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 Series: *Communion*
 Title: *Why Tithe?*
 Text: Various
 Preacher: Mark Adams

This week I came across a story about a School Teacher in a Christian Academy who gave her third graders an assignment. They were to write a letter to God. Would you like to see and hear a few of them? Please say yes.

*Dear God,
 My grandad said You were around when he was a little boy. How far back to You go?
 Love, Dennis*

*Dear God
 I do not think anybody could be a better God. Well, I just want You to know but I'm not just saying that because You ARE God.
 Charles*

*Dear God,
 Daddy says you are bigger than anything. Are you bigger than SHAQ?!*

*Dear God
 It is great the way You always get the stars in the right places.
 Jeff*

*Dear God,
 How come You didn't invent any new animals lately? We still have just all the old ones.
 Johnny*

*Dear God,
 Here's a poem.
 I love You because You give
 Us what we need to live
 But I wish You
 Would tell me why
 You made it so
 We have to die
 Daniel*

This Daniel is deep for a 3rd grader! It makes me wonder what prompted him to write his poem. In any case, I love letters like these because they are so honest. Plus, they remind me of the fact that in His Word, we are told that God is our Father---and that like earthly Fathers He WANTS us to come to Him with our questions. As James reminds us, ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, Who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."*** (James 1:5)

This morning as God's children I want to ask Him for the wisdom to answer a very important question, namely: ***"WHY DO WE HAVE TO TITHE?"*** And---it may surprise you to know that the answer to this question---addresses the question Daniel posed in his little poem.

Let's begin with a definition of this word. You tell me. What does the word ***"TITHE"*** mean? Correct---it means "a tenth." Everybody knows that!

But too many of us don't really UNDERSTAND the word "tithes" because they use it to say things like, "I tithe \$10 a week." If the word "tithes" means a tenth and if you tithe \$10 a week that would mean you only make \$100 a week---and with gas at over \$5 a gallon and eggs nearly \$4 a dozen---well, you can't live on \$100 a week---not in Montgomery County in 2022---maybe in 1922---but not today.

So when someone says they tithe \$10 a week---they are either bad at math or they don't really understand the concept. Well, the fact is all of us---even those of us who are good at math---we all need God's help in deepening our understanding of this word---because TITHING is MORE than a percentage kind of deal.

In fact, when we first read this word---back in the Old Testament, tithing was described as much MORE than a "tenth." It was to be A WAY OF LIFE for God's people because Israel had not one---but several tithes. Here are three of them.

a. One is described in the book of Numbers.

God said, "***I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving in the Tent of Meeting.***" (Numbers 18:21) Remember, when the Promised Land was conquered and then divided among the twelve tribes of Israel every tribe received a portion of the land---EXCEPT the tribe of Levi. The plan was that the other Israelites were to tithe their produce of the land to God---and that would support the Levites---who didn't have time to farm the land and raise any produce or livestock of their own because of their duties in the tent of meeting---and later the temple.

b. Another tithe is mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy.

God said, "***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---so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.***" (Deuteronomy 14:22)

The purpose of this particular tithe was to teach people to celebrate God's goodness. In verse 26 God said, "***Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, WINE OR OTHER FERMENTED DRINK, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall EAT THERE in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice.***"

Now to be clear---buying alcohol does not count as tithing.

Now---the point here is that God wants His people to gather to celebrate His goodness---His faithfulness---to provide for their needs. He wants us to connect GIVING and GENEROSITY with CELEBRATION and JOY. As Paul told the Corinthians: "***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.***" (2nd Cor 6:9) I think this is where the idea of POTLUCK DINNERS originated. It's a time we each bring good food to share as a way of REJOICING in the goodness of God.

In my seminary church we had a potluck dinner once a month and I remember one month no one brought a meat dish---just veggies and desserts---but we still had a great meal together. We still rejoiced in the goodness of God---especially our vegetarian and sweet tooth members.

Now---if eating doesn't help you feel JOYFUL and GENEROUS---try this.

- Go over to the ROC and check out our new Young Adults Grace Group. They had 15 (not counting their teachers) last week. And this is just the second time they have met!
- Ask someone who volunteers in UPWARD basketball to tell you about the time when a child on his team learned a memory verse that told him God is always with him.
- Drive up to SKYCROFT this week and take a look at those 36 Redland teens who will be up there. Watch them as they worship. Peek in as they gather in small groups to study the Bible.
- Ask an RBC CAMP worker---to tell you about a child in his or her class who decided to become a Christian this past week.
- Ask one of our Grace in Store volunteers to tell you about a faith conversation they had with a shopper.

