

Giving Begins with the Self-Sufficiency of God

The question before us is why would God require me to give financially to my local church?

First, we must define money and why it is important.

Technically speaking, money is debt. Money is a promise that I have given up something of value now for the promise that I can receive something of value later.

In that sense money is just a piece of paper or an arrangement of electrons on a computer network. It has no intrinsic value that we should care anything about it. Except for what the money represents. The money represents the time, energy, goods, capital, and work that make up life. In that sense money is encompassing of everything. Lots of people like to say “it’s just money.” But just try an experiment where somebody steals all your money, leaving you with none, and tell me how your life is different. Or tell me that you were the guy who paid your taxes with joy the day you got the bill in the mail. Or just tell me how you feel that don’t care that the thing that cost you \$75 four years ago now cost you \$100. I haven’t heard a single person who is super excited about the theft of inflation. Money represents life, so it is of great consequence.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that for any entity, an individual, a business, a charity, or even the government, there are exactly three basic things that you can do with money.

- 1) Spend it on goods or services to consume
- 2) Invest it in some productive way so that it grows and returns more to you later
- 3) Give it away and expect nothing to return to you in particular

Think about your finances in this manner. Your entire financial life is a three-legged stool, and you have to do some of each of these three for it to stand up and be healthy. If you remove any one of these three legs, the stool is unbalanced and broken.

God is the only person who does not function in this way. The only thing that God can do with treasure is to give it away. We know this because of what theologians call God’s incommunicable attribute of self-sufficiency.

“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to also have life in himself.”
– John 5:26

God is the only being who needs nothing from no one. He is life in himself, which is why in the context of John 5 Jesus says God is the one who has the power to heal and to raise the dead. God can’t buy anything or find a magic potion that will make him stronger, healthier, wiser, or greater than he already is. He can’t self-actualize and discover a way to feel better about himself, because he cannot conceive of a perfection greater than himself. He can’t take a dollar and invest it so that it has more value to him in 100 years, because he already

created and lives outside of the time that would allow that investment to grow. The only thing God can do with life and wealth is to share it with us.

And doesn't He do it? Lavishly! He provides everything we need for life. He gives us breath for our lungs and water for our tongue. He gives food for our belly and beauty for our eyes. In fact, if God were to take his hand off the world for one nanosecond, we would all die, implode, and cease to even be a thought in the universe.

He gives himself for our salvation, knowing there is not a chance we could begin to repay that debt. And he does all of this with agape love, that has zero condition that we give him back love in proportion to what he has already given to us. God, at his core, is the standard of what it means to be a giver.

“Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children.” Ephesians 5:1

Even though self-sufficiency is not a quality that we can possess like God possesses, the generosity that God is afforded by his self-sufficiency is a characteristic that he fully intends to bestow on his children. He gives to us for the express purpose that we would in turn give in like manner. You can't be a child of God without the goal of your life to be imitating God. And you can't imitate God without seeking to be free of want and bound to give.

So how does this pertain to the original question of giving to the church?

There is an order in which God created the universe that places value in the tenth, or tithe, of things. When God created the universe, Genesis tells us he spoke ten times. Ten words (let there be) and BANG, it is. God gave mankind 10 generations before he destroyed the world and recreated it in the days of Noah. Ten more generations until God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans. With ten plagues God brought the mightiest nation on earth to desolation. God spoke ten more “words” in Exodus 20 to establish the covenant with Israel. We have ten fingers on our hands. The Roman calendar had ten months (January and February were “dead time” winter). I could go on and on, but it was natural to both pagans and God worshipers alike that life could be divided ten ways.

What does that have to do with the tithe? There is a principle of life that precedes even that Bible that when you give a tithe of a thing, you are recognizing that ALL of the thing came from the hand of God. Abel gave a tithe of his sheep as an act of submission to God and God was pleased by it. Abraham gave a tithe of his raid to Melchizedek expressly to acknowledge the blessing that Melchizedek spoke of him being blessed by God. Abraham would not accept any portion of the spoil of Sodom, because he wanted it to be known that everything he owned came from the hand of God and not from the hand of some godless king.

Jacob upon seeing the vision of the ladder to heaven attempted to make a bargain with God. "If you take care of me and bring me back to this place, then I will acknowledge that you and you alone have done it." The sign that Jacob was acknowledging God would be his tithe. Keep in mind that all of this occurred BEFORE the law of Moses.

In the Law, there is not one, but three tithes that are commanded of the people of Israel. (See John MacArthur on giving)

- 1) The tithe of all that the land produces to support the Levites, who own no land.
- 2) A tithe of all that is left to be consumed at the various religious feasts of the year
- 3) An additional tithe every third year to support the poor

In case you haven't done the math yet, the "tithes" in the Law of Moses ended up totaling 22.33% of gross income. This does not include the offerings required under the law for various events, sins, and cleansings. Nor does it include the taxes that would be imposed later when Israel asked for a king (which could legally be up to 100%).

