

Giving (Part 1)

“Why I Don’t Tithe”

Mark 12:41-44

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Mark 12:41ff “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on.”

Generosity is not measured by how much one gives but by how much one has left.

I told my family I was sorely tempted to read the scripture text, make this statement and then dismiss.

But they assured me that as clever as the idea was, it probably wouldn’t have the desired effect.

Thus you must put up with an entire sermon.

I pray that my sermon doesn’t get in the way of this very strong and startling message of Jesus.

Jesus was in Jerusalem and on the particular day of this incident he was in the temple courtyard – the large common area in front of the temple building.

He was teaching.

Some of the many people coming and going in the courtyard were gathered around him in the open air and he was teaching about the kingdom of heaven – about God’s rule in the world.

Apparently he finished the teaching and found a place opposite the offering receptacles and sat down to watch.

Other sources tell us that in this Temple courtyard were 13 horn-shaped receptacles (large opening that became smaller toward a base) each to receive a different kind of offering from those who were visiting the temple.

The text says that Jesus specifically sat where he could watch the crowd putting their money in.

It seems obvious that he did so because he wanted to teach his disciples something important.

Apparently he didn't have to wait long to find excellent illustrations of the point he wanted to make.

What he saw were many "rich" people throwing in large amounts of money.

The metal receptacles would probably clang loudly with the many and large coins that were tossed in – it's true today that a handful of silver dollars would make more noise than a penny.

The author of the gospel, Mark, indicates that they were "rich".

I think we have adequate reason to understand that he didn't mean these were the Bill Gates, Ted Turners and Donald Trumps of the day.

The "rich" were all who had disposable income, all who lived above a subsistence level, all who had more income than was absolutely necessary to feed, clothe and house themselves and their families.

While it is probably true that as in most of the world for most of history the great majority of people lived at a subsistence level, it is also true that many had more – they were the "rich".

In our country and certainly in this church, most of us today would qualify as "rich" by this standard.

Most of us would never **call** ourselves "rich" but if we have any more income than is absolutely necessary to modestly feed, clothe and house ourselves, we are in fact rich.

Jesus saw these people walking up to the offering boxes and throwing their money in – some were doing it reverently as an offering to God and probably some were doing it rather ostentatiously, with something of a noticeable flourish.

But then Jesus saw a woman, not just any woman but apparently, from her clothing and demeanor, a poor widow woman.

He saw her come and put her offering into the container.

Jesus notices that what she puts in are two very small coins – the smallest Roman coins in circulation – worth almost nothing.

At that, Jesus called his disciples to him to make his point.

Out of all who gave he chose to compare those who put in a great amount with this poor widow woman who gave almost nothing.

He chose those two to illustrate the greatest contrast possible and to illustrate a very important concept:

God sees things quite differently than we naturally do.

The whole world (including most in the church) is impressed with the size of the gift.

James 2:1-7

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

“When Mr. Goldring comes to the church, he is given special treatment, flattery, perks...and a special place to sit. This is the way one may expect to be treated at an expensive boutique, but not in church (or a “kingdom” related ministry). The reason people fawn over the rich and (famous) is not because they love them but because they want to win their favor. The poor, on the other hand, are treated almost with contempt because people ask themselves, ‘What can they contribute to us?’ Jesus (on the other hand) looked at things from God’s vantage point.” (David Carland in The NIV Application Commentary Mark p486)

Many times I have been approached by well-meaning people in our church who tell me of a new family that has visited telling me what a fine "catch" they would be.

Remarking on the family's status, talent or treasure they say, "Do you know who they are? Do you know the kind of contribution they could make to the church?"

When I hear of how some churches or more likely para-church agencies fawn over wealthy contributors, I am appalled (I hope not just jealous).

As the size of your gift increases you can expect an increased response from the organization and its leaders.

A small gift rates a letter, a larger gift rates a book by the famous founder or director of the ministry, a very large gift might land you an invitation to sit in a special place at the annual banquet, and a truly large gift might gain you an audience with the director or a weekend in a very exclusive place for a private briefing on the ministry.