- Ask my wife to tell you about someone in our community who thanked her for the food pantry---one of many families who have said they wouldn't have made it without the food on those shelves.

As you watch all that—hear all that—tell yourself, *“My giving—my tithing—to God helps make all this happen.”* If that doesn't make you want to celebrate and rejoice in God's goodness—something is wrong with you!

Okay, here's a third tithe.

c. It was called the POOR tithe.

It was collected once every three years so that as Deuteronomy 14:29 says, *“...the foreigners, 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 works of your hands.”*

It was kind of like the benevolence offering we will take at the end of this service---that money goes to help people who face serious financial issues. My point is, the Hebrews didn't just pass the plate in Synagogue on Saturdays. No, they had many tithes and, as I said, the three I've mentioned were just some of the main ones.

In fact, if you look at ALL the tithes God asked them to give, we discover that tithing for the Israelites totaled much more than 10%. They gave somewhere between 20 and 23 percent of their resources—their income—to God.

So, you see, tithing was never meant to be a mere percentage—it's meant to be a way of life. It's not just a mathematical calculation that leads us to write a check for a certain percentage.

It's a perspective on our time and possessions that enables us to cheerfully, generously join with God in His work.

My prayer is that more of us would embrace a TITHING lifestyle. I'm not saying you should give 20 or 23 percent—Feel free to do so but that's not my point. I'm saying, try making tithing your perspective on life. If giving a tenth scares you—try 2% at first—and as you see God blessing which He WILL—increase to 5% then 10% and beyond. If you've never tithed of your time by serving on a committee or team or working with our children or teaching a Grace Group---try it. If you do, you'll experience a caliber of joy that will surprise you---and bless you.

Okay—we've dealt with the WHAT of tithing---let's get back to our original question. If we were to ask our Heavenly Father WHY we must we tithe, what would He say? By reading His book we know how He would answer this question for in Scripture God has said a lot. For example, He has said:

1.) We tithe to OBEY.

God—the OWNER of all we have—commands us to use our money and our lives, to further His kingdom. To keep with the parenting paradigm, when we ask Him why we should tithe, God could rightly respond by saying, *“Because I said so.”* And He HAS indeed said so.

- In Leviticus 27:30 He says, *“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.”*
- Jesus commended the widow for the faith that motivated her to give her mites. He held up her generous, sacrificial, faith-filled gift as an example to follow.
- In Romans 12 Paul says we must give not just a tithe of our income—we must offer our entire lives to God for Him to use.

I love The Message paraphrase. It says, *“Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.”*

Tithing is indeed a LIFESTYLE.

The point here is that tithing is a command of God just as much as His other commands—so when we tithe, we are OBEYING God. When we don't, we being disobedient.

I don't know about you---but I read our church newsletter from cover to cover---and the giving report---which is at the end---doesn't look too good these days. We are way behind in supporting the spending plan we committed to meet in December—and just barely ahead of expenses. So---it looks like this is a command more of us need to take more seriously.

My intent is not to make you feel guilty about your lack of giving---that's the Holy Spirit's job. My job is just to teach the WORD---and in His WORD it says that God is the OWNER of all we have---we are just stewards. So, when we don't tithe--it's more than disobedience—it's theft.

That reminds me of a story I came across this week about something that happened back in 2005---when Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots paid a visit to Russian President Vladimir Putin. During their visit, Kraft made the mistake of showing the Russian leader one of his Super Bowl rings. Kraft took it out and handed it to Putin, who put the massive ring on his finger and said, *"I could kill someone with this ring."* Then, instead of handing it back to its owner Putin put the \$25,000 ring in his pocket; his KGB guys surrounded him, and they walked out! This isn't surprising because---as we all know---Putin has moved on from stealing rings to stealing other things that don't belong to him---like countries.

But before we shake our fingers at Vladimir---I have to point out that too often we do that with our possessions. By not tithing---we take what belongs to God and put it in our pockets and walk away. Remember, we are not owners. We are STEWARDS. And a "steward" is someone who manages finances, possessions, property, or real estate on behalf of someone else.

Tithing is a way of acknowledging the fact that everything we have is God's and He has commanded us to give Him our tithes---HIS tithes.

But there's more to it than that. In answer to our *"WHY TITHE"* question, God would also say:

2.) We tithe to GROW.