What was the purpose of the OT? Some of the tithes' purpose covered things that we now would say are included in our taxes but are also included in charitable giving today. 1) Supporting the service of the Levites, whose job was to administer the sacrificial system that was for the common good of the whole nation. 2) Supporting the needs of the poor 3) Supporting the social life and festivals of the community.

There is not a clear one-to-one correlation between the OT tithe and giving to and through the church in the NT. We can only rely on the principles of things that God expects his children to use their resources to support: 1) People who serve the community in religious and common-good functions, 2) gatherings of the community to worship God, and 3) kindness toward the needs of the poor.

Nowhere does the New Testament COMMAND the tithe as a percentage of income in the way that the Old Testament does. But neither does the New Testament command that believers should NOT tithe as it is a custom that precedes the law of Moses and is therefore not abolished or completed by Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

How does the New Testament command that believers should give?

We first need to acknowledge that if Jesus were to walk the streets of the United States of America in 2024, he would get EXACTLY the same response he got in 28 AD. Throngs of people would love his miracles. Religious people would find fault that he didn't do things their way. Many would be intrigued by his teaching. But he would also have this nasty habit of talking about money and hell more than ANY OTHER SUBJECTS. We should have no doubt that America would crucify Jesus even faster than the Jews did.

Any discussion on giving should start with the words on the hill that were spoken by the Master giver.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. – Matthew 6:1-4

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

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.^[1]

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?^[2] ²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” – Matthew 6:19-34

If a man ever took to heart the sermon on the mount and lived it out with total commitment to the Way of Jesus, that man would be viewed by everybody as a total revolutionary. What Jesus said about giving, money, and wants is radical. It is also the uncompromising standard that he places on any man who would dare enter the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus doesn't say to tithe. Jesus doesn't say not to tithe. Jesus says to give it ALL. Going back to the way the natural law that God placed into creation. We acknowledge the whole by giving the first tenth.

But giving doesn't stop at the tenth. The life and mindset of the giver is the one described in the sermon on the mount. We are to be focused on our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Citizens of that kingdom are characterized by the following:

- 1) Righteousness is to flow from the inward life outward.
- 2) God is the intended audience of righteous deeds, not men.
- 3) We should seek the approval and rewards of heaven, not the approval and rewards of men
- 4) This life is temporal. The treasure that is attained on this earth cannot be taken into eternity.
- 5) Treasure on this earth can be converted into things that will yield treasure in eternity.
- 6) How we handle the temporal treasure of this earth indicates the condition of our heart toward eternal things.
- 7) The life of faith in our heavenly father is the antidote to worry over temporal needs. God never abandons nor ceases to love his children, so we have no need to worry about whether he will provide the good things that he intends for us to have.
- 8) God doesn't tell us how he will provide for the needs of tomorrow. He only reveals his Providence at the time that we need it. Our job is to trust Him to handle the details of tomorrow.

The man or woman who truly learns these lessons will no longer view giving a tithe....or more..... as a burden. Rather than a subtraction from the wants or needs of life, the person who has embraced the life described in Christ will view giving as a joyous opportunity to demonstrate faith in a loving heavenly Father. If I am confident that God loves me and will provide for me tomorrow, then it would completely be consistent with that belief to trust Him with the first tenth of what he has already given to me. The man or woman who is not confident in the love and Providence of God will be very hesitant to give a tithe. They will want to hold on to whatever they can for themselves because they have no idea if God will provide tomorrow.

None of this is to say that we are not to use our funds as the means through which God intends to provide for us today and tomorrow. This is why I began by describing finances as a three-legged stool. If I give ALL of my money away when God intended for me to feed my kids with part of that money, then I have sinned in how I used it. If I go hungry tomorrow when God has given me the money TODAY to invest for tomorrow, then I have dishonored God's provision. This is why there is a key to the Biblical principle of the tithe...proportionality.

Paul's letters contain the most important applications of the teachings of Jesus to the life of the New Testament church. Venture is a New Testament church, so we should apply the teachings of Paul's letters even more directly to ourselves than we apply the principles of the tithe in the Law of Moses. In Second Corinthians 8 and 9 Paul engages in a lengthy discussion to encourage the Corinthian believers to generously give to the needs of the church

The situation was that the church in Jerusalem was experiencing such profound hardship that the people could not provide adequately for their own needs. Paul and his team had brought the Gospel to Greece and Macedonia, Gentiles had believed, and churches had been established. The Greek speaking church felt something of a kinship and gratitude to the Jewish believers, represented by the Apostle Paul. There was a sense that the Gospel which had been preached and believed was of infinite value, and a response of giving finite and temporal resources in response to this Gospel was a small, yet appropriate response.

Part of the brilliance of Paul was that he was not the only one encouraging this giving. The church at Phillippi had seen a need and responded to that need without even being asked. Paul is using their testimony and also the work of Titus, to encourage the Conrinthian church, who have more resources than the Philippians, to join the effort of supporting the church at Jerusalem.

But it is interesting that Paul doesn't use guilt to persuade Christians to give. He doesn't use obligation to force them to cough up what they owe. He lays out some principles for giving that we should adopt in our own church.

- 1) Giving is orderly. Titus has been appointed as something of a trustee to collect the gifts and oversee the process of getting them to Jerusalem. Paul isn't just saying "hey, give to whoever you can however you can figure out how to do it." He is saying to give to Titus, who is gifted and appointed for a task of bringing accountability and integrity to making sure the gifts go where they are intended.
- 2) Giving is systematic. Paul isn't telling people to look in their pockets and give their lunch money. He is telling them to think deeply about what they should give. To make purpose in their hearts about giving. He is telling them to PLAN to give.
- 3) Giving is significant. The reason giving must be planned ahead of time is because Paul is encouraging that there should be A LOT of it. You can't do big things unless you PLAN to do big things. He is telling the church to lay aside money over time because it will take time to accumulate the amount of giving that is required for the task at hand. I'm not saying that God doesn't use small gifts, because he does, but if you earn a typical income in the richest economy in the history of the world, you should not equate pocket change gifts with New Testament giving.
- 4) Giving should be proportionate. Paul points to the Philippians and says that they have set the bar on giving because they have given out of their poverty. But Paul says the Corinthians should be in a better position to give because they have a surplus. We are to give from what we HAVE, not from what we don't have. This is where the tithe is useful. It's not a LAW to follow, but a benchmark. How do I know if my giving is proportionate? Because I am giving a percentage.
- 5) Giving is a response to God's giving. It is a Gospel issue. If Paul says we give because we know the Gospel of grace, then to not give is to demonstrate that you do not believe in a Gospel of grace (giving).
- 6) Giving is a heart issue. You can judge your belief by your giving. Paul even relates proportionality to our hearts. Are we purposing in our hearts to see how little we can

give and still make God happy? Or are we seeking every avenue to see how MUCH we can give because we are overwhelmed with goodness that God has shown to us? We are to decide in our hearts what to give, but the principle of sowing and reaping applies. If we sow sparingly (from a heart that has a small desire to give) then we will reap sparingly. And if we sow generously then we stand to reap generously. We aren't merely repaid by God with more stuff, although sometimes this is the case. God's repayment is FAR GREATER than material wealth and health. We will be enriched IN EVERY WAY FOR ALL GENEROSITY, which produces thanksgiving. The greatest blessings which we reap from giving have to do with experiencing the fullness of a relationship with God. I don't know about you, but I want to be a position to be enriched by the God of the universe IN EVERY WAY that he knows how to give. I would be a total fool not to sign up for that plan.

Now back to the tithe. Why do we still speak of tithing in the church age when our relationship to the Law has fundamentally changed. After all, God gives salvation graciously to us without any consideration of whether we will give a single dime back to his work. It sounds incongruous with grace to speak of tithing as an expectation for the Christian life, doesn't it?

One of the most common misconceptions about ethics and morality in the New Testament is that somehow the ethical standards that God finds joy with his kids adopting somehow became more lax. One place that you find this sort of false teaching in the American church is in the area of sexual ethics.

There are all sorts of false teachings and bad practices in which "Christians" believe and behave as if God doesn't really care what we do with our bodies sexually. There is a lax and permissive approach to sexual ethics that begins to treat God as if he is some stupid grandparent who will embrace any lifestyle his spoiled grandchildren choose to adopt. But when you read what Jesus and Paul taught about Christian sexuality (Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Galatian 5:19, 1 Corinthians 6-7, 1 Timothy, Titus, etc.) the standard for a Christian's sexual conduct is actually MUCH MORE STRICT than the standard laid out in the Mosaic law. The reasons for this are that 1) we have a closer relationship with the law giver, which leads to a greater desire to obey the law giver than under the Mosaic law and 2) we have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to give us the ability to live in the high ethical standards of God. Furthermore, God established marriage as a picture of the intimacy and love that he has for the church, so the man or woman who dishonors marriage is demonstrating a lack of understanding about what a relationship with Jesus Christ by grace through faith is supposed to be (Ephesians 5, Hebrews 13:4).

I propose to you that the Christian ethic of giving functions in much the same way as the Christian ethic of sex.

The person who says "because the relationship I now have with God is based on the free giving by God of salvation, I have complete freedom in God to give less than he required of

those who knew him according to the Mosaic law” is technically correct but destitute of principle. How in the world would it make any rational sense for a person who know God as giver to think that he can please God by giving less? Why would a person who knows God as a giver want to give less? It would be reasonable to assume that person knows very little of the Gospel of grace and is still living in a paradigm where they can only approach God according to law. Tithing should be the STARTING PLACE of our giving to God, not the goal to which we can say we’ve arrived. It should be inconceivable that those of us who live under grace would want to give less than those who lived under the law.

I say none of this with the intention of laying down guilt. The truth is quite the opposite. The New Testament commands that giving should be free from guilt, but based on love. Giving is a primary way that I GET to show my love for God. If I went to Jennifer one day with a gift and told her “I have this heavy weight of guilt that I am obligated to give to you, so here it is so that I no longer feel guilty.” She will probably take that gift and throw it in the trash. But if I give her a gift and say “I was thinking about you all day and because I was thinking about you I wanted to give you token of what I was thinking” then she is going to cherish that gift and it will strengthen our relationship.

What are the practical roadblocks to New Testament giving and how can we begin to remove them?

- 1) We treat giving as if it is taboo. This is a misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was speaking about the motivation for giving, not the secrecy of giving. In first century Israel giving was a very public activity and it would be nearly impossible to hide from your community. We treat giving today like it should be life’s greatest secret. But if giving is truly a joy then we should want to talk about it! The danger is that we should speak of giving as in “look what I’ve done.” NO we should speak about giving as if it’s a really cool activity that we go to join our heavenly Dad in and experience his joy. Why would we not talk about that? I remember a Venture partner telling me when we used to take D-Block kids to Stanley football that his favorite thing to see every day was that bus going down the road knowing that he was able to support the gas and the insurance and the upkeep on the bus to make sure that kids had that opportunity.
- 2) We don’t budget. Remember Paul’s admonition to plan to give. The plan to give is called a budget. And you can only budget by looking at ALL of your income, giving a purpose to every dollar of it, and assigning it a priority in your life. Make a budget that reflects the three-legged stool before you get your paycheck and then do what the budget told you to do during that month.
- 3) We don’t prioritize giving. It’s quite interesting the people who will tell you that they are poor or broke who drive around in cars and live in houses that are nicer and more expensive than anything most people in the human history could dream about. They have no money to give, but they somehow scrounge up the money to travel for multiple vacations every year. Sometimes it’s not that we can’t give, it’s that we just don’t think it is as important as spending on our own enjoyment. I’m not here to

condemn you, I am just asking you to take a look at your spending and be brutally honest with yourself about what you prioritize.

- 4) We live as slaves. Debt is slavery. It is selling your future for something you need or want right now. This goes straight into the conversation about priorities, but let me issue one simple challenge: if you have to take on debt to buy something, the reason is because you cannot afford it. If you cannot afford something today, that is typically a sign that God doesn't intend for you to have it. Would you really prefer the comfort of buying that thing on credit over the freedom to buy it outright tomorrow and to also have the margin to give generously? The separation from childhood to adulthood is the ability to delay gratification. If something is worth having, it is always worth waiting for until God intends for you to have it.
- 5) We don't think that the joy of giving is real. Let me tell you about my journey of giving. I am fortunate that I grew up with parents who taught me that tithing is just something that God expects us to do with our money. They gave me an allowance, but the condition was that ten percent went to the church and ten to twenty percent went to investing for college. Fifty cents a week doesn't sound like much, but it ingrained in me and my siblings a habit that we carry around until today and it has served us each well.

That was easy as long as I lived in my parents' house and most of my living expenses were covered. But the challenge came when I got married and all of a sudden I have to be the one to pay the rent buy the groceries by working a J-O-B. True story, but I quit my job and put seminary on pause to move to Greensboro and get married to Jennifer. When we got married I was jobless and had \$3,000 in an investment account. We went on our honeymoon with the cash we received in the cards at our wedding. We ate Vienna sausages and crackers on the beach for lunch on our honeymoon. It was awesome!

I actually got a job while on our honeymoon. But let me tell you, tithing those first couple of paychecks as a married man were the absolute hardest checks to write in my life. It was going to be cutting it close to buy gas, groceries, and pay rent and lights. How could I afford to tithe? And especially how can I afford to tithe before I even pay rent? Honestly, the only reason I did tithe those months was because I married a woman who wouldn't let us not tithe. She said that no matter what we had, it came to us from God, so we had no other option than to give the first tenth of it to God's work at the church.

What did I learn from that experience? Firstly, I learned that even though I knew more about the theory of money and how to invest and how to divide a nickel ten ways, my wife had the wisdom that I sometimes lacked about why we had money in the first place and what God intended it for. We learned the lesson in the first month of marriage that God took care of us, so we could ALWAYS afford to give to him.

If you are struggling in faith OR in finances. Tithing is God's solution to find a different way. Put God to the test (Malachi 3:10). See what he does.