I have heard from more than one fund-raiser that the larger the gift the more the donor expects to be treated specially.

Everyone (from the donor to the recipient to the casual observer) seems to be impressed with the size of the gift!

But size doesn't impress God! In this context, size alone is irrelevant to God.

Here is the way Jesus says it: "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others."

She has put in "more"?

How is that true?

Did she put more money in the box? NO!

How can it be more?

Generosity is not measured by how much one gives but by how much one has left.

That is unsettling!

I don't like it and if you are listening, most of you won't like it either.

Based on the way the world thinks and based on a faulty understanding of what the Bible teaches, many of us content ourselves with a false standard of giving which we have either met or about which we feel guilty.

Before I proceed, let me tell you **who** I hope will hear this sermon today.

There are some here for whom this sermon is not intended. If you are not a Christ-follower then please understand this sermon is not for you.

There are others here who have no interest at all in giving. You think sermons on giving are nothing but manipulative techniques to “guilt” people into giving to the church.

You haven’t given and you don’t intend to. This sermon is not for you, though you might learn something from it. You have an entirely different issue which needs to be addressed in a different way.

I am addressing those who already give - to the work of the church, to charity, etc.

I’m addressing you who feel you ought to give more AND you who feel that you have met your obligation to God because you give a certain percentage of your income to charitable causes AND you who frankly are fairly satisfied, if not secretly proud, that you have exceeded the generally acceptable standard of giving.

What drives your guilt or satisfaction in giving?

By what measure do you judge your giving?

What is your standard of giving?

Have you ever heard the words “tithe” or “tithing”?

The word “tithe” simply means “tenth” as in “1/10”

Have you ever been led to believe that giving 1/10 of your income was the minimum standard for meeting your financial obligation to God?

Have you ever felt guilty for not giving at least 1/10 of your income to charity or felt satisfied because you had given at least 1/10 of your income or maybe proud because you give more than 1/10th?

Nowhere does the New Testament require Christians to tithe.

Today I want to debunk the theology of tithing!

I want you to go out of here absolutely free of any idea that you should give 10% of your resources to the church, to charity or even to that noble cause called "The work of the kingdom".

I wish for you never again to measure your giving by a standard of 10% - to never again feel inferior if you don't give 10% nor to feel superior for giving 10% or more.

I will attempt to show you that the "tithe" is as much a part of the OT legal code as are circumcision and temple sacrifices and that with the death/resurrection of Jesus they are all superceded by a much superior way.

The "tithe" and circumcision are both first found with Abraham.

But interestingly enough it was only circumcision that was commanded by God.

The "tithe" is only seen in Abraham's tribute to the priest Melchizedek of Jerusalem.

By the time of Moses, the tithe became mandated for all God's people.

It became part of the Mosaic law along with 612 other laws.

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.

As people obeyed the rule of the tithe and gave their money, it met the needs of the temple workers and some aspects of government.

Numbers 18:21 God said, "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle and then Temple)."

But there is another tithe spoken of as well.

Deuteronomy 14:22-27 “Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name... And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own.

The first “tithe” or 1/10 of their income was to go to support the Levites and Priests.

This second “tithe” or 1/10 is to be taken to Jerusalem and eaten as part of a grand celebration (It seems evident that Levites, the poor, and even strangers would receive part of the tithe in this celebration).

What is the required “giving” of God’s people? 10% or 20%? It looks more like 20%.

But we are not done yet. – there is a third tithe.

Look at Deuteronomy 14:28-29

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the... aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

That is a third tithe levied every three years.

No less a scholar than Dr. Craig Blomberg concludes, “It is likely that the tithes amounted to roughly 23% of one’s income and that was in addition to offerings.” (Blomberg in Neither Rags nor Riches)

If we want to adopt an OT standard for giving we should be consistent: Look at all the tithes and in addition to that were other taxes and free-will offerings.

Together they add up to about ¼ to 1/3 of one’s income.

If you believe that the tithe is the biblical standard for giving, I ask which tithe do you mean?

My rationale for rejecting the tithe as a basis for giving doesn't end there.

When you look to the New Testament you will not find a single reference to tithing in a positive context?

Some try to argue that Jesus commends tithing in Matthew 23:23,24 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, **without neglecting the former**. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

But does Jesus statement "without neglecting the former" form a tacit approval of tithing?

Yes, in the sense that Jesus' listeners were under the law of Moses, they did have an obligation to obey that law of giving.

But no it is not the establishment of a new law for Christians.

Because after Jesus' death/resurrection that law, like the laws of temple sacrifice and circumcision, was fulfilled in Christ.

In the New Testament, there is no law, no 10% or 23%, no tithe or tithes that form the basis for determining how much a Christian should give.

Jesus makes the issue of giving much more fundamental than a percentage.

He takes it right to the heart of all we are and have.

He doesn't let us off with buying God off with a % but he demands our all.

Before we look at the standard that Jesus sets forth for Christians I want to emphasize why I think the concept of the tithe is not just a helpful guideline but in fact a dangerous standard.

"Perhaps the most widely employed law of stewardship in the history of the church has been the law of the tithe... The wide acceptance,

which this particular system has enjoyed, is undoubtedly due to the fact that it supposedly rests upon the authority of the Bible Vischer P. ix
 “The tithe which commits a tenth part of our wealth to God makes it possible for us – but allegedly with divine approval – to retain personal control over the greater portion of our possessions. Thus the tithe can be conveniently adapted to the system of self-determination which, by nature, dominates mankind’s attitude toward stewardship. Such an approach completely violates the radical challenge of Christ to commit all that we have to his service.” Vischer P. xi

What is the radical standard Jesus initiates?

Luke 19:1 “Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a `sinner.’ ” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Mark 10:17-24 “As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good--except God alone. You know the commandments: `Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’ ” Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

Luke 12:32-34 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

II Corinthians 8:3-5 “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

What's the standard? 10%? Absolutely not!

Jesus' radical new standard is “everything”.

Generosity is not measured by how much one gives but by how much one has left.

I think the comparison Jesus makes in Mark 12 between the “rich givers” and the “poor widow” is the comparison between Comfortable Piety and Passionate Commitment.

For too many of us when we give our 10, 15 or 20% we settle into a comfortable piety (we've done our part) when what Jesus calls us to is a passionate commitment

Such commitment will never be demonstrated by anything less than full willingness to give it all.

I know that 10% is a nice easy answer to giving but for the Christ-followers there is no such easy answer.

Because from Jesus we learn that the real and frankly very difficult issue is not how much should we give but how much should we keep.

That is a very difficult issue that is not solved by giving some percentage away.

In fact again I emphasize that the standard of the tithe actually ends up circumventing Jesus' much more radical standard of how much should we keep.

“The tithe which commits a tenth part of our wealth to God makes it possible for us – but allegedly with divine approval – to retain personal control over the greater portion of our possessions.”

Another time I will speak to this issue of who owns what we have – and you can be certain that it isn't us.

The tithe lets us pretend that once we give God his portion, then we are free to use the rest as we see fit.

That's one of the great dangers of the tithe.

Christians are called to be counter-culture in most of life.

That is certainly true in giving.

The culture judges our giving by the amount of the gift.

Jesus judges our giving by the amount left over.

I dare us to adopt Jesus' standard.

I have spent many hours preparing this sermon.

During that time I thought of almost every argument against Jesus' standard and in favor of the simpler 10% that leaves me in control of the rest.

I like the 10% standard because I know that a radical change in the standard will result in a radical change in life-style and I resist that.

- What about education for my children?
- What about caring for my family?
- What about retirement?

If I accept Jesus' standard:

- What kind of house can I live in?
- What kind of car can I own?
- What kind of vacations can I take?
- Can I really justify spending any money at all?

We like the law of the tithe because it's simple – but it's simply wrong. We want to pay our dues and be done, but God calls us to the tough and daily decision of using his money – the money he entrusted to us – for his purposes.

What that will look like for you is, I believe, different than it will look for me.

Jesus calls us to a very different standard.
Will we trust him?

Mark 12:41ff “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on.”

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