Imagine then what we could do if everyone here actually tithed. A few years back, a Galveston church had a Tithing Demonstration Sunday for its members. On a designated Sunday everyone was asked to give a tithe of one week's salary. They urged everyone ... whether or not they usually tithed ... to give a tithe that one time. As you could imagine, the offering that Sunday was the largest ever given. In fact, it was 6 times the usual offering. The aftermath was even more exciting. Many who had never tithed before changed their attitude and decided if they could do it once, they could do it again. By the end of that year giving was up almost 3 times what it had been before the demonstration. The

enthusiasm was up more than that. Over and over, people gave testimonies of the many changes in their lives as God fulfilled his promise in Malachi 3:10. All of this came from a simple obedience to Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides.

c) Tithing overwhelms the giver – By withholding our tithes we are robbing God, we are robbing the church, and we are actually robbing ourselves. The Lord said, **“Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I 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”** (3:10).

The danger here is that we will slip into a “prosperity gospel” position if we think that by giving we will get rich, or that we will receive answers to our prayers. Your attitude is wrong if you think this way. We give so that our God is worshipped; our attitude is to praise Jesus for all he has done.

The true blessings are eternal – the joy of giving back to the Savior who gave so much for you; the peace that comes from not being enslaved to greed or a materialistic mindset – the pleasure of seeing how God can use what you give him to glorify him and change the world. We give with a heart of worship.

Tithing overwhelms the giver with the pleasure of God. It is up to God how that is going to be manifested. In other ways we can see how our giving can change the world. Larry Burkett, a financial expert said, “If every Church member in America would increase their giving to an average of 10% (current estimates are that American Christians give less than 3%), there would be an extra \$69 billion for overseas missions and an additional \$150 billion in income for American churches.”

Imagine what we could do here and abroad if everyone gave the Lord the mere ten percent that each of us owes him.

Finally...

I believe this truly is the foundation for firstfruits giving in the Christian church today. I want to close with a story again that illustrates the connection between money and our allegiance to Christ:

There was a terrible earthquake in California many years ago. Thousands of homes were destroyed and the state was in chaos. Many people were claiming the homes they lived in as their own. The courthouse and all the titles and deeds were destroyed completely. The gas lines ran under the court house, and the flames were so consuming, not one record was found. This couple had lived in this house 15 years and they went to the judge to declare the home theirs. Another individual came forward and claimed the home was theirs. The judge did not know what to do, the people had lived there 15 years and brought people forward to back their claim. The other people brought little stubs where the people had paid rent to them. The judge asked to see the peoples signatures? The judge asked, Is this your signature on these rent stubs? The people said, YES! The judge declared the other people the owners of the home, even though they did not live there. May I suggest to you, that is sort of what paying tithes really is... 10% is a legal document that you believe Jesus is Savior and Lord, and that God is the Creator. Your giving could be used in a court of law that you know who God really is. Tithing acknowledges God as the true owner.

AMEN