

Faithful Giving

Matthew 23:23

DT- Giving is about lordship. Giving is required to teach us to put God first.

We are finishing up our Thanks – Giving series today. We've talked about how to be thankful, we talked about how the bridge from thanks to giving is trust, and today we will ask and answer some important questions about faithful giving. Let's pray and we will get started.

PRAY

The Bible has more than 2,350 verses that speak directly about money related issues and many of those speak directly about giving. Faithful giving should be a natural part of every follower of Christ. Just like serving, studying, praying, and evangelizing should be natural parts of our walk with God, giving should be as well. The opening pages of the Bible introduce us to a giving God. A God who is beyond generous. A God who gave us an earth to live on and be stewards of. A God who gave us life in the form of these human bodies. With these bodies we engage this beautiful earth that he gave to us, to have dominion over it.

We should be faithfully giving because we serve an incredibly giving God. Look at these verses on the screen that describe how generous and giving our God is:

Genesis 1:29

"Then God said, "Look! I have **given** you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food."

Deuteronomy 8:10

"When you have eaten your fill, be sure to praise the Lord your God for the good land he has **given** you."

Jeremiah 24:7

"I will **give** them hearts that recognize me as the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me wholeheartedly."

Ezekiel 11:9

"And I will **give** them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them."

Luke 11:13

“So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father **give** the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

John 3:16

“For this is how God loved the world: He **gave** his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

God is incredibly generous. From the beginning of time God has been lavishly generous to us and he still is today. He made the first move of generosity when he created the heavens and the earth. Then he created us and breathed life into us, but we rebelled, and his generosity only grew, and it eventually culminated in the giving of his one and only Son, Jesus, so that you and I could have eternal life.

Giving is about lordship. It's not about the law, it's not about legalism, it's about lordship. Do you give back to our generous giving God what is already his? Here's the crazy thing; giving really isn't about money. Money is amoral. It's not good or bad. It can be used for good, and it can be used for bad, but it's amoral. Giving is not about money. Giving involves money, especially today, but giving isn't about money. When God commands us to give he is not after your paycheck, that's not what he wants. What God wants is what our money represents, our priorities, our passions, and our purpose.

Giving is part of the Christian life because it helps teach us to put God first. Giving is about lordship. Do you submit to the lordship of God, and give back to him what he commands or is your allegiance placed in something else, or someone else? How we manage the resources that God gives us has an eternal impact. Giving is not the most important part of the Christian life, we will see even Jesus saying that today, but what you give still matters to God.

Today I want to ask and answer 4 questions that will either remind us what faithful giving looks like or for some of you it will be the first time you have biblically heard how we should faithfully give. We're going to be in both the OT and the NT because Jesus came to fulfill the law which means some of what was done in the OT should still be done in the NT. When it comes to sacrifices we don't do that because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice once and for all. However, when it comes to giving that is something we should be doing in the same way because Jesus bolstered that fact through his teaching in the NT.

Our first question is this: where did firstfruits, tithes, and offerings begin?

1. Where did firstfruits, tithes, and offerings begin?

Some will say that in Leviticus we have the first written command to give. That's true. In Leviticus 27 God lays out the tithe, he says this in Leviticus 27:30, "One tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord and must be set apart to him as holy."

Later in Deuteronomy 12 God is describing how his people should worship him and he says this in Deuteronomy 12:4-6, "Do not worship the Lord your God in the way these pagan peoples worship their gods. Rather, you must seek the Lord your God at the place of worship he himself will choose from among all the tribes—the place where his name will be honored. There you will bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, your sacred offerings, your offerings to fulfill a vow, your voluntary offerings, and your offerings of the firstborn animals of your herds and flocks."

Just a few chapters later in Deuteronomy 14 the command to tithe is given even more directly when God says in Deuteronomy 14:22-23, "You must set aside a tithe of your crops—one-tenth of all the crops you harvest each year. Bring this tithe to the designated place of worship—the place the Lord your God chooses for his name to be honored—and eat it there in his presence. This applies to your tithes of grain, new wine, olive oil, and the firstborn males of your flocks and herds. Doing this will teach you always to fear the Lord your God."

Giving taught them to fear the Lord. Giving is about lordship. This is where firstfruits, first born males, and the tithe is first commanded, but it's not the first time we see it practiced. In fact, the very first murder in all of human history was committed because of the tithe and firstfruits. Unfortunately, we only get 4 chapters into Genesis before the first murder occurs. Genesis 4:3-5 describes what led up to that act of violence where it says, "When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The Lord accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected."

This is actually where the firstfruits, the tithe, the very first offerings begin. Cain and Abel were the first recorded people to give an offering to God.

- Cain and Abel were the first recorded people to give an offering to God.

They both brought an offering, but Abel brought the firstborn while Cain just grabbed some of his crops but certainly not the firstfruits of his harvest. But they both gave something; I mean isn't that good enough? No, it's not. Why? Because that's not what God said to do. Have you ever heard the saying, "Some people create their own storms and then complain about the rain." That's Cain. Obviously at some point God had told them to bring an offering. We don't have that recorded but it's fairly clear that Cain and Abel knew what to bring before God.

Because Cain looked dejected and upset that God did not accept his gift; he and God had a discussion just after that. Genesis 4:6-7 says, "Why are you so angry?" the Lord asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

God said your offering, and therefore you, will be accepted if you do what is right. That means at some point God had told them what the right kind of offering was. We can use simple deduction or common sense to figure out what was right by looking at the offering that was accepted. Abel brought the firstborn, the firstfruits, not the leftovers. Cain should have admitted his mistake and begun to do what was right, but instead he got rid of Abel and killed him.

Today people don't kill the group in the church that tithes and brings their firstfruits, instead they just ignore sermons like this, or go to another church, or say things like, "The church or the preacher is always asking for money." If we all tithed, if we all brought our firstfruits we wouldn't have to bring this subject up very much. We would occasionally because new Christians and young people who will grow up to be leaders in the church need to hear sermons like this, because giving is about lordship.

God didn't need Cain and Abel's offering, he wanted what that offering represented, their hearts, their allegiance. Where did firstfruits, tithes, and offerings begin? 4 chapters into the Bible. 10 chapters later we see Abraham tithing. 14 chapters after that we see Jacob tithing. We know where giving began. Question number 2, how do we know what to give?

2. How do we know what to give?

I know that for some people this can be a big roadblock. Let's not beat around the bush this morning; our economy is not great. Everything is more expensive right now with inflation, and giving to God, giving to the church is hard. I agree, but coming under the lordship of God was never described as easy. Yes his yoke is easy, and his burden is light, but it's still a yoke. There is still lordship involved. The reason why we talked about trust last week is because we will never learn to give to God until we learn to trust God.

Giving to God indicates whether or not God matters most in our lives. So how do we know what to give? God tells us plainly through scripture.

- God tells us plainly through scripture.

Before the law was written, before Leviticus, before Deuteronomy, God taught Cain and Abel about the firstfruits. In some way God had explained to them that this is what belongs to me. You bring the firstfruits to me. You bring me the best, and I'll take care of the rest. The firstfruits have always belonged to God. Again, this is not about legalism, or the law. Those things weren't even in place with Cain and Abel, or Abram, or Jacob. This is about lordship.

How much of the firstfruits do we need to bring? It's a tithe so a tenth. That's what tithe means. The percentage of our tax rate changes depending on who's president, depending on how much money you make. Depending on how many deductions you have and can take. From the very beginning God has been crystal clear about how much you should give; the first ten percent. That's not the finish line that's the base line. That's the minimum that God requires.

Malachi 3:10 says, "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."

The whole tithe is to be brought to the storehouse. Giving the whole tithe is not advanced math. You don't need a calculator. You move the decimal point one space to the left. You make \$750.00 dollars that week and you move the decimal point one space to the left and your tithe is \$75.00. Do you give based off of the gross or the net. It's the whole tithe I think we all know the answer.

We bring that whole tithe to the storehouse. What's the storehouse? It was part of the temple. The Israelites were required to take their tithes to the priests serving at the temple, and the priests were required to put them into the storehouse for safe keeping. Those tithes accomplished several things. It provided for the priests and Levites. It provided for the traveling prophets. It provided for any widows and orphans, and it provided for the care and upkeep of the temple.

The tithe does the same thing today. It provides for ministers, missionaries, benevolence, and maintenance. God's people have always known what to give and the percentage has never changed. As we grow spiritually our first question might be, "How much money do I have to give to God." We grow a little more and ask, "How much of God's money will I give back to Him." The hope is for us to grow into a fully devoted follower of Christ who asks, "How much money do I need to live on so that I can give the rest to God."

This text in Malachi also describes for us where that tithe belongs. For them, as an agricultural community, it was the storehouse in the temple because they brought grain and animals as their tithe. Our culture predominately operates within a money system so we tithe off what we make, and that tithe goes to the local church you're a part of. You won't eat at Ajuua here in town and then drive over to Jalapenos to pay for it. I know some people like to split their tithe but that's not really how scripture describes the tithe. You might give an offering over and above your tithe to some other organization, but the tithe belongs to God. Imagine how you would feel if I gave my tithe to Amber and told her to put half of it in my personal retirement account. Would you have a problem with that?

Barry Cameron in his book, "The Road to Financial Freedom" tells a story about a time when he was a freshman in Bible College. He said, "I was sitting on the third row of Blendville Christian Church in Joplin, Missouri. It came time for the offering, and I had a tithe of what I'd made at McDonald's that week; the tithe was in an envelope, and I put it in the offering. My three friends who were sitting with me gave nothing. I asked, "Aren't you going to give something?" They said, "We already give to God's kingdom. When we pay on our school bill, that's going to the kingdom because it's a bible college." I told them, "No, that's not how it works. "Ironically, or maybe not, none of those guys are in ministry today."

It's a privilege to give to God and he has told us plainly through scripture how to give. To this point we have stayed exclusively in the OT and many people will ask, "what does the NT have to say about firstfruits, tithing, and offerings?" What does the NT have to say about giving? Those questions eventually lead to the biggest question; what did Jesus say about tithing?

3. What did Jesus say about tithing?

That's a legitimate question but it's often asked as if the OT has no bearing on those of us who live in the NT era. Let me address that for just a second. Yes there are some things that were practiced in the OT that no longer need to be practiced in the NT. I already mentioned animal sacrifices as one of those things. However, we can't forget what Jesus said in Matthew 5:17 (ESV), "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Just 2 verses later in Matthew 5:19 (ESV) Jesus says, "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus didn't come to lower the expectation; he came to raise it. The next 3 chapters of Matthew describe how he came to raise the bar. Just getting angry with someone is like committing murder. Just looking lustfully at a woman is committing adultery with her in your heart. You've heard that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say pray for those that persecute you. So, if Jesus came to fulfill the law, and raise expectations, not lower them, what did Jesus say about tithing? Thankfully we have the answer to that question from his own lips. What we find out about tithing is that he reinforced it but stressed there are more important things.

- He reinforced it but stressed there are more important things.

In Matthew 23 Jesus is speaking to a group of religious leaders and in Matthew 23:23 he says, "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things."

It's clear what Jesus said about giving, about the tithe. You should be giving a tenth of what you make back to God. We would describe these religious leaders as legalist. They obeyed the law from the OT to a T. They were even tithing the firstfruits from the spices in their herb gardens. Jesus says that it's good that they are so careful to do that, but you're neglecting more important things like justice, mercy, and faith. He tells them to tithe as you should, be mature enough in your faith to take care of that and move on to more important things.

Jesus clearly reinforces the tithe here, but he knows that tithing is just one part of our growth in Christ. Giving is about lordship, but so is biblical justice, so is showing mercy, and certainly growing in our faith has everything to do with recognizing Jesus as Lord.

There's one more question I want us to answer because it's one that gets thrown around quite often. In fact, I recently saw a clip on social media where someone butchered this whole topic of giving and tithing. I hope he wasn't a pastor. He tried to use 2 Corinthians 9:7 as a proof text that the principle of tithing found throughout all of scripture is overridden by what Paul writes to the church in Corinth. Here's what 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."

Our final question is shouldn't we give whatever we decide in our hearts?

4. Shouldn't we give whatever we decide in our hearts?

The short answer to that is no. If you're new here then you may not have heard me say this yet but for those who have been around a while you can probably guess what I'm going to say. Context is king. You cannot read just one verse from the Bible and rip it out of context to make it say what you want it to say. There is typically just one author's intended meaning in a text. To help us understand what the author's intended meaning is, we must look at the context of a verse. Read 3 or 4 verses before it and 3 or 4 verses after it at the least.

Was Paul speaking about tithing here in 2 Corinthians? No. It's a great verse but it just doesn't have anything to do with tithing and it certainly doesn't override all the other verses, and Jesus own words about the tithe. Paul was asking the church in Corinth to raise a love offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Shouldn't we give whatever we decide in our hearts? Only when it comes to giving above and beyond our normal tithe.

- Only when it comes to giving above and beyond our normal tithe.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to each decide in their hearts how much they could give to help the church in Jerusalem. When we had our Better Together stewardship campaign we each decided in our hearts how much we could give over and above our normal tithe. When it comes to the tithe, God has already decided that. God said the firstfruits are always to be brought to him, and its 10 percent of whatever he has blessed us with. The only time you decide in your heart how much to give is when that giving is separate from the tithe. A special offering, a stewardship campaign, a donation to charity. In those cases it's your choice, otherwise God says the firstfruits belong to me.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:21, "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." Where is your heart in this spiritual discipline of faithful giving? Barry Cameron says later on in that same book I mentioned earlier that "Jesus made it clear, what we give and how we give reveals our hearts. Judging by the statistics of all the churches in America, and the statistics of the way people give, a lot of people are on spiritual life support."

Giving is not about the law. It's not about legalism. It's not about money. It's about the master. It's about our faithfulness and who we follow. Giving is about lordship. I know we're in a tough time economically in our country, and bringing the tithe is a stretch but it's what God requires. We do that so that we can focus on more important things like justice, mercy, and faith. Let Proverbs 3:9-10 be an encouragement to you as you faithfully give, "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."

May we all learn to honor the Lord with our wealth as we seek to place ourselves under the lordship of Jesus Christ.