

SUBJECT – “First-fruits Finances”

Welcome back to the BEYOND THE SERMON podcast. I'm Pastor David Staff, lead pastor here at Christ Community Church. Thank you for investing time in this podcast to deepen your walk with the greatest Person you'll ever know and meet, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This week's subject – First Fruits finances, from Proverbs 3:9-10

Wisdom that urges *Honor the Lord from your wealth, and with the first fruits of your produce. Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats bursting with wine.* From this proverb, this principle – Endowed with all things, I first honor the Endower.

In this podcast, we'll take up 3 questions submitted, that came out of our WISDOM teaching on Proverbs 3.

First – “Doesn't the Bible teach that tithing – giving 10% of my income to kingdom causes – is what God expects?”

Second – “Are there other ways to give back to God besides writing a check to the church?”

Third – “What if I can't afford to give in a first-fruits way?”

Let's take up your questions in the moments ahead.

What about **QUESTION #1 – Doesn't the Bible teach that TITHING (the word tithe means 10%) is what God expects?**

If you've spent any significant time in a church that teaches the Bible, you've probably heard some pastor or Bible teacher set this standard before you. 10 percent is what the Lord expects. You might have heard this Scripture passage--

Malachi 3:8-10 Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.

Pretty stern stuff from an Old Testament prophet calling the nation of Judah/Israel to start obeying the Mosaic Law, to start tithing and contributing. And, it's fairly easy for pastors to quote those verses and urge people in the Body of Christ “not to rob God” by giving their 10%. If that was required in the Old Testament, some teach, why wouldn't that be required in the New Testament?

But a closer look reveals this, and even Malachi says it. He declares “in your tithes and contributions.” Did you notice the *plurals* there? More than one tithe? And contributions?

If we study the Mosaic Law, we discover Israelites were actually required to give three tithes to the Lord. Dr. Charles Ryrie sums up the Old Testament standard in his chapter on “Money and the Love of God” in *Balancing the Christian Life*.

The regulations of the Old Testament required a tenth of one's income be given to the Levites (Leviticus 27:30-33), who in turn tithed what they received and gave it to the priests. In addition, the Jews understood that a 2nd tithe (10% of the remaining 90%) was to be set aside and consumed in a sacred meal in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:5-6). Then, every third year, this second tithe was taken for the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). All told, every Israel was obliged to bring to the Lord 19% or more of his yearly income.

<p>A simple 10% was never the standard in the Old Testament. More like twenty to thirty percent, or even more if your heart was full and responsive to God.</p>

Dr. Ryrie doesn't mention all the additional “contributions” which the Law also talked about, “thank offerings” – an offering you brought if you wanted to demonstrate a special thankfulness to the Lord for some blessing He placed in your life, and “votive offerings” – an offering you would bring if you were making a special vow before the Lord.

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And when you turn to the New Testament – what Jesus and His apostles taught about our giving--they never designated a percentage. To be sure, they were fully aware of what the Old Testament required, but their teaching went beyond the Mosaic Law. Jesus and his apostles simply taught eager generosity, and faithful responsive giving. Jesus said, “Give and it will be given to you...the measure you use to give, it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). And Paul urged Christians “Each one should decide in his/her own heart what to give *in keeping with his income*. As Dr. Ryrie says, “this may mean 8%, 12%, 20%, 50%--any percent, depending on the individual case.”

Translation – it is up to you and the Holy Spirit...to be generous and to be faithful. Here in the Christ Community Church family, our value is *radical generosity*—living and giving adventurously to impact our world.

So a quick word of personal application – Do some digging in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament. Luke 6, Acts 4, 1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Philippians 4, 1 Timothy 6. As you read, as the Holy Spirit what He wants you to give, and decide in your own heart with Him. As Romans 8:14 says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons and daughters of God.”

QUESTION #2 - “Are there other ways to give back to God besides writing a check to the church?”

The short answer is “Of course!” And this is where the leading of the Spirit in each of our lives, in response to the Scriptures, is so important.

Still, it’s helpful to keep these things in mind. First, our Lord Jesus Christ has a personal and high commitment to building and growing His Church. Jesus’ church is the one group in the world committed exclusively to proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. Jesus’s church is His bride. Jesus’ church is the “household of God”, the “church of the Living God,” and the pillar and buttress of the truth according to 1 Timothy 3. Bill Hybels rightly said it, “The church is the hope of the world.” So it makes sense, if we are aligned with Jesus’ own priorities, to give to your local church first, so that its ministry is strong and makes a difference locally, regionally, and in the world.

Second, in getting the gospel out and growing His church, the Lord has raised up many Gospel-centered, helping organizations that help the church extend its reach. Of course it is fitting to give to those mission and helping organizations that follow Jesus and proclaim the gospel.

Jesus’ priority is to building His church which defeats the gates of hell in people’s lives. It makes sense to give to your local church which is helping rescue people with the gospel.

Third, we who are Christians are to be known for our good deeds, agents of God’s common grace to all people. Paul urged the Galatian Christians, *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* Galatians 6 verse 10.

Pamela and I give to a variety of Christ-centered causes. First to our local church. Then to others serving the Lord around the world, and to organizations like Samaritan’s Purse bring the gospel and practical help to people in need. We also give to support several beautiful orphan children in the Congo. That is how the Holy Spirit has led us to give.

So again, ask Him...and I’d urge a prioritizing of your first-fruits giving.

Let’s finish with **QUESTION #3** – What if I can’t afford to give in a first fruits way?

If I may, I’d say this. Because the Lord is involved, and because our lives are not just “naturally” lived, I might say that it is likely that you can’t afford NOT to give in a first fruits way. To not put the Lord first is a poor, even unwise, financial approach. His promise in both Testament’s is clear. When we honor Him first...even when we can’t figure out how we can afford it – our living God promises to supply our need. Even when we can’t see how that will happen. He is a supernatural God...and He is a faithful God.

Years ago, one of my college professors - a mentor -- told me his story. Sitting in church one day, knowing he and his wife Joann had only \$30 in their checking account, he sensed God’s Spirit saying to him, “When the offering comes, put in a check for \$30.00.” Sure he wrestled with it. Was he hearing from God, or not? On that Sunday morning, he wrote the check. On Monday, when the mail came, what was unexpectedly in his box but a check to him for \$50.00.

What if I can’t afford to give to God in a first-fruits way? Perhaps I should ask, “Can I afford not to give?”

Truth is – none of us can afford NOT to put the Lord first in a first-fruits way. We walk by faith in a God who keeps his promises and is utterly faithful. Give Him a chance to be faithful in your life.

Thanks again for dialing up BEYOND THE SERMON. I'll see you again next week in Proverbs 3:11-12.