Tithing is a way of maturing spiritually. In fact, TITHING is just as much a spiritual discipline as prayer or Bible Study or worship.

Let me explain why I say this. For something to be a spiritual discipline it has to meet two requirements.

a. First, it must help us learn to live life as JESUS would.

Simply put, a spiritual discipline is also something that makes us more like Jesus. And to you remember what did Paul say about that? Look at 2nd Corinthians 8:9: *"Though Jesus was rich, for our sakes He became poor, so that through His poverty we might become rich."* Jesus came into this fallen world not to RECEIVE but to GIVE.

- As He said to Nicodemus, *"For God so loved the world that HE GAVE!"* (John 3:16)
- Referring to the cross, our Lord said, *"No one takes My life from Me—I lay it down—I GIVE it—of my own accord."* (John 10:18)

So, when we learn to give of our time and talents—and especially our money—we are disciplining ourselves to become more Christlike.

Here's something else that makes a spiritual discipline a spiritual discipline.

b. It must build our RELATIONSHIP with God.

When we read the Bible---when we talk to God---when we gather to worship Him---we learn important things about God---relationship-building things. For example,

- We learn that God DOES hear us when we pray---that He IS always with us---that He will guide us.
- We learn to recognize His still, small voice.

- We learn that with Him in us---we are strengthened such that we can do all things.

And tithing does all that as well. In fact, when it comes to DEEPENING your friendship with God—there is nothing like tithing. When we faithfully give---we experience the truth of God’s promises. I’m thinking of promises like:

- ***“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”*** (2nd Cor.9:8)
- And Psalm 37:25 where it says, ***“I was young and now I am old but I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed beg for bread.”***
- My favorite is in Matthew 6:31-33 where Jesus says, ***“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”***

By tithing we learn that God is a promise-keeper. We learn we can COUNT on Him to do what He says He will do—and God says if we tithe—He will provide for our needs—provide like only God can. I like how R. G. LeTourneau put it. He said, *“I shovel out and God shovels in, but God’s shovel is always bigger.”*

Now, we should never GIVE to GET. I’m not proclaiming a health/wealth gospel here. I’m just saying that we can trust that as we give, God will meet our needs and He is better equipped to do this than we are on so many levels!

GIVING—TITHING—STEWARDSHIP OF LIFE is a FAITH thing.

It’s professing our faith that God is Who He says He is—and will do what He says He will do. Landrum Leavell puts it this way: *“If a man says he belongs to Jesus but holds on to his possessions, he has denied his profession of faith.”* Leavell’s point is that TITHING---STEWARDSHIP---is based on FAITH, not SIGHT. Biblical giving is not doing just what we SEE can be accomplished but doing what we believe can accomplish with the resources of Heaven and the power of God.

I don’t want to step on any toes this morning, but I believe the source of the financial trouble many believers experience---is their refusal to tithe. Their relationship with God is a shallow one. They don’t know Him well enough to know that He can be trusted to take care of them.

Every month they fight the battle of the budget on their own---and lose. They just can’t make ends meet. They are always exhausted financially. Why is that so? Why can’t they keep their heads above the water? Why can’t they make any financial headway? It’s because their relationship with God hasn’t grown to the point where they have learned they can and SHOULD turn their personal finances over to Him.

Listen, if you want to KNOW—if you want to EXPERIENCE God’s great faithfulness—try tithing.

Give it a shot and watch what He does. If you do—your relationship with Him will DEEPEN. You will see what God does when we trust Him enough to obey His commands.

To drive this home, let’s read God’s promise in Malachi 3: ***“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and 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.”***

Here’s a third way God would answer our “WHY TITHE” question.

3.) We tithe to EXPAND.

You see, when it comes to the time and money that God gives us---we can do two things. We can use it on things that DON’T last—don’t expand—or it can go for things that DO. And—even someone as ignorant as I am when it comes to stocks and investments knows that it’s foolish to invest in the former instead of the latter. Wise people—good stewards—will invest their money—their lives—in things that last the longest. This is what Paul is getting at in 1st

Timothy 6:17-19 when he says, *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God—Who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”*

I imagine all of you have heard of Stephen King. He’s the author of 64 suspense and horror novels that have sold well over 350 million copies. Many of his novels have been made into blockbuster movies like *The Shining*, *Misery*, and *Shawshank Redemption*.

Here’s a few things you may NOT know about Stephen King:

- He is a serious Boston Red Sox fan, which is the Red Sox always appear somewhere in his novels.
- He was also a guitar player in a mediocre rock ‘n roll band made up of other famous authors.
- He’s a recovering alcoholic.
- And---he almost lost his life back in 1999.
He was walking along a country road in Maine, and a van hit him and knocked him into a ditch. His legs were so crushed the doctors considered amputating them. But he managed to pull through. Here’s another surprising fact about Stephen King:
- He’s an outspoken advocate of generosity.

If you doubt that then listen to a portion of the speech he gave to graduates recently at Vassar College in 2001: *“I have found out what ‘you can’t take it with you’ means. I found out while I was lying in the ditch at the side of a country road covered with mud and blood---and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans, like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm.*

We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life’s simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed up when we go out, but we’re just as broke.

Warren Buffet is going to go out broke. Bill Gates is going out broke. Tom Hanks is going out broke. Steve King, broke, not a crying dime. All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade, all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. So, I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on. We have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we’re going to take it with us? Oh, please. Right now, we have the power to do great good for others. So, I ask you to begin giving and to continue as you began. I think you’ll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had and did more good than you ever dreamed.”

I wish I could tell you that Stephen King is a Christian---but I can’t. I know he was raised Methodist and says he believes in God---but there’s no mention of Jesus. Statements like his speech give me hope though---because he has learned the principle of investing in things that last---and he mentioned that all he has is not his---it’s just on loan. I pray we read someday soon that Stephen King has made the best eternal investment ever by giving His heart and life to Jesus.

I also pray that more of us will learn that one answer to our question about tithing is this principle of investing in things of eternal significance. That’s the only “thing” you CAN take with you.

Here’s one more way God would answer our question. He would say:

4.) We tithe to THANK.

When we tithe, we are saying, *“God, I am giving back a portion of all You have given me—to THANK YOU—to show my gratitude for Your great faithfulness to me. You give me so much—and so I am giving back!”* We tithe—we give—to acknowledge that God is the Provider! We give to THANK HIM for His gracious abundant giving to us. And when we fully understand ALL God has given and is giving us---we just naturally WANT to do that.

Imagine you are on a cruise---and you lean out too far and fall overboard. You don't know how to swim---and begin to drown. Someone on the deck spots you, flailing in the water and throws you a life preserver. It lands directly in front of you and, just before losing consciousness, you grab hold for dear life. They pull you up onto the deck, and you cough the water out of your lungs. After you finally catch your breath what would you do? You would immediately seek out the person who threw the life preserver and thank them.

And this would not be some superficial *"THANK YOU."* No---you would embrace them, ask them their name, invite them to dinner, maybe give them your cabin! Why? Because gratitude is a natural response to salvation.

That brings a question to mind? Perhaps you are already asking it to yourself. *"Does my financial giving to this church---does my giving of my life in ministry---does it show my GRATITUDE to God?"*

Let me tell you one more thing about how the FIRST tithers---the Israelites---gave. In Exodus 23:29 God said, ***"Bring the best of the FIRST fruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God."*** And the first Israelites to hear this command did exactly that. When they saw the earliest plants with fruit appearing, they were filled with gratitude. And before waiting to see if the rest of their crop would be a good one they would take those first stalks of wheat---or that first bunch of ripe grapes---they would TIE A REED around this FIRST best, healthiest, plant and say,

"I'm going to give that to God. I trust that God is going to give me a good crop and I'm showing that trust by giving the first part of it." This *"Celebration of First Fruits"* brought so much joy that people would have parades at harvest time to bring their first fruits to the temple---led by people playing flutes and harps. The parade would end at the tabernacle where the priest would take these baskets in which people had brought their first fruits.

Now do you remember what Paul said when He described Jesus' resurrection? In 1st Corinthians 15:20 he said, ***"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, THE FIRST FRUITS of those who have fallen asleep."*** So---Jesus is God's first fruit. God TIED A REED around Him. He is the best God had to give---and He gave Him to US. When Jesus was crucified for our forgiveness and then resurrected for our hope, it meant a whole crop of forgiven, resurrected humanity was going to follow.

So, in answer to Daniel's poem---we don't have to die---not really---because Jesus died in our place. When we understand this---our natural response is gratitude in our GIVING---giving our best---our FIRST FRUITS.

We share this meal---as a reminder of God's gift of Jesus. I invite all Christians to join us---even if you are not a member of this church---because of course if you are His---this is yours.

THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION