

Giving a Tenth to God

Genesis 14: 17-15: 1; 1 Corinthians 15: 50-16: 4

This is an edited outline of a sermon given at All Saints Church Wellington by Mark Ireland, when he was vicar.

I don't know if any of you are fans of The Simpsons? There is a marvellous moment when they are sitting down to eat in Mo's diner and Marge asks Bart to say grace: 'Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.'

Lack of gratitude to God is one of the biggest killers to our spiritual life.

Many Christians find that giving a tenth to God is a beautiful response of gratitude to the God who actually gave us everything, and graciously allows us to keep the other nine-tenths.

But giving is not just a response of gratitude to God. It is also a way of sharing with God in his giving to the world. God created the world out of nothing, and he is constantly giving himself for the sake of the world, and by our giving we get to take part with God in his cascade of grace.

Today we are thinking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, particularly in the area of money. This is the Sunday when we usually have a financial presentation about All Saints, but this year we aren't going to. For a very good reason, which is that due to God's grace and very careful financial management, we are paying our way and are on course for a balanced budget. So this morning we are thinking about giving, not because the church needs it, but because giving is good for us, it's part of our discipleship.

Four weeks ago I preached about the process by which we become new disciples and grow in our discipleship, under the title, Thresholds and Strongholds...looking at thresholds we have to cross and strongholds we have to overcome on the journey of discipleship.

A disciple literally means a learner, and so following Jesus is a lifelong process of growth, of imitating the Master, which won't be complete until the day when one day we shall see Jesus face to face...

Key to our growth as disciples is dealing with strongholds in our lives. A stronghold is any area of our life which we have not yielded to the lordship of Christ. All of us have strongholds, areas of our lives, our thoughts, our actions, which we would rather hide from God keep control of ourselves. And each of us has different strongholds. Lust is an obvious stronghold for some – this week in Morning Prayer we have been reading about King Solomon, whose unbridled sexual appetite was a real stronghold which allowed the enemy to draw him away from God...

A short temper or a love of gossip can also be a stronghold

And so can money. In fact for many Christians it is our unwillingness to yield to God's lordship in this area of our lives that really holds back our growth in discipleship, and can ultimately draw us away from God.

And that's why so many Christians down the centuries have found the practice of tithing, giving the first tenth of their income to God, to be a wonderful spiritual discipline that really liberates them and breaks down this particular stronghold in their lives.

So what is tithing?

For Christians, tithing is not about law, it's about lordship.

For me, the practice of tithing means that of my free choice I give the first tenth of all income I receive (whether pay, or a gift, or a legacy) to God. In fact I try not to use any of it until I have first given my tithe as a thank offering to God. I am really glad I learnt to tithe as a child, because it is a lot easier to tithe your first pay cheque when you have had practice with your pocket money!

What are the roots of tithing in the OT?

The first reference to tithing comes long before the giving of the Law to Moses. In our reading from Genesis 14, Abram returns from defeating Kedorlaomer, and is met by Melchizedek, king of Salem, who brings a gift of bread and wine and

blesses Abram, and then in v20 we read, 'Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.' Why Abram did so is not explained here, and nor do we read much more about this mysterious figure of Melchizedek, but the writer to the Hebrews clearly sees him as a type or picture of Jesus – in Heb 5: 18 the writer says that Jesus became a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, quoting Psalm 110. Melchizedek means king of righteousness, and, and in 7: 1-10, the fact that the patriarch Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything is discussed as showing that M was forerunner of Jesus, resembling the Son of God he remains a priest for ever, and of course like M offer us bread and wine, which are for us his body and blood given for us.

In the Law of Moses Hebrews were required to tithe arable crops, the fruit of the trees, and their herds and flocks. Lev. 27: 30, 32 – **'A tithe of everything from the land, whether from the soil, or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord...along with every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod....'** (note the clever way of stopping people giving the worst of the flock)

Tithing continued as a requirement throughout the OT, though when we get to the last book in the Bible, Malachi, we find that people were making excuses not to tithe, and God has to rebuke them harshly, and tell them that failing to tithe was in fact robbing God of what was his due. See Malachi 3: 8. God longed to bless his people materially, but told them they were missing out on those blessings because of their failure to give God the tenth that was due to him.

'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven...'

What about tithing in the NT?

Jesus mentions tithing in Luke 23: 23, saying that the Pharisees were right to tithe even small herbs which were not mentioned in the law, but wrong because they neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness. **'You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former.'**

However we are Gentiles, not Jews, and so not under obligation to keep all the Mosaic law. **For Christians, tithing is not about law, it's about lordship** – are we ready to acknowledge Jesus' lordship over every area of our lives, or is our money a stronghold we are still not willing to yield to Christ.

And in our second reading, from 1 Corinthians 16: 1, Paul clearly endorses the principle of regular proportionate giving for Gentiles as well as for Jews...

What are the objections to tithing?

'Not under law but under grace' – true, but in the OT before Christ tithing was only the beginning – people gave the tithe because they were expected to, and then gave freewill offerings on top of that. So if giving a tenth was the baseline in the OT, for those who did not yet know Christ, **how sad it is if our giving, as those who have received the grace of God in Jesus, actually lags behind that of those who did not have Christ**

'we don't need to tithe, we pay taxes' – but so did the Jews of Jesus' day, to the Romans, and to the temple, and Jesus didn't see paying taxes as a substitute for giving to God – 'Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's'. Having said that, it makes sense to calculate your tithe on your take-home pay, after stoppages for tax and NI, especially as when you gift aid it, the church or mission agency gets the tax back too

Tithing is not about tax, a three letter word, it's about ta, a two letter word which means 'thank you' – it is our expression of thankfulness to God for all his mercies.

'unrealistic for those who are poor' or 'unrealistic for those who are rich' – I don't think Jesus is at all realistic in the Gospels, he asks for everything – he commends the widow who gave all that she had to live on, and he challenges the rich young ruler to give it all away, and he can't. But thank goodness Jesus is not realistic in his own giving – or he would never have given his life on the cross for a scumbag like me. It wasn't a very fair exchange was it? And if I want to be a disciple of Jesus, one who follows the master's example, then I have a lot more giving to do. And just maybe, you do too.

So if I want to give it a go, how do I start?

Look at the handout and work out where you are, and where you would like to get to...

[The handout had a simple tool to help people work out what their giving each week or month represented as a percentage of their income, with a number of steps on a gradient.]

So, as we conclude, **let's give wisely**, so that our giving can make a real difference for God's kingdom, both at home and abroad.

But also give recklessly – not becoming so calculating in our giving that we seek power over the people we give to – that isn't giving. The woman with the alabaster jar of ointment broke it and poured it over Jesus head – the disciples thought it was a waste, Jesus thought it was an act of beauty